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Acceptance speech by Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International, on receiving the Pilkington Window to the World Award

Women of the Year Lunch and Assembly, London, 14 October 2002

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

It is a great honour and privilege to receive this award today.

I have spent twenty two years of my life in the cause of human rights, and as I stand here today, I would like to pay a tribute to the brave and tireless work of women around the world who are fighting to make sure that everyone can enjoy their human rights. In giving me this award, you are honouring all those other women.

Women like Radhia Nasraoui of Tunisia, who has been imprisoned, harassed, and placed under constant surveillance because of her work as a human rights lawyer. Women like Digna Ochoa, who was killed in Mexico last year because she dared to speak out against injustice. Women like Malaysian human rights activist and mother of three, Irene Fernandes, who has been on trial for a report she produced on immigration detention camps. Women like Dr Frances Lovemore, the medical director of an NGO in Zimbabwe for speaking out against torture and politically motivated rape. Today, we celebrate their achievements through this award.

As I accept this award, I would also like to think that we are giving voice to all those women whose rights are being violated in prisons, police cells or detention centres, in their homes, their community or their places of work. According to the World Bank figures, at least one in five women and girls have been beaten or sexually abused in her life time - that is a shameful statistic at the beginning of the twenty first century.

For twenty one years I worked with thousands of refugee women who had been raped during their escape, were sexually exploited in their country of asylum by corrupt officials, and exposed to danger when they were forced to return home in unsafe, insecure conditions.

Over the past year in my work for Amnesty International, I have had to deal with many human rights challenges but none have moved me as much as that of women victims of violence.

Last month I was in Burundi to discuss with the Government the atrocities that are being committed there by the army and armed opposition groups. This is a tiny country in the heart of Africa, forgotten by the rest of the world, where a civil war has claimed thousands of lives over the last ten years. I saw and heard some awful things - but nothing was as shocking as the revelation by a UN representative that a survey has

found that a very high proportion of girls in Burundi are raped before they reach the age of 18. It showed once again that women and girls are the first - and I am afraid, often the forgotten - victims of war.

But women are not safe in times of peace either. In Pakistan, hundreds of women are killed by their father or brother in the name of honour. In India, brides are burnt to death because they fail to bring a sufficient dowry. In parts of Africa, girls are subjected to female genital mutilation in the name of religion and culture. In Nigeria, even now a woman called Amina Lawwal is awaiting the sentence of death by stoning because she had a child outside marriage. In Saudi Arabia 15 girls died in a school fire - they were not allowed to leave the premises because they were not wearing head scarves and their male relatives were not there to receive them!

For many women their home is a place of terror, even in rich societies. Here in this country, police receive at least one call every minute for public assistance against domestic violence. In the United States, a woman is battered every 15 seconds, and 700,000 women are raped every year.

Violence against women is fed by a global culture which, despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, despite the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, despite treaties, laws and declarations, denies women equal rights with men. This must stop. Underlying the abuses suffered by women is a discrimination perpetuated by governments and by society -- and here everyone has a responsibility -- political leaders, corporate leaders, community leaders, the media and ordinary people.

Amnesty International has been working to eradicate torture and other human rights abuse for a number of years now. As the first woman secretary general of Amnesty International, I have made a global campaign against violence on women one of my own personal goals. By honouring me today, I believe you have helped to draw important attention to this work.

Today we are celebrating the achievement of women - it is actually a celebration of hope - and so let me end by telling you the story of an ordinary woman with extraordinary hope. Her name is Zubaida, she is from Afghanistan and I met her last December in a refugee camp on the border of Pakistan. She was wearing a dirty, torn burqa, covered from head to toe, except for her a slit around her eyes. She was holding a little baby in her arms, sitting with her husband. I asked her what she would do when she went back. I expected her to talk as the other women in the camp had done about her baby and her husband. But she looked at me and said without hesitation, "I am going back home to study science and be a scientist." This was a poor illiterate woman going back to a war torn country after ten years but she had held on to her dream - and as long as she has hope, we cannot lose hope. It is women like her who inspire women like you and me.

So, in the name of women human rights activists and in the name of women who suffer human rights abuses around the world, but who continue to hope for a better life, I accept this award today. Thank you.

**For more information about Woman of the Year Lunch and Assembly, please visit
<http://www.woyla.co.uk>**

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