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20th anniversary of Women's Convention: Time to take women's human rights seriously

Pakistan 1999: Ghazala was set on fire by her brother in the name of honour. Her burned and naked body lay unattended on the street for two hours as nobody wanted to have anything to do with it.

Pakistan has ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Women's Convention). The government is failing to take serious measures to safeguard and protect women's human rights.

"This situation is far from unique. Today, on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the Women's Convention, women around the world continue to suffer human rights violations simply because they are women," Amnesty International said.

"Governments are not living up to their promises under the Women's Convention to protect women from discrimination and violence such as rape and female genital mutilation."

Despite the commitment to achieve universal ratification of the Women's Convention by the year 2000 -- made by governments in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women -- many countries, including the USA, have not yet ratified the Convention. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the instrument is impaired by the large number of reservations entered by governments that have ratified it.

Too often countries are failing to fulfill their international obligations regarding women's rights and the provisions of the Convention are often not enforced at the national level. This leaves women with no means to redress violations of their rights under the Convention.

An important step to fill this gap and thus ensure effective protection of women's rights was taken on 10 December when 23 countries signed the newly-adopted Optional Protocol to the Women's Convention at the UN General Assembly.

The Optional Protocol is not just a piece of paper. It will allow women the right to bring complaints of violations of the Women's Convention before an international monitoring body (CEDAW) when their own governments fail to uphold their commitments to the Convention. It will also create an inquiry procedure into situations of grave or systematic violations of women's rights.

"This is an important tool relevant to the every day lives of women. For the first time it will give women the right to seek redress under the Convention," Amnesty International stressed. "It will also allow women to bring their concerns directly to the attention of an international human rights body."

“But last week’s signing ceremony must be backed up by action. Governments should now demonstrate their commitment to bringing the Women’s Convention to life in their country by ratifying the Optional Protocol quickly,” the organization urged. “States that have not ratified the Convention itself are urged to do so without further delay”

Millions of women still have no right to live in safety, to think and express themselves freely and without fear, and to participate in the public life in their own countries.

“On the eve of the next century, it is about time governments translated the human rights of women into reality. Women are entitled to enter the next century with full enjoyment of their rights,” Amnesty International concluded.

Background

The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (known as the Women’s Convention) was adopted in 1979. It recognises that discrimination prevents women from enjoying the full range of human rights and freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural and civil fields, and it outlines measures which governments are required to take to end such discrimination.

The Convention establishes the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a committee of 23 independent experts which reviews the reports that state parties are required to submit indicating the measures taken to implement the Women’s Convention.
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