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INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY -- 50 YEARS OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS?

In the run up to international women's day, Amnesty International today launches a campaign calling on governments to mark the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by mainstreaming human rights practices which fully recognize women's rights.

"Despite their long struggle for human rights, women continue to suffer from second class status both in their own countries and at the United Nations," Amnesty International said. "The UN sometimes uses sexist human rights language and does not consistently include a gender perspective in human rights reporting and gender expertise in field visits and operations."

The organization is calling on the UN to bring women's human rights from the margins into the mainstream by adopting gender-sensitive language. In particular, the organization's French-speaking members around the world will be writing to their governments and non-governmental organisations asking for the expression "*droits de l'Homme*" to be replaced by a non sexist expression, such as "*droits humains*."

For two hundred years, the official French language has used the words "*droits de l'Homme*" (literally, the "rights of man") when referring to human rights. The language arises from the 1789 Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen -- a declaration whose rights were not meant for women, and which did not treat men and women as equal human beings.

"Many francophone people around the world have acknowledged this and stopped using "*droits de l'Homme*". However, their governments and organizations such as the United Nations and the Francophonie continue to use it --showing that their language has not kept pace with the developments and inclusion of gender perspectives in the field of human rights," Amnesty International said.

It is not just the French language which needs to be changed, according to the organization. All governments, inter-governmental organizations and nongovernmental organizations should adopt gender-sensitive language which does not obscure women's experiences.

"This language change may be seen as trivial in itself, a question of semantics to some, but language is indicative of the continuing failure to take women's human rights seriously, and that failure leads to death, torture, "disappearance", unfair trials, honour killings and using rape as a weapon of war," Amnesty International said.

Another reason for the lack of work on women at the UN and governmental level is that the inclusion of a gender perspective in human rights reports is far from complete. Women's rights remain invisible in the majority of reports. To rectify the situation, all international and national bodies investigating human rights violations should systematically include violations of women's human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights.

However, women are not just invisible in some UN human rights reports, they are woefully under-represented on UN human rights bodies as a whole, with the exception of those regarded as having a focus on women. To really integrate women's issues into all areas of the UN, a gender balance on those bodies and mechanisms need to be implemented as speedily as possible.

While there have been advances in some areas, such as the 1993 adoption by the UN of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the 1994 appointment of a Special Rapporteur on violence against women, women's rights have not been systematically and consistently integrated into the majority of the UN's work. Indeed, women's human rights were only substantiated and reaffirmed in the Vienna Declaration issued at the World Conference on Human Rights – almost 50 years after the UN was founded.

1998 marks the 50th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which obliges governments to protect all their citizens, male and female, no matter which country they live in. It specifically forbids discrimination against women because of their gender or religion and on any other bases. Yet, this year the universality of human rights is under attack –an attack which inevitably leaves women as its victims. In the name of culture or tradition, women are denied equal rights before the law. Women are also targeted because they stand up for their rights, campaign for change or defend their family and community.

- 32-year-old Nadezhda Chaykova, was a journalist investigating high-level corruption in the Chechen Republic. Her body was found in March 1996 in a shallow grave. She had been blindfolded, severely beaten and shot in the back of the head. Although there is conflicting information about her killers she clearly believed that the Russian army, angry at articles alleging misappropriation of funds earmarked for reconstruction.
- Dita Indah Sari is serving a five year sentence in an Indonesian jail. The 24-year-old's "crime" was to take part in a peaceful demonstration calling for a rise in the national minimum wage. She was convicted under the draconian Anti-Subversion law which the government uses to silence its political critics.
- Leticia Moctezuma Vargas, a teacher in the Mexican state of Morelos is peacefully campaigning to stop a government sponsored multi-million dollar golf course and tourist complex on land the Tepoztlán community considers sacred. Both Leticia and her 11-year-old daughter have been beaten, and told to "take it easy with your politics or we will kill you".

As part of its year-long campaign to promote the UDHR, Amnesty International is calling on governments to demonstrate that they give a priority to promoting and protecting women's human rights by ratifying and implementing human rights treaties relating to women, fully integrating work on women's rights with human rights work, stopping discrimination against women, training police and military personnel on gender issues, and protecting women from gender-based violence.

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