



## Human Rights and Legal Status

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes that “the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”<sup>1</sup> Full realization of the human rights of all women, men, and children is key to achieving gender equality and to meeting the current challenges of poverty reduction, peace-building, and sustainable development worldwide.

Though enshrined in human rights treaties and conventions, women’s human rights in practice have been historically undermined, violated, and disregarded. “Significant numbers of the world’s population are routinely subjected to torture, starvation, terrorism, humiliation, mutilation, and even murder simply because they are female.”<sup>2</sup> The pervasiveness of gender-based discrimination, violence against women, and women’s and girls’ lack of access to resources led nations to come together in 1995 in Beijing to discuss and debate women’s changing roles and status in society, to come to consensus on women’s rights, and to reaffirm the international commitment to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>3</sup> Full realization of women’s rights remains a key human rights issue, and one that has been defined as the ‘problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.’<sup>4</sup>

Women’s human rights are interrelated, and the majority of projects that VGIF supports fall under the broad spectrum of human rights protections. For example, VGIF-funded projects promote the right of girls to life and dignity by providing hygienic and appropriate bathroom facilities to enable them to stay in school. VGIF supports women’s rights to participation, representation, and decision-making through funded projects to train women in public speaking and leadership skills. Under the specific category of human rights and legal status, VGIF has supported projects to address women’s human rights and legal protections through advocacy, legal support, and other mechanisms.

From 1970-2013, VGIF invested close to 260,100 USD to support 51 projects to address women’s and girls’ human rights and legal protections across East Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. These projects reached close to 113,200 women and 5,700 girls.

### VGIF grantees used a range of strategies to bolster and expand women’s rights and legal status including:

- Raising public awareness about the rights of girl children under regional and national laws;
- Educating policymakers and communities about human trafficking and advocating for broader protections for women and girls who are victims of or at-risk for trafficking due to their labor or migrant status;
- Organizing legal clinics and support services for women to exercise their rights to own or inherit property;
- Raising awareness and advocating to expand the rights of ethnic minority women under national laws;
- Advocating for policymakers to expand or better enforce laws related to violence against women and girls.

*The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is the international treaty designed to protect and promote women’s human rights. Since entering into force in 1981, CEDAW has been ratified by 186 United Nations Member States.<sup>5</sup>*

## PROJECT HIGHLIGHT: Women's Inheritance Rights Training



“Mwamko mpya” or “new awakening” is how the chief of Kandara, Kenya described the Community Education and Empowerment Centre’s (CEEC) training program on women’s inheritance rights, funded by VGIF in 2012-2013. The project achieved three major objectives: it equipped strong grassroots women’s rights champions with the capacity to promote and protect women’s inheritance rights; reduced the violations of women’s inheritance rights; and increased peaceful and harmonious co-existence within communities.

The project’s impact did not stop at the conclusion of the grant period. At the end of the CEEC training, the participants organized themselves into groups and developed actions plans for the future. They also published a training manual around advocacy for inheritance rights to be shared with other women. In total, these women were able to impact 832 people through sensitization outreach on women’s right to inheritance under Kenyan law.

## VGIF ACHIEVEMENTS: Human Rights and Legal Status

From 1970-2013, VGIF funded **51 projects** that included a human rights component, reaching close to **119,000** women and girls and **204,000** people overall, including men and boys. Mass media and community outreach campaigns accounted for the high numbers of people reached. Additionally, a project in Georgia focused on combatting sexism and homophobia reached an estimated 130,000 people through television and radio broadcasts.

VGIF projects invested in creating **sustainable change** and promoting **respect for women’s rights** in the target communities. While projects addressed a variety of issues, they were all focused on improving women’s knowledge of their human rights and enhancing their ability to advocate for themselves at all levels. Aside from mass media outreach, effective strategies implemented by grantees included advocacy training, public education, legal advice and services, and network-building to help women organize, advocate for rights, and achieve lasting change.

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, “Universal Declaration on Human Rights.” (United Nations, 1948) available at <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Bunch, “Women’s Rights as Human Rights: Toward a Re-Vision of Human Rights.” (Human Rights Quarterly, 1990) 12:486-498.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, “Fourth World Conference on Women Beijing Declaration.” (United Nations, Beijing, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Hillary Clinton, Speech made at the Women in the World Summit, New York, NY, April 2013.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations, “United Nations Human Rights: Your Human Rights.” (UN, 2014) available at <http://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/pages/whatarehumanrights.aspx>.