

**Immigrant Women's Support Service (IWSS)
20 Year Anniversary Event**

**Bardon, Queensland
Thursday 9 November 2006, 9:45 am**

**Speech by Georgina Perry
National President, Amnesty International Australia**

Thank you Heather.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Butchalla people who are the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet.

It is a great honour to be invited to address you today as part of this celebration of the great work of the Immigrant Women's Support Service.

Amnesty International is a democratic organisation with 1.8 million members in over 150 countries around the world. Our members campaign to bring change and to protect human rights. Amnesty International takes no money from governments and is entirely funded by individuals like you and me. When Amnesty International was founded by Peter Benenson in 1961, it worked mainly to free political prisoners and prisoners of conscience around the world. Today Amnesty International's work has expanded to cover a broad spectrum of human rights issues: from economic and social rights, such as the right to health and education, to political and civil rights, such as freedom of expression and the right to a fair trial. Amnesty International gives voice to the voiceless: to forgotten prisoners; to those suffering in hidden crisis in remote corners of the world; to the poor and the marginalised; and to refugees and women.

I know that there are people who may question you and who say why bother. How can you change the world you are but one person, just one individual? But I also know that those people are wrong. I know you can make a difference as all our members and supporters have made a difference. I made the decision over ten years ago to join Amnesty International, motivated by the belief that ordinary people can achieve extraordinary change. And time and again I have seen my belief become a reality. I have seen the power of Amnesty International – through the efforts of

ordinary people – securing the release of prisoners of conscience, saving the lives of the condemned and holding governments to account.

Today as we celebrate the 20 year anniversary of the Immigrant Women's Support Service I want to tell you what I think you can do to make a difference to end one of the world biggest human rights scandals: violence against women.

It is difficult to think of violence against women in an age in which women are heads of state, have travelled to space, won Olympic medals and been awarded the Noble Peace Prize. In January this year Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson of Liberia became the first woman head of state in Africa, and Michele Bachelet the first elected President of Chile. Just a few months before that Angela Merkel was chosen as the first female Federal Chancellor in Germany. For two years running, in 2003 and 2004, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to women: Shirin Abadi, a lawyer from Iran, and Wangair Matthai, an environmental activist from Kenya. The New York Stock exchange is now headed by a woman, as is the London Business School – as indeed is Amnesty International.

It is evident that women around the world are breaking social and economic barriers. That is why it is particularly shocking that, according to the United Nations, one in three women, that is one billion women, suffer violence – physical attack, sexual assault, rape, or coerced sex – at least once in their lives. Women and girls are being subjected to violence at shocking levels.

Violence against women can take many forms: women in Asia and the Middle East are killed in the name of honour. Girls in West Africa undergo genital mutilation in the name of custom. Migrant and refugee women in Western Europe are attacked for not accepting the social mores of their host community. Young girls in South Africa are raped and infected with HIV/AIDS because the perpetrators believe that sex with virgins will cure them of their disease. And in the richest most developed countries in the world women are battered to death by their partners.

In too many communities leaders and the media promote roles, attitudes and customs, which seek to subordinate and subjugate women. Too often armed groups defy international humanitarian law and use rape as a tactic of war to defeat and humiliate the enemy and too often they get away with it.

The proliferation of small arms, the militarisation of many societies and the backlash against human rights in the context of the so-called 'war on terror' is only worsening the plight of women.

And so it was from pressure, persuasion and the persistent courageous defenders of women's human rights that brought Amnesty International to the point in 2004 where our 1.8 million members and our millions of global supporters stood ready to acknowledge that violence against women is a human rights scandal unparalleled in its dimensions as a cultural, social and political malignancy. It is rooted in prejudice, bigotry and discrimination and its eradication needs to be sought without reservation, without equivocation and without delay.

The challenge is to bring about a change that will make a difference in the lives of women around the world. That is what women the world over are calling for today.

We are demanding the abolition of laws and practices around the world that discriminate against women and perpetuate violence. We call for effective laws, policies and programs to stop violence in the family. We call for the effective enforcement of laws that criminalise rape and other forms of sexual violence, in war time and in peace. And we seek to end discrimination against women everywhere. In doing this, we seek the solidarity of men with women as violence against women affects everyone in our community.

China Keitetsi was unwanted from birth. Her father had wanted a boy. So after continuous abuse she ran away at the age of eight and was abducted by the rebel movement that, two years later, brought Yoweri Museveni to power in Uganda. Too small to carry a gun China was used as a decoy and together with thousands of other children she was educated in killing and torture. China lost her childhood. She killed so many people that she lost track of how many. Nor can she remember how many officers raped her and other girl soldiers in the evenings when they were exhausted from marching and fighting.

Falling pregnant at the age of 13 she was stripped of her uniform until she had given birth. Her son Moses was kept in barracks while China was forced to return to the army. When China left Uganda after spending nine years in armed combat, she was pregnant with her second child. She had rejected the sexual advances of a senior officer and in return, was accused of having sold weapons to the enemy forces. Together with a friend, she crossed the continent to reach South Africa where she

applied for refugee status. Four years later, China found her way to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. From there she was taken to Denmark.

Today, a decade after her escape from the military, China is working together with Amnesty International to draw attention to the human rights abuses that are happening around the world. She campaigns against the use of child soldiers, she speaks out to stop abuses and torture and she raises her hand to stop violence against women.

I want to thank China for her voice, and for giving voice to the millions who are too afraid to speak out and for those for whom it is too late.

Girls like 14 year old Claudia who on 9 March 2003 vanished in the city of Chihuahua Mexico. Although she has been reported missing and her mother constantly distributes leaflets with her photograph she has never been found. Claudia is one among hundreds of women and girls who have disappeared in Chihuahua and Ciudad Juarez on the US border. Over a period of ten years these women and girls have been abducted, tortured, raped and killed. The authorities did little to investigate and prosecute the crimes because the victims were poor powerless women without any political clout. What shone through in these cases though was the courage of the mothers of those killed. They have organised themselves and are agitating for justice, Together with them and others Amnesty International succeeded in pressurising the Federal Government of Mexico to intervene in 2003 in an effort to end the killings.

China and Amnesty International also give voice to girls such as Jamila, a 16 year old Afghan girl who was abducted from her home in Kunduz when she was just 15 years old. She was forced into marriage, abused and raped. Caught by the police, she was sent to prison in Kabul for deserting her husband. Jamila told Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan that she would have liked to go home to her parents, but she is afraid that her father will kill her because she has soiled the family honour. Her fear is not unfounded. In 2003 President Karzai granted amnesty to 20 women convicted of crimes similar to Jamila's, but on their release one woman was instantly killed by her family and several others 'disappeared'. But Jamila has not lost hope. She says that one day girls like her will not have to live in a prison to be safe.

Yet Amnesty International works not only to expose abuse but to celebrate courage and the enormous achievements of women's groups and women's activists from the

mothers of Ciudad Juarez to China. These stories do not only represent the voices of victims – these are also the stories of survivors and agents of change. As you listen you will hear their voices, not just over there in far away places but here, as violence against women does not only happen to other people, it happens to us, our friends and our families.

It may be an uncomfortable truth but violence against women affects the lives of all women everywhere. It is the most pervasive human rights abuse of our times. It is a hidden atrocity. One billion women, subjected to violence simply because of their gender and the reality is that all women live under the threat of violence at some point in their lives.

It is perhaps easier to look at the violence against women in conflict than it is to look at the violence occurring on your doorstep, easier to think that it is an atrocity which happens over there.

But it is not.

From women in Morocco and Iran, to Yemen and Sudan who suffer violence in their own homes and communities. To the US where one in three women face the threat of sexual assault and to France where out of an estimated 25, 000 rapes only 8,000 are reported in a year because of the stigma attached to rape. From Switzerland where a woman is at a greater risk of violence in her own home than she is on the streets to the UK where emergency services receive an average of one call per minute about violence in the family.

We say that human rights are universal. Violence against women has unfortunately made human rights abuse universal.

And one form of violence above all others occurs in every single country in the world: violence in the family.

In Australia one in four women suffers violence in their intimate relationships. The figures are even more alarming for indigenous women. In Cape York Indigenous communities up to 90 percent of families are affected by violence. Yet prevention of violence in indigenous communities cannot be effective without first addressing the social and cultural destruction and the disempowerment of the Indigenous peoples.

In February 2006 the United Nations provided the Australian Government with a list of recommendations to eliminate discrimination against women. Their concerns included: high rates of violence against women, the high rate of imprisonment of Indigenous women, women trafficked into sexual slavery in Australia, racism and xenophobia directed at women, the particular needs of rural, refugee women and women with disabilities.

The Federal Government must take a leadership role and provide the political will and resources for the development of a national integrated strategy to prevent violence against women. Only then will these human rights violations against women begin to be addressed. It is time for us to demand a better system!

Freedom from violence is not a privilege it is a universal human right. All women are entitled to be free from violence committed by the state or by private actors. Governments are obliged under international law to uphold this right. No custom, culture or tradition, no law, policy or practice can be used to deny women their human rights. Nothing can excuse violence against women.

So why is there such widespread abuse and violence of women around the world?

It happens because laws, policies and practices discriminate against women, denying them equality with men, politically, economically and socially. In many parts of the world women still do not have the vote, or equal access to property or family rights. There was a universal outrage when only whites could vote during apartheid in South Africa – yet we remain silent in the face of gender apartheid when only men are allowed to vote in Saudi Arabia.

It happens because in many societies gender roles reinforce the power of men over women's lives and bodies. It happens because community and religious leaders reinforce roles, attitudes and customs which seek to subordinate and subjugate women and perpetrate violence against them. Whether at the hands of Christian, Islamic or Hindu fundamentalists a common casualty has been women's human rights.

It happens because of the feminisation of poverty – although wealthy women also face violence, the risk of violence is increased when women are poor. Poor women are more exposed to violence and unable to escape it because they do not have a job, or any alternative shelter or social support. More and more of the poor today are women.

It happens because governments turn away from violence against women and allow impunity to flourish. Rape and other gender-based violence during armed conflict are prohibited under international laws. However in the most modern conflicts hundreds of thousands of women and girls have been raped or recruited as child soldiers and sex slaves as deliberate tactics of military strategy. They persist because those in power do not acknowledge the wrongs that have been done and rarely prosecute those who have committed them.

It happens because some governments are manipulating the security agenda in the name of women, claiming to liberate women from the clutches of the Taliban in Afghanistan but leaving them more vulnerable than ever before.

Violence against women happens because we allow it to happen. As women we are too afraid and ashamed to speak of it. As men we deny it. And as a society we tolerate it and find excuses for it in the name of religion, custom, culture and tradition.

The human rights movement in general, and Amnesty International is no exception, has been slow to come to the defence of women. It has taken a long time to overcome the false division between violations in the public arena and violations in the private sphere.

Since the 1990s Amnesty International has campaigned to establish that women's rights are human rights. But more was needed to be done to establish gender equality at the heart of Amnesty International's work. And so with the launch of a six year international focus to Stop Violence Against Women in 2004 Amnesty International has been able to move towards increasing awareness of the gender based aspect of human rights violations, undertaking more research into violence against women and building partnerships with women's movements around the world to combat violence against women.

Amnesty International Australia has taken an active stance on the issue of violence against women with groups in capital cities and regional centres across Australia taking part in 16 Days of Activism between 25 November and 10 December as part of the organisation's six year global priority to Stop Violence Against Women.

Our national aim is to collect 16,000 signatures over the 16 days in calling on the Federal Government to establish a National Plan of Action to address the human rights abuse of violence against women.

Amnesty International is calling on governments to live up to their obligations under international law to respect, protect and fulfil women's human rights.

States are required to make sure that the rights recognized under human rights law are made a reality in practice as International treaties and mechanisms are only useful if they are implemented properly. Laws and policies can only offer protection if they are respected. And human rights are only real if they provide real equality and equal protection.

According to the United Nations Declaration of the Elimination of Violence Against Women, states should, "exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate, and in accordance with national legislation punish acts of violence against women whether those acts are perpetrated by the state or by private persons".

Yet the violence continues.

The Government's ongoing failure to tackle violence against women in Papua New Guinea has resulted in this violence becoming so pervasive that it impedes national development and contributes to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Gang rapes, knife attacks on wives, beating and sexual assault of girls and murder of female 'sorcerers' are among the many forms of violence facing women in Papua New Guinea.

The threat of rape, sexual assault and other violence is so great that women and girls cannot freely move around in their communities; go to school, to the market or to work. The state's failure to enable women to become safely involved in civil and economic life severely constrains the full use of resources for national development.

A lack of political will and the Government's tendency to dwell on difficulties and dredge up old excuses has meant that very little has changed for women in 20 years. Sadly, many women have come to see violence as normal – as have men, confident in the knowledge that the state will not act quickly, decisively or consistently against them. Police regularly send home those reporting domestic violence, or wife bashing as it is locally termed, telling them it is a 'family matter'.

A family counsellor has described violence against women in the family – "Surviving an abusive relationship is like surviving torture – the future narrows down to getting through the next few hours, the next day".

Governments cannot escape their responsibility just because violence against women is often perpetrated by private actors – such as intimate partners – rather than state officials. The obligation of the state to protect women's human rights does not disappear when a woman steps into her own home.

This is not to say that governments are responsible for every violent crime that is committed against a woman. What it means is that the state has an obligation to take all reasonable measures through law, policy and practice, to ensure that a woman is not exposed to violence – and that she can obtain protection if she faces risk and redress if she suffers violence.

It means not using culture, custom or religion as an excuse for turning away from human rights abuses against women or for failing to protect them.

Yet despite persecution, inequality and obstruction, the battle for women's human rights and to stop violence against women has remained largely a battle fought by women for women.

It is women who lead the struggle to expose and counter violence and to bring dramatic changes in law and practice. Women have organised themselves, broken taboos and spoken up, sometimes at great personal cost. They have had to challenge an existing power structure. They have been harassed, beaten up and abused. They have been called traitors, troublemakers and man haters. But it is largely through the efforts of women that the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination in 1979, that in 1993 the World Conference on Human Rights acknowledged that women's rights are human rights; and in 2001, the Statute of the International Criminal Court recognised rape during conflict as a war crime and crime against humanity.

The recognition of violence against women as a human rights violation changes the perception of violence against women from a private matter to one of public concern and means that public authorities are required to take action. The parallel of international and regional human rights standards reinforces this accountability.

Framing violence against women as a human rights issue creates a common language for the work of anti-violence activists and facilitates global and regional networks. These networks are taking their governments to task and instigating new international legal standards and practices.

By initiating this change women have shown that they are not victims although victimised but rather that they are agents of change.

I am very conscious of whom I am addressing today. You within the Immigrant Women's Support Service are part of the women's movement; you are the very people who are spearheading these positive changes for women's human rights through organising and mobilising to demand respect for women's human rights.

I thank you for acknowledging that violence against women is a violation of human rights and is a crime against the individual and society and for acknowledging that violence against women is both a consequence and reinforcement of the imbalances of power between men and women.

I thank you for working towards the elimination of violence against women, particularly women from non-English speaking backgrounds and for advocating for the elimination of domestic violence and sexual assault amongst non-English speaking background communities in Queensland. It is you who have joined the movement to expose the shameful acts of violence against women and demanded that it stop.

Thankyou for speaking out for those can't.

Through its Stop Violence Against Women campaign, Amnesty International has also added its voice to the call for action. Together with you and many others Amnesty International brings the power, the persuasion, the energy and the determination of its 1.8 million members, men and women from all over the world to stop violence against women.

It is a campaign for us all – for all men and women – who want to condemn violence against women – who want to stand up for the right of women to live without violence, to work without sexual harassment, to marry without domestic violence, to form a family without incest, to enjoy consensual sex without coercion, to flee as refugees from violence to safety and not to more violence.

And although there is a long road ahead of us and the challenges are great, Amnesty International's Stop Violence Against Women campaign has achieved a rate of success.

We have applied a rights based, victim/survivor centred approach to violence against women. A report action on sexual violence in Darfur achieved its objective of gaining greater international attention on Darfur, getting humanitarian workers into Darfur, and also of getting more of Amnesty International's membership working on the situation. Within half a year of the release of a report on the Solomon Islands, recommendations on the establishment of a police sexual assault unit, an increase in the number of counsellors, women paralegals and policewomen, and the establishment of a women's shelter with protection facilities were put into effect.

The prime minister had publicly committed to set up a national human rights commission, which would investigate if not past violations during the conflict, at least future violations, and work on VAW issues.

Two radio stations now feature information programs by the solicitor's and the attorney general's offices on a weekly basis on legal issues, including the nature of arrests and court trials, the legal provisions on rape and the reasons why a woman forced into sex and then given money must be considered a victim and not somebody who volunteered a service for money.

From Algeria to Israel, Ciudad Juarez and Japan successes are occurring. Our campaign to stop violence against women is working to give voice to the millions of women in the world who suffer from violence simply because they are women.

To the women of Iraq who live in daily fear of being kidnapped, raped or murdered amidst continuing insecurity. They fear a backlash against women's rights in a climate of political insecurity.

Our campaign gives voice to the women in the occupied Territories of Palestine whose suffering is rarely covered by the media and to the women in Australia where domestic violence contributes to more ill-health and premature death than any other single cause for Australian women aged 15 to 44.

Yet the purpose of our campaign is not to portray women as victims and stigmatise men as perpetrators; it is to condemn the act of violence itself.

The solidarity of men is an essential component in Amnesty International's strategy for achieving the eradication of violence against women, as men are not just the perpetrators of violence. Men also suffer when the women they love are victims of violence and many of them are a part of the movement to condemn and eradicate

violence against women. We at Amnesty International are issuing a strong call to men to join the campaign to stop violence against women and will be mobilising all its members and supporters, men and women to this end.

Together we can end violence against women in organising to counter violence and to use the power and the persuasion of the human rights framework in the efforts to stop violence against women. We must be willing to challenge religious, social and cultural attitudes that belittle women. We must be ready to fight for the equal access to women for political power and economic resources. We must have the courage to confront those in authority and demand change. But most importantly we can end it if we are ready to change ourselves – to say NO.

The violence will only end when each of us makes the pledge not to do it, not to permit others to do it, not in any way to tolerate it and not to rest until it is eradicated.

Freedom from violence is not a privilege; it is a universal human right. All people have equal rights by virtue of being human. All human rights should be enjoyed by all people.

In 2004 Amnesty International embarked on its biggest ever campaign, together with women's groups across the world, to stop violence against women.

Help us to win this campaign and make human rights a reality for all women.

Violence against women may be universal but it is not normal, legal, inevitable or acceptable. It can and must be stopped.

Please join today the worldwide campaign to Stop Violence Against Women.

Thank You.

ENDS/