



PRESS RELEASE

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International Women's Day: Women confronting taboos and censorship

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression: this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19.

On the occasion of International Women's Day, 8 March 2008, ARTICLE 19 has published a set of portraits of women activists who are speaking out against taboos, laws, and their governments. The publication entitled "[Confronting Taboos and Censorship: Women Speaking Out](#)" profiles women are claiming their right to speak and their right to impart information, including on issues which are often constructed as the most unmentionable of them all – rape and incest, reproduction and abortion, sexuality.

“Throughout the world, women are prevented from seeking, receiving and imparting information on their rights including their right to life, right to health, and sexual and reproductive rights. They confront silence and fears. They are denied information which could save their lives. They die. Pressures and taboos from our societies and cultures are enforced or re-enforced, tacitly or explicitly, by our States.”
Said Dr. Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director.

“Against these historical trends, Lina Khoury in Lebanon, Sunila Abeysekera in Sri Lanka, Jacira Melo in Brazil, activists in Mexico have taken on taboos, hypocrisy and the censors, put sexuality, rape and abortion on the political and social agenda, and upheld the mantle for women's rights.”

In Lebanon, Lina Khoury has triggered public debate about sex, harassment, domestic violence and *coco*, otherwise known as the vagina, through her play *Hakeh neswan* (Arabic for Women's talk). In Brazil, Jacira Melo is promoting the reproductive rights of women through mass media, a difficult approach in Brazil due to the political influence exerted by conservative groups, especially the Catholic Church, which do not hesitate to refer to pro-abortion campaigners as “*assassins*”. In Sri Lanka, Sunila Abeysekera is actively promoting a broad discussion on the decriminalisation of abortion, and repeal of the sodomy laws under which homosexuality is a crime. She is advancing the cause of lesbians, bisexual women and trans persons. In Mexico, access to information activists, including ARTICLE 19 Mexico, have allied their efforts with those promoting the rights of women to campaign for a proper information regime on reproductive rights, particularly on women's right to abortion in Mexico City.

Dr. Callamard adds: *“Governments must respect, protect and uphold women's right to freedom of expression. The kind of censorship experienced by Lina Khoury, Sunila Abeysekera or Jacira Melo is simply unacceptable.”*

“Governments also bear a duty to inform women about their rights. They should as well inform the police and the medical establishment of the laws, policies, and guidelines, regarding such issues as contraception, abortion, and rape. Women are unjustly denied the proper police investigation or safe

medical procedures to which they are legally entitled, because police or physicians are not properly informed about them, or are fearful and deterred from following them.”

It is the responsibility of governments to ensure that the police force follows proper procedures when investigating allegations of rape or incest, and to make rights to contraception or legal abortion transparent by publicising regulations and organising mass information campaigns.“

“On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, let’s make sure that women claim as theirs the information space that centuries of silence and repression have denied them, and that we hold our governments to account whenever they fail to uphold our right to free expression and information.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

- The document is available: <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/women-s-day-2008.pdf>
- For more information, please contact Agnes Callamard, ARTICLE 19 executive director, at agnes@article19.org, + 44-207-278 9292
- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees freedom of expression.