

Women Human Rights Defenders Leaflets (LGBT)

6th December 2005

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[Front cover]

Sexual rights are human rights

Defending women defending rights

(pic) © AP (end pic)

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The right to defend...human rights

The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1998, affirms the right to defend human rights and urges states to protect human rights work and those who carry it out. To bolster implementation of the Declaration, the office of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on human rights defenders was created in April 2000.

The Special Representative, Hina Jilani, has highlighted the role played by women human rights defenders and the challenges they face as a result. Her 2002 report to the UN Commission on Human Rights stated that “while women defenders work as indefatigably as their male counterparts in upholding human rights and the rights of victims of human rights violations, there exist some characteristics that are specific to them as women involved in the defence of human rights” and that “they face risks that are specific to their gender and additional to those faced by men”.

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Women on the frontline

Women are at the forefront of the global movement of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs), actively promoting, protecting and defending human rights across the world. Women HRDs include activists, professionals, and victims and survivors of human rights abuses and their families. Women HRDs have founded the human rights movement in many parts of the world. They have documented and exposed violations of civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights, and often highlighted the gender-specific manifestations, causes and consequences of such violations.

Women HRDs often form the backbone of movements working for the rights of, among others, women and girls, ethnic and religious minorities, refugees and other displaced people, trade unionists, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. They protest against widespread impunity for all forms of violence against women, and promote women’s right to live free of gender-based violence. They support countless victims of human rights violations in demanding justice. In particular, they lead projects dedicated to supporting victims of gender discrimination, sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women.

Women HRDs face marginalization, prejudice, violence and threats to their safety and wellbeing on multiple levels: as HRDs, as women and as individuals who challenge societal gender stereotypes. Their aggressors may be the state, political groups, the community – even their partners or relatives.

Governments and social movements often do not prioritize the rights that women HRDs fight for, thus undermining the credibility and legitimacy of their struggle. Women HRDs have been killed, abducted, and made to “disappear” as a consequence of their work. They face gender-specific repercussions, such as sexual harassment and rape.

Women HRDs may have to flee their country to find effective protection of their rights, often encountering gender-specific hurdles on the way.

(Pic) below: Women protest against gang-rapes in housing projects in French cities, 7 March 2003. The experience or threat of violence affects the lives of women everywhere, cutting across boundaries of wealth, race and culture. © Gamma/Katz (end Pic)

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‘It’s as if we didn’t have rights’

Juliet Victor Mukasa

Broadcast banned

Juliet Victor Mukasa took a chance when she organized a radio broadcast on the right of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people to HIV/AIDs prevention programmes. Unfortunately, the broadcast was never aired; it was cancelled in May 2005 on the grounds that it breached “minimum broadcasting standards which are against homosexuality” in Uganda. Homosexuality is illegal in Uganda and punishable by up to seven years of imprisonment.

Since then, Juliet, who is chairperson of the human rights organization, Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), has faced increasing harassment. On the night of 20 July 2005, local government officials from a suburb of Kampala entered her house while she was out. They seized documents and other material, apparently looking for “incriminating evidence” relating to her SMUG activities. SMUG campaigns for the right of LGBT people to the freedoms enshrined in the Uganda constitution and international human rights treaties, including freedom from discrimination.

Arrested and abused

Another lesbian activist, who was in the house on the night of the raid, was arbitrarily arrested and detained by local government officials and then taken to the police station. She was subjected to humiliating and degrading treatment because of her sexuality. No charges were pressed against her and she was released, on the condition that she and Juliet reported back to the police the following morning. Juliet went into safe housing and the other activist has left Uganda.

(pic) above: Juliet Mukasa, 30 September 2005. © AI (end pic)

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Those officials acted as if they had a licence to violate our rights ... to search my house without a warrant, to arrest and detain my friend... just because of our sexual orientation [end pull quote]

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Defending the 'Indefensible'

Women activists struggle for sexual rights

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women's human rights groups and those who are active on issues of sexuality especially sexual orientation and reproductive rights... are often very vulnerable to prejudice, to marginalization and to public repudiation, not only by State forces but other social actors.

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[quote caption]

Report of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on human rights defenders to the Commission on Human Rights, March 2001

[end quote caption]

Women who campaign for sexual rights and activists known or perceived to be lesbian or bisexual are frequently seen as breaching social codes, fomenting dissent and advocating "deviancy". Too often, as a result, they are targeted for abuse.

Sexual rights include: the right to choose one's partner; the right to decide freely on matters related to one's sexuality without fear of violence, discrimination and coercion; the right to seek and provide information on sexuality; the right of access to confidential sexual health services, and the right of all persons to express their sexual orientation.

Women's sexuality is controlled by legal, social and cultural constraints which are often enforced through violence, at the hands of the state or by members of their community or family. Women are accused of being "too masculine" if they challenge stereotypes of femininity, criticized as "hating men" if they challenge assumptions about women's reproductive role, and threatened if their sexuality falls outside perceived "norms" or they behave in ways that are judged to be "inappropriate" by state, religious or community authorities.

Defenders of sexual rights face threats, imprisonment or physical or sexual assault, particularly where their work is seen as challenging traditional social and cultural norms. Their organizations may be closed down and their personal reputations maligned. They may be threatened with public revelations about their actual or imputed sexual orientation to discredit and silence their work. They may even find themselves excluded from human rights organizations and activities. Their work is

under-reported and their organizations are frequently attacked and denied legal recognition or funding.

Many lesbian and bisexual activists choose not to report violations for fear of the possible consequences to themselves, their partners, friends or family members. Many defenders feel too threatened to call attention to their work on sexuality, and to their personal identities.

Perpetrators assume they can act with impunity because they see the defenders they target as “indefensible”. Nevertheless, sexual rights activists across the globe are increasingly making their voices heard.

(pic) above: AIDS awareness talk for women, Kolkata, India. Violations of women's sexual rights often leave them unable to protect themselves from HIV or to protect their health and wellbeing once they have HIV. © Peter Barker/Panos

cover: Thousands of women join a lesbian march in Mexico, March 2003. All over the world, women are asserting their right to sexual self-determination despite the widespread use of violence to control women's sexuality © AP

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Support networks

International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS

Challenging inequality

With 3000 members in 134 countries, the International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW) is the only international network of HIV-positive women. Established in 1992 and based in the UK, it provides support, information and services for women living with HIV worldwide and advocates on their behalf on policy issues. Not only do ICW members confront the twin taboos of sex and death, but they challenge the violence and inequality that are part of the daily lives of HIV-positive women.

ICW campaigns for recognition of the sexual rights of HIV-positive women within a funding and political environment that is increasingly hostile to the idea of sexual and reproductive rights. ICW activists also work tirelessly to make sure that HIV-positive women are meaningfully involved in all policy development issues that impact their lives.

Advocacy and involvement

While bolstering the advocacy skills of HIV-positive women, ICW also promotes the ability of decision-makers to engage with people in ways that are equitable, respectful and productive for all involved. ICW are exerting increasing influence despite being over-stretched and under-resourced and despite the illness and death of many of their members and founders.

“I have a right to my sexuality and sexual practices,” says one ICW member from

Africa. "I should be able to say 'No' to intercourse. I have the right to motherhood ... [and] to treatments... Choices can't be made without rights."

(pic) above: An ICW training for trainers workshop in Guatemala, 2002. © ICW
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Take action – make a difference

Call on your government to recognize the legitimacy of the work of women human rights defenders campaigning for sexual rights. Ask them to:

- Do everything they can to protect those who defend sexual rights and those who are targeted because of their real or perceived sexual orientation; investigate all allegations of violations; prosecute perpetrators; and ensure that victims receive fair and adequate reparations, including compensation.
- Ensure that defenders of sexual rights can carry out their work without fear of persecution.
- Recognize that sexual rights are human rights in public statements, policy and legislation. Make clear that attacks on defenders of sexual rights are not only unacceptable, but will be prosecuted.

What you can do

I would like to join the Stop Violence Against Women campaign. Please send me more information.

I would like to join Amnesty International. Please send me details.

I would like to make a donation to support Amnesty International's work.

Credit card number:

Expiry date: Amount:

NAME:

ADDRESS:

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.....

Signature:

Please send your form to the address in the box above or to:

Amnesty International, International Secretariat,

Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street,

London, WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom

or visit www.amnesty.org

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