

Griffith University event
75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

27 November 2023, Canberra

Address by Australian Ambassador for Human Rights, Bronte Moules

I wish to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting and recognise any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. I pay my respect to leaders past, present and emerging.

Distinguished guests.

It's a pleasure to join you this morning to mark the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

And to commemorate Australia's role in its creation, and the legacy of this involvement – which we look forward to reflecting on more this morning.

Australia has a proud connection to the drafting of the UDHR, as one of eight countries involved, overseen by the then-President of the UN General Assembly, Former Australian Foreign Minister, Doc Evatt.

We also recognise Australian women's rights pioneer and UN delegate Jessie Street, who took a stand to advocate for the UDHR to protect *all* people's rights.

We pay tribute to all the drafters, for their principled stance for humanity, their vision and determination.

Although crafted in a very different era, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is of enduring power and relevance.

The principles – universality, indivisibility, non-discrimination, all rights applying to all human beings without distinction of any kind – remain at the foundation of Australia's international engagement on human rights.

The passage of 75 years hasn't changed this.

Another thing that hasn't changed is that protecting and promoting human rights is hard.

The drafters of the UDHR could reasonably have expected that the practice of protecting and promoting human rights would have advanced beyond where it is today. That we might have learned more lessons from history.

But, even if we could say, with confidence, that the rights set out in the UDHR are genuinely universally supported, the real challenge is making sure these rights work in practice. Just talking about human rights can be challenging.

This is not to say there haven't been major strides in advancing human rights since the UDHR was established – there have been hard won battles and extraordinary achievements, and there's much to celebrate at this anniversary.

And yet intolerance and aggression, as we continue to witness, and lack of respect for universal human rights, remain pervasive in modern times.

We're seeing attempts to wind back some of the hard-won gains which have been made over recent decades, including around gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

The enduring relevance of the UDHR is all too apparent.

It's not surprising therefore that in this 75th anniversary year there's been a lot of reference both to the contemporary relevance of the UDHR, and to the need to bringing discussion about human rights back to the basics.

Central to this is the concept of universality, and the principle - as Foreign Minister Penny Wong emphasised in her address to this year's UN General Assembly - that human rights apply to all people, no matter who you happen to be or where you happen to be born.

Multilateral institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly provide a necessary foundation for global cooperation on universal human rights. International rules and norms developed in these institutions have underpinned peace and human development for decades.

However there is increasing strain and polarisation in the multilateral system.

So in our international engagement, in DFAT, we put a lot of emphasis on defending the principle of universality, rejecting a selective approach, and rejecting any assertion of a hierarchy or other false choices, when it comes to human rights.

This underpins our work to defend against the pushback of rights, including around gender equality.

For example, at the recent UN General Assembly Third Committee, Australia initiated and led, with a small group of countries – Chile, Japan, Spain and the UAE – a Joint Statement calling for protection of the human rights of women and girls in Afghanistan.

Over 80 countries signed on to the statement, including 12 Organisation of Islamic Cooperation member states.

The initiative reflected our determination to work with a broad range of international partners to reduce contestation, while ensuring diverse voices can speak together on the need to advance and protect gender equality.

Universality also underpins our work to defend the right to determine one's own sexual orientation and gender identity. And our current efforts to develop an LGBTQIA+ human rights engagement strategy – a first for DFAT.

Universality is the basis of our defence of the right to access sexual reproductive health services.

Of our promotion of universal abolition of the death penalty.

Our work to combat modern slavery.

To defend right to freedom of religion or belief.

And our defence of all the rights enshrined in the UDHR, whenever they're challenged.

In the polarising context of the international human rights system, diverse country experiences need to be valued in discussions on how to address global challenges that impact the realisation of human rights.

We want to see the voices of Pacific nations, and their unique challenges in terms of climate change and human rights impacts, elevated. These are important stories and perspectives that must be part of global discussions.

When promoting the universal nature of human rights, we also look for common or shared experiences that might open opportunities for dialogue, such as engagement on Indigenous rights.

The appointment of Australia's inaugural Ambassador for First Nations People (a world first) provides us with a unique opportunity to lead on expanding that dialogue.

At the last session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, 21 countries signed on to an Australian-led joint statement urging all states to support the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples at the Council. We then worked closely with Mexico and Guatemala on their resolution which mandated, for the first time, the participation of Indigenous Peoples in formal meetings of the UN Human Rights Council.

We know, however, that emphasising the universality of human rights, while important, isn't enough.

For the UDHR to have the impact it should, we need to get better at talking about human rights and why they matter.

We know that when we talk about the universality of human rights, responses can vary.

Sometimes you can have an engaging and productive discussion.

Sometimes the audience finds more appeal in the notion of being able to pick and choose which human rights best suit their local political or economic context.

Some are persuaded by the false narrative that human rights, particularly around gender equality and social inclusion, are mere Western constructs.

Some are just not particularly interested in human rights.

In our international advocacy on human rights, we therefore pay a lot of attention to the question of how we can have conversations which raise understanding about the relevance and practical value of human rights.

The principles and values we promote are the same, whatever the context, but the way we have the discussion necessarily varies.

Data can be helpful in this respect. In the ongoing work to defend against the pushback of gender equality, for example, data around the socio-economic benefits of gender equality helps underscore the compelling nature of the case.

Being attuned to local contexts and priorities is also critical for us to be able to talk about human rights in ways that are practical and relevant. And enables us to identify the tools likely to have the most influence or impact in any given context.

Civil society organisations often play an invaluable role – through their first-hand understanding of local contexts and needs, as partners to deliver programs, and as sources of advice to ensure we do no harm in our work to support human rights defenders.

This is why consultation with civil society is an important component in the development of several strategies DFAT is currently working on, all with human rights angles, on:

- . Gender equality
- . Disability equality and rights
- . Humanitarian action
- . A refresh of our strategy for abolition of the death penalty.
- . LGBTQIA+ human rights engagement strategy – which also covers the newly established Inclusion and Equality Fund, which will see \$3.5 million go to LGBTQIA+ civil society organisations and human rights defenders across Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

Recognition of the value of our work with civil society is also why we maintain our Australian NGO Cooperation Program - where many of the projects have a positive bearing on human rights.

And it's also why, under the new International Development Policy, a Civil Society Partnership Fund is being established, to support the contribution of local civil society organisations to effective development.

There are many examples of our collaboration with civil society on human rights, but just to mention a few:

- . Our embassy in Kathmandu supported local and international NGOs working to tackle human trafficking through legislative reforms, control and prevention, awareness raising among youth, and support services for victims of trafficking.
- . In Suva, our development program funded the establishment of the Women's Fund Fiji, which now operates independently as a registered Fijian charity, working on First Nations engagement, LGBTQIA+ rights, economic empowerment and climate change.

. The Women's Fund Fiji is part of a consortium with other feminist funds that receive fund through DFAT's Amplify-Invest-Reach Partnership, which supports local women's organisations and human rights defenders in the Asia Pacific region.

We're also doing practical work utilising the deep expertise of the Australian Human Rights Commission, who DFAT funds to provide technical assistance and capacity building on human rights in Vietnam and Laos.

This has involved, for example:

. In Vietnam, development of a Master of Human Rights Law course at Vietnam National University School of Law, with support from Monash University's Castan Centre, with funding for 100 scholarships for Vietnamese students.

. Development of the Vietnamese language version of a "Rights App".

. Partnering with the Laos Department of Treaty and Law, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to provide support to Laos to meet its UN treaty body reporting obligations, including in respect of the Universal Periodic Review process.

In all our international efforts, we're conscious that an element of self-reflection is important for promoting universality, as no country has a perfect human rights record. So we engage in a spirit of self-reflection – open to fair scrutiny and constructive feedback – with a view to also improving human rights in Australia.

I'd like to extend our deep gratitude to Professor Harris Rimmer and her team at Griffith University for their initiative in organising this event, and thank you for the opportunity to share perspectives with you this morning.

It's a privilege to be able to join you to reflect on the timeless principles enshrined in the UDHR and the invaluable role that Australians have played in promoting human rights at home and abroad.