

10 December 2010

Human Rights Day 2010

On December 10 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) came into being. The world was reeling from the devastation of the Second World War and this document became the reminder that in our varied, time-bound existence, the main concern of every earth citizen should be human rights for all. To commemorate this, we now celebrate World Human Rights Day on December 10 every year.

The theme for this year's Human Rights Day is "Speak Up; Stop Discrimination."

For the last 18 years, one of the key concepts promoted by IWRAP Asia Pacific is that women's equality and non discrimination are central to the full enjoyment of human rights by all. IWRAP Asia Pacific believes the implementation of human rights treaties and other mechanisms are critical in the realization of women's equality and combating gender discrimination and perspectives and systems that subordinate women. It views international human rights standards as tools for bringing about change at all levels, the national and international, and in a wide range of contexts. With an impact on half of the world's population, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women became IWRAP Asia Pacific's focus.

The Convention addresses the discrimination and inequalities faced by women, which act as a barrier to them claiming their full rights. The Convention alone however, can only do so much if women aren't aware and are unsure as to how to make full use of it. To fill this gap, IWRAP Asia Pacific has worked to spread awareness and encourage full and proper use of the Convention.

The CEDAW Convention promotes the pursuit of substantive equality between men and women through state accountability and non-discrimination. The recognition of its importance is evident in the number of signatories to the Convention which peak at almost 97% of UN Member States. With the Optional Protocol for the elevating of national cases of discrimination to international levels and 28 General Recommendations on different thematic areas pertaining to women, the CEDAW Convention is the most comprehensive convention on women's human rights to date.

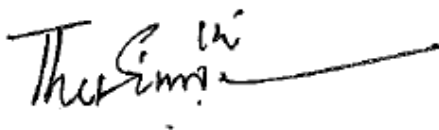
This is an exciting time for women's human rights. On 23rd November this year the 100th State ratified the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, almost exactly one month before the 10th anniversary of the entry into force of the OP on December 22nd 2010. There is also huge potential for making concrete gains in achieving substantive equality with the creation of UN Women and its imminent operationalisation in January 2011. This entity amalgamates the work of four disparate UN agencies focused on women's human rights and will hopefully provide much needed centralisation and cohesion of the UN's efforts in this area. IWRAP Asia Pacific welcomes the creation of UN Women although it notes that it will be critical to its future effectiveness that it recognises the synergy between the Beijing Platform for Action and CEDAW whereby the latter provides the normative framework for combating discrimination and providing for substantive equality between the sexes while the Beijing Platform for Action provides a policy and programme through which this can be achieved.

IWRAP Asia Pacific hopes that UN Women will be one of the ways in which women's human rights defenders can address the gap which still exists between recognition and enforcement of women's civil and political rights and of women's economic, social and cultural rights. Human rights defenders are increasingly recognising the need to promote fulfilment of women's economic, social and cultural rights but even amongst ourselves we must strengthen our understanding of the inextricable nature of women's human rights as generally defined and economic, social and cultural rights without which substantive equality is an illusory ideal. We must build our own capacity to unite these strands in our advocacy efforts to ensure that our message to States is clear and women are empowered by an environment that enables their access to all rights and fundamental freedoms.

IWRAP Asia Pacific is heartened by the increasing recognition by human rights defenders of the nature of the intersections between women's identities and between women's rights. This is evident, for example, in our efforts to combat recent trends by States to conflate concepts such as culture and religion with barriers to effective fulfilment of women's human rights. Women's human rights do not exist in a vacuum but must be contextualised within their diverse realities without losing sight of the universal nature of those rights despite differences in contexts. IWRAP Asia Pacific encourages human rights defenders to continue and strengthen their work on the intersectionality of rights and in particular on ensuring that States recognise that their obligations under CEDAW and other international treaties and standards require them to take action to change cultural rationalisations which continue to subjugate women.

Human Rights Day this year is about the efforts of human rights defenders the world over who have so significantly contributed to fighting injustice, discrimination and for the peaceful enjoyment of full rights for all people, regardless of demographic, social, or cultural differences. Without them the CEDAW Convention would not have scored even a quarter of the successes it has today. We honour their sacrifices, applaud their efforts and hope they will continue to work to achieve full ratification of CEDAW and the Optional Protocol, provide sound reports and information to the Committee, and eventually stamp out discrimination against women.

We remind State Parties who have not ratified CEDAW and/or its Optional Protocol (as well as other Conventions) to do so and commit to fulfilling their obligations to women. We urge them to take cognisance of the legally binding nature of state obligations under all human rights treaties and to enact laws, policies and initiate dialogue between their citizens and communities, men and women, to ensure that the values and standards of international human rights are understood, respected, protected and fulfilled.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Thusitha Simon', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Thusitha Simon
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