

Women's Human Rights on the World Stage

An Unfinished History

ALDA FACIO, EDITED WITH ANGELA MILES

C'est une courte histoire du développement des droits humains internationaux des femmes dans le système des Nations Unies depuis le début et comment leurs droits devraient être protégés pendant la Décennie des femmes des Nations Unies et jusqu'en 1990 quand les mouvements internationaux des femmes pour leurs droits ont pris de l'ampleur. L'auteure rêve d'un courant genré qui intégrerait les droits des femmes dans les activités des Nations Unies.

I am going to tell you a story that has been sidelined, as have been most of women's endeavors. It is an unfinished history of the international recognition of the human rights of women within the United Nations system. The road has not been straight or smooth. It has been like a road in my country, Costa Rica, winding up, down, and around the mountains. It has been marked by changes in thinking and policy on women's issues over many decades. The road to women's human rights has been obstructed by misogynists and fundamentalists from every region and creed. Progress has also been hindered by many who are committed to the liberation of all women, but who were, or are still, convinced that the human rights framework is not the way.

Human rights theory and practice can be summarized as a commitment to respect, cherish, and treat all life with the utmost care. If you believe in this then you can defend human rights, even if you do not know all the human rights laws, procedures, and mechanisms that have been established. Knowledge of the human rights documents, their articles, and clauses, is of course very useful, especially in making claims for justice and reparations in specific cases of human rights violations. But it will not help if you do not feel deep respect and care for all living beings,

especially if you do not really believe that we are all born equal in value and dignity. At a time when nationalistic and religious intolerance are on the rise and the powerful few are ruled by economic self-interest, a stance of respect for all life constitutes a very different and sacred starting place. It is precisely here that we trace the origins of the evolution of women's human rights. The power of the concept of *human rights*, and *human rights laws and procedures* more broadly, lies in the following important principles crafted in international processes during the founding of the League of Nations and the United Nations:

- Human Rights are universal. All human beings have rights inherent in their humanity.
- Human Rights must be guaranteed equally and without discrimination.
- Unlike other agreed societal development goals and aspirations, Human Rights are not discretionary. States have a *legal obligation* to respect, protect, and fulfill everyone's human rights without discrimination and *are accountable* to the international community for implementing these obligations.
- There are legal and political mechanisms for establishing accountability for failures to abide by Human Rights obligations.
- The protection and promotion of all Human Rights is a legitimate concern of the international community, with priority over claims to national sovereignty.

The establishment of the legal terminology of "human rights" itself relied on certain historical prerequisites. To begin with, *individuals had to gain legal rights vis à vis the State under international law*. This came about in