

## WHAT'S IN A WORD?

What's in a word? A story, a discovery, a transformation, but also an identity, a struggle, a victory or a defeat. In a word, one may find the politician's slogan, the artist's creativity, the activist's alert. There are some words which incite to violence, others to peace. There are words which express the power to exclude, and others the will to include.

When words are needed but cannot be found, societies, whatever their languages, search for them, create them, or transform them. Words and expressions have been changed to reflect scientific discoveries, changes in customs, representation of identity. Words have also been the object of struggles and transformations aimed at the recognition for all human beings of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

This report was written on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in order to draw attention to an expression which excludes: "droits de l'homme" [rights of man] and, more generally, to examine the transformations which remain to be undertaken as far as the language of human rights is concerned. While reliance on the expression "droits de l'homme" in reference to historical documents (e.g. the Declaration Universelle des Droits de l'Homme) is not questioned, its use in all other contexts in a large part of the Francophone world ought to be challenged: the language of human rights cannot promote a single gender (and sex) as a universal category and serve as a vehicle for prejudices: women have rights, too. This recognition should be reflected in a language that recognizes women's existence.

This document focuses on the use of the expression "droits de l'homme" but the analysis and recommendations apply to other words, expressions, or terms, and to other languages: the formalization of male as a universal category and its use to describe the human being, condition, and rights characterise numerous societies.

Amnesty International recommends that, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a non-sexist and all inclusive language of rights be adopted by the United Nations, other inter-governmental organisations, the governments and civil societies of countries which have not done so yet. In particular, this document recommends that the Francophone world works towards, and campaigns for, replacing the expression "droit de l'homme" [rights of man] by a non sexist expression. There are four main reasons for these recommendations.

The first is that three centuries of research have well proven that language is not static but in constant evolution to reflect the political, social, and cultural world, and, moreover, that it constitutes a crucial element in the construction of social and cultural

identity and in the representation of social relations. Thus, the use of sexist terminology is seen as negating the political, social, and cultural transformations of 20th century societies which have seen women gaining access to the right to vote, the right to run for public offices, the right to work, etc. Such a use is also, arguably, the product of deeply-entrenched discriminatory practices and beliefs which contradict the commitments taken by governments with regard to women and women's rights, as well as the mandate and work of the United Nations.

The second factor is that the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen from which the term "droits de l'Homme" is extracted, never meant to include women and that the rights attributed to men in 1789 were deemed irrelevant for women.

The third is that there are ambiguities as to whether, in its current usage, the term may be said to encompass both men and women understood as equal beings.

The fourth factor behind this recommendation is that human rights activists, as well as governments, have moved throughout the world (including the French-speaking ones) towards the rewriting of terms that may be understood as sexist (or racist) and therefore as constituting an obstacle towards the implementation of the principle of equality between men and women.

## **I- THE DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND CITIZEN: WAS IT MEANT TO INCLUDE WOMEN?**

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was adopted on August 26, 1789 after long and lively debates between deputies of the National Assembly, and is considered as a leading document in human history. This Declaration, when taken together with the American Declaration of Independence, laid out a number of rights and principles which later formed a significant basis for the text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The rights of men, as conceptualised through the 1789 Declaration were inspired by a liberal conception of society, of men and of the world, a belief in natural law and universal order (resulting from the scientific and intellectual achievements of the 17th century), and a growing confidence in human reason (a major characteristic of the so-called Age of Enlightenment of the 18th century)<sup>1</sup>. Hence philosophers asserted throughout the 18th century that certain rights pertained to men because they existed in the state of nature and, upon entering civil society, men surrender to the state only the

right to enforce these natural rights. The theory of the inalienable rights of men and the 1789 Declaration were derived from the belief that rights are the properties of persons capable of exercising rational choice<sup>ii</sup>.

### ***The Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen***

The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, passed in the summer of 1789, inspired a number of women to claim similar rights for women:

Etta Palm d'Aelders, a Dutch woman active in the revolution, addressed the National Assembly in the summer of 1791, asking for equal education for girls as well as equal rights for women<sup>iii</sup>. *"You have restored to man the dignity of his being in recognizing his rights; you will no longer allow women to groan beneath an arbitrary authority."*

That same year, in 1791, Olympe de Gouges composed the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen, a revision of the Declaration of the Rights of Man written to include women. In it, she challenged the basic assumptions from which both the principles and rights in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were derived<sup>iv</sup>. She stated that "Women are born free and remain equal in rights to men." Further, she posited that the goal of political association was not the "conservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man" but the "preservation of the irrevocable rights of woman and man." She parted way with the drafters of the Declaration of the Rights of Man over the basic question of what constitutes a nation. She did not see it as either depending solely on the interests of men. She asserted that the principle of sovereignty "is located in the nation which is none other than the union of women and men." For de Gouges, the right to liberty without a corresponding reference to justice was inadequate. She therefore asserted that:

*"Liberty and justice consists of rendering to persons those things that belong to them; thus the exercise of women's natural rights is limited only by the perpetual tyranny with which man oppresses her; these limits must be changed according to the laws of nature and reason."*

According to de Gouges,

*"Female and male citizens, being equal before the law, should be equally admissible to all public honours, positions and employments, according to their capacity and with no distinctions other than those of virtue and talent."*

Further, Article 10 of the declaration of the Rights of Woman read:

*“No one should be threatened for their opinions, however divergent. Woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she should likewise have the right to speak in public, provided that her demonstrations do not disrupt public order as established by law.”*

### **Was the Declaration of the Rights of Man meant to include women<sup>v</sup>?**

Olympe de Gouges felt compelled to compose the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen because the rights embodied in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were set exclusively for men.

Yet, French women had been active throughout the French revolution: from 1788 on, they petitioned the government, joined in the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789; in October, thousands of Parisian women marched first to city hall to demand bread, then to the Champs Élysées, and then to Versailles. At Versailles, a delegation of women met with the king and eventually escorted the royal family back to Paris. They entered the political arena in these years, formed the Society for revolutionary Republican Women (1793) and other women's clubs, joining revolutionary clubs, addressing men and women revolutionaries in public places and political circles. But despite their involvement, often enough on the front-line, French women were subsequently not recognised as citizens.

Equality between men and women was discussed in the course of one debate in the National Assembly but the majority of the deputies rejected it on the basis that **a woman does not have reason** and that it was not feasible to grant rights to a minority of exceptional women. The Declaration of the Right of Man was not meant to include women, and the rights laid down in the Declaration were not relevant to women. The term “Man” was understood by the drafters of the Declaration in its gender specificity: at no point was it meant to refer to both men and women. At no point were the rights conferred to men meant to be attributed to women as well.

Olympe de Gouges' Declaration was never formally adopted or implemented. Instead, having addressed her Declaration to Marie Antoinette and having succeeded in bringing it to some public attention, Olympe de Gouges was castigated and called hysterical, irrational, unreasonable and generally lacking in character<sup>vi</sup>. She was eventually accused of wanting to be a statesman and forgetting the virtues suitable to her sex. She was guillotined on November 3, 1793.

That same year, d'Aelders was forced to flee France.

That same year, in October 1793, the Jacobins ruled that all women's clubs and associations were henceforth illegal. A representative of the Committee of General Security declared that:

*“in general, women are ill-suited for elevated thoughts and serious meditations... We believe, therefore, that a woman should not leave her family to meddle in affairs of government<sup>vii</sup>.”*

Two weeks later, all women's deputations were barred from attending sessions of the Paris Commune. In the speech that convinced the Commune to vote unanimously to exclude women, a revolutionary orator declares:

*“It is horrible, it is contrary to all laws of nature for a woman to want to make herself a man... The Council must recall that some time ago these denatured viragos wandered through the markets with the red cap to sully that badge of liberty and wanted to force all women to take off the modest headdress that is appropriate for them... Is it the place of women to propose motions? Is it the place of women to place themselves at the head of our armies? If there was a Joan of Arc, that is because there was a Charles VII; if the fate of France was once in the hands of a woman, that is because there was a king who did not have the head of a man.<sup>viii</sup>”*

The conviction that all women, including revolutionary women, should remain at home out of public life united men who agreed on no other issue. The French revolutionaries Babeuf, Marat, Hebert and Robespierre all condemned women's public participation.

In the Code Napoleon of 1804 which consolidated many revolutionary gains for men, women lost ground and were classified with children, criminals and the insane as legal incompetents.

This pattern repeated itself in the Revolutions of 1848. The French revolutionary provisional government delayed giving women the right to vote. Early in June, before its overthrow, police closed the Club des Femmes. In July, the Second Republic ruled that women could neither belong to clubs nor aid them. The defeat of republican governments only intensified the exclusion of women from politics. After 1851, in France as well as in the German states, women were forbidden by law to participate in political activities or to attend meetings where politics was discussed. Even the men of the Paris Commune did not consider granting women political rights<sup>ix</sup>.

French women will have to wait for almost one century to be granted the right to vote and the right to be eligible for political offices. This was in 1944.

---

## II- DO THE TERMS “HOMME” ET “DROITS DE L’HOMME” REFER TO MEN AND WOMEN UNDERSTOOD AS EQUAL BEINGS?

Clearly, the Declaration of the Rights of Man was not meant, in 1789, to include women: men had inalienable rights because they had reason, while women were deemed as unable to exercise rational thinking. In its historical meaning, the concept of “Rights of Men” is gender-specific and addresses itself to men only. The question, then, is whether in its *current usage*, the term may be said to encompass both men and women *understood as equal beings*.

### ***The precedence of the masculine form***

According to the Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Française [Etymological Dictionary of the French Language], "l'homme" [man] is "un être animé de raison" [a being endowed with reason]; the French word comes from the Latin "hominem", with the Latin nominative "homo" becoming the modern French "on" [one]. In modern French, the word "homme(s)" is used to apply to all members of the human race, both male and female. But its meaning is sometimes ambiguous. According to UNESCO, for example, "*in a practical context, it [the word "homme(s)"] refers firstly to individuals of the male gender and only secondly to women*"<sup>x</sup>. The Council of Europe notes "*that, in the context of modern society, the use of the masculine gender to refer to people of both sexes causes some uncertainty about whom - men, women, or both - is concerned*"<sup>xii</sup>.

This ambiguity has two causes. The first is that the use of the French word "homme(s)" to refer to both men and women is illogical from a grammatical point of view. In principle, the French grammatical gender concurs with the sex of animate beings: "homme/femme" [man/woman], "coq/poule" [cockerel/hen], "avocat/avocate" [male lawyer/female lawyer], "le propriétaire/la propriétaire" [male owner/female owner]. In the Middle Ages, there were few exceptions to this rule, so that most such terms had male and female equivalents - "commandant/commandante" [male commander/female commander], "juge/jugesse" [male judge/female judge], "promoteur/promotrice" [male promoter/female promoter].

The other cause of ambiguity concerns the fact that exclusive use of the word "homme(s)" to refer to men and women establishes a hierarchy or segregation between the two sexes. This hierarchy dates back to the seventeenth century when, in 1647, the famous grammarian Vaugelas declared that "**the masculine form takes precedence over the feminine because it is more noble**"<sup>xii</sup>. Henceforth, it became correct to write "les

légumes et les fleurs sont frais", rather than "fraîches", and "un chat et trois cent femmes sont présents", rather than "présentes", with the adjective agreeing with the masculine noun ("légumes" and "chat"), as opposed to previous usage during this period, which would have made the adjective agree with the feminine noun ("fleurs" and "femmes"). Indeed, in the Middle Ages, it was quite correct to write, as Racine did, "ces trois jours et ces trois nuits entières". In this example, the feminine adjective "entières" applies to both the feminine noun "nuits" and the masculine noun "jours". Also during the Middle Ages, it was not sufficient to use the masculine form alone: in addressing women and men in speeches given in public places, speakers would use both the masculine and feminine forms - "iceux et icelles" (those men and those women) and "tuit et toutes" (every man and every woman).

The precedence of the masculine form propounded by Vaugelas was rapidly reflected in occupational titles. A hundred years after Vaugelas, the Countess of Genlis demanded that she be called "gouverneur" [governor] rather than "gouvernante" [governess] of the children she looked after<sup>xiii</sup>.

Although the past 30 years have seen some French-speaking countries rejecting some of the rules laid down by Vaugelas, these rules continue to prevail in France, where the use, even now, of the masculine gender to refer to women is still based on the hierarchy established between the masculine and feminine genders in the seventeenth century. In 1984, for example, the Académie française wrote, apparently without being aware of the irony of its argument, that:

*"When feminine forms of occupational titles have been clumsily created because there was thought to be a need for them, their lack of use has very quickly given them a **derogatory connotation**: "cheffesse" [female chef], "doctoresse" [female doctor] and "poetesse" [female poet] are a few examples. It is to be expected that other, similarly artificial terms will meet the same fate and that the result will be quite contrary to the desired effect."<sup>xiv</sup>*

It is interesting to note that this "derogatory" connotation does not apply to all occupations, but mainly to those to which a certain amount of prestige is attached. For example, in French, one speaks of "la secrétaire" [woman secretary]<sup>xv</sup> but of "Madame le Secrétaire d'Etat" [with the masculine form being used to refer to a woman Secretary of State], a situation that led French feminist Benoîte Groult to say that "acceptance of the feminine form is inversely proportional to the prestige of the occupation concerned". Not only are its roots hierarchical, but usage of "*Madame le*" [a mixture of feminine and masculine akin to English usage such as "Madam Chairman"] complies with no French tradition as regards marking the gender of nouns - something that linguist Ferdinand

Brunot denounced as long ago as 1922, when he spoke of "*this frightful term, 'Madame le' that disfigures so many of our texts*"<sup>xvi</sup>. And the eminent grammarian Albert Duraz had no hesitation, in 1971, in writing:

***"Any woman who prefers to be referred to by a masculine title rather than by a feminine one is exhibiting an inferiority complex that contradicts her legitimate demands for equality. To speak of 'Madame le Docteur' is to proclaim the male superiority of which the masculine gender is the grammatical expression."***

How can we fail to see the emergence of the word "*maieuticien*" [a newly created word meaning "male midwife"] as an expression of the superiority of the masculine gender and of prejudices towards feminine forms? During the 1980s, the fact that men were becoming midwives in France led to a demand for the creation of a new title, because of resistance towards the obvious masculine equivalent ["sage-homme"] of the existing feminine form ["sage-femme"]. The term "*maieuticien*" was newly created and is defined by the Petit Robert [standard French-French dictionary] as "homme qui exerce la profession de sage-femme" [man who exercises the profession of midwife]. This example illustrates the fact that language is not static and that a new term can be created in order to include men in a traditionally feminine occupation. But it also shows how much easier it is for such changes to be introduced when it is men who are concerned...

### ***"Droits de l'Homme" [Rights of Man] for men and women?***

In current usage, the term "Droits de l'Homme" [Rights of Man] refers to the rights of all human beings, both men and women. But attempts are made to specify "Homme avec un grand H" [Man with a capital M], that is, using an upper-case first letter in the written form, to distinguish it from "homme" [man] with a lower-case first letter, which refers to a male adult of the human species. This common practice, which cannot be reflected in the spoken word, is evidence of the fact that there is some ambiguity as regards the word "homme" [man]. This ambiguity is also reflected in the French version of the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

If we analyse frequency of use of the various words designating the human being, we find the following, in order of decreasing frequency:

- <i>la personne</i> [the person] and <i>toute personne</i> [all people]:	20
- <i>nul</i> [no one]:	8
- <i>individu</i> [individual] and <i>tout individu</i> [all individuals]:	6
- <i>droits de l'homme</i> [rights of man]:	6 (3 in the Preamble)



- <i>chacun</i> [everyone]:	4
- <i>êtres humains</i> [human beings]:	2
- <i>l'homme</i> [man]:	2
- <i>personne humaine</i> [human person]:	1
- <i>famille humaine</i> [human family]:	1
- <i>humanité</i> [humanity]:	1
- <i>des hommes et des femmes</i> [men and women]:	1
- <i>l'homme et la femme</i> [man and woman]:	1
- <i>quiconque</i> [whoever]:	1

If we compare the French version of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights with the 1789 Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen [Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen], we can see how usage has changed, since this latter uses only the word "homme" [man], which even accompanies the word "nul" [ie no man] and leaves absolutely no doubt about the substantive man it concerns - the reason being that women had no rights under the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. With regard to the French version of the UN Declaration, it may be noted that the general term "la personne" [person] is used most frequently, that the vague term "nul" [no one] is also much used and that the word "homme" [man] is used mainly within the expression "droits de l'homme" [rights of man]. Thus, we can deduce that those who drafted the French version of the UN Declaration were concerned to stress that no sexual discrimination was intended, by, in most cases, using words other than "homme(s)" [man/men] in describing the various rights contained in the Declaration. The mixture of terms that characterizes this attempt at non-discrimination did not escape the eye of Professor of Law Yves Madot, when he noted that *"the French wording of the title of the Declaration and of its Article 1 is indicative of a terminological problem that could easily be solved by use of the term 'droits de la personne humaine' [rights of the human person]<sup>xviii</sup>".*

Although neither France nor the other French-speaking countries have taken steps in the direction advocated by Professor Madot in 1948, policy-makers have tried, as did those responsible for drafting the French version of the UN Declaration, not to use just the word "homme" [man]. When action has been taken to integrate women in the world of politics and to grant them rights and duties, the term most commonly used has often been "hommes et femmes" [men and women].

For example, although the Provisional Government decree of March 1848 re-establishing "universal" suffrage (for men only) notes that *"sont électeurs tous les français âgés de 21 ans"* [all French men over the age of 21 shall be entitled to vote], the document establishing real universal suffrage, as introduced by General de Gaulle in 1945, states that *"l'Assemblée Nationale Constituante sera élue par tous les Français et*

---

*toutes les Françaises majeurs*" [the Government shall be elected by all adult French men and women].

Occupations have also been feminized, though with difficulty and not exhaustively. In 1984, the French Government created a terminology commission responsible for studying the feminization of titles and posts and, more generally, the vocabulary concerning women's activities<sup>xviii</sup>. The commission's work resulted in the memorandum of 11 March 1986, which lays down rules for the formation of feminine forms for occupations and titles that had previously existed only in their masculine form<sup>xix</sup>.

More recently, in 1997, during a Senate law-commission debate on a plan to reform the Court of Appeal, senators discussed a single word, "homme" [man], which appeared in the oath taken by members of the jury: "*Vous jurez et promettez de vous décider avec l'impartialité et la fermeté qui conviennent à un homme probe et libre*" [You hereby swear and promise to make your decision with the impartiality and certainty required of a free and honest man]. During the debate, senators noted that "*a jury comprises both men and women, and sometimes more women than men*", and that "*until the liberation, only men could be members of a jury*". Senators voted to adopt an amendment that substituted "une personne" [a person] for "un homme"<sup>xx</sup>.

The aim of the decisions to question the exclusive use of the word "homme" [men] and to replace it with "hommes et femmes" [men and women] or "personne" [person], and of the feminization of the names of occupations ratified by the memorandum of 11 March 1986, was to adapt the language to the social and cultural realities of French society in the late twentieth century. This trend is also part of a political movement towards recognition of the equality of men and women and, more recently, in France, of male/female parity.

### III- FEMINIZATION OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE THROUGHOUT THE WORLD

Feminization of the French language in order to adapt it to social realities is nothing new. For example, the term "mair<sup>e</sup>ss<sup>e</sup>" [woman mayor] was used in the thirteenth century, "commandant<sup>e</sup> en chef" [woman commander in chief] and "inventeur<sup>e</sup>" [woman inventor] in the fifteenth century, "inventric<sup>e</sup>" [woman inventor] and "lieutenant<sup>e</sup>" [woman lieutenant] in the sixteenth century, "chirurgienne" [woman surgeon] in 1759, etc. Since the end of the Second World War, many governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations have advocated the use of non-sexist language.

**Canada** has been at the forefront of this movement. In 1978, the Canadian Ministry of Employment and Immigration published the first official lexicon for the feminization of occupations. In 1981, calling on academics, trade-unionists and members of government, the Office de la Langue Française [Office for the French Language] set up a committee whose work was used as a basis for a guide to the use of non-sexist language - *Pour un genre à part entière*. The term "droits de l'homme" [rights of man] has been replaced by "droits de la personne" [rights of the person]. The feminization of language has very quickly been taken up in common usage.

In **Switzerland**, in 1989, the Bureau de l'Égalité des Droits entre Homme et Femme [Office for Equal Rights for Men and Women] feminized its entire terminology concerning occupations and professions, to comply with a State ruling requiring the feminization of official reports. Two years later, a guide to the use of non-discriminatory language was published. The term "droits de l'homme" has been replaced by "droits humains" [human rights].

In **Belgium**, a law of 4 August 1978 banned any discriminatory libel against either sex. In March 1989, the Belgian authorities issued a draft decree on the feminization of occupational titles.

In 1990, the Committee of Ministers of the **Council of Europe** adopted Recommendation No R(90), which calls on the governments of Member States to promote a use of language that reflects the principle of equality between women and men; to encourage the use, wherever possible, of non-sexist language; to bring the terminology used in legal texts, the public administration and education in line with the principle of gender equality; and to encourage the use of non-sexist language in the media.

The agencies of the UN system have also put forward non-sexist guidelines regarding language.

The report of a meeting organised in 1996 by the United Nations Centre for Human Rights and the UN Development Fund for Women begins with the following recommendation:

*“The language used in the formulation of new human rights instruments and standards and in existing standards should be gender inclusive...The Commission on Human Rights, its Sub-Commission and the various human rights mechanisms... should also strive to ensure that the language used in reports and resolutions is gender inclusive<sup>xxi</sup>.”*

As far as **UNESCO** is concerned, the issue of sexist language was first raised during the twenty-fourth session of the General Conference in 1987. A call was made for the avoidance of gender-specific language in UNESCO and the General Conference adopted resolution No 14.1, which invites the Director-General:

*"to adopt a policy related to the drafting of all the Organization's working documents aimed at avoiding, to the extent possible, the use of language which refers explicitly or implicitly to only one sex, except where positive action measures are being considered".*

In February 1988, the issue was also addressed by the council of the FICSA [Federation of the International Civil Servants Association], which:

*"urges the executive heads to demonstrate their commitments to the full and equal participation of women at all levels within their own organizations, by (...) eliminating the use of all gender-biased provisions and language".*

The General Conference went on to adopt an increasingly firm stance on this issue at its twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth sessions (25 C/Resolution 109 and 26 C/Resolution 11.1) in 1991 and 1993<sup>xxii</sup>. "Guidelines on non-sexist language" was then published, which recommended that:

*"it would also be appropriate, in particular, to avoid using the word 'homme' [man] in the title of any new programmes and to seek terms that clearly cover both sexes. The term 'droits de l'homme' [rights of man], which is hallowed by usage and texts, is an historical term and it is not up to UNESCO to take the initiative in changing it. However, it should be noted that, in Canada, use is made of the term 'droits de la personne' [rights of the person] - a term that shall be used wherever possible. The terms 'droits de l'individu' [rights of the individual] and 'droits de la personne humaine' [rights of the human person] are also used<sup>xxiii</sup>".*

Thus, in January 1997, a Declaration issued by Secretary-General Frederico Mayor was entitled "*Le droit de l'être humain à la paix*" [Human beings' right to peace]<sup>xxiv</sup>.

In Vienna, on the occasion of the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights, an NGO-Forum on "All Human Rights for All" was held on 10-12 June 1993. The plenary session of the Forum of Non-Governmental Organizations adopted and recommended<sup>xxv</sup>:

*"the standardization of the language of human rights instruments so as to eradicate gender bias (eg to replace 'droits de l'homme' by 'droits humains' or 'droits de la personne humaine')"* (Recommendation 23).

#### **IV- WHAT'S IN A WORD?**

A number of documents were made available to Amnesty International for this research project. Those that advocate continued use of the term "droits de l'homme" [rights of man] offer two main reasons for this opinion. The first, indicated in the quotation at the beginning of this report, is that the term "droits de l'homme" [rights of man] has a scope that is historical, universal and philosophical: "*We could use the term "droits des hommes et droits des femmes" [rights of men and women], but this would somehow change the original concept*". The second reason given is that an authoritarian change in the language to purge it of anything that might seem to suggest sexism does nothing to change attitudes or behaviour. By contrast with the first argument (where inequality between men and women, which is sustained by the original concept, is of no significance or consequence), the second recognizes that the term may be a vehicle of sexism, but sees this as inconsequential: we need more than a word to change attitudes and practices.

Most people think that the purity of language is set once and for all by dictionaries and grammar books. But language is not static; it is constantly changing to reflect new realities and social and political change. For example, the letter "W" was not officially incorporated into the French alphabet until 1964. Language is both a reflection and a driving force of every society. Every year, dictionaries add new words that reflect social, technical and medical developments or changes in practices. The French-French dictionary, *Petit Robert*, included feminine forms of occupations in the 1993 edition. For several decades, the French Government has had Commissions de Terminologie [Terminology Commissions], whose remit is to adapt modern language to new scientific, medical and commercial realities and which have approved such commonplace words as "informatique" [data-processing], "ordinateur" [computer], "stimulateur cardiaque" [cardiac stimulator], etc. There have been competitions in which French men and women create "new" words for "new" things - occupations, discoveries, customs, practices, etc.

The purpose of creating new words and terms is not simply to replace those that have fallen into disuse, but also to reflect changes in the representation of "Self", in social or racial identity. In the USA, for example, the term "African-Americans", which is now entering current usage, was coined only recently as a way of acknowledging the continental, rather than racial, origin of an entire people. It was preceded by "Black

Americans" and "Afro-Americans", to cite just two examples. Words construct and reflect the culture and life of every society: when Americans decide to represent themselves and be identified by the word "African-Americans", they are making a statement about their history, their struggles and aspirations, at a specific moment in American history when ethnic groups are beginning to perceive their identity not in terms of racial groups but in terms of nations or groups of nations (Italian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc).

**Language plays a fundamental role in creating individuals' social identity, and the interaction between language and social attitudes** no longer needs to be proven - it has been the subject of many studies and theories, starting way back in the eighteenth century with the work of the German philosophers Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who argued that language is the vital basis of any socio-political association (the *Volk*), right up to the modern French philosopher Michel Foucault, who focused on the relationship between power and discourse<sup>xxvi</sup>. More recently, in 1982, Pierre Bourdieu published *Ce Que Parler Veut Dire* [Language and Symbolic Power]<sup>xxvii</sup>, in which he describes the existence of a "linguistic market" and "linguistic capital", which are an integral part of socio-economic relations between individuals and social classes. Bourdieu draws from this linguistic capital the concept of "symbolic power", which is internalized and accepted: **language is the symbolic form or representation of power relations and provides them with their legitimacy.**

## V- CONCLUSION

The Committee of Ministers of the European Union was in harmony with social developments in the late twentieth century when it stated, in 1990, that **the sexism that marks language usage in most Member States of the Council of Europe - which gives the masculine precedence over the feminine - is an obstacle to the process of establishing equality between women and men.** Amnesty International has decided to adopt a language of rights that accords with its mandate, objectives, and vision. Three terms have been identified that could replace the current usage of "droits de l'homme" with the exception of historical documents. They are: "droits humains" [human rights], "droits de la personne humaine" [rights of the human person], "droits de l'être humain" [rights of the human being]. More generally, Amnesty International has also decided to use words that do not obscure either of the sexes and which feminize the titles of posts, as suggested by numerous guidelines on non-sexist language (annex 1).

Advocating a change in terminology is not about trying to eliminate from the collective memory an event such as the French Revolution of 1789, nor is it about

rejecting the contribution and consequences of such an event for humanity. It is, quite simply, about recognizing that "the rights of man" have changed since 1789, that economic, social and cultural rights are now part of everyone's heritage and that equality between men and women is also an integral part of this development. The language of human rights cannot promote a single gender (and sex) as a universal category and serve as a vehicle for prejudices: women have rights, too. This recognition should be reflected in a use of language that recognizes women's existence.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Amnesty International recommends that, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all governments, the United Nations and other inter-governmental organisations adopt and campaign for a gender-sensitive and all inclusive language of human rights.

**Governments** which have not done so yet should:

- ◆ adopt a policy on a gender-sensitive language of human rights, including using words and expressions that do not obscure women's experiences.
- ◆ develop and disseminate widely guidelines on non-sexist language
- ◆ ensure that these guidelines are incorporated and reflected in the work of all relevant official bodies as well as in all governmental publications
- ◆ campaign for the rapid dissemination of a gender-sensitive language. For instance, government representatives and leaders of political parties should adopt the use of gender-sensitive language in their media work, in the course of official speeches, when addressing their constituency, etc.

**Governments of Francophone countries** which have not done so should:

- ◆ adopt a policy on a gender-sensitive language of human rights, including:
  - replacing the expression "droits de l'homme" with a gender-inclusive expression, such as: droits humains; droits de la personne humaine; droits de l'être humain.
  - adopting words that do not obscure women's experiences

- ◆ develop and disseminate widely guidelines on non-sexist languages
- ◆ ensure that these guidelines are incorporated and reflected in the work of all relevant official bodies as well as in all governmental publications
- ◆ campaign for the rapid dissemination of a gender-sensitive language. For instance, government representatives and leaders of political parties should adopt the use of gender-sensitive language in their media work, in the course of official speeches, or when addressing their constituency.

**The United Nations and other inter-governmental organisations should:**

- ◆ adopt a policy replacing the expression “droits de l’homme” with a gender-inclusive expression, such as: droits humains; droits de la personne humaine; droits de l’être humain, in all the communications, reports, publications, and resolutions of the United Nations
- ◆ ensure that the recommendation of the report of the expert group meeting organized by the UN Centre for Human Rights and the UN Development Fund for Women be implemented. In particular, ensure that:
  - the language used in the formulation of new human rights instruments and standards and in the implementation of existing standards should be gender inclusive
  - the language used in reports and resolutions of the UN Commission on Human Rights, its Sub-Commission and the various human rights mechanisms be gender inclusive
- ◆ disseminate widely guidelines on non-sexist language, such as the UNESCO guidelines or others
- ◆ ensure that these guidelines be incorporated and reflected in the work and publications of all UN agencies, treaty bodies, thematic mechanisms, country rapporteurs, etc.
- ◆ work towards the rapid dissemination of a gender-sensitive language: for instance, United Nations representatives should adopt the use of gender-sensitive language in their media work and in the course of official speeches.



**Non-Governmental Organisations, the media, other groups or individuals** should:

- ◆ replace the expression “droits de l’homme” with a gender-inclusive expression, such as: droits humains; droits de la personne humaine; droits de l’être humain in all their publications
- ◆ officially adopt words that do not obscure either of the sexes, such as the use of masculine to refer to positions held by women, in all their publications
- ◆ develop and disseminate within their respective constituency and among their staff guidelines on non-sexist language
- ◆ ensure that these guidelines be incorporated and reflected in their work and publications
- ◆ campaign for the rapid dissemination of a gender-sensitive language: by publicizing their decision to adopt a gender-sensitive language, by using gender-sensitive language in the course of media work, meetings or speeches.

## ANNEX 1

<b>Problem A: words that do not obscure either of the sexes</b>	<b>Forms used</b>	<b>Recommendation 1: use generic terms</b>
	man, men, mankind	people, humanity, human beings, the community, society, person, individual,
		<b>Recommendation 2: use both genders</b>
		man and woman, men and women, all men and women
		<b>Recommendation 3: alternate genders</b>
<b>Problem B: posts held by women</b>		<b>Recommendation 4: use generic titles</b>
	craftman, chairman, cameraman, businessman, etc.	craftperson, artisan, craftpeople, chairperson, camera operator, business people, representative, etc.

## Endnotes

i. Insisting that “men are born and remain free and equal in rights,” the declaration proclaims that the “aims of every political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man,” identifies these rights as “liberty, property, safety and resistance to oppression” and defines liberty so as to include the right to free speech, freedom of association, religious freedom and freedom from arbitrary arrest and confinement. It further asserts that no organ or body of state and no individual could exercise any authority not emanating from the nation, from which is derived the principle of sovereignty.

ii. See Larousse, *Encyclopedie*; Henry J. Steiner and Philip Alston, *International Human Rights in Context*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

iii. Darlene Gay Levy, Harriett Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson, eds., *Women in*

---

*Revolutionary Paris: 1789-1795*, Urbana: University of Illinois press, 1979, pp.62, 75.

iv. This summary is extracted from Jan Bauer, *Only Silence will Protect you. Women, Freedom of Expression and the Language of Human Rights*, International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development: Montreal, 1996, pp.21-26.

v. **The following is based on: Liberté, Egalité... et les femmes? Sous la direction de Michèle Dayras, 1991; Bonnie Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, A History of their own, New York Harpers and Row, 1988.**

vi. Jan Bauer, *Ibid*, p.26.

vii. Cited in Darlene Gay Levy, Harriett Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson, eds., *Women in Revolutionary Paris: 1789-1795*, Urbana: University of Illinois press, 1979, p.215.

viii. Levy et al, *Ibid*, pp.219-220.

ix. Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of their own*, Volume 2, New York: Harpers and Row, 1989, pp.279-284, pp. 350-352.

x. UNESCO, *Pour un langage non sexiste* [Guidelines on non-sexist language], Paris, 1996, p 3.

xi. Recommendation No R(90) of the Committee of Ministers to the Member States on the elimination of sexism in language.

xii. A similar evolution has characterized the English language. The British grammarian John Kirkby formulated in 1746 his "88 Grammatical Rules". In Rule 21, Kirkby declared that the male gender was more comprehensive than the female. In making this statement, Kirkby was not only reaffirming the view that men are more important than women but also formalizing men as a universal category. Later on, the linguist Geoffrey Leech categorized English into "plus male" and "minus male" to distinguish masculine from feminine.

xiii. The many rules laid down by Vaugelas and his successors are an integral part of the "standardization" of the French language, which (probably) began with the creation of the Académie française in 1635 and accompanied the emergence of the modern French State.

xiv. Declaration made by the Académie française at its meeting of 14 June 1984, in response to the setting-up of a terminology commission "responsible for studying the feminization of titles and posts and, more generally, the vocabulary concerning women's activities. Occupational titles are, albeit slowly, being adjusted to modern social and cultural realities.

xv. In defiance of Alexandre Dumas' prediction that "it will never be possible for women to be secretaries; they talk too much". These days, the word is essentially a feminine one in French.

xvi. *Le Monde*, 11 June 1991.

xvii. Yves Madot, *Droits de l'Homme*, Masson, 1991, p 4.

xviii. The masculine-feminine mixture of "*Madame le*" is often still used.

xix. The commission's work gave rise to numerous criticisms whose sexism is disheartening. For example, a philosopher writing in *Le Figaro*: "*Well, they have taken over power, the academies, the ministries - even the Ministry of War! But everyone knows that women have more power when they efface themselves and blend into the background. All over the world, women govern better when they do not reign*".

xx. *Le Monde*, April 1997.

xxi. UN Doc.E/CN.4/1996/105, para. 71(1).

xxii. UNESCO, *Guidelines on non-sexist language*.

xxiii. *Ibid*, p 3.

xxiv. UNESCO, SHS-97/WS/6.

xxv. The NGO-Forum was attended by over 2,000 participants representing a total of more than 1,000 non-governmental organizations active in the field of human rights and development. The work of the NGO-Forum was carried out in 5 major working groups. Working Group D examined the relationships between human rights, development and democracy, with particular attention to the role of non-governmental organizations in fostering popular participants and in creating awareness of the necessity of solidarity between the North and the South. In *Human Rights, The New Consensus*, London, Regency Press, 1994, p 239.

xxvi. Michel Foucault, *Pouvoir et Connaissance* [Power and Knowledge] and *L'Archéologie de la Connaissance* [The Archaeology of Knowledge].

xxvii. Pierre Bourdieu, *Ce Que Parler Veut Dire*, 1982, translated into English as *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited and introduced by John B Thompson, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1991.