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GLOBALISATION OF YOUTH ACTIVISM AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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BACKGROUND

PROTESTORS AT THE WTO MEETING
IN PRAGUE > PIC OxfamGB

For decades young people have been at the forefront of social movements and social change, making activism anything but a fad. Rather, it is a tool for those who feel that an injustice has occurred and decide to act against it. Although only a fraction of the young people fall into the ‘activist’ category, those who do carry an energy that has proven significant in achieving social change. Activists have learnt to use the tools and processes of globalisation to push for social change. There is a belief among many activists that at no time in history has the opportunity for change been as possible and so necessary.

Young people become activists for many reasons but often as a response to human rights abuse, environmental degradation or simply as a way to express their outrage at political, social, economic or environmental injustices they have witnessed. For many young people, globalisation has meant greater awareness of these abuses through global links and well-publicised campaigns. Where once single issues were the focus for many activists, globalisation has highlighted a multifaceted and interconnected understanding of global processes. For example, issues such as global warming are now understood to be as much an economic as an environmental challenge.

Activism has been successful in both promoting progressive change and stopping injustices occurring. For example, the Multilateral Agreement on Investment was rejected in large part because activists formed international alliances and highlighted the flaws of the proposal. Activism has also raised awareness on other important issues including debt relief, gender issues, the AIDS pandemic, child labour and global warming. Other issues that have been raised but are yet to be ‘mainstreamed’ by activists include civic participation and representation in policy making. In fact, a fair portion of youth activism centres on the right of young people to participate in decision-making processes on all levels, through local, national, regional and global youth councils, fora and institutional platforms. This may be seen as the soft end of activism.

The harder end comes in the big demonstrations of Seattle, Gothenburg, Genoa and Davos, which catch the headlines.

The world seems to represent Peter Russell's (1983) prognosis of *The Global Brain*: "It took millions of years for atoms to combine to form a molecule. There are about ten billion atoms in one molecule; it took more millions of years for ten billion molecules to come together to form one living cell; millions of years later, ten billion living cells came together to form one human brain. Soon - with ten billion human brains living on the planet - we shall have created a Global Brain and thus be ready for the next stage of Evolution." Russell was writing before the arrival of the internet, which makes his thesis even more plausible: the ten billion cells of the global brain now have the potential to be inter-connected.

Today there are critical challenges facing the world. War continues to rage in dozens of countries every day. Tens of thousands of children die from preventable causes, for which the solution would require little more than the daily revenue of several of the largest corporations in the world. Human rights abuses remain pervasive despite international agreements and treaties. Further, the role and authority of United Nations is often undermined; stripping it of the authority it needs to function properly.

The intersection of youth activism and human rights within the context of globalisation presents a tremendous opportunity: to create a grassroots and democratic effort on a scale never before seen to ensure the basic rights of every person in the world. The vision of greater democracy that not only includes, but is also driven by young people, is one that needs to be encouraged.

Globalisation has presented young people with the opportunity to become politically active – not only in their local communities, but on the global stage. Rather than being labelled 'anti-globalisation', the real agenda appears to be a different type of globalisation. Thus, the focus of this chapter will be limited to the discussion of activism engaged in by young people around the issues of globalisation.

KEY DEFINITIONS

ACTIVISM: can be broadly defined as efforts to create changes in the behaviour of institutions or organisations through action strategies such as lobbying, advocacy, negotiation, protest, campaigning and raising awareness.

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE: Activism can include civil disobedience which Rawls' (1971) defines as a "public non-violent conscientious act contrary to law done with the intent to bring about change" where arrest or punishment are expected and accepted without resistance.

KEY PLAYERS

VARIOUS UNITED NATIONS ORGANISATIONS such as the UN High Commission for Human Rights (UNHCR) and UN Development Program (UNDP).

MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS: including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

THE MYRIAD OF ACTIVIST ORGANISATIONS WORLDWIDE INCLUDING:

- **The Global Policy Forum** www.globalpolicy.org
- **Global Uprising** www.youthactivism.org
- **Protest.Net** www.protest.net



PLACARDS > Oxfam Community Aid Abroad and the Oxfam International network are part of a diverse global movement against poverty. Here Oxfam protesters raise the issue of debt and education at the WTO meeting in Prague, September 2000. PIC Oxfam Great Britain

- Global Exchange www.globalexchange.org
- World Development Movement www.wdm.org.uk
- No WTO www.nowto.cat.org.au
- Global Youth Connect www.globalyouthconnect.org
- Human Rights Education Associates (Soros) www.hrea.org
- Amnesty International www.amnesty.org
- Idealist – Action Without Borders www.idealist.org
- The Communications Initiative www.comminit.org
- Human Rights Watch www.humanrightswatch.org
- Kids Can Free The Children www.freethechildren.org
- Independent Media Centre www.indymedia.org
- Peace Child International www.peacechild.org.au
- Global Youth Action Network & TakingITGlobal www.takingitglobal.org

MAIN ISSUES

Violations of the human rights of young people are widespread and varied in nature. It is important to understand the extent to which globalisation has been both a cause of these violations and a tool to prevent them.

1. GLOBALISATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The processes of globalisation have many effects on the enjoyment of human rights, particularly those of young people. In 1998 the resolution on the Rights of the Child made by the Commission on Human Rights stated it was:

“Profoundly concerned that the situation of children in many parts of the world remains critical as a result of... inadequate social and economic conditions aggravated by the current international financial crisis in an increasingly globalised world economy.”

The Commission further stated it was:

“Alarmed by the reality of daily violations of children’s rights, including the right to life, to physical security and to freedom from arbitrary detention, torture and any form of exploitation, as laid out in relevant international instruments.”

There is a growing international focus upon the link between the observance of human rights and the issues of good governance, poverty reduction, economic development and sustainable development. For example, the UNDP identifies in its human development reports the fundamental role political participation and democracy play in achieving sustainable development. The way in which globalisation effects these wider issues also impacts upon young people and their human rights.

There are a number of key positive effects that need to be noted:

- There is easier access to information on human rights. International human rights documents are accessible on the internet, as well as interpretive information and what they mean for young people.¹
- Monitoring agencies keep records of human rights abuses and potential abuses worldwide. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are organisations that utilise the collection of information as a tool to raise public awareness about violations and mobilise action against the perpetrators. Access to records also

enables communication and sharing of information and skills between the organisations.

- Threats of human rights abuses can be voiced to an international audience. There is access to information about what violations of human rights are occurring and what action other people and organisations have taken when violations of human rights have occurred².

The internet and the ease with which people can travel and transmit images has enabled the circumstances of many people to be communicated around the world. Further, email networks can enable a campaign to be disseminated to millions of people. For example, Amnesty International launched its Campaign Against Torture via the www.stoptorture.org website. The first case posted to the site concerned asylum seekers in Lebanon. Visitors to the site were asked to sign a petition to help the asylum seekers. Emails were sent direct to the government at a rate of 2-3 per minute over the first two days the site operated and the site was visited 50,000 times.

- The establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) should mean that the perpetrators of human rights abuses can be brought to trial. Arguably pressure has been brought to bear upon nations to support the ICC by the greater awareness by their citizens of gross human rights violations.

However, there are also a number of negative effects that need to be raised:

- Globalisation has led to an increased tension between international economic law and international human rights³. Many of the negative impacts upon young people from globalisation stem from the priority given to economic goals.
- Globalisation has further entrenched the gap between rich and poor. While the accessibility of information and ease with which people and organisations can communicate with each other is praised as one of the most powerful tools provided to youth, this information flow is not accessible to everyone. It is often those in most need and the isolated who are not able to access computers or the internet. Further, even if the internet is accessible, English is used on 80 percent of web sites, yet fewer than one in ten people worldwide speak the language (Barlow 2002).
- The application of human rights concepts by Western governments has often lacked cultural sensitivity or an honouring of local traditions. Indeed human rights discourses have sometimes been used to piously impose Western cultural standards on developing countries. Globalisation has been associated with unwanted interventionism in the name of 'human rights'. It is argued that many would prefer their national sovereignty to Western interventions.

A good example of this is the conflict in Zimbabwe. Most in the West recoil at the human rights abuses perpetrated by President Robert Mugabe and there is strong feeling that he should be removed. And yet, there are many Zimbabweans who support Mugabe's stand against white farmers and feel that the opposition candidate is a puppet of the West. Mugabe received some of the loudest cheers of any Head of State at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in Johannesburg in 2002, to the anger and incredulity of many Western activists.

- In many cases globalisation has led to governments and corporations removing human rights from civilians, especially their rights to participate in decision-making processes.



MOZAMBIQUE RALLY IN MAPUTO >
Mozambique on debt and education issues.
Organised by the partner organisations of Oxfam
Community Aid Abroad in the Mozambique Debt
Group. PIC Liz Mann/Oxfam CAA

- One key impact of globalisation has been to negatively influence the ability of nation-states, particularly those with low levels of development and lacking in economic resources, to meet their basic and fundamental obligations to their citizenry. Obligations placed upon states by the WTO, World Bank and the IMF may undermine the ability of states to achieve sustainable human development. One example of this is the processes of privatisation and sovereign debt repayments, which former chief economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz (2002), argues are undertaken with limited acknowledgment of the human impacts.
- Transnational corporations and multilateral institutions have increased their economic influence without correlating obligations to observe international human rights instruments and norms. There is extensive debate regarding the obligations of these entities and other non-state actors to observe human rights. These institutions have traditionally refused to acknowledge their responsibility to respect human rights and current policies such as the WTO's New Poverty Agenda, though limited, are perhaps a step forward in the recognition of human rights.⁴
- The enforceability of human rights instruments under international law is limited and hampers the success of their mandate. Human rights treaties often do not succeed in combating injustice, despite being widely acknowledged and even ratified by the necessary number of member states. At the same time, human rights instruments have an impact that goes beyond the legal realm, by setting a benchmark for discussion and directing the attention of the media and the general public. This is particularly the case when considering TNCs, who rely greatly upon the maintenance of corporate image and brand-name appeal.

2. GLOBALISATION AND ACTIVISM

Many of the primary issues on the agenda of activist movements are linked to global processes, including: international trade rules; the role of international institutions such as the WTO, IMF and World Bank; corporate accountability; the global imbalance in the distribution of resources; environmental degradation caused by trans-boundary pollution and industrial practices; and non-conformity to employment laws and international treaties governing the rights of workers (especially under-aged workers in sweatshops, which has spawned a strong enough movement of its own).

Activism has changed significantly in its form and focus over the last few decades. Many of these changes have been caused by globalisation and include:

- There is debate about whether there has been a decline or increase in the number and size of street demonstrations⁵. The anti-war demonstrations in early 2003 saw widespread street demonstrations that were often coordinated worldwide. Prior to these demonstrations, however, there appeared to be a decline in their use at least since 11 September 2001.
- More communication among individuals via the internet has increased the speed with which information regarding issues can be disseminated and actions organised.
- Formal political channels are not the only avenues for activists, particularly as it is commonly perceived by young people that governments have ceded power to multinational corporations and the political process is less important. In the 1960s and 1970s social movements were traditionally directed against political oppression on the part of the state. There is now an increasing recognition and concern about the role of transnational corporations in detracting from the human rights of young people, particularly their economic and cultural rights.

Shared concerns about the effects of globalisation provide a link between different campaigns and a common ground for concerned groups to bring their efforts together. Though single-issue campaigns are often the best way of mobilising young activists, there is a greater understanding of the interrelated nature of key issues. Young people are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their global lobbying as evidenced at the WSSD in 2002, where representatives of the youth caucus led the debates on energy and labour. Additionally, the youth intervention on the final day drew a three minute standing ovation from the audience. This was not just because the audience was being polite and that it was delivered by a ‘cute young kid’. Rather, it was because the young woman raised issues that other delegates had either overlooked or dared not raise – and she raised them in a direct, unvarnished way that appeared as a breath of fresh air.

The increasing sophistication of youth intervention in international debates must continue and youth-adult partnerships within the existing forum can be an effective. Additional positive issues are:

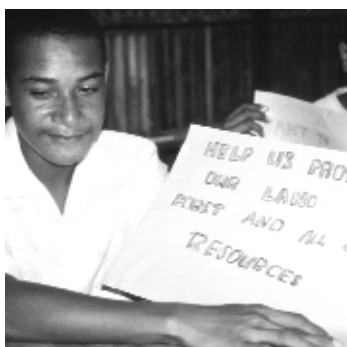
- Technology has enabled global communication which has expanded the audience for, and participation, in activism campaigns.
- Access to information and resources has encouraged greater collaboration among campaigns and organisations, leading to improved networks both nationally and internationally.
- Such networks have also overcome a sense of isolation for activists who may otherwise feel marginalised.

Globalisation has posed some further challenges to activists. For example, most of the mainstream media is controlled by corporations that often experience a conflict of interest when reporting major events. This is important because they can choose what information is presented, with the result that often human rights abuses are ignored, or activism is portrayed negatively. For example, the Press Council of Australia recently found that one Sydney-based mainstream newspaper inappropriately portrayed a meeting to discuss the issues of ‘civil disobedience in today’s context’ as a training ground for violent protests (RIIA 2003). This kind of coverage of youth activism has painted a misleading portrait of young people’s efforts to counter the negative effects of globalisation, too often focusing on occasional violence or the lack of a cohesive message.

The processes of globalisation have also politically marginalised young people. As the slogan goes, “If they thought that voting would change anything, they would have banned it long ago.” This kind of cynicism is perpetuated by the global market place and the erosion of power by national governments. Young people, in particular, feel further removed from political processes than previous generations.

KEY RIGHTS AFFECTED

The range of human rights violations in young people’s lives that result from processes of globalisation have been detailed in the other chapters of this report. In response to growing awareness of global conditions, as well as human rights violations in their own countries, young people seek to express their dissent and argue for alternatives. In most of the developed world there is unconstrained access to information and an increasing number of platforms to voice opinion. Yet in many countries young people’s right to express their beliefs (as a form of activism, such as street marches) is constrained. Key policies continue to be formed by a select few with little civic participation though they impact on vast populations. Key rights that need to be acknowledged are outlined below.



PNG STUDENTS > School children in St Thomas Ujaku Community School, PNG, learning about how important the forest is to their way of life. Their forest is under threat from multinational logging companies. PIC Martin Wurt/OxfamCAA

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UNHR):

- 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 (Article 19).
- Article 20 includes the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association and that non-one may be compelled to belong to an association.
- Everyone has the right to take part in the government of one's country, directly or through freely chosen representatives (Article 21.1).

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD:

- The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice (Article 13.1).

INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS:

- Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of choice (Article 19).
- The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognised. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of this right other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order, the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others (Article 21).
- Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others (Article 18).

DECLARATION ON THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT:

- The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realised (Article 1.1).
- States have the duty to take steps, individually and collectively, to formulate international development policies with a view to facilitating the full realisation of the right (Article 4).

The right to development is considered to be “the precondition of liberty, progress, justice and creativity” (Bedjaoui 1991). While the content and enforceability of this right is contentious, the World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna in 1993, reaffirmed by consensus the right to development as a universal and inalienable right and an integral part of fundamental human rights.

The ability of young people to engage in activism is reduced when they do not themselves have access to all their human rights. Since all human rights are interdependent, the above human rights are indirectly restricted when other human rights are violated.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The key theme that emerges from the policy recommendations is that participation of young people should be enabled in decision-making on all levels. This needs to be achieved within local communities, as well as at the national level and in global forums such as the United Nations. This needs to be encouraged and supported by national governments.

GOVERNMENTS. We urge governments to:

- 8.1 ratify human rights conventions and declarations that directly promote the rights of young people to be politically active.
- 8.2 lobby multilateral institutions for changes so that human rights are fundamental to their policies.
- 8.3 lobby for greater consideration to be given to the human rights impacts of multilateral agreements, and the corresponding changes to be made to those agreements.
- 8.4 ratify and uphold the decisions of the International Criminal Court and War Crimes Tribunals, the International Labour Organisation and other such entities.
- 8.5 promote avenues through which civilians can voice their concerns about potential human rights abuses.
- 8.6 develop and support policies that encourage more youth programs, development and training. This type of development needs to include cultural exchanges and international camps, in an effort to expose young people to different cultures and environments, skill and capacity building opportunities, and thus raise their awareness, compassion and abilities to address international issues.
- 8.7 educate young people about the ways in which the government supports youth work and provide opportunities for development through specific programs.
- 8.8 encourage and facilitate greater numbers of cultural exchanges among youth from others countries, supporting international programs that focus on training and capacity building.
- 8.9 allocate greater resources to NGOs that provide these kinds of programs.
- 8.10 ensure representation of marginalised populations, such as Indigenous and at-risk youth, in decision-making structures.
- 8.11 consult young people in the development of avenues for civic participation.
- 8.12 ensure the continued expansion of the role that civilians can play within their structures, particularly through citizen review boards and outreach through educational and other programs.
- 8.13 end compulsory military service for young people and provide other opportunities for young people to serve their country, including volunteering and international exchanges, internships and teaching opportunities in under-served communities.
- 8.14 include young people on official delegations to the United Nations General Assembly.

MULTILATERAL INSTITUTIONS. We believe that multilateral institutions should:

- 8.15 consult with young people directly to determine the effects of their decisions and actively engage young people as part of the decision-making process.



PROTEST OUTSIDE THE HIGH COURT IN PRETORIA, SOUTH AFRICA > International pressure forced drug companies to drop their case against the South African government and allow the production of cheaper HIV/AIDS drugs. PIC Paul Weinberg/Oxfam GB

- 8.16 recognise and support National Youth Councils as mechanisms to ensure the ongoing representation of youth in formulating national policies.
- 8.17 encourage the development of Local Youth Councils in communities and schools to give young people a voice at the local level.
- 8.18 dedicate resources to ensuring that young people can participate in decision-making by enabling submissions to, and attending the meetings of, key policy-making bodies and entities.
- 8.19 raise awareness of the decision-making bodies that impact upon young people's livelihood and the processes that they engage in to make their decisions.
- 8.20 dedicate resources to analysing the ways in which their policies and agreements are currently failing to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of young people around the world.
- 8.21 introduce changes to their policies that ensure greater adherence to human rights standards.
- 8.22 create citizen review boards, encouraging the participation of the public in monitoring both their successes and areas that need improvement.
- 8.23 create educational outreach programs that inform young people about their work. In particular, their support to nation-states should stipulate in the allocating of funds the need to support youth development programs within those countries.
- 8.24 ensure that education opportunities continue to expand as a result of their work. They should be required to set and achieve certain benchmarks in furthering access to basic education within the countries they serve, judging their success accordingly.
- 8.25 make qualified statements on how their work is taking into account the needs specific to Indigenous and impoverished populations within the countries they serve. Their decision-making structures should provide opportunities for adequate representation of these populations, so as to effectively minimise their continued marginalisation.

CORPORATIONS. It is recommended that corporations:

- 8.26 support and adhere to the international human rights framework even if they are not bound to do so by international law.
- 8.27 especially those targeting youth as their primary consumer group, be required to allocate a specific portion of their revenue to support programs that serve this section of the population.

NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS. We recommend NGOs:

- 8.28 incorporate Youth Advisory Boards or Councils wherever possible, providing additional avenues for their voices to be heard.
- 8.29 lobby on behalf of youth as a marginalised population so as to further their level of representation in key policy-making institutions and government.
- 8.30 exert pressure upon decision-making entities to involve young people in the decision-making process.
- 8.31 educate people about multilateral agreements and the policies of multilateral institutions that negatively impact on human rights.
- 8.32 lobby multilateral institutions for greater respect of human rights.

- 8.33 provide an alternative voice for young people from around the world to express their own interpretation of the international human rights framework in their cultural context.
- 8.34 continue to exert pressure on governments and multilateral institutions, as well as on corporations, through mass mobilising and awareness campaigns, so that demands for global accountability can be heard.
- 8.35 continue building bridges and channels of communication between young people, youth NGOs and policy-making bodies. Extensive work has been done in recent years to enable greater information sharing among youth on the global level, but these initiatives require greater recognition and support from government.
- 8.36 provide effective ways to increase the representation of young people, particularly through grassroots outreach, education and mobilisation initiatives that engage these groups. Their work can serve to galvanise their voices, raise the level of awareness for the impact key decision-making bodies are having upon them and demand greater accountability for those processes that aid in their marginalisation.
- 8.37 provide specific opportunities to young people who do not wish to commit themselves to military service. These can include volunteer programs and municipal avenues for civic engagement, particularly in schools and under-served communities that represent alternate avenues for serving the greater needs of the country.

INDIVIDUALS. We believe that individuals:

- 8.38 fulfil responsibilities that correspond to those rights. As global citizens, they should have a sense of contribution to the global application of human rights standards, rather than being solely concerned with their own entitlements.
- 8.39 must act as conveyors of information about opportunities that exist for young people to develop themselves as active citizens, providing, when possible, support to enable their participation in such programs.

CASE STUDY: ACTIVISM

There are many examples where activism has had an enormous impact on local and global events. For example, Amnesty International launched a campaign over the internet to support Amina Lawal, who was ordered to be stoned to death in Nigeria for adultery. This led to large-scale global public participation in the campaign to save her life. At the time of writing, the Court's judgement had not yet been finalised, but a great deal of pressure had been exerted on the government to change the initial decision.⁶

The issue of debt relief is now a topic of discussion at most official international forums. This has been a key focus of "anti-globalisation" protests, which first made the world stage in Seattle (1999) against the WTO. Such protests draw tens of thousands of people of all ages together to highlight a wide range of issues in addition to debt relief. Following Seattle, protests were held in Washington DC against the practices of the World Bank and IMF, including their role in the growth of debt in many impoverished nations. By 2001, protests were being organised around the world as awareness of the negative impacts of globalisation and debt expanded. No matter your opinions of the position of protestors, the significance here is that these protests have moved the debt debate, including trade, to the front pages of newspapers, rather than it being situated in the domain of economists and trade negotiators.

These case studies also highlight different types of activism that have had varying impacts. They provide excellent examples of how activism has become a surrogate for representation in a world in which young people often feel excluded.

Today, while conflict rages in the Middle East, public disapproval of military action (especially unilateral action) continues. Concerned citizens and activists, educators and parishioners, religious and political leaders have all been speaking out. Massive mobilisations have been organised all around the world, with call-in campaigns to the White House, letter-writing campaigns to the United Nations, multi-media campaigns designed to focus attention on the damaging effects of military action, each galvanising people's voices to effectively unite them in their call for peace.

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- 1 For example, Peacechild has published information providing an interpretation of human rights instruments in a form understood by young people.
- 2 For example, the main role of Human Rights Watch is to investigate and expose human rights abuses. This is a manner in which they seek to hold perpetrators accountable.
- 3 This is explored in the progress report submitted by J. Oloka-Onyango and Deepika Udagama to the Economic and Social Council Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights dated 2 August 2001 E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/10.
- 4 See the progress report submitted by J. Oloka-Onyango and Deepika Udagama to the Economic and Social Council Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights dated 2 August 2001 E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/10.
- 5 Information about the number and size of demonstrations is difficult to gather. Some argue there has been a decline in mass demonstrations with young people having become more apathetic but this is not a universally held opinion.
- 6 See: www.amnestyusa.org/amina/index.html.