

years after the approval in 1979 of the Women's Convention, which as of February 1997, had been ratified by 156 countries.

Note also that as far back as 1974, the UN Development Fund for Women or UNIFEM, a voluntary fund, was already established by the Economic and Social Council, and assigned to identify the obstacles for women and to recommend promotional, educational and other measures to mitigate the problems.

And in 1976, the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) was created to research ways to monitor and appraise the effects of programs and projects on women's integration into development activities.

The lack of enforcement of the conventions on women's human rights does not come as a surprise. During its 50th foundation year in 1995, the UN admitted that even the implementation of the Conventions [on human rights] "has serious difficulties."

STATE RESPONSIBILITY

Many States have not yet ratified many of the instruments. Only half of the UN members have ratified the two Covenants of 1996 (on civil and political rights, and on human rights, economic, social and cultural rights), and 20 percent have accepted the Optional Protocol.

"Those who have ratified the Conventions often fail to meet their commitments, report on time or not at all. In some cases, failure to report is due to lack or absence of resources to gather information or compile the reports. For others, late reporting shows a lack of political will by States for implementation," the 1995 UN report on human rights revealed.

"Overlaps and inconsistencies have also made the current system for the protection of those rights less than transparent," the UN admitted. "Many factors make it difficult to have a clear interpretation of these mechanisms

and which prevent them from being fully effective."

The report suggested that it may be necessary to harmonize the various human rights conventions as a corollary to the streamlining of the treaty-making bodies.

This had earlier been pointed out by Marsha Freeman of the University of Minnesota, in her report "Human Rights in the Family: Issues and Recommendations for Implementation" published in 1993 by the International Women's Rights Action Watch.

Freeman said: "As more countries have ratified the Women's Convention and submitted their reports, it has become clear that elaboration of Convention standards would be helpful to both governments and the non-governmental community concerned with Convention implementation."

Clear standards are basic in reducing confusions in interpretation, but these should be useless if not disseminated to the grassroots women, which compose the greater majority of women worldwide.

GRASSROOTS ACTIVITIES

Whether vague or overlapping, UN instruments are already there and can only be effective when used by those for whom they were created. Peoples worldwide can challenge their own governments to enforce the instruments which their countries are signatories of.

To recognize human rights violations, basic knowledge of human rights is "indispensable," Tomasevski says. Grassroots women's organizations can involve themselves in human rights information and education campaigns for their members and the public at large. The UN declared 1994 up to year 2003 as the UN Decade for Human Rights Education.

UNICEF's Stuart told elementary school principals at a human rights forum in Quezon City in the Philippines, sponsored last May

Protecting Human Rights

1. Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949);
2. Convention on the Political Rights of Women (December 20, 1952);
3. Protocol of October 23, 1953, adopting the 1926 Slavery Convention;
4. Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, adopted by the First UN Congress on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (1955);
5. Supplementary Convention Against Slavery, Slave Trade and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956);
6. Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (January 29, 1957);
7. Convention to Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages (November 7, 1962);
8. International Covenant on Human Rights, On Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966);
9. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966);
10. Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (December 18, 1979);
11. International Convention for the Protection of Human Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families (1991).