

**Statement by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet,  
Geneva, 6 December 2018**

*As we celebrate the 70th anniversary and many achievements of this trailblazing document, High Commissioner Bachelet calls on “each of us to do our part to breathe life into the beautiful dream of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” The statement below will be available in all official UN languages on [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org) tomorrow, ahead of Human Rights Day on 10 December 2018.*

GENEVA (6 December 2018) - On 10 December, we mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that extraordinary document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It is, I firmly believe, as relevant today as it was when it was adopted 70 years ago.

Arguably even more so, as over the passing decades, it has passed from being an aspirational treatise into a set of standards that has permeated virtually every area of international law.

It has withstood the tests of the passing years, and the advent of dramatic new technologies and social, political and economic developments that its drafters could not have foreseen.

Its precepts are so fundamental that they can be applied to every new dilemma.

The Universal Declaration gives us the principles we need to govern artificial intelligence and the digital world.

It lays out a framework of responses that can be used to counter the effects of climate change on people, if not on the planet.

It provides us with the basis for ensuring equal rights for groups, such as LGBTI people, whom few would even dare name in 1948.

Everyone is entitled to all the freedoms listed in the Universal Declaration “without distinction of any kind such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

The last words of that sentence – “other status” – have frequently been cited to expand the list of people specifically protected. Not just LGBTI people, but also persons with disabilities – who now have a Convention of their own, adopted in

2006. Elderly people, who may get one as well. Indigenous peoples. Minorities of all sorts.  
Everyone.

Gender is a concept that is addressed in almost every clause of the Declaration. For its time, the document was remarkably lacking in sexist language. The document refers to “everyone,” “all” or “no one” throughout its 30 Articles.

This trailblazing usage reflects the fact that, for the first time in the history of international law-making, women played a prominent role in drafting the Universal Declaration.

The role of Eleanor Roosevelt, who chaired the drafting committee is well known. Less well known is the fact that women from Denmark, Pakistan, the Communist bloc and other countries around the world also made crucial contributions.

Indeed it is thanks primarily to the Indian drafter Hansa Mehta, that the French phrase “all men are born free and equal,” taken from the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, became in the Universal Declaration “all human beings are born free and equal.”

A simple but – in terms of women’s rights and of minority rights – revolutionary phrase.

Hansa Mehta objected to Eleanor Roosevelt’s assertion that “men” was understood to include women – the widely-accepted idea at that time. She argued that countries could use this wording to restrict the rights of women, rather than expand them.

Born out of the devastation of two World Wars, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the Holocaust, the Universal Declaration is geared to prevent similar disasters, and the tyranny and violations which caused them. It sets out ways to prevent us from continuing to harm each other, and aims to provide us with “freedom from fear and want.”

It sets limits on the powerful, and inspires hope among the powerless.

Over the seven decades since its adoption, the Universal Declaration has underpinned countless beneficial changes in the lives of millions of people across the world, permeating some 90 national Constitutions and numerous national, regional and international laws and institutions.

But, 70 years after its adoption, the work the Universal Declaration lays down for us to do is far from over. And it never will be.

In 30 crystal-clear articles, the Universal Declaration shows us the measures which will end extreme poverty, and provide food, housing, health, education, jobs and opportunities for everyone.

It lights the path to a world without wars and Holocausts, without torture or famine or injustice. A world where misery is minimized and no one is too rich or powerful to evade justice.

A world where every human has the same worth as every other human, not just at birth but for the duration of their entire lives.

The drafters wanted to prevent another war by tackling the root causes, by setting down the rights everyone on the planet could expect and demand simply because they exist – and to spell out in no uncertain terms what cannot be done to human beings.

The poor, the hungry, the displaced and the marginalized – drafters aimed to establish systems to support and protect them.

The right to food and to development is crucial. But this has to be achieved without discrimination on the basis of race, gender or other status. You cannot say to your people – I will feed you, but I won't let you speak or enjoy your religion or culture.

The rights to land and adequate housing are absolutely basic – and yet in some countries, austerity measures are eroding those very rights for the most vulnerable.

Climate change can undermine the right to life, to food, to shelter and to health. These are all related – and the Universal Declaration and international human rights conventions provide a roadmap to their achievement.

I am convinced that the human rights ideal, laid down in this Declaration, has been one of the most constructive advances of ideas in human history – as well as one of the most successful.

But today, that progress is under threat.

We are born 'free and equal,' but millions of people on this planet do not stay free and equal. Their dignity is trampled and their rights are violated on a daily basis.

In many countries, the fundamental recognition that all human beings are equal, and have inherent rights, is under attack. The institutions so painstakingly set up by States to achieve common solutions to common problems are being undermined.

And the comprehensive web of international, regional and national laws and treaties that gave teeth to the vision of the Universal Declaration is also being chipped away by governments and politicians increasingly focused on narrow, nationalist interests.

We all need to stand up more energetically for the rights it showed us everyone should have – not just ourselves, but all our fellow human beings – and which we are at constant risk of eroding through our own, and our leaders' forgetfulness, neglect or wanton disregard.

I will end, where the Universal Declaration begins, with the powerful promise – and warning – contained in the first lines of its Preamble:

“...Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

“...Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief, and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

“...It is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse as a last resort to rebellion against tyranny and oppression that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.”

And we would do well to pay more attention to the final words of that same Preamble:

“...every individual and every organ of society keeping this Declaration constantly in mind shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.”

We have come a long way down this path since 1948. We have taken many of progressive measures prescribed by the Universal Declaration at the national and international levels.

But we still have a long way to go, and too many of our leaders seem to have forgotten these powerful and prophetic words. We need to rectify that, not just today, not just on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary next Monday, but every day, every year.

Human rights defenders the world over are on the frontlines of defending the Universal Declaration through their work, their dedication and their sacrifice. No matter where we live or what our circumstances are, most of us do have the power to make a difference – to make our homes, communities, countries, and our world better – or worse – for others. Each of us needs to do our part to breathe life into the beautiful dream of the Universal Declaration.

For this was the gift of our ancestors, to help us avoid ever having to go through what they went through.

ENDS

*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was adopted by the UN General Assembly at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris three years after the end of World War II. It was the product of 18 months' work by a drafting committee, with members and advisers from all across the world, and – in the words of one of its principal architects, René Cassin – “at the end of one hundred sessions of elevated, often impassioned discussion, was adopted in the form of 30 articles on December 10, 1948.”*

**To see a series of 30 short articles on each of the 30 Articles of the Universal Declaration:**

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23871&LangID=E>

**More details about the events and campaigns linked to the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary can be viewed at** <http://www.standup4humanrights.org/>

**For more information on the UDHR itself, please visit** <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

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