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‘As long as girls and women are valued less, fed less, fed last, overworked, underpaid, not schooled and subjected to violence in and out of their homes – the potential of the human family to create a peaceful, prosperous world will not be realised.’

Hillary Clinton, The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995



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# WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS

## An overview



Congolese refugees returning home from exile in Tanzania to begin rebuilding their lives © UNHCR/S Schulman

# WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS

Women should be able to enjoy all the human rights that are enshrined in international law, on an equal footing with men. Yet unequal power relations between women and men, and deep-rooted discrimination, result in women's continued subordination depriving women of their human rights. This underlying inequality comes into play at every turn of a woman's life, creating multiple barriers that women must confront on a daily basis.



Women domestic workers in Indonesia read out a statement demanding to be recognised as workers  
© Rumpun Tjoek Nyak Dien

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## AMNESTY'S WORK ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Amnesty International champions the human rights of women and girls, and holds governments accountable for ending discrimination and inequality.

In recent years our work has included campaigning for:

- women's equality in Iran with Iranian women's organisations;
- securing protection for survivors of trafficking in the UK;
- the establishment of safe refuges for domestic violence survivors in Turkey;
- an end to impunity for rape and sexual violence in Darfur.

Amnesty International UK's Women's Human Rights Programme works on a broad range of issues, including violence against women, gender and conflict, and sexual and reproductive rights.

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## THE GLOBAL STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS

'It is a violation of human rights when babies are denied food, or drowned, or suffocated, or their spines broken, simply because they are born girls.'

It is a violation of human rights when women and girls are sold into the slavery of prostitution.

It is a violation of human rights when women are doused with gasoline, set on fire and burned to death because their marriage dowries are deemed too small.

It is a violation of human rights when individual women are raped in their own communities and when thousands of women are subjected to rape as a tactic or prize of war.

It is a violation of human rights when a leading cause of death worldwide among women aged 14 to 44 is the violence they are subjected to in their own homes.

It is a violation of human rights when young girls are brutalised by the painful and degrading practice of genital mutilation.

It is a violation of human rights when women are denied the right to plan their own families, and that includes being forced to have abortions or being sterilised against their will.

If there is one message that echoes forth... it is that human rights are women's rights – and women's rights are human rights.'

*Hillary Clinton's opening statement, UN World Conference, Beijing 1995*

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In 1993, governments confirmed that women's rights were indeed 'human rights'. That this statement (at the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna) was ever needed is striking: women's entitlement to human rights should never have been in doubt. Nevertheless, it marked a pivotal moment in formal recognition of women's human rights. Two years later in Beijing, the UN World Conference on Women acknowledged that women are often the targets of human rights abuses

simply because they are women. Despite numerous international commitments, abuses against women continue without let-up, widely tolerated if not explicitly approved.

Today simply being born female can still mean automatic and systematic disadvantage: women and girls are still fighting for the most basic right of control over their own bodies and their own lives, and government actions have fallen far short of the mark.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence affects women in every corner of the globe. It takes place in the home, on the streets, in the workplace, refugee camps, during armed conflicts and crises. The perpetrators are individuals, families, communities, armed groups and governments. The specific acts of violence – from sexual and domestic violence to abuse during pregnancy and so-called honour killings – may differ, but the common underlying cause is discrimination. The common purpose is to control, punish, persecute and humiliate women and girls. And the common outcome is to deprive women and girls of a whole range of human rights.

Often women and girls don't report violence, for fear of reprisals and because support services – such as emergency refuges, health care and justice systems – are limited.

Lack of accurate and reliable information on trends and patterns of violence against women makes it more difficult to prevent these abuses. However, a range of studies have shown that at least one in three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime (source: [www.unfpa.org/gender/violence.htm](http://www.unfpa.org/gender/violence.htm)). The abuser is often someone known to her.

In most contexts, survivors suffer further human rights violations as government agencies lack the skills, knowledge, experience, commitment and will to support women properly, investigate abuses and punish perpetrators.

## CONFLICT AND INSTABILITY

Armed conflict, natural disasters and other crises destabilise social infrastructure, leaving many people, particularly young women, vulnerable to sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking. Minimal services and support are available to the survivors, and limited law enforcement can result in perpetrators going unpunished.

Sexual violence is often used as a weapon of war, targeting civilian women and children. Survivors are at high risk of severe and long-lasting health problems, disabilities, death from injuries or suicide. Health consequences can include unwanted pregnancy, unsafe self-induced abortion, infanticide, and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. Psychological trauma is also common, and may be exacerbated by social stigma and rejection by the family or community.

Wars and crises have an enormous impact on girls, even if they escape sexual violence. The threat of violence can prevent them from going to school, cause breakdowns within families or force them to flee.

In conflicts, men, women, girls and boys are abused, exploited or forced to become soldiers, yet the experiences of women and girls in conflict are still treated as less important.

In emergency situations, all forms of violence and exploitation of women increase, often escalating to pandemic



#### HAITI AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

Violence against women was a problem in Haiti long before the earthquake. Rape was only recognised as a crime in 2005.

The earthquake increased the dangers. The emergency shelters are flimsy tents, offering no protection from attackers carrying knives, razors or machetes, and providing no privacy: women have to bathe and dress in public view. Aid agencies have taken steps to address the needs of women, highlighting the need for lighting and security in the camps, safe food distribution, private washing facilities and latrines, and access to health services for women who are assaulted and raped. All of these measures, if adequately implemented, would help make women safer. But in the long term, it is the protection and promotion of women's rights that is key.

Cleaning up after Haiti's earthquake © AI

## INEQUALITY IN FIGURES

■ More than 100 million women are missing from the world's population – a result of discrimination against women and girls, including female infanticide.

■ Two thirds of the 774 million adult illiterates worldwide are women – the same proportion for the past 20 years and across most regions.

■ Among women aged between 15 and 44, acts of violence cause more death and disability than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined.

■ More than 60 million girls worldwide are forced into marriage before the age of 18.

■ An estimated 100 to 140 million girls and women worldwide currently live with the consequences of female genital mutilation/cutting, and 3 million girls are estimated to be at risk every year.

■ Many of the countries that have ratified the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) still have discriminatory laws governing marriage, land, property and inheritance.

■ Each year 358,000 women die from pregnancy and childbirth-related causes.

■ Rates of HIV infection among women are rapidly increasing. Among those 15-24 years of age, young women now constitute the majority of those newly infected, in part because of their economic and social vulnerability.

Source: Amartya Sen, United Nations

levels. In Haiti, for example, the earthquake in 2010 led to a huge increase in sexual violence, particularly in camps (Amnesty International Report 2011). Despite countless examples of the particular ways in which the rights of women and girls are violated in war, it is only in the last decade that the international community has responded. Rape in times of conflict was only recognised as a crime against humanity and a war crime by the Rome Statute in 1998. In October 2000 the UN Security Council made an historic decision when it passed Resolution 1325, which broadened the Security Council's mandate to ensure women's participation is central to peace-building processes.

In early 2010 UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed a Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict to press for more action. The aim was to 'provide coherent and strategic leadership' and to work with governments, military and judicial representatives, as well as all parties to armed conflict and civil society, to address sexual violence.

While the commitments on paper look promising, it is their implementation that is critical. In the past many governments have demonstrated reluctance to implement the changes necessary to meet their obligations on women's rights, and so the struggle continues.

#### ATTACKS ON WOMEN'S SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

- **The likelihood of a woman dying in pregnancy – and from childbirth-related causes – is 1 in 8 in Sierra Leone, compared with 1 in 4,700 in the UK.**
- **Globally, 215 million women who want to delay or avoid a pregnancy are not using an effective method of family planning.**
- **Each year there are 22 million unsafe abortions, resulting in 70,000 maternal deaths.**

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) requires states to ensure that women have the same rights as men to decide the 'number and spacing of their children and to have access to the information, education and means to enable them to exercise these rights'. Despite this clear obligation, women's rights to control their sexual and reproductive lives are vociferously contested. Governments are often reluctant to agree targets to protect and promote sexual and reproductive rights.

Women's unequal status in families and communities permeates their sexual and reproductive lives. In some places girls continue to be forced into marriage, sometimes at very young ages, and have little say over their sexual lives, and may require their husband's consent to use family planning and contraception. If they become pregnant, they may have little say over whether they can use health facilities, or whether they can pay for essential care to avert maternal injury or death.

Despite high-profile international efforts, including UN Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 5, maternal mortality remains unacceptably high. Almost all maternal deaths are preventable, given adequate health care, yet approximately 358,000 women die each year of complications related to pregnancy or childbirth. Ninety-nine per cent of these unnecessary deaths occur in developing countries, so poverty

is a major cause. Shortage of funding and failure to prioritise basic health services also contribute to high maternal death rates.

In a desperate attempt to regain lost ground, the UN launched its Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health at the MDG summit in 2010, announcing impressive financial commitments for the period to 2015. But these are likely to fall far short of ensuring universal access to reproductive health.

Attempts to improve reproductive health services must also contend with religious conservatism, which in some cases has influenced national legislation on contraception and abortion services in ways that undermine women's rights.

#### WOMEN AND POVERTY

Women bear a disproportionate burden of the world's poverty: the World Bank estimates that more than 70 per cent of those living in extreme poverty are women. Gender discrimination and violence trap women and girls in a seemingly unbreakable cycle of poverty and hinder their ability to claim their rights.

As children, girls are more likely to be taken out of school than boys. Gender stereotyping leads parents to prioritise boys' education when money is scarce. In addition, widespread violence forces many girls to leave their education. According to a 2006 study of schoolgirls in Malawi, 50 per cent of the girls said they had been touched in a sexual manner 'without permission, by either their teachers or fellow schoolboys'.

Lack of education has lifelong consequences for girls – including lack of financial independence, higher risk of a maternal death, and higher risk of contracting HIV.

Many women are expected to undertake vast amounts of unpaid work such as caring for family members, diminishing the time they can spend in paid work. When women do have paid employment, it is often in the informal sector, which offers women lower wages and hazardous working conditions. Women in the informal sector are at risk of violence at the





hands of their employers, and have little recourse to justice.

Violence, for women, is both a cause and a consequence of poverty. Injuries and disabilities resulting from violence reduce women's capacity to make a living. Being poor leaves women with difficult choices, putting them at further risk of violence. A woman who is economically dependent on her abusive partner may see no way to support herself and her children if she leaves. Discrimination and violence against women and girls are interlinked with poverty, and have profound impacts on the lives of women and girls.

### WOMEN AS HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Women human rights defenders' struggles for freedom and equality have been a part of all social movements for social justice throughout history and today many women around the world put themselves on the front line to promote and protect human rights.

Human rights defenders of both sexes face danger for exposing human rights violations, helping victims of abuse to assert their rights and working to bring the perpetrators to justice. Women, however, often encounter greater hostility and face additional risks simply because they are women. And if they work for women's rights in particular, they are targeted for challenging widely held perceptions of women's social roles. They are likely to meet with prejudice, exclusion and hostility from the state and society at large.

The challenges women face in human rights work is compounded by the fact that far fewer women than men make it to decision-making positions – whether in the community, in business, in the public sector, or in government.

### WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

The principles of equality and empowerment demand greater representation of women at all levels of government. Yet despite the efforts of women activists to challenge men for public office, women remain under-represented at practically all levels of local and national decision-making.

Some of the most interesting developments in women's political participation have occurred in post-conflict countries whose constitutions have been rewritten. The Rwandan parliament, for example, has the highest representation of women in the world with over 50 per cent. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Africa's first female president, was elected in Liberia, a country that had been torn apart by conflict and corruption.

While these individual developments are encouraging, the overall picture is less so. In 2010, there were just 11 women among 192 heads of government and average women's representation in national parliaments was only 19 per cent. Women's participation at all levels of decision-making whether in the family, the community or different levels of government, is critical for women's equality, and also to ensure that laws and policies take account of women.

### OUR WORK

Amnesty International champions the human rights of women and girls, and holds governments accountable for ending discrimination and inequality.

For further information and current campaign actions, visit [www.amnesty.org.uk/women](http://www.amnesty.org.uk/women)