

# THE GENDER TRAP

WOMEN, VIOLENCE AND POVERTY

STOP VIOLENCE  
AGAINST WOMEN

AMNESTY  
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Women working at a rice mill in Asuganj, Bangladesh.

# THE GENDER TRAP: WOMEN, VIOLENCE AND POVERTY

Most of the people living in poverty in the world are women – more than 70 per cent, according to UN estimates.<sup>1</sup> Why is it that more than two thirds of the world's poor are women, although women are only half of the world's population?

Discrimination is a key driver of poverty. In some countries discrimination against women is built into the law, in others it persists despite equality laws. Women do not have equal access to resources and productive means such as land, credit and inheritance rights. Women are not paid the same wages as men and most of their labour is unpaid. Women often work in informal employment with no job security or social protection. At the same time, they are still held responsible for providing care for their families and homes.

## Most of the people living in poverty in the world are women

Poverty, for women, is both a consequence and a cause of violence. Women who suffer physical, sexual or psychological violence lose income and their productive capacity is impaired. Violence against women also impoverishes their families, communities and societies. On the other hand, poverty makes it harder for women to find avenues of escape from an abusive relationship. While economic independence does not shield women from violence, access to economic resources can enhance women's capacity to make meaningful choices. A woman who is economically dependent on her partner may see no viable way of supporting herself and her children.

A girl who becomes pregnant as a result of a rape may find herself excluded from school, reducing her prospects of finding work and securing an independent future.

The violence women face helps keep them poor, and it is poor women who are most exposed to violence. Many women living in slums experience violence and insecurity on a daily basis both in their homes and in the streets. Women in low-paid jobs in the informal sector often work in deplorable conditions. Migrant women workers face exploitation and violence from employers or criminal networks when they seek better economic opportunities abroad.

Discrimination and violence against women often go hand in hand, resulting in the denial of women's rights to health, education, shelter and food. Poverty in turn puts women and girls at risk of further abuse and violence, closing the vicious circle.

Discrimination undermines the human rights of many different groups in society, including Indigenous People, ethnic, racial, religious or linguistic minorities, and migrants. Within these groups, women face double discrimination – both as group members and as women. In addition, particular groups of women are especially prone to be targeted for violence, including minority, Indigenous and refugee women, destitute women, women in institutions or in detention, girls, women with disabilities, older women and women in situations of armed conflict.

Poverty is more than lack of income. It is also lack of security, lack of voice, lack of choice. The voices of women who live in poverty are rarely heard. Poverty manifests itself in different ways and affects people and countries differently. Some groups are hit harder than others, both in developed and developing countries. Women experience the effects of poverty in particular ways because of their roles in society, the community and the family.

However, women are not passive victims. They can be active citizens and human rights defenders who claim their rights, organize themselves, demand justice and accountability, and work to improve their lives and the situation of their families and communities. Women often are the most committed and successful agents of change, not only for their own families and communities but for the whole of society. Examples of such positive changes can be found in all corners of the globe.

## UNEQUAL SHARES



**Afghan women's rights activists protest against a controversial law that they fear would place new restrictions on Shia women's freedom of movement, April 2009. The law has since been revised to include some positive changes proposed by Afghan women human rights defenders, although some concerns remain.**

Despite producing 60 to 80 per cent of the food in developing countries, women own only 1 per cent of the land.<sup>2</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, the majority of women work in the agricultural sector but customary law often denies daughters and wives the right to inherit the land they cultivate. In some countries, women are required to obtain their husbands' permission or co-signature before they are granted credit by a bank. Unequal access to credit, land

and inheritance is a major impediment to women's economic independence.

In many countries such gender inequalities are enshrined in openly discriminatory laws. Even in countries whose constitutions guarantee equality before the law, there are often laws on the statute book that deny women equal rights with men.

Equality in law does not guarantee equality in practice. Even in countries with equality laws, discrimination often persists because the laws are not effectively implemented.

International laws and standards require all states to protect, respect and fulfil equal rights for women, but in most countries women are effectively denied the same legal rights as men. This can be seen in areas such as property and inheritance rights, protection from violence, marriage or divorce laws, freedom of movement and full legal capacity and equality before the law.

### **Despite producing 60 to 80 per cent of the food in developing countries, women own only 1 per cent of the land**

Violence against women entrenches inequality and exacerbates poverty by reducing the capacity of women to contribute productively to the family, the economy and public life. It also drains resources from social services, the justice system, health care agencies and employers.

Women's potential for economic success, driving entire communities out of poverty, can be seen in the experience of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). BRAC became the world's largest grassroots development organization by putting women and girls at the centre of its anti-poverty strategies and engaging with them as active agents of change. Over the years, BRAC has organized women and girls and, with their active participation, has piloted, refined and scaled up practical ways to increase their access to resources and support them as entrepreneurs. BRAC runs microfinance and education programmes in Asia and Africa, reaching more than 110 million people, and is more than 80 per cent self-funded.

# WOMEN WORK FROM DAWN TO DUSK

Women earn only 10 per cent of the world's income although they do two-thirds of the world's work.<sup>3</sup>

## In both developing and developed countries, women consistently earn less than men for the same work

Women and girls carry the burden of domestic work and take on even more responsibility in times of crisis. Rural women spend much of their time fetching water, collecting firewood, working in the fields and caring for young children or sick family members but their labour is unpaid and its importance is unacknowledged. Both rural and urban women work in the informal sector, often in low paid or hazardous jobs with no regard to their labour rights. UN-Habitat has estimated that in Africa, 84 per cent of women's employment outside the agricultural sector is informal.<sup>4</sup>

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Girls pounding grain in a village in northern Sierra Leone, 2009.

Environmental degradation and climate change affect the lives of countless women and girls. When droughts or floods devastate the countryside, many men migrate to urban centres to look for work but escaping natural disaster is more difficult for women, especially those with dependent children. Women have to work harder to produce crops, walk longer to fetch water or collect firewood, and survive on depleted resources. When resources are scarce, sacrifices are often made at the expense of women and girls. Seven out of 10 of the world's hungry are women and girls, according to the World Food Programme.<sup>5</sup>

The impact of globalization and of policies such as deregulation of economies and privatization of the public sector have tended to reinforce women's economic inequality, especially within marginalized communities, according to the UN Secretary-General. Economic restructuring has reduced public sector programmes and social spending in many countries, and while industrialization and economic migration offer women waged work outside traditional boundaries, women are employed primarily in gender-segregated and low-wage industries.<sup>6</sup>

In both developing and developed countries, women consistently earn less than men for the same work. As a result, even in wealthy countries, many women live in relative poverty, especially if they are single and have dependants.



**A schoolgirl in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, wears one of the badges made by a South African women's project for Amnesty International's Stop Violence Against Women campaign, March 2008. Tens of thousands of her contemporaries are not in school as a result of poverty.**

Many women face discrimination and harassment at work and women migrant workers are particularly exposed to exploitation and abuse. Poverty may push them into semi-legal or illegal forms of employment, often gender-segregated, such as domestic service, work in manufacturing sweatshops or the sex industry. Many find themselves entrapped as victims of human trafficking or other contemporary forms of slavery.

T., a 27-year-old woman from the Philippines, is one of the tens of thousands of migrant domestic workers in Jordan. Her employer confiscated her passport when she arrived and made her work 17 hours a day, seven days a week. The family gave her little food and locked her in the house when they went out. She worked for two years but her employer failed to pay her almost a year's salary and forced her to work for two more months without a visa. Eventually T. jumped from the window on the second floor to escape and hurt her leg. Her employer reported her to the police and accused her of theft in an attempt to avoid paying her overdue salary. The employer finally agreed to pay T.'s return ticket to the Philippines, but not her overdue salary, and she returned home.

Poverty and marginalization not only put girls at risk of violence, but also force them to work instead of going to school or in order to pay for schooling. According to UNICEF estimates, in 2007, 102,000 girls aged 6 to 17 worked as domestic servants in Haiti. Isolated from family, friends and the outside world, these girls are particularly exposed to abuse. Stéphanie is one of them. She worked from the age of 12, receiving only food and lodging as payment, and sold goods in the street to fund her education. She was returning home with her merchandise and a day's takings when she was attacked by three men and raped at gunpoint. Her goods and money were stolen and she had to abandon her education as she could not pay the school fees.

# GIRLS MISS OUT ON EDUCATION

Three quarters of the world's illiterate adults are women.<sup>7</sup>

Education is a right in itself and it is also a pathway to the enjoyment of other rights. Lack of education has lifelong consequences. For girls, lacking an education reduces their opportunities for financial independence. It increases the likelihood that they will enter into early marriage, with its high incidence of emotional and physical ill-health. Lack of education also significantly increases the risks of contracting HIV and of dying in childbirth. It makes it harder for women and girls to navigate society successfully and claim their rights.

Poverty forces families to make tough choices when they have to pay for children's education. Often boys' education is prioritized over that of girls, as boys are seen as the future bread-winners for the family. In many countries, girls are expected to share domestic work with their mothers until they become wives and mothers themselves. Though evidence has shown that educated mothers have healthier and better educated children, education is often not seen as equally important for women.

In Tajikistan, for example, the combination of gender stereotypes and the costs of schooling mean that about one in five girls drops out of school at the age of 13 or 14. Many families cannot afford the basic essentials needed for their children's schooling – text books, clothes and transport. So rather than sending girls to school, they prioritize the education of boys, who will support them financially in later life. Many girls do not

complete their education but instead care for family members or work in the fields or at the market until they are married.

Countless girls drop out of school because of sexual harassment and violence, or fear of violence. Sexual harassment of girls in school occurs around the world. A study in the USA found that 83 per cent of girls aged between 12 and 16 in public schools had experienced some form of sexual harassment.<sup>8</sup>

Early marriage is another reason why girls do not go to school or drop out of school. Despite laws prohibiting early marriage, many girls around the world are married off to older men. They are left with little or no education and few prospects for economic independence. Their lack of financial independence can mean that their life choices are greatly restricted.

## Three quarters of the world's illiterate adults are women

A 27-year-old mother of three children from Iraq told Amnesty International in May 2008 that her father had forced her to marry an older man when she was just 13. Years later, she said, her husband falsely accused her of adultery because he wanted to divorce her and evade responsibility for supporting her. She was being detained in the Erbil women's prison because of her husband's accusations. She said she had received only minimal education as a child and, alone, could not support herself and her children. She now hoped that her husband would allow her to return to the family home to live as her husband's "servant", if this was what he required, so that she could at least be with her children.

In many countries, when money is scarce and education is costly, some girls enter sexual relationships which they would not otherwise, for example with "sugar daddies" (older men who give them gifts or cash), in order to get the money they need for school.

# MULTIPLE DISCRIMINATION

Women often face multiple discrimination – they are discriminated against and denied their rights because they are women and because they belong to a marginalized group. Women living in poverty also face discrimination simply because they are poor.

Multiple discrimination is intimately linked to violence against women. It shapes the forms of violence that a woman experiences. It also makes some women more likely to be targeted for certain forms of violence because they have less social status than other women and because perpetrators know such women are less likely to report abuse or seek assistance.

The discrimination that women face often leads to exclusion from access to justice, protection or services – exclusion that arises from poverty and further entrenches poverty.

Many women living in poverty do not have access to health care because they cannot afford to pay for it or because they cannot afford the cost of transport to reach health facilities. Others face barriers because they are illiterate, do not speak the official language or are not given the information they need.

The disparities are shown clearly by the toll of maternal mortality – one woman every minute dies of complications of pregnancy and childbirth. The vast majority – more than 95 per cent – are poor and come from developing countries.

In developed countries, women who belong to racial or ethnic minorities are often more likely to be poor and face greater barriers in gaining access to health

services.<sup>9</sup> For example, in the USA, African American women are almost four times more likely to die in childbirth than white women.<sup>10</sup>

Peru has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality in the Americas. Most of the women who died in pregnancy and childbirth are rural, poor and Indigenous women who in practice do not receive the same health services as other women in the country. Women's access to healthcare reflects the deep inequalities in Peruvian society. Women living in rural areas have poorer access to vital emergency obstetric care and may also lack access to information on maternal health. Indigenous women often find themselves facing additional barriers because they do not speak Spanish and because of deep rooted institutional prejudices.

## **Discrimination often leads to exclusion from access to justice, protection or services**

Women in South Africa, particularly black women, are disproportionately affected by poverty and by the HIV pandemic. The government has expanded free access to anti-retroviral therapy for people living with HIV and AIDS. However, treatment, care and support services are still mainly provided through hospitals, which are under great pressure, rather than through primary healthcare facilities. Transport costs are high in relation to people's income and women living in poor rural communities find it particularly difficult to reach hospitals to begin or maintain their treatment under medical supervision. Many also do not have adequate food, which is essential for coping with the side effects of anti-retroviral medication. Women's low social status compounds the problem of poverty as it means they may not receive their fair share of limited family resources. T.H., who took her meals with 12, and sometimes 20, other members of her husband's family, told Amnesty International in May 2007 that when there were food shortages, she would be the last to eat. She said, "I am at the lowest end of all".

In many countries justice is effectively denied to poor women whose only recourse lies in local, customary forms of justice that are heavily biased in favour of men. For example, women suffering domestic violence





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often lack legal protection. Their only way to escape the abuse is through divorce, but discriminatory legal practices and social attitudes make divorce difficult or impossible.

Women living in rural Sierra Leone, for example, come up against a range of barriers if they seek justice. Marriage, divorce, maintenance, property and inheritance are often governed by customary laws that discriminate against women. Under customary law, which operates in all areas outside the capital, a woman's status in society is equivalent to that of a minor. Before marriage, a woman is subordinate to her father or brother, and after marriage, to her husband. If her husband dies, she is subordinate to her male relative, usually a brother, until she remarries. In an

**Peru: a pregnant woman in a maternal waiting house where she can rest until it is time to go to the nearby health facility to give birth.**

effort to address discrimination against women, in 2007 laws were passed to prohibit domestic violence and to regulate inheritance, marriage and divorce. However, a government body set up to assist in their implementation has found that there is very little understanding within communities of the details of these laws, and they have largely not been implemented.

Sometimes the stamina and determination of an individual woman fighting against multiple discrimination has changed the rights landscape for all women in



a country. Bhanwari Devi, a human rights activist and a Dalit from Rajasthan, India, is one such. In 1992, she was gang-raped by five Gurjar men after she told police about the planned marriage of a nine-month-old baby girl. The men were tried, but the judge pronounced that the rape could not have happened because an upper-caste man could not have raped a lower caste woman, and because she was too old and unattractive to be raped by young men. The men were convicted of minor crimes and then released. The judgment led to a huge nationwide campaign for justice for Bhanwari Devi, who was ostracized and stigmatized as “polluted by rape” within her own community. The campaign led to new legal guidelines on sexual violence at work and the registration of rape cases in Rajasthan went up dramatically. To this day, although her legal case is stalled, Bhanwari Devi and her continuing work supporting Dalit women are a beacon of hope for women in Rajasthan.

**A vigil to honour missing and murdered Indigenous women, Parliament Hill, Ottawa, October 2007. Indigenous women in Canada face much higher rates of violence than other women. According to the Provincial Partnership Committee on Missing Persons, in the province of Saskatchewan, 60 per cent of the long-term cases of missing women are Indigenous, although Indigenous women make up only 6 per cent of the population.**

# WOMEN'S LIVES, MEN'S DECISIONS

Custom, culture and religion combine with poverty to deny women access to the political process. They are prevented from making themselves heard and from making choices about their lives, including whether and when they will be mothers.

The battle for control over women's lives is played out most acutely over the issue of abortion. Every year unsafe abortions cost thousands of women their lives. It is well known that decriminalizing abortion and ensuring access to reproductive health and family planning services reduces maternal mortality. Yet in many countries where women are silenced and excluded from decision making, access to such services is denied.

In Nicaragua, a law came into effect in 2008 which criminalized all forms of abortion in all circumstances, endangering the lives of girls and women and preventing health professionals from providing timely and effective life-saving treatment. The law imposes prison terms for health professionals who cause any harm to the foetus, regardless of intent. Some medical interventions during pregnancy or delivery can result in unintentional injury or death of the foetus, and medical staff may feel justified in delaying or denying treatment for illnesses such as cancer, or in order to expedite delivery. The law can lead to punishments for girls and women who have suffered a miscarriage, as it is often impossible to distinguish spontaneous from induced abortions. The fact that women and girls who become

pregnant as a result of rape or incest are now compelled to carry their pregnancy to full term is a violation of their human rights. The overwhelming majority of girls made pregnant as a result of rape or incest in Nicaragua are young – between the ages of 10 and 14.<sup>11</sup> For these girls the future now seems very bleak with no choice but to continue with the pregnancy, or risk prosecution and endanger their health seeking an unsafe backstreet abortion. One young rape survivor said, "I've felt like killing myself many times – the trial was like a 10-month-long nightmare... When the case fell apart, I was hysterical... As well as everything else, I had a baby by him who I had to accept. What happened to me shattered my dreams, my hopes – I wanted to be someone who worked outside the home but I spend all day at home looking after the baby."

If women and girls follow their own choices, sometimes they pay with their lives. Du'a Khalil Aswad was stoned to death in the street by a group of men in front of a large crowd on 7 April 2007 at Bashiqa, near the northern city of Mosul in Iraq. Her murder was filmed by an onlooker and then widely circulated on the internet. The men who killed her reportedly included some of her male relatives. Her "crime" in their eyes was that this 17-year-old member of the Yezidi minority had formed an attachment to a young Sunni Muslim man. Other people, including members of local security forces, saw the murder but failed to intervene. She had sought protection from both the local police and the local office of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, but they had merely referred her to a local community leader, who accepted assurances from her family that they would not harm her.

## PUBLIC INSECURITY

More than a billion people – the majority women – live in one of the world's 200,000 slums or informal settlements.<sup>12</sup> Slums share common characteristics: inadequate housing, sanitation and drainage, poor water and electrical services, overcrowding, exposure to toxics in the environment and high levels of violence.

Many women move to cities in search of a better life or to escape abuse in their villages. In slums they are likely to find themselves confronted with similar problems to those they tried to leave behind – poverty, violence and police brutality. The difficulties of daily life are compounded by the fact that discriminatory property laws deny women the right to legally own their property.

### Violence against women is rampant in slums

Women who lack security of tenure are particularly vulnerable to forced evictions. In most cases evictions are conducted without any due process, consultation, adequate notice or compensation. The effect of forced evictions can be catastrophic, particularly for people who are already living in poverty. Forced evictions result not only in people losing their homes (which they may have built themselves) and personal possessions, but also their social networks. After forced evictions, people may no longer have access to clean water, food, sanitation, work, health or education. Because of their role within the family, women bear the brunt of this deprivation.



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**Mme Dibie, aged 75, with neighbours in front of the ruins of her home in Farcha, N'Djamena, Chad. She had lived here for more than 40 years and supported herself by selling local beverages. Her home was destroyed in a government-authorized campaign of demolitions and forced evictions in 2008 that has rendered tens of thousands of people homeless and deprived many of their livelihoods.**

Officials carrying out the evictions often use excessive force against residents. Those responsible for these human rights violations are rarely brought to account.

In a survey of six major cities around the world, the Center on Housing Rights and Evictions identified violence against women as “rampant” in slums.<sup>13</sup> Criminal gangs fill the vacuum left by an absent state and violence becomes a part of daily life, particularly for women. Crimes are rarely reported due to the lack of police stations and hostility towards slum dwellers on the part of police.

Sixteen-year-old Blanche was raped by several men at gunpoint while she was doing her homework by the light of one of the few street lamps that were still working near her grandmother's home in Carrefour



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Feuilles neighbourhood in the Haitian capital Port-au-Prince. Blanche's grandmother took her to a clinic but discouraged her from reporting the attack to the police, believing it to be futile.

In January 2007, a 14-year-old girl and a teenage boy were stopped by military police officers in the favela (shanty town) of Jardim Elba in São Paulo, Brazil. They were taken to a nearby school yard and beaten with sticks. The girl was sexually abused by one of the officers. The case was taken up by the Sapopemba Human Rights Centre, which reported the police officers involved. A few days later, the police officer accused of sexually abusing the girl arrested her for drug trafficking and she was detained for two weeks until the prosecutor dismissed the charges as unfounded. She continued to receive death threats from police officers.

**A woman carrying a child in Vidigal, Rio de Janeiro, 2006. The armoured vehicle in the background, known as a *caveirão* ("big skull"), is used to police these communities. Amnesty International knows of a number of women and girls in favelas (shanty towns) in Brazil killed in the cross-fire between the police and drug traffickers, or between rival gangs.**

Lack of documentation or recognition of a formal address adds to the insecurity and exclusion of slum residents, limiting their access to credit, public services, formal employment and even the right to vote. Women living in slums are frequently prevented from participating in the processes and decisions that affect their daily lives.

## ARMED CONFLICT

Both these strategies were seen during the conflict in Darfur, Sudan. Hundreds of thousands of Darfuris fled from Sudan into neighbouring Chad. They now live in tents and struggle to survive on aid. Women and girls have to leave the camps to fetch water or firewood, placing them at risk of assault by armed opposition groups, bandits or local men. They are not safe within the camps either, as levels of abuse and violence are high.

Mariam, a mother of two, was raped in the Gaga Refugee Camp in eastern Chad. She has lived in the camp for more than six years, since the beginning of the conflict in Darfur, and for the last three years has been a social worker. One of her co-workers, a Chadian man, raped her. Although he lost his job, no formal investigation or proceedings were conducted. The man lives at large in a nearby town while Mariam has to live with the aftermath of the rape: "I do not even go to get water anymore because I feel like everyone is watching me".

### Women's voices have still not been heard or given their rightful place in the search for peace

Quite often the end of open warfare is followed not by peace, but by continuing armed violence, leaving civilians, and women in particular, at risk. In the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), extensive rape and other sexual violence against women and girls continue, despite several peace agreements. Most acts of rape are committed with near-total impunity by soldiers and members of various armed groups.

Negotiations for peace in eastern DRC, which have been brokered by the international community, have paid insufficient attention to the concerns of women living in the conflict area and have failed to eliminate widespread gender-based brutality against women and girls. This is despite the clear requirements of UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009) and 1889 (2009) on Women Peace and Security that women should participate in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peace-building processes. At the Goma peace conference in January 2008, women from eastern DRC protested: "Women's voices have still not been heard or given



**A woman struggles against the storm in Kibati camp for displaced people north of Goma, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, November 2008.**

Insecurity reaches its most brutal extremes in times of armed conflict. Poverty creates the conditions for conflict and conflict in turn further impoverishes populations. In Africa, armed conflict is a major cause of poverty as people are displaced, their livelihoods are destroyed and their social networks disintegrate.

In many conflicts attacks on civilians have been a deliberate strategy to terrorize populations and occupy land. Forcing people to flee by depriving them of their means of survival is military strategy. Women and girls are targeted deliberately for sexual violence as another strategy to break down communities.



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their rightful place in the search for peace. Yet, alongside children, women are the principal victims of diverse forms of violence”.<sup>14</sup>

In most countries that have gone through an armed conflict, peace-building efforts have failed to ensure women’s participation, to address the long-term impact of sexual violence on women’s lives or to factor women’s rights into post-conflict reconstruction programmes.

During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995, women and girls were subjected to rape and other sexual violence on a mass scale. As a result, many suffer from serious physical and psychological problems but very few women can afford to pay for medication or counselling. The social stigma attached to rape often pushes them into a life on the margins of society, with many divorced by their husbands when

**This woman was raped by soldiers when she was just 13 years old, during the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Tens of thousands of women and girls were raped during the conflict, but only a handful of perpetrators have been brought to justice and the authorities have failed to ensure adequate reparations to the survivors.**

they learn that they have been raped. Many of these women live in poverty, unable to hold down a steady job. Some have not returned to their homes because they continue to fear for their safety. More than 14 years after the war, the authorities have failed to ensure justice and adequate reparations to the women survivors of sexual violence.

## WOMEN SPEAK OUT

and went to a judge's office on her own to seek a divorce from her 30-year-old husband who had abused her physically and sexually for two months. She also filed a case against her father who had forced her into the marriage. Although child brides are common in Yemen, this case was the first to reach court. Nojoud was lucky to encounter a sympathetic judge who put her husband and father in custody, ended the marriage, and sheltered her before sending her to her uncle's home. According to Yemeni law however, neither the husband nor the father had committed any crime. While Yemeni civil law sets the minimum age of marriage at 15, parents can sign a marriage contract for younger children. Nojoud's case sparked international interest and has encouraged other girls in the same situation to stand up for their rights. In February 2009, after lobbying by NGOs, the Yemeni parliament adopted a draft law to increase the minimum age of marriage from 15 to 17, and to require marriage contracts to be certified by a judge. The draft law has yet to be ratified by the President.

When women speak out and assert their rights or the rights of other marginalized groups, they run grave risks because they challenge cultural or social beliefs and pose a threat to vested interests. Women human rights defenders may be targeted by community members or organized political or religious groups for not complying with their views. Sometimes they are harassed by the authorities. In Zimbabwe, for example, members of the women's rights organization Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA) have been arrested repeatedly since February 2003 for peacefully demonstrating against the worsening social, economic and human rights situation. They were among the targets when the government cracked down on civil society and opposition activists after the first round of presidential elections in March 2008, and more than 30 WOZA activists have been arrested in 2009, with many facing trial for disturbing the peace. WOZA members continue to show great resilience and bravery in adversity.



**Journalists protest at the murder of Uma Singh in Nepal in January 2009. The 26-year-old journalist and activist was hacked to death in her home by a gang of 15 men. Uma Singh worked for Radio Today FM and the Women's Human Rights Defenders Network. Some of her articles had become popular across the region, particularly those in which she defended women's rights and criticized the dowry system in Nepal.**

When women and girls know that they have rights, they will claim them despite all the obstacles they face. There are inspiring examples to be found throughout the world.

Eight-year-old Nojoud Ali set a legal precedent in 2008 when she became the first child bride in Yemen to demand a divorce in court. Nojoud escaped in a taxi

Sometimes governments are complicit in violence against women human rights defenders by not taking action to prevent it.

Women human rights defenders may be stigmatized and accused of undermining their culture's values and traditions. They may be subjected to gender-specific forms of violence and abuse including acid attacks, rape and other sexual violence.





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Sahar Hussain al-Haideri, a 44-year-old journalist and human rights defender, was shot dead on 7 June 2007 in Mosul, Iraq. She had frequently reported the situation of women and had criticized Islamist armed groups for their attacks on women's human rights. She had survived an abduction attempt and received several death threats. An Islamist armed group, Ansar al-Islam, reportedly claimed responsibility for her killing.

**“I am receiving death threats and there was an attempt to kidnap my nine-year-old son... The people who were there threatening me were clearly saying that I should close the shelter for women at risk and if I don't I will face the consequences”**

Shahla, who runs a shelter for women at risk of violence in Afghanistan.

**Survivors of Japan's military sexual slavery system and activists demonstrate outside the Japanese Embassy in South Korea, demanding an official apology. Up to 200,000 women and girls were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army before and during World War II. Humiliated and ashamed, the survivors remained silent for decades. Women drafted into military sexual slavery, “comfort women”, have suffered from physical and mental ill-health, isolation, shame and often extreme poverty as a result of their enslavement.**

Whether acting as human rights defenders or simply as members of their families and communities, women drive social progress and human rights advancement for all. In some countries, women are active participants in the political process and have made significant strides towards political and economic equality. However in others, they face political forces seeking to reverse the gains women have made towards equality.

## PROGRESS ON PAPER

Sustained campaigning by women's rights activists over the past decades has brought significant advances in the international community's commitment to the advancement of women's rights. At the international and regional level, there are legally binding agreements to protect and promote women's rights. A key principle of human rights is that of equality between men and women. This principle is reflected in all human rights standards.

Specifically focused on women's rights are: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women rests on the conviction that all women have human rights. It takes as its basic premise that ensuring equality between men and women is a state obligation, and that states must change laws and attitudes that foster inequality. It interprets violence and discrimination against women as forms of inequality and calls on states to eradicate them in law and practice. Where state agents and private citizens violate the right to equality, they must be stopped. The Convention spells out specific rights which women and girls are entitled to enjoy, and identifies specific obstacles to the equal enjoyment of these rights, all of which are relevant to eliminating women's poverty.

The Beijing Platform for Action was negotiated and adopted by 180 states as a result of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing, China. The Beijing Platform is of great importance as it was developed with the participation of the women's movement and took on board the concerns of grassroots women's organizations. It identifies 12 critical areas

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**Iraqi women demonstrating in front of the Kurdish Parliament in 2007 against the killing of Du'a Khalil Aswad. She was stoned to death in the street because of her friendship with a young man of whom her family disapproved.**

of concern, among them violence against women and women and poverty.

At present the major global response to poverty is captured in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The eight goals were agreed by all governments in 2000 and lay out what the international community hopes to achieve by 2015. As an effort to address poverty and benchmark progress towards that end, they are an important achievement as they reflect a global consensus. At the same time, in the way they are constructed, they mask continuing discrimination and fail to address the human rights abuses that keep people poor. Although gender issues are a focus of some of the goals, women's human rights are only partially reflected in the MDGs. Changes are needed in the way the UN measures progress towards the MDGs, particularly in relation to women and girls living in poverty.

The international system must help to protect women's rights in many countries where governments fail to make good on their commitments. At the national level, there are laws in many countries to protect women's rights and promote gender equality. However, these laws do little to improve the lives of women if they are not enforced. There are no legitimate excuses to explain why governments have failed to fully implement – and make effective – the national and international laws passed over the last few decades to end discrimination and violence against women. One thing is certain: equality and rights can only be achieved when women actively participate in political processes and when their voices are heard.

# THE WAY FORWARD

Economic growth is not enough to overcome poverty, especially for women and girls who are denied their fair share of income, resources and power. Growth in many countries is not improving the situation of marginalized groups, so a general increase in income levels is insufficient; discrimination and inequality must be confronted.

Women continue to be most affected by poverty, violence, environmental degradation and diseases. Women continue to be targeted in armed conflicts and to face restrictions on their freedom and autonomy.

Women's voices must be heard. Their contributions must be recognized and encouraged. The active participation of those affected is a critical part of any strategy to overcome poverty.

There have been many leaps forward in recent years in the understanding that women's rights are human rights. Many reports have been published showing how states fail to ensure women's human rights. Despite progress in understanding and developments in international law, many women's lives have hardly improved: states and international institutions have to work harder to ensure women's rights in practice, with a strong political will to ensure equality.

## ENDNOTES

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*Left:* This drawing by an 11-year-old was entered into a competition called “When peace reigns in the family” run by a women’s organization in Armenia.

*Cover:* Most of the world’s poor are women – in every country in the world women struggle to make a livelihood in conditions that are often hazardous. Violence against women is also a global phenomenon, reinforcing poverty and making it harder for women and girls to build a better life. Here a woman scavenges in a pile of rubbish, Madagascar, August 2009.

## YOU CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Every one of us has a role in creating the political will for change. We can challenge our governments to improve women’s rights at home, and all around the world, through international cooperation.

In September 2009, all governments agreed to the creation of a strong new United Nations agency for women. This agency will have greater capacity to help the UN and governments, with the full engagement of civil society, to ensure that women and girls around the world enjoy their rights in practice. This new agency for women urgently needs sustained political commitment and funding to succeed. An intervention at this moment could have a powerful and strategic effect.

- Take part in the global NGO campaign calling on governments and the UN system to ensure that the new UN agency for women is given the resources, personnel and authority it needs to make a real difference to women’s lives around the world. Visit <http://www.amnesty.org/en/gear>

- Become part of Amnesty International’s campaigning to Stop Violence Against Women and to Demand Dignity for all. Visit <http://www.amnesty.org/en/campaigns/stop-violence-against-women> and [www.demanddignity.org](http://www.demanddignity.org)

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