

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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International Women's Day: Failure to respect the rights of women deprives us all

International Women's Day is a time to celebrate women's commitment to work for equality and justice for all people.

The landscape for women's rights has changed dramatically over the past century. In 2009, the issue is less about women's legal status – although many countries do still have discriminatory laws on their books – and more about ensuring women genuinely experience equality in all aspects of their lives.

At the international and regional level, there are legally binding agreements to protect and promote women's rights. In many countries women are active participants in the political process and have made progress towards some economic equality. However, women's right to life, to physical integrity, to health, to education, to freedom from violence, remains largely unfulfilled. Nowhere is this more evident than for women living in poverty. The reason? The lack of political will, and the rhetorical commitments of political leaders are followed by a gaping vacuum in terms of action and resources.

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 once and for all.

The failure of governments to act, coupled with persistent and pervasive discrimination in societies, systematically undermine the rights of women who are marginalised and excluded. Women living in poverty are deprived of their rights to health and education and live in fear of violence in their lives and of their children, demonstrating that freedom from fear and freedom from want or inextricably linked. Women living in poverty are excluded from the opportunity to actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. Women experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination based on their race, ethnicity, caste, religion, gender or sexuality but also simply on account of their living in poverty.

In South Africa, high levels of sexual violence and the prevalence of HIV make women particularly vulnerable to HIV infection. Women who live in poverty are often unable to afford the costs of transportation to access medical facilities where they could receive comprehensive care and treatment. Women living in Kibera, Kenya, one of the world's largest slums, struggle daily to access basic necessities such as water and food and some degree of physical security. In Haiti, many girls cannot afford to pay school fees. This either means they are denied access to education or they end up in sexually exploitive relationships with men in order to pay the fees. Over half a million women die preventable deaths every year from complications related to pregnancy. The vast majority of these deaths are of women living in poverty. Poverty will not be eradicated unless all these gross human rights violations are addressed.

The Millennium Development Goals, the major global response to poverty agreed by all governments at the beginning of this century, do include commitments to women's empowerment and health. But the existing targets and indicators used to measure progress to this end are inadequate - masking

discrimination, and leaving largely unaddressed the violence and marginalisation of women. Violence against women inhibits poor women's efforts to overcome poverty through employment. Violence against girls, means fewer girls attend school, and violence against women is both a significant factor pushing women to leave rural areas and their continuing exposure to it in slums.

Today, International Women's Day, women around the world will celebrate, stand up and speak out to demand their rights. Will governments listen to these demands and act to uphold the rights of women? Of all women?

Amnesty International urges governments to listen and to act. Failure to respect the rights of women deprives us all. None of us can afford to live in a world in which the gifts, talents and experiences of half the population are excluded.

Public Document

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