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@Human rights are women's right
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Universal and indivisible

For millions of women the 1990s have meant terror, deprivation and the imperative of fighting for justice. Today, what unites women internationally—transcending class, race, culture, religion, nationality and ethnic origin—is their vulnerability to violations of their fundamental human rights, and their dedicated efforts to claim those rights.

Most of the civilian casualties of war are women and children; most of the world's refugees and displaced people are women and children; most of the world's poor are women and children. Most of these women are struggling to care for and protect these children. Human rights violations against women are rampant partly because they are largely hidden.

The great failure of the world's community of governments is not just that they have been unable to guarantee women their social, economic and cultural rights—women's right to equality, development and peace is the theme of the forthcoming United Nations (UN) World Conference on Women. It is that they have been unable to prevent and in some cases have sanctioned the violation of women's civil and political rights: the rights not to be tortured, killed, "disappeared", arbitrarily detained or imprisoned. Certain violations, such as rape by government agents, are primarily directed at women.

The deliberate violation of the human rights of women is increasingly a central component of military strategy in conflicts all over the world. Governments, who in December 1993 adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, are responsible for appalling levels of violence against women.

Responsibility for abuses against women goes beyond governments. The growth of nationalist, secessionist and ethnic conflicts which threaten all regions of the world with violence and bloodshed has seen armed opposition groups adopt similar methods of repression and terror in pursuit of their goals. Women have been killed, raped, ill-treated or taken hostage.

The UN Declaration prohibiting violence against women calls for "the universal application to women of the rights and principles with regard to equality, security, liberty, integrity and dignity of all human persons". All governments are morally obliged to uphold this Declaration. They are also legally bound by international human rights treaties which they have ratified not to violate the fundamental human rights of their citizens. Many governments breach these treaties with impunity, some even reject the basic principle that human rights standards are universal standards which apply at all times, in all situations.

The universality of human rights is being undermined by governments who argue that human rights must be subject to the interests of national security, economic strategy and local traditions. When it comes to women's human rights, many governments take a particularly restrictive view.

Human rights are not only universal, they are also indivisible. In many countries women face such grave threats to their civil and political rights—the risk of torture, imprisonment or death—that claiming social, economic and cultural rights is either impossible or the act of a heroine.

Without respect for women's fundamental human rights, the goals of the UN World Conference on Women—women's rights to equality, development and peace—are unattainable.

The World Conference on Women offers an opportunity to bind governments to protecting and promoting all the human rights of women.

The past two decades have seen women's organizations spring up around the world. Some work for their "disappeared" relatives; some are community activists, fighting for basic rights such as freedom from want; some are lawyers seeking justice for the unrepresented; some campaign against torture, some against domestic violence, some for equal treatment at work or for land rights and access to credit.

This wave of courage, creativity and commitment has all too often met a wall of government indifference and sometimes government repression of the cruellest kind. Few governments recognize the work of women's human rights organizations as a legitimate exercise of fundamental civil and political rights. They are our partners in the struggle to protect women's human rights worldwide.

picture caption: Women demonstrate in Algeria in March 1994. The banner reads: "Silence is death. If you stay quiet you die. If you speak you die. So speak out and die."

picture credits: © Nacerdine Zebbar/Frank Spooner © David Stewart-Smith/Katz

Quote: 'The human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights'.

Declaration of the UN World Conference on Human Rights,
June 1993

Women and war

Half a century ago, rape in war was outlawed by the Geneva Conventions which state: "Women shall be especially protected ... against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault". Rape may be outlawed under the international rules governing conflicts, but women are being raped—terrorized, degraded and violated—in every modern conflict on the planet.

Women are raped because their bodies are seen as the legitimate spoils of war. Rape by combatants is an act of torture, and clearly prohibited by the rules of war and by international human rights law. Yet few governments or armed opposition groups have taken action to prevent rape during conflict.

Rape by the armed forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina has received unprecedented publicity and the extent of sexual abuse there has caused shock and dismay. Women have been raped in their homes by soldiers from their own town or strangers passing through. Women prisoners have been raped by soldiers and guards in detention centres. Women have been raped in an organized and systematic way: they have been imprisoned in hotels and other buildings specifically so that they could be raped by soldiers.

Soldiers from all sides in the conflict have become rapists and women from all backgrounds have been victims. However, most of the victims have been Muslim women raped by Serbian soldiers and irregulars. The sexual abuse of women has been part of a wider pattern of warfare, characterized by intimidation and abuse of Muslims and Croats which have led thousands to flee or be expelled from their home areas. The UN Special Rapporteur on the conflict in the former Yugoslavia reported:

“...rape was being used as an instrument of ethnic cleansing... There are reliable reports of public rapes, for example, in front of a whole village, designed to terrorize the population and force ethnic groups to flee.”

Rape is not an accident of war, or an incidental adjunct to armed conflict. Its widespread use in times of conflict reflects the special terror it holds for women, the special power it gives the rapist over his victim, the special contempt it displays for her. The use of rape in conflict reflects the inequalities women face in their everyday lives in peacetime. Until governments live up to their obligations to ensure equality, and end discrimination against women, rape will continue to be a favourite weapon of the aggressor.

In our fragmented and volatile world all human rights are under threat. During conflict—whether international war, civil war, or low-intensity insurgency—the human rights of civilians become secondary to military advantage. Women suffer especially. They are caught up in conflicts largely not of their making. They become the butt of reprisal killings. They are forced to become refugees. They are left to raise families by themselves. They are raped and sexually abused with impunity.

Only five per cent of the casualties in the First World War were civilians. By the Second World War this figure had risen to 50 per cent. By the mid-1990s, about 80 per cent of the casualties in conflicts were civilians—most of them women and children.

Women’s lives have been devastated by war in many quarters of the globe. Often, government forces face opposition from organizations which draw their support from a particular ethnic group which has been excluded from power and denied access to resources. In country after country, troops engaged in counter-insurgency operations have targeted women just because they come from the ethnic group identified as “the enemy”.

In January 1994 an armed indigenous peasant movement took control of several towns in Mexico, demanding land rights and electoral reforms. After several days of heavy fighting, they retired to the mountains. Since then, indigenous peoples have suffered repeated threats and attacks by the Mexican army.

In the southeastern state of Chiapas three young indigenous women were returning to their village with their mother after selling their produce in a local town on 4 June 1994. The young women were stopped at a road-block and raped by 10 soldiers. They were warned that they would be killed if they reported being raped.

This also has been the experience of women living in the southeastern provinces of Turkey. Since the government announced in July 1993 that its armed forces would pursue a policy of “total conflict” against guerrillas of the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), human rights abuses against Kurdish villagers have been reported on a daily basis.

In brutal operations in villages suspected by the government of supporting the PKK, women, including pregnant women and women with new-born babies, young girls and elderly women have been beaten and publicly humiliated. Women have been killed in reprisal attacks by security forces on civilian areas of towns in the southeast. In police custody women have allegedly been raped and several have “disappeared”.

The growth of conflict in all parts of the world has seen millions of people forced to flee in search of safety. Between 1981 and 1993 the number of refugees worldwide doubled from eight million to more than 20 million; millions more are displaced within their own countries. In most cases they have been forced to flee situations of war or civil strife.

More than 80 per cent of refugees are women and children. Refugee women are particularly vulnerable during flight, when they may be attacked by members of the security forces, pirates, bandits, locals, smugglers, or other refugees. Border guards have detained women and girls for weeks to exploit them sexually. Smugglers sometimes assist female refugees across the border

in exchange for sex or money. A refugee woman fleeing the Mengistu Government in Ethiopia described her journey to a neighbouring country:

“We were four people: my two children, four and two years old, our guide and myself. I was five months pregnant. On our way we were stopped by two men who asked us where we were going. When we explained, one pulled me aside and said: ‘No safe passage before sex!’...he forced me down, kicked me in the stomach and raped me in front of my children. He knew I was pregnant, but that made no difference to him.”

The vast majority of women who flee in search of safety never get as far as seeking asylum abroad. According to the UN, there are more than 100 million displaced people worldwide, some 80 per cent of whom are women and dependent children. In their desperate search for safety, these women have effectively become refugees within their own countries, struggling to survive far from their homes.

Millions of women are caught between the government and an armed opposition, both of which use violence in pursuit of their goals. For the victims of abductions, torture and summary executions, the pain and suffering are the same, regardless of who is responsible.

Armed opposition groups all over the world have resorted to brutal tactics against innocent bystanders. Women have been murdered, raped, taken hostage and tormented by armed opposition forces in many parts of the world. Many of these groups claim to be fighting for the rights of those they abuse.

In Algeria killings of women by militant Islamic groups have coincided with drastic clampdowns by the government and a sharp deterioration in respect for human rights. Since a state of emergency was imposed in Algeria in February 1992, more than 10,000 people have been killed by the security forces, armed Islamist groups and other armed groups. Scores of women have been killed in Algeria since the beginning of 1993 in attacks attributed to armed Islamist groups.

Women have faced increasing pressure from armed Islamist groups to wear the Islamic veil. Katia Bengana, a 16-year-old student, was shot dead outside her home in Mefta (Blida), Algeria, in February 1994 because she was not wearing the veil. Before her death she had been repeatedly threatened that if she did not wear the veil she would be killed. She refused. On the day she was killed she was coming back from school with a friend who was wearing the veil. A gunman appeared in front of them, told the other girl to move out of the way and shot Katia dead.

BOX: Teaching a cruel lesson

Hamda As‘ad Yunis, a 69-year-old teacher, has been in jail in Kuwait for four years. Her crime, for which she was sentenced to death, was to continue teaching Arabic at the Bibi al-Salem secondary school during the Iraqi occupation. After the withdrawal of Iraqi troops, receiving pay as a public servant during the invasion was regarded as “collaboration”.

Thousands of people were arbitrarily arrested by Kuwaiti security forces immediately after the withdrawal of Iraq’s armies in February 1991. The vast majority of those arrested, tortured and killed were non-Kuwaiti.

Hamda As‘ad Yunis, who has Jordanian nationality, was tried before the Martial Law Courts, set up specifically to try cases of “collaboration”. Her trial was blatantly unfair, lacking the most basic safeguards: she was not allowed to see a lawyer; she had no right of appeal and the proceedings were rushed. She was sentenced to death in May 1991 on charges of spreading tendentious information and accepting funds from the occupying forces. The next month her sentence was commuted to life imprisonment.

Four years later Hamda As‘ad Yunis is still a political prisoner. She and her two sons, who are

also serving sentences for “collaboration”, are held in Kuwait Central Prison. They see each other once a month

quote: ‘... one pulled me aside and said: “No safe passage before sex!” ... he raped me in front of my children. He knew I was pregnant.’

picture caption: This 13-year-old Mozambican girl was raped by soldiers of the armed opposition group RENAMO. She is now a mother.

picture credit: © Bruce Paton/Panos

picture caption: Woman mourns in Baku cemetery, Azerbaijan

picture credit: © Eustafiev/Katz

picture caption: Fleeing from conflict in Iraq (left) and Mexico picture credit: © Tom Stoddard/Katz

picture caption: All over the world women’s lives have been devastated by war. Below: Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bottom: Somalia

picture credits: © Kevin Frayer/Rex Features © Tim/Rex Features

Fighting injustice

Dr Manorani Saravanamuttu is one of the many mothers, wives, sisters, companions and partners of the tens of thousands of people who have “disappeared” or been murdered by government forces in Sri Lanka. A medical doctor, her life was suddenly propelled into a world of death, grief and intimidation when her son, Richard de Zoysa, a journalist, was abducted and killed in Colombo in 1990.

Three months after the murder, a letter signed “Justice Honour and Glory to the Motherland”, warned her: “Mourn the death of your son. Any other steps will result in your death ... Only silence will protect you. Heed this advice. Your son failed to heed advice and had to be killed ...”.

Manorani Saravanamuttu refused to be silent. She campaigned to expose the truth about her son’s killing and for the murderers to be brought to justice. She said she could identify one of her son’s abductors as a Senior Superintendent of Police in Colombo. Despite her determination, no independent inquiry into her son’s abduction and killing has been held, and the police inquiry has produced no results.

She also defiantly ignored the repeated threats against her by taking on a leading role in the Mothers’ Front, a mass movement of 25,000 mothers of Sri Lanka’s “disappeared”. “They expect you to curl up in a corner and die of fear,” she told the *Washington Post* newspaper in 1991. “The women are saying ‘We are going mad with grief at home alone’. Now at least we are doing something.”

Manorani Saravanamuttu is a symbol of countless other women around the world whose names are not widely known but who have stood up for their principles, regardless of the personal cost. Most were singled out because their activities were perceived as a threat by the authorities.

When governments allow their forces to abduct, kill or secretly imprison political opponents, they hope their acts of violence and the victims will be quickly forgotten. They have not reckoned on the determination and courage of the victims’ relatives—often the wives or mothers. These women frequently transform their shattered lives to become crusaders for justice.

In some countries, women’s attempts to exercise their social rights, such as the right not to suffer discrimination, has resulted in an assault on their civil and political rights. In November 1990 Saudi Arabian women demonstrated for the right to drive, traditionally denied them. Dozens of women drove in convoy along one of Riyadh’s main streets. Their protest was

stopped by police who detained 49 of the women until male members of their families signed an undertaking that they would not defy the ban again. A week later the Ministry of the Interior introduced legislation making it a criminal offence for women to drive cars.

All over the world women are forced by economic necessity into miserable factories with miserable rates of pay. Women employees are seen as cheaper and more docile than men. Sometimes, however, women organize and fight back. But when they take up the struggle for their rights they are seen as a threat by those in power. This can mean that they lose their jobs, or even their lives.

Marsinah's body was found by a group of children in a shack at the edge of a rice field over 100 kilometres from her home. It was bloodied and covered in bruises. There were strangulation marks on her neck.

A few days earlier she had been a lively 25-year-old leading a strike at the watch factory where she worked in East Java, Indonesia. She was brutally murdered, almost certainly by the military, because she was a trade unionist who stood up for workers' rights.

In Indonesia the official rate of factory pay is less than a third of that necessary for physical survival. Women workers fare even worse—taking home on average half the male wage. In the factory where Marsinah worked, the management decided it would not even pay the official minimum wage. So on 3 May 1993 the workers walked out. Marsinah was one of 24 workers elected to negotiate with the company. Two days later she was abducted and killed.

A thorough investigation by an independent human rights organization concluded that high-ranking military authorities were responsible for Marsinah's murder. There is little chance, however, that those responsible for killing Marsinah will be brought to justice in Indonesia, where the security forces appear to be free to kill with impunity.

When governments allow their security forces to kill and intimidate with impunity, the cycle of violence is perpetuated. It is in precisely these situations that those who do stand up for human rights are particularly vulnerable.

Edméia da Silva Euzébio was a Brazilian woman who refused to remain silent about the "disappearance" and probable murder of her son, Luiz Henrique da Silva. He was one of 11 youths abducted in July 1990 from a farm in Magé, in the state capital, Rio de Janeiro, allegedly with the involvement of civil and military police. None of the youths was ever seen again.

Despite repeated death threats, Edméia da Silva Euzébio campaigned vigorously for an investigation to find the youths. In January 1993 she paid for her bravery with her life. She was walking in downtown Rio de Janeiro with her friend, Sheila da Conceição, when two men approached in broad daylight and shot both women dead. A few days earlier Edméia had testified about police involvement in the "disappearances".

Eren Keskin is a lawyer and a human rights activist in Turkey, where government forces have adopted a scorched earth tactic in their drive to crush the armed opposition PKK. Because she has defended members of the PKK, Eren Keskin has been repeatedly harassed. The harassment includes death threats—"we are measuring your coffin", went one telephone message—being shot at, physical assault by a police officer and arbitrary detention and ill-treatment to prevent her doing her job. Eren Keskin also faces a sentence of two years' imprisonment for "separatist propaganda" because she sent a message to the Belgian parliament about the situation of the Kurdish minority in Turkey.

Many women in many countries are behind bars because they were political activists. One is Dr Ma Thida, a surgeon and a writer, who is serving a 20-year prison sentence because she distributed information on opposition activities and campaigned on behalf of the National League for Democracy, the party which won the elections in Myanmar (Burma) in 1990 but

was denied power by the military.

Shaheen Sameie has spent the past 13 years as a political prisoner in Iran; she is expected to remain behind bars for the next three years. Shaheen Sameie was a factory worker before her arrest in 1982. She was tortured, tried in secret in 1983 and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. The charges against her are not known. It seems the authorities suspected her of supporting a banned left-wing organization, Peykar.

In Sudan Sara Nugdallah, a university lecturer and member of the executive and women's committees of the banned Umma Party, has been repeatedly detained for her political activities. The last time she was arrested was on 7 April 1994. She was initially held in the security headquarters before being transferred to Omdurman Women's Prison. She was released on 20 June. No reason was given for her arrest.

Women make up nearly a third of the hundreds of political prisoners held in Tibet. Many have been tortured. Most are nuns serving sentences of "re-education through labour", who were imprisoned for organizing or joining protests for Tibet's independence from China.

Phuntsog Nyidron is one of the imprisoned nuns. She is not due for release until 2006. Her 17-year sentence, the longest known current prison sentence for a female prisoner in Tibet, was imposed after she and five other nuns were arrested during a pro-independence protest in Lhasa, capital of Tibet. Her initial sentence of nine years was extended by another eight years to punish her for composing and recording pro-independence songs in prison.

Women everywhere are involved in community activities. They organize support networks. They set up health and education projects. These activities allow women to make greater contributions to their societies and in most places are seen as a valuable addition to community life. In some places, however, governments view these community activities as a threat. So the activists are targeted. In Peru the authorities often use the pretext that community activists sympathize with the opposition in order to target them.

Such was the fate of Santosa Layme Bejar, whose only "crime" appears to have been helping women's and children's health projects in her community. In 1983 she became involved in local projects in her home district of San Juan de Lurigancho, in the capital Lima. She helped set up the *Vaso de Leche* (Glass of Milk) program, which feeds the needy. Since 1989 she has been the area coordinator for her neighbourhood.

Santosa Layme was detained in February 1994, accused of being a member of Shining Path (the main armed opposition group) and charged with "terrorism". This is ironic, because she has also been threatened with death by Shining Path. She has consistently made public her opposition to the activities of the armed opposition in Peru. In 1991 she joined a march for peace after Shining Path had killed two community leaders.

The women whose cases are featured here come from many different countries, different races, different backgrounds, but they all have one thing in common. They have been victimized because they fought for their rights.

Many of them are women who tried to improve their societies. Many others felt compelled to become activists because they are the mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters of men who are victims of human rights violations. Women whose families have suffered torture, political imprisonment, "disappearances", political killings and the death penalty are often compelled into human rights activism.

Women such as these have suffered the worst brutalities known to the modern world because they stood up for fundamental human rights."⁴

Box: Abusive use of law

At the beginning of May 1994, Josephine Nyawira Ngengi was a member of a human rights

group in Kenya called Release Political Prisoners, attending the trial of her brother, a prisoner of conscience. By the end of the month she was a political prisoner.

She was arrested on 8 May 1994 and spent three weeks in illegal and incommunicado detention before her court appearance on 30 May. She was then charged with robbery with violence, a charge that has been used against other political prisoners.

If convicted, Josephine Nyawira Ngengi faces a mandatory death sentence. Before her court appearance she was reportedly severely tortured; beaten until she bled heavily and forced to lick her blood off the floor.

The Kenyan Government appears to be using capital criminal charges, which are non-bailable, against people whose only offence is non-violent criticism of the government. Amnesty International is concerned at what appears to be abusive use of the "hanging" law and is investigating whether the charge against Josephine Nyawira Ngengi has been fabricated to silence her opposition.

Quote: 'They expect us to curl up in a corner and die of fear. The women are saying "We are going mad with grief at home alone". Now at least we are doing something.'

Picture caption: Women in action. Above: demonstrating in Jerusalem against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Below: protesting against human rights violations in Chile © Penny Tweedie/Panos. © Ivo Saglietti Agenzia Contrasto/Katzb

Picture caption: Below: women protest against the refoulement of Haitian refugees outside the UN headquarters in New York in May 1992. Bottom: meeting in support of women's rights in the Philippines. © Marc French/Panos © Brenda Prince/Format

Picture caption: Celebrating the launch of the African National Congress Women's League in Durban, South Africa, 1990. © Maggie Murray/Format

Women at risk

No country in the world treats its women as well as its men. Women from all social classes, cultures and races, in all societies, are at risk of abuse of their human rights. Discrimination in society can compound the risk to women's human rights. This is often reflected in national law. If the law regards a woman as a second-class citizen, there is little incentive or the opportunity for society as a whole to respect women's human rights.

Women taken into custody in many countries are at risk of rape and other sexual torture and ill-treatment. In several countries judicial systems discriminate against women by sentencing them more harshly than men convicted of the same offences. Some judicial systems provide cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments for crimes for which most offenders are women. Women who come from minority or marginalized groups are in double jeopardy.

Rape is a form of torture experienced by women all over the world. Rape, threats of rape and sexual abuse are often used to elicit information or a confession during interrogation, or to humiliate and intimidate women.

Women are also raped and sexually abused to punish entire communities. When the military launched an anti-poaching operation in Zaire's Salonga National Park during April and May 1992, more than a dozen school girls aged between 13 and 15 were raped by soldiers; a father was forced at gunpoint to rape his 18-year-old daughter.

Sometimes women are raped solely because police officers and soldiers think they have the right to do so. One of two young factory workers raped in East Java, Indonesia, in January 1993, said the soldier who raped her boasted: "Go ahead and report us to the commander. He's not going to do a thing. This is our right!"

Hundreds of cases of police rape have been reported in India but convictions of police officers for raping women in their custody remain rare. Few cases of custodial rape reach the trial stage.

In 1990 five police officers in West Bengal were suspended for allegedly repeatedly raping Kankuli Santra in Singur police station. The police at first claimed Kankuli Santra was mentally ill. They then said she was a “bad” woman. Public protests eventually forced charges to be brought against two of the officers, but the case was dismissed for “lack of evidence”.

When law enforcement officials are seen to be able

to rape women without fear of prosecution, this clearly signals to society at large that the authorities do not treat the crime seriously.

All over the world women are discriminated against in criminal and in civil justice systems. Few countries can claim that they honour the principle that all shall be equal before the law.

In Iraq a decree passed in 1990 gave men the legal right to act as judge and executioner, by killing female relatives “for reasons of honour”. The decree was rescinded within two months; whether the implicit message about women’s human rights in Iraq passed equally swiftly into history is another matter.

In some countries the law provides for particularly cruel, inhuman and degrading punishments for offences which are mainly committed by women.

Hundreds of women have been flogged for breaching the dress laws in Sudan since the military government introduced a new penal code in March 1991. The penal code defines a wide variety of offences which are punishable by flogging: wearing clothing contrary to public decency is punishable by up to 40 lashes. A non-Muslim woman living in Omdurman was fined and sentenced to 35 lashes after being arrested in late 1991 for wearing trousers. She was flogged immediately. “Before they finished I was crying and shouting ‘Jesus’”. At once the judge stopped the man from lashing and said, ‘add on another five lashes’. Women in Iran have also been flogged for breaking the dress laws.

In Bangladesh the government has largely failed to protect people from Islamist death threats. Foreign and Bangladeshi non-governmental organizations which train women to become self-supporting have been threatened or have had their offices set on fire or bombed. Islamists assert that these organizations alienate women from their “proper” social roles and Islamic life-styles. Schools and women’s health and family planning centres have been subject to arson attacks.

Bangladeshi women are particularly at risk in areas where local village councils controlled by Islamists have set themselves up as enforcers of their interpretation of Islamic law. In the past three years, these councils, known as *salish*, which are not part of the judicial system and have no legal authority, have ordered the execution, torture or ill-treatment of women.

In January 1993 a young woman, Noorjahan Begum, was publicly stoned in Chatakchara, a village in Sylhet district. A *salish* had declared that her second marriage was illegal under Islamic law (her first marriage had been dissolved), and that she had therefore committed adultery. Noorjahan and her husband Motaleb

were sentenced to death by stoning. Immediately after the verdict, Noorjahan was buried in the ground up to her chest, then villagers began throwing stones at her. She died a few hours later. Motaleb, her husband, reportedly survived.

Most women who fall victim to human rights violations come from the poorest and most vulnerable groups in society: the homeless; indigenous women; women belonging to socially disadvantaged groups such as the Scheduled Castes and Tribes in India; ethnic minorities; women in immigrant communities, and women who are criminalized because of their sexual orientation.

Economically disadvantaged and marginalized by cultural and linguistic factors, such women often have little access to state institutions through which they could seek redress. Sometimes access to redress is blocked by state agents charged with protecting them; often, instead of

protection, women from these groups meet official abuse.

Women are often detained, tortured, held hostage and sometimes even killed because their relatives or people they are associated with are connected to political opposition groups, or are wanted by the authorities.

Eighteen-year-old María Teresa Akumu was sentenced to 12 years' imprisonment by a court in Equatorial Guinea. She was charged with an attempt against the security of the state and convicted of giving shelter to plotters, apparently because of her boyfriend's alleged involvement in a raid against a military barracks.

After her arrest in March 1994 María Teresa Akumu was tortured and not given any food. Her trial was blatantly unfair. No evidence against her was produced and she was not allowed to reply to the charges. During her sentence she is being forced to carry out domestic labour at the house of a government official during the day and is taken back to prison every night.

In Europe women of non-European ethnic origin have been the victims of state violence. In the United Kingdom there have been allegations of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of women forcibly deported as illegal immigrants or after being refused asylum. Joy Gardner, a 40-year-old Jamaican woman, was arrested by immigration and police officers for removal from the United Kingdom in July 1993. Having been bound and gagged, Joy Gardner collapsed, fell into a coma and was pronounced dead four days later.

In several countries women are persecuted because of their sexual orientation. Lesbian women are in double jeopardy: vulnerable to abuse because they are women, lesbians are further marginalized and stigmatized due to their sexual orientation.

Involvement in a lesbian relationship can cost a woman her life in Iran. Any woman convicted four times of lesbianism faces the death penalty.

In many other parts of the world homosexuality remains a criminal offence under laws which affect lesbians as well as gay men. In the Australian state of Tasmania consenting adults who engage in homosexual acts in private face prosecution and imprisonment. In the United States of America, consensual homosexual acts in private are punishable by imprisonment in five states—Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, and Tennessee—with penalties ranging from 30 days' to 10 years' imprisonment. In Romania this "offence" is punishable by five years' imprisonment.

The abuses lesbians suffer are often surrounded by silence because lesbians frequently do not have access to the resources needed to call attention to ill-treatment. This means that the abuses committed against them are even more difficult to monitor and punish. The international community's failure to see lesbian and gay rights as human rights has meant that abuses against them frequently

go unreported by local, national and international human rights organizations.

BOX:Persecuting the Roma

In Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and the Slovak Republic, Roma people have been singled out for illegal detention, torture and ill-treatment. Even more common is the routine failure of police officers to protect Roma from racist attacks.

In September 1993 racial violence erupted in the Romanian village of Hadareni. Three Roma men were killed and more than a dozen houses set alight by a crowd of villagers, while a squad of 45 police officers looked on. Most of the Roma fled the village. Two Roma women came back to collect some of their livestock. On their way to the village they were attacked and beaten by a police officer who warned them not to come back.

Another Roma villager, Maria Moldovan, complained about the ill-treatment of her son by police officers. She was then fined for disturbing the public peace. She has appealed against the fine. In June 1994 she was arrested and imprisoned for two days.ⁿ

Picture caption: Above: indigenous women in Guatemala. Below: refugees from genocide in Rwanda. © Paul Smith/Panos© Paul Smith/Panos

Quote: 'Go ahead and report us to the commander. He's not going to do a thing. This is our right!'

Picture caption: Women whose hair is uncovered risk flogging in Sudan.© Sarah Errington/Hutchinson Library

Picture caption: Below: woman grieves in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Bottom: ethnic Armenian woman deported from Azerbaijan, with her belongings. © Ron Haviv/Katz© Sherbell/Katz

Campaigning for women's human rights

Discrimination is a deadly disease. More women and girl-children die each day from various forms of gender-based discrimination and violence than from any other type of human rights abuse. Every year, because of discrimination, millions of women are mutilated, battered to death, burned alive, stripped of their legal rights, and bought and sold in an unacknowledged but international trade in slaves for domestic or sexual purposes.

The extent and severity of such practices must be recognized if we are to fully address the context in which human rights violations against women occur.

Domestic violence is an international problem. In most of the world's countries it is the cause of most violent attacks on women. In many it remains the main source of violence against women, even when prohibited by law. The problem of domestic violence crosses borders, - cultures, and classes.

For many years now, African women have been in the forefront of the campaign to eradicate female genital mutilation. An estimated 110 million women suffer serious, even life threatening, injuries throughout their adult lives, as a result of this traditional practice which many underwent as children, some even as infants. The scale of the practice is enormous; around two million girls are mutilated every year.

Thousands of women and girl-children have fallen victim to the trade in sexual and domestic slaves. This international industry exists with the knowledge and sometimes the acquiescence of governments in whose countries it takes place.

In numerous countries, it is activists against the abuses encompassed by the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women who have been threatened, imprisoned, tortured, "disappeared" and killed. The perpetrators of these violations are often agents of the same governments who in Geneva, New York or Vienna agree fine-sounding prohibitions of such actions. Governments must be held to their obligations if this international standard is not to become one more double standard.

Amnesty International works to promote all the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other international standards, through human rights education programs and campaigning for ratification of human rights treaties. At a minimum, the UDHR obliges governments to eradicate practices which are abusive and discriminatory of women. Few governments have taken seriously this fundamental duty.

Amnesty International's specific mandate for action is to oppose certain grave violations of the rights to freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination, and of the right to physical and mental integrity. In particular, Amnesty International believes that no one should be imprisoned as a prisoner of conscience and that no political prisoner should be imprisoned without a prompt and fair trial. Amnesty International also opposes torture, the death penalty, extrajudicial executions and other forms of deliberate and arbitrary killing and "disappearances".

Amnesty International acknowledges the important work by individuals and other organizations

against abuses such as domestic violence, genital mutilation, and other violent acts committed by private individuals and organizations.

However, Amnesty International's mandate for action on behalf of individual victims is directed at governments and armed political groups.

We urge governments who are seriously committed to ending discrimination and violence against women (in both the public and private spheres) to adopt and fund comprehensive policies for widespread education and consciousness-raising about all women's human rights issues. When governments knowingly tolerate abuses such as domestic violence, female genital mutilation or trafficking in sexual slaves, the gap between what is public and what is private narrows.

In 1993 the UN unequivocally stated that women's rights are human rights. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, the final document of the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights, states: "The human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights". With the encouragement of the Conference, the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights appointed in March 1994 a UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women.

Yet the UN resolution to hold the World Conference on Human Rights had made no mention of women, or of gender-based abuses. What forced women's human rights onto the agenda in Vienna, was the collective action of women in the years and months beforehand. As one activist put it: "The conference was part of a continuing process to improve women's rights, which is precisely why women targeted it as an important place to be present and to be heard. And we were."

Women's voices can be heard all over the world: demanding justice, protesting discrimination, claiming rights, mourning dead husbands and comforting raped daughters. The task of the international human rights movement is to make governments listen and ensure that they take action to protect and promote all the human rights of women.ⁿ

Picture caption: Tribal women in Andhra Pradesh, India © W. Van Cappellen/Katz

Picture caption: Below: Iraqi refugees demonstrate against Saddam Hussein. Bottom: demonstration by mothers of the "disappeared" and missing in Vukovar, Croatia © Lehman//Katz © Marc French/Panos

15 steps to protect
women's human rights

Governments should:

- 1 Recognize that women's human rights are universal and indivisible
- 2 Ratify and implement international instruments for the protection of human rights
- 3 Eradicate discrimination, which denies women human rights
- 4 Safeguard women's human rights during armed conflict
- 5 Stop rape, sexual abuse and other torture and ill-treatment by government agents and paramilitary auxiliaries
- 6 Prevent "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions by government agents and compensate the victims
- 7 Stop persecution because of family connections
- 8 Safeguard the health rights of women in custody
- 9 Release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally
- 10 Ensure prompt and fair trials for all political prisoners
- 11 Prevent human rights violations against women refugees and asylum-seekers and displaced

women

12 Abolish the death penalty

13 Support the work of relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations

14 Promote women's rights as human rights through official programs of education and training

15 Armed political groups should safeguard women's human rights.