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International Women's Day: ARTICLE 19 Affirms the Rights of Women with the Right to Free Expression

ARTICLE 19 joins the global community on International Women's Day to celebrate the leadership and contribution of thousands of women around the world who strive for women's equality and empowerment through their daily work.

ARTICLE 19 reaffirms the importance of gender equality as a key component of the right to freedom of expression. As ARTICLE 19 Executive Director, Dr Agnes Callamard, states: *"Women's voices are all too often silent in the media and other public spaces. Women must be heard and must be able to receive information on issues that affect them. Women journalists, activists, community leaders and others must be allowed and encouraged to articulate their views and tell their stories. They must be able to engage freely in their work, without fear of censorship, harassment or violence."*

ARTICLE 19 here reflects the experiences of just a few women who have stood up for freedom of expression in some of the countries in which we work.

Africa

Sudan

Lubna Hussein, a former journalist and United Nations employee, became a symbol of resistance to the oppression of women in her home country of Sudan in 2009, when she defied a ban on wearing trousers in public. She was one of several women arrested in a Khartoum restaurant last July and charged with violating "decency laws". All the women were convicted and they all paid "admission of guilt" fines and received 10 lashes, except for Hussein who risked a worse flogging to challenge the charges.

The Sudanese Penal Code 1991 states that *"whoever does in a public place an indecent act or wears an obscene outfit shall be punished with flogging which may not exceed forty lashes or with fine or with both."*

Hussein launched an email campaign inviting people to witness her flogging. The Sudanese Government offered to drop the charges if she would agree to stop wearing trousers. She refused and was imprisoned overnight, while a pro-government press agency paid her fine, possibly in order to avoid further embarrassment for the Government. Since then, Hussein has been writing actively and risked further

punishment when she left the country to campaign for Muslim women's rights in France earlier this year.

ARTICLE 19 has been working in Sudan for several years, lobbying for more effective press laws and for better human rights protection.

Tunisia

While Tunisia has made remarkable strides in its economic development in recent years, this has not been matched by a similar commitment to democracy and the promotion of human rights. The country has been considered a pioneer for having ratified international conventions protecting women's rights and these were enshrined in the 1959 Constitution. However, these have not been adequately upheld during the government of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who has been in power since 1987.

Sihem Bensadrine is a journalist and human rights activist who has been subjected to regular physical abuse, including beatings and torture, as well as slander by pro-government newspapers and websites which have called her a "prostitute" and "sexual pervert". Together with **Naziha Réjiba**, she runs an independent online journal *Kalima*, which is censored in Tunisia, along with a radio station, Radio Kalima. Both women are under constant surveillance by police and their phones are monitored. This pattern of harassment has become significantly worse since the 2009 election of President Ben Ali for another term. The pro-government media has begun calling opposition journalists "agents of Israel" and calling for them to be lynched.

ARTICLE 19 is a member of the Tunisia Monitoring Group, which monitors human rights abuses and supports independent journalists, writers and activists in their fight against censorship and violations of freedom of expression.

Asia

Nepal

Uma Singh was the first female journalist to be killed in Nepal: she was stabbed by as many as 15 men in her apartment in Janakpur on 11 January 2009. A radio journalist, Singh had broadcast and written material on themes relating to women's rights, the caste system and the country's political situation. While a number of individuals have been sporadically detained, her killers have never been identified or brought to justice.

In a 2008 interview with *Republica*, a Nepalese news and publishing house, Singh said:

"My name is Uma Singh. My home is in [Nepal]. I am currently working at Radio Today as a reporter and news reader. Working in the Tarai [region of Nepal] is fraught with problems. Organisations and groups constantly apply pressure on us. They say "broadcast this news, don't broadcast that news." They threaten us if we do not broadcast what they ask. Women journalists also face additional social pressure. Society's views of women journalists matters a lot. Society does not accept us as equal to men. They say that journalistic work is not appropriate for women. On top of that, violent political groups are growing and have been a major challenge for us. We have been compelled to dance to their tunes. Yesterday there was a mainstream

political event in Janakpur, but violent groups forced us instead to cover what they were doing and saying instead. This makes us helpless. What do we do? If we do not broadcast what they ask, they threaten to kill us and life becomes very very hard for us. We also have to balance our news rather than bow to their orders. We find ourselves in a really difficult situation. Working as a journalist is a really tough job.”

Nepal has seen an increase in violent attacks against media workers since the start of the Constitution-making process in 2006. ARTICLE 19 has participated in several international missions to Nepal in recent years and has been working to promote freedom of expression in the Nepalese Constitution.

Indonesia

Siti Musdah Mulia is a champion of Islamic and women’s rights, as chairperson of the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace and professor of Islamic Studies at Syarif Hidayatullah Islamic University in Jakarta.

In 2004, Mulia embarked on a project to revise Indonesia’s Islamic Code, which included a ban on polygamy and forced marriages, raising the legal of marriage for girls from 16 to 19 years, and demanding equal rights for husbands and wives. These proposed reforms caused such violent protests from conservative clerics that the Minister for Religious Affairs withdrew them from the parliamentary process.

Mulia has spoken widely on freedom of expression, especially with regard to the rights of women to access information and voice opinions. She is currently challenging the 1965 defamation of religion law, which is under review at the Constitutional Court. ARTICLE 19 is providing an *amicus curiae* in this case.

Indonesia has enjoyed positive development in democracy and civil liberties following the fall of President Suharto in 1998. However, in recent years, religious conservatism and national security concerns have threatened media pluralism, freedom of expression and human rights. The Indonesia Journalists Association (AJI) has identified press freedom as one of their three main concerns. Despite a relatively free press compared to other countries in the region, journalists, especially those covering environmental issues, still risk being stopped or even arrested. Journalists also face threats of protests and attacks by mobs and hard-line Islamic groups.

New legislation such as the controversial Anti-Pornography Bill and Electronic Information and Transaction Law (with up to six years’imprisonment for defamation on the internet), the enforcement of the 1965 Defamation of Religion Act, and the planned introduction of an internet censorship law, are all worrying signs that freedom of expression is under threat in Indonesia.

Europe

Chechnya

Natalia Estemirova, an award-winning human rights campaigner, was murdered by unknown assassins in July 2009. Estemirova worked for the Russian human rights group Memorial in Grozny, Chechnya, where she documented dozens of human rights violations.

Trained as a history teacher, Estemirova had begun reporting on human rights abuses and casualties during the Chechen War in 1999. She was also instrumental in helping foreign journalists access information and interviews in the region, and was a key figure in helping tell the story of the Chechen conflict around the world.

She was abducted in the morning of 15 July last year and taken away in a car. Her body was found later the same day, with bullet wounds, in neighbouring Ingushetia. Her killers have not been identified and nobody has been charged with her murder, despite an expression of outrage from Russian President Dmitri Medvedev at the time.

In 2005, Estemirova was awarded the Robert Schuman medal by Members of the European Parliament, who voted her an “emblematic moral figure”. In 2007, she travelled to London to receive the inaugural Anna Politkovskaya award from the Reach all Women in War campaign. During an interview with the BBC at this time, she was asked whether she felt her life was in danger. She responded: *"Sometimes I just can't even come to feeling that because I have such strong other feelings. I try to be very exact about how I go about things and of course I do have worries about my family and people close to me but I still have to do my work. Of course there are moments when I feel scared."*

ARTICLE 19 works in the North Caucasus to promote freedom of expression and supports journalists and human rights defenders in their work reporting abuses.

Latin America

Brazil

Thais Corral is an expert in social communications, recognised for her leadership on sustainability, environment and gender issues. She is the chairperson of ABDL (Brazilian Association for the Development of Leadership) and co-founder of CEMINA (Communication, Education and Information on Gender).

Throughout her professional life, Corral has been involved starting up organisations, which include WEDO (Women, Environment and Development Organisation), founded with American Member of Congress, Bella Abzug, and Nobel Laureate, Wangari Mathaai. WEDO plays a major role in the United Nations global system and lobbies for economic and social justice. Corral is also a founder member of REDEH (Rede de Desenvolvimento Humano), an organisation that works for the development of public policies on health, sexual and reproductive rights, education and environment. Amongst her accomplishments are the design and implementation of a project to empower women in water management carried out in Northeastern Brazil, selected in 2003 by the World Water Forum as a world best practice.

More recently, Corral conceived and implemented a women's radio network which links 400 women's radio programmes and their communities throughout Brazil. The network aims to encourage the use of community radio by women, as a means of airing their views especially in relation to women's rights. The network empowers women community leaders to develop their own radio programmes.

This network subsequently gave birth to the Cyberelas project, which is a model for capacity-building that links radio and internet communications, facilitating access to communications tools and information exchange through telecentres located in under-

resourced and poor areas. These train women in the use of technologies, software and radio, in order to advance awareness of sexual and reproductive rights. When the centres are not being used for radio production, they are open to local communities for free internet use.

Mexico

Maria Esther Aguilar Casimbe, a crime reporter in Zamora for the local daily *Cambio*, in the central Mexican state of Michoacán, went missing on November 2009. She was last seen when she left home after receiving a phone call. She had been covering stories relating to local corruption and had recently exposed abuses by local authorities.

Michoacán is considered one of the most dangerous states for journalists in Mexico, owing to its high levels of violence, relating to drug trafficking and organised crime. Aguilar is the third journalist to have disappeared in this province and the first woman out of nine other journalists across the country who have disappeared without trace since 2000.

ARTICLE 19 runs a multi-faceted programme to address issues of safety for journalists in Mexico. This includes lobbying the Government to provide better protections for journalists and media workers, and to ensure that perpetrators of crimes against journalists are brought to justice. ARTICLE 19 also monitors and tracks attacks against journalists, and provides safety training for people working in this field.

Middle East

Iran

Shiva Nazar Ahari is an Iranian blogger, journalist, human rights defender and activist who has been in solitary confinement in Tehran's notorious Evin prison. Over the past six years, she has been arrested on several occasions under a variety of charges related to her intrepid interviews with international media and her critical blogging. She is a founding member of the Committee of Human Rights Reporters.

In June 2009, the security forces searched her house and confiscated personal possessions. The next day she was arrested and kept in solitary confinement for 33 days. During this period, she was allowed only one phone call to her family. On 1 September, her family was informed that bail for her release had been set at USD 500,000, which was reduced to USD 200,000 on 16 September. Her family raised the money and Ahari was released on 23 September.

On 20 December 2009, Ahari was again arrested, along with a colleague, while on a bus from Tehran to Qom to attend the funeral of Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri, an influential cleric who had been critical of the Government. A prosecutor later informed her family that the Committee of Human Rights Reporters was affiliated with an armed opposition group, although she has not been charged or given access to a lawyer since her arrest. On 11 February, Ahari told her family by phone that she had been transferred to a cage-like solitary confinement cell where she cannot move her arms or legs. She added that she remains under pressure to accept accusations made against her, although the nature of these accusations is not clear.

The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the most repressive countries in the world, with tight restrictions on all forms of mass communication, including the print and broadcast media, the publishing sector, the internet, and mobile and fixed line telephone networks. This stifling trend has worsened since the mass citizen protests that escalated following presidential elections in June 2009. Although the Government downplays the means it employs to curtail dissent, with official figures of 2,500 people arrested and up to 30 killed during this period, independent organisations believe the numbers are far greater. Journalists, activists and bloggers face unfair trials, torture and lengthy prison sentences for criminal offences such as mutiny and disruption of public order.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

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- 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 free speech.