

‘We Declare Solidarity’

The document below was the product, in late 2023, of a series of discussions and conversations among moderators and participants in the Symposium on Strength and Solidarity for Human Rights. The intention was to use the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as an opportunity to draw attention to the rapidly accelerating abdication by states across the globe from their binding commitment to uphold and protect human rights. At a moment when many felt moved to celebrate the UDHR, our view was that there was little to celebrate and a great deal to criticize.

The original draft was prepared by Principal Moderator Professor Chris Stone with Program Director Akwe Amosu, and then worked on by the six-strong moderator team. Drafts were then shared with the full Symposium participant community (approximately 140 people at that time) and feedback incorporated. On 9 December, we held an in-person meeting in New York composed of 20 participants drawn from each of the Symposium’s eight groups to date, and five moderators.

The draft changed and improved in significant ways through being workshopped at the New York meeting, but disagreement arose there about how closely to relate the declaration to the bombing and killing of civilians under way for the past two months in Gaza. For some participants, the document would have no credibility if it did not center that crisis. For others who hoped to use the document as a tool for challenging states and mobilizing solidarity in multiple settings beyond the Middle East, such a focus might limit its use. The fact that any condemnation of the genocide of Palestinians was being used punitively by pro-Israel actors to censor news, cancel grants, expel students and terminate faculty or staff in many places across Western societies added intensity and urgency to the argument.

Due to time constraints, the moderators were mandated to finalize a new draft overnight integrating the diverse elements on the table and a new version was shared the next morning with both Symposium participants and other guests. It did not resolve the disagreement, however, and in the absence of shared ownership or clarity about whose views were represented, the process was indefinitely paused.

For the Symposium moderators, this outcome may partly be explained by the process by which the original draft was generated by the moderators, rather than Symposium participants. It should be stressed that there was no disagreement in the New York group about the horror in Gaza – anger and distress was unanimously shared; but the group could not reach consensus on how the document should respond. That the failure by states to intervene in the ongoing genocide was a stark proof of our overriding complaint only made the disagreement more ironic. Moderators felt both responsibility and regret for our failure to resolve these issues.

We reproduce the document here as an artefact of the Symposium’s experience from which there are valuable things to learn and tensions to understand. We greatly appreciate the insight and views of all who contributed and believe the fundamental point, on which there was broad consensus, still stands – those who seek to defend rights must build power with each other rather than waiting for states and their systems to act.

Akwe Amosu
Program Director and moderator,
The Symposium on Strength and Solidarity for Human Rights.

We Declare Solidarity

If I must die,
you must live
to tell my story.

From "If I must die" by Dr Refaat Alareer, Palestinian poet, killed in Gaza, 7 December 2023

There is little to celebrate as we mark the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Authoritarianism, oppression, multiple inequalities, and flagrant violations of human rights are flourishing across the world today. In the face of capitalist greed, genocides, and extinction, we choose to unite around love, solidarity and hope.

We, as people, communities and movements must reimagine our vision and renew our commitment to the realisation of human dignity. None of us are liberated until all of us are liberated.

New Stories for Human Rights

This manifesto calls for new stories of the defence of human rights, stories powered by people worldwide who refuse to let the vision of human rights die.

We must take up the Universal Declaration's ambition as our own, advancing human rights not only through a conversation among states, but through the mobilisation of people worldwide in active solidarity.

The international system, birthed by the Declaration and the covenants and treaties that followed, has failed egregiously, as powerful states have prioritized their self-interest and the even narrower interests of their economic and political elites, abandoning their wider obligations. That system has been restricting and excluding the participation of those whose rights are at stake.

Yet in each year since the Declaration's adoption, civil society has grown stronger, and mobilised citizens have proved an increasingly potent force in defence of rights.

Today, we can and must forge a civilian community, a solidarity of civil society, a movement of movements for human rights. We must practice a more rigorous solidarity than the world has seen in recent years, and we must build popular movements of greater strength, making states accountable to our movements and building pressure on other states, corporations, and all those in power to prioritise human rights over the narrow interests of elites.

We must take lessons from the strongest expressions of solidarity in decades past; we must reflect on the successes and failures of movements for rights in our own time; and we must invent new and stronger forms for the decades ahead. A more rigorous solidarity depends on a continuing practice of reflection, self-critical discussion, and creative collaboration.

Three Principles of Solidarity

The solidarity we seek will likely take innumerable, unpredictable forms, but we believe its strength will depend on our adherence to three principles.

First, our solidarity should be based on deference to those whose rights are violated. The advance of rights requires work by all, but the leadership must lie with those whose rights are on the line. Those whose rights are at stake must set the strategy. The solidarity we need depends on a rigorous practice of such deference.

Second, our solidarity should be based on embracing the differences among us and forging alliances across movements, engaging and learning from those with whom we differ. To build the power we need requires recognizing our differences as strengths and as sources of creativity, mutual aid, and fresh ideas. This has long been a tenet of feminist organising. The solidarity we need depends on our generous assessment of the distinctive strengths that we each bring and on a humble understanding of how our own activism complements others.

Third, our solidarity should extend to those with whom we disagree, embracing empathy and the complexity of intersectionality. Finding unity despite disagreement requires intentional dialogue, reflection, and respect for the rights of others.

New Hope

To build a new future for human rights, our movements and organisations must be durable. There is no single formula for such resilience, but this practice of solidarity requires radical change. In Audre Lorde's words, the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. We need to strengthen our organising and mobilizing, experiment with new ways of working, decolonizing our structures, unlearning and co-learning. We must imagine rights struggles that draw on the wisdom of indigenous movements and our interconnectedness with each other and the planet. We need to redistribute available resources and generate new ones. We need to practice individual and collective care.

On this 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we can take up what its signatories have largely abandoned. We can show the rights abusers who stride the world today that they must contend with our newly powerful solidarity for human rights. And we can offer all

whose rights are threatened or abused the most meaningful support in today's struggles for liberation and dignity.

In this bleak moment, our solidarity can unite and liberate us.

*New York
12 December, 2023*