



HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACTING AGAINST DISCRIMINATION

SPEAK UP
STOP DISCRIMINATION

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY 2010

Rosa Parks

Lech Walesa

Emmeline Pankhurst

Nelson Mandela

Harvey Milk

Huda Shaarawi

Mahatma Gandhi

Enriqueta Estela Barnes de Carlotto

Bartolomé de las Casas O.P

Asma Jahangir

INFORMATION NOTE

Discrimination has multiple disguises. It can manifest as racism. It can present as religious intolerance and bigotry. It may be that being a woman is enough to consign a person to a life of fundamental deprivation. Millions of individuals from indigenous communities do not go to school, have no access to health care, and cannot find jobs because of their ethnic origins. People attracted sexually to people of the same gender struggle for equality. These people are all discriminated against.

Despite the seeming hopelessness of many of these situations, a number of remarkable people have managed to break the cycle of discrimination and in so doing have changed forever the way we regard ourselves. Because of their example we know it is possible to defeat discrimination, to achieve justice, to lead full, rich lives in which the world 'future' has meaning for all.

Here are the stories of some of these human rights defenders. This does not seek to be an exhaustive list but offers a selection of just a few individuals who have been instrumental in achieving reforms in situations that appeared intractable.

AN END TO RACISM

Rosa Parks (1913 –2005)

"I was arrested on December 1st, 1955 for refusing to stand up on the orders of the bus driver, after the white seats had been occupied in the front... I took a seat that was just back of where the white people were sitting, in fact, the last seat... We went on undisturbed until about the second or third stop when some white people boarded the bus and left one man standing. And when the driver noticed him standing, he told us to stand up and let him have those seats... He wanted to know if I was going to stand up, and I told him I was not. And he told me he would have me arrested. And I told him he may do that. And of course, he did."

(From an interview on the website of the "Academy of Achievement")

Rosa Parks was 42 on 1 December, 1955 when she ignored the directive of the bus driver and sparked a protest movement that is now acknowledged as the beginning of the modern civil rights movement in the United States. The subsequent boycott of the city-owned bus company led by Dr Martin Luther King gave the issue international exposure. Ultimately the Supreme Court struck down the ordinance under which Mrs. Parks had been fined and outlawed racial segregation on public transportation.

(From the website of the "Academy of Achievement")



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WORKERS' RIGHTS

Lech Walesa

"We are fighting for the right of the working people to association and for the dignity of human labour... The path to a brighter future of the world leads through honest reconciliation of the conflicting interests and not through hatred and bloodshed. To follow that path means to enhance the moral power of the all-embracing idea of human solidarity."

(Read by Danuta Walesa, on behalf of her husband, Lech Walesa, Nobel Peace Prize ceremony, 10 December 1983)

Lech Walesa achieved international fame as the most prominent leader of Solidarity, the protest movement in support of workers' rights which began in 1970 in the shipyards of Gdansk in Poland. Through the efforts of Walesa and others, more than a decade later, the military regime was forced to hold parliamentary elections which resulted in the establishment of a non-communist government.

(Adapted from the official website of the Nobel Prize)

EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

Emmeline Pankhurst (1858 –1928)

"It has come to a battle between the women and the government as to who shall yield first, whether they will yield and give us the vote, or whether we will give up our agitation. Well, they little know what women are. Women are very slow to rouse, but once they are aroused, once they are determined, nothing on earth and nothing in heaven will make women give way; it is impossible."

(Pankhurst's speech, 'Freedom or death', Connecticut, USA, November 1913)

Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Franchise League in England in 1889, which campaigned to allow married women the vote in local elections. Later, in 1903 she helped found the more militant Women's Social and Political Union - an organisation that gained much notoriety for its activities and whose members were the first to be christened 'suffragettes'. Pankhurst was arrested on numerous occasions over the next few years and went on hunger strike herself, resulting in violent force-feeding. In 1918, women aged over 30 were given the right to vote. A decade later, shortly before Pankhurst died women were granted equal voting rights with men at age 21.

(Adapted from the BBC's "Historic Figures")

AN END TO RACISM

Nelson Mandela

"I am also (sic) here today as a representative of the millions of people across the globe, the anti-apartheid movement, the governments and organizations that joined with us, not to fight against South Africa as a country or any of its peoples, but to oppose an inhuman system and sue for a speedy end to the apartheid crime against humanity. These countless human beings, both inside and outside our country, had the nobility of spirit to stand in the path of tyranny and injustice, without seeking selfish gain. They recognized that an injury to one is an injury to all and therefore acted together in defense of justice and a common human decency."

(Nelson Mandela's acceptance speech, Nobel Peace Prize, Stockholm, 1993)

Nelson Mandela is one of the world's most revered statesmen, who led the struggle to replace the apartheid regime of South Africa with a multi-racial democracy. Jailed for 27 years, he emerged to become the country's first black president and to play a leading role in the drive for peace in other spheres of conflict.

(From Nelson Mandela's Life and Times: BBC)

EQUAL RIGHTS FOR GAYS, LESBIANS, BISEXUALS AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE

Harvey Milk (1930 –1978)

"I can't forget the looks on faces of people who've lost hope. Be they gay, be they seniors, be they blacks looking for an almost-impossible job, be they Latins trying to explain their problems and aspirations in a tongue that's foreign to them. I personally will never forget that people are more important than buildings... I think it's time that we have many legislators who are gay and proud of that fact and do not have to remain in the closet. I think that a gay person, up-front, will not walk away from a responsibility and be afraid of being tossed out of office."

(The Hope Speech: Harvey Milk, March 10, 1978)

Harvey Milk was the first openly gay person to be elected to office in San Francisco. He was elected in November 1977 to the district where most of San Francisco's gay population was centered. Though open about his sexual preference from the start, Milk campaigned on a broad platform that included expanded childcare facilities, low-rent housing and a civilian police-review board, rather than primarily on the issue of homosexual rights. Just a year after the election, Milk and the Mayor of San Francisco George Moscone were shot and killed.

The man charged with the two murders, a former government official, was convicted of the lesser charge of voluntary manslaughter, leading to chaos and riots throughout the city.

(Adapted from an article in The New York Times)

EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN

Huda Shaarawi (1879 – 1947)

“In moments of danger, when women emerge by their side, men utter no protest. Yet women’s great acts and endless sacrifices do not change men’s views of women. Through their arrogance, men refuse to see the capabilities of women. Faced with contradiction, they prefer to raise women above the ordinary human plane instead of placing them on a level equal to their own. Men have singled out women of outstanding merit and put them on a pedestal to avoid recognizing the capabilities of all women.”

(From “Harem Years, The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist”, translated and introduced by Margot Badran, 1986)

Huda Shaarawi, regarded as a pioneer in the emancipation of women in Egypt was born into a wealthy family in the last days of the harems. She began her career in social reform, establishing a number of philanthropic and feminist associations and was also very prominent in Egypt’s independence struggle. Huda and two other feminist leaders made up Egypt’s delegation to the 9th International Feminist Conference in Rome in 1923, marking the debut of Egyptian women on the world scene. At that meeting, the three women removed their veils and never wore them again. Their priorities for that meeting included improving education for women, prohibition of marriage for girls below the age of 16 and reforming the mode of engagement to enable prospective spouses to acquaint themselves with one another prior to marriage. From then on Huda continued to participate internationally as a member of the International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship.

(Adapted from Al-Ahram Weekly, al-Hakawati Arab Cultural Trust)

THE RIGHT OF A NATION TO GOVERN ITSELF

Mahatma Gandhi (1869 –1948)

“In the democracy which I have envisaged, a democracy established by nonviolence, there will be equal freedom for all. Everybody will be his own master. It is to join a struggle for such democracy that I invite you today. Once you realize this you will forget the differences between the Hindus and Muslims, and think of yourselves as Indians only, engaged in the common struggle for independence.”

(Mahatma Gandhi’s “Quit India” speech, 1942)

Mohandas K. Gandhi was a Hindu leader in India’s quest for independence from Britain and was a prime apostle of nonviolence — “passive resistance” — as a way to achieve political and social goals.

Gandhi was born in 1869. He studied law in London and was subsequently hired as a legal adviser with an Indian firm in South Africa, where he found that Indian immigrants were denied civil liberties and political rights. During his 20 years in South Africa he began teaching the policy of passive resistance, or Satyagraha, in his struggle for human rights. After World War I, he began advocating passive resistance against Britain as a means to achieve home rule in India. Britain eventually left India in 1947. The following year, Gandhi was assassinated.

(Adapted from The New York Times)

SEARCHING FOR THE ‘DISAPPEARED’

Enriqueta Estela Barnes de Carlotto

“I wish to touch upon the theft of children born during the captivity of their disappeared parents... In Argentina, this practice was executed in a systematic manner; hundreds of children disappeared and were appropriated by civilians and military, altering their identity and history. They are now young men and women of 30 years of age or over, who we consider live disappeared and whom the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo have been searching for, day in and day out, for over three decades. We have located 89 of them, so far – hundreds are still missing.”

(From an address by Enriqueta Estela Barnes de Carlotto, May 2008, to a United Nations panel in New York.)

Enriqueta Estela Barnes de Carlotto is the President of the Asociación Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo [Association of Plaza de Mayo Grandmothers]. This organization was established in 1977 in response to the forced or involuntary disappearance of hundreds of children following the military coup in Argentina. These children were either abducted with their parents, or born in clandestine detention centers for young pregnant women. Barnes de Carlotto joined the Association in 1978 while searching for her own daughter, Laura Estela and Laura’s son. In the decades since, Barnes de Carlotto and the Association have located missing and kidnapped children and restored them to their rightful families.

(UN citation on the awarding of the United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights to Enriqueta Estela Barnes de Carlotto in 2003)

SAFEGUARDING THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS

Bartolomé de las Casas O.P. (c.1484 – 1566)

“They laid Wagers among themselves, who should with a Sword at one blow cut, or divide a Man in two; or which of them should decollate or behead a Man, with the greatest dexterity; nay farther, which should sheath his Sword in the Bowels of a Man with the quickest dispatch and expedition. They snatcht young Babes from the Mothers Breasts, and then dasht out the brains of those innocents against the Rocks; others they cast into Rivers scoffing and jeering them, and call’d upon their Bodies when falling with derision, the true testimony of their Cruelty, to come to them, and inhumanely exposing others to their Merciless Swords, together with the Mothers that gave them Life.”

(A translation (retaining the original archaic spelling and punctuation) of “A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies” by Bartolomé de las Casas, originally published in Seville in 1552: taken from the Project Gutenberg website)

Bartolomé de las Casas, a 16th Century Spanish Dominican priest, has been described as the “founder” of human rights. In “A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies” which was published in Spain in 1552, Las Casas chronicled the treatment of the indigenous populations by the Spanish colonists. The campaign of Las Casas to end slavery and improve treatment of the indigenous populations through his historical accounts and his advocacy are credited with helping achieve the passing of Spain’s New Laws - legislation aimed at restoring the rights of the American Indians. These reforms are regarded as marking the emergence of international law and are similar to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

(Adapted from the site of the Las Casas Insitute, Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford and Wikipedia)

THE UNIVERSAL CULTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Asma Jahangir

“Religious intolerance is not a natural outcome of diverse societies. Rather, intolerance is often the product of manipulation by a few groups, political forces or individuals for various reasons. History, both contemporary and much earlier, has proven that issues of religion or belief are highly emotive. As the germs of religious intolerance spread, it is hard to contain them. The structure of the State, its method of governance and educational policies may – depending on their design and implementation – either help in creating religious harmony or contribute to religious friction. Preventive activities and the commitment of Governments and societies to fundamental human rights are therefore key to creating an atmosphere of religious tolerance.”

(Asma Jahangir’s final statement to the Human Rights Council as Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, March 2010)

Asma Jahangir from Pakistan has been awarded the 2010 UNESCO/Bilbao Prize for the Promotion of a Culture of Human Rights. Jahangir’s term as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief expired July 2010 after six years in the mandate. For the six years prior to that appointment, Jahangir was the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions. In awarding Jahangir its Prize, UNESCO cited her “excellent record as a human rights defender, notably the outstanding work she has carried out as a renowned lawyer and advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan particularly for the rights of religious minorities, women and children.” Jahangir is the founding member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and the Women’s Action Forum.

(Adapted from UNESCOPRESS)

CONTACT US

Visit our Human Rights Day webpage www.ohchr.org/hrday2010 and download audiovisual and print materials, visual designs and more.

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ABOUT THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE

The United Nations Human Rights office, part of the UN Secretariat, has been given a unique mandate to promote and protect all human rights. Headquartered in Geneva, the Office is also present in some 50 countries. Headed by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, a position established by the General Assembly in 1993 to spearhead the UN human rights efforts, the Office takes action based on the unique mandate given it by the international community to guard and advocate for international human rights law. For more information please visit www.ohchr.org



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