

Human Rights are Women's Rights

Human Rights. A concept dating to the 17th century has gained universal acceptance only in the past 40 years with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provided a definition and criteria as to what constitutes the rights of humans. Human rights now rolls off the tongues of not only human rights advocates but also of mainstream media, governments and businesses. Head of states debate whether there is one universal definition or if there are regional definitions to human rights. With the Declaration, peoples all over the world have been able to demand and fight for freedoms and liberties.

Yet, still very few enjoy the rights outlined in the Declaration; and women lag even further behind. Women worldwide do not enjoy the most basic of rights as sampled in this issue. They continue to struggle on the most basic of rights such as entering into marriage with "free and full consent."

As more women are informed about their rights, there will be more clamor for those rights. But if we women are unaware of our rights, we do not have the tools with which to chip away at the chains that bind us. It is this fact that pushed us to produce this issue on women's human rights.

This issue focuses on the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) for, at present, it is the most comprehensive instrument that exists on rights for women. We are aware that there are many limitations to the UN system and that changes are happening at a snail's pace. But as Aurora de Dios says, "we have to start somewhere."

At the same time, we are pushing that women receive more information, more training, more support, more money, more accountability measures and opportunities to organize and share strategies with one another. For us to fight for what is rightfully ours by pushing our own individual governments to

institute laws and mechanisms for protecting the human rights of women, we need to know what protections we can demand.

The UN has been under attack for many years for mismanaging its funds and for lacking clear priorities. The U.S. has been the most critical, punishing the UN by withholding 1.5 billion dollars in unpaid dues and pressuring newly appointed UN Secretary Kofi Annan to show management reform. In Annan's proposal "Renewing the United Nations: A Programme for Reform," he conveys a better managed UN system and identifies areas of priorities in the coming century. It was disappointing however to see that women are mentioned very rarely and that the standing proposal is to subsume all human related committees under one human rights commission. This, says Aurora de Dios, "will bury women's issues." This would likely push women's issue as Katrina Tomasevski points out in her book *Women and Human Rights*, into the realm of remedies rather than pushing forth the debate that women cannot advance or improve their status until equal rights are protected for all women.

We call on Secretary Annan to make rights of all women a UN priority. We agree with him "that the last half century has witnessed successive waves of tumultuous change..." and "that equally if not more far-reaching changes lie ahead." Women's clamor for their rights will be one of those waves of change. And the international community, as Annan himself points out, is obliged "to itself and successor generations to put in place effective multilateral mechanisms that can successfully harness the mutual benefits such changes may offer." Yes, Secretary Annan, but only with reforms that include a greater role for women will the UN be better equipped to play its part in meeting the future.

