

Human rights require bodily autonomy for all – at all times

Statement by UNFPA Executive Director on Human Rights Day

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly 75 years ago. Yet its promise to humanity still speaks to us today, louder than ever, calling for dignity, freedom, peace and equality for all.

While people everywhere cherish these universal values, in far too many places human rights are under siege, with women and girls particularly affected. The statistics say it all: nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended; every two minutes a woman dies due to pregnancy or childbirth; one in three women experiences violence in her lifetime, with threats heightened for those living through humanitarian crises.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights agreements underscore that bodily autonomy is a fundamental right. People must be able and empowered to freely and responsibly make decisions about their own bodies, including if, when and how many children to have. Realizing this right includes ensuring universal access to quality sexual and reproductive health information and services, even in conflict and disaster. It also depends on ending all forms of gender-based violence whenever and wherever it occurs – whether that's in homes, the workplace, in crisis settings, or online. Harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage must also end.

Around the world, UNFPA stands with women and girls in claiming their right to bodily autonomy, and to a life of freedom and equality. We work with governments and civil society to ensure sexual and reproductive health policies are grounded in human rights and aligned with national and international human rights mechanisms. For example, in Kenya, the Kyrgyz Republic, Mozambique and the United Republic of Tanzania, UNFPA has helped align family planning programmes with human rights principles. In Costa Rica, we helped shape a new bill that protects pregnant women from obstetric violence before, during and after childbirth.

UNFPA's efforts to improve the collection of disaggregated data are helping to combat discrimination and cast a light on people who have long remained uncounted. For the first time, Cambodia, Jordan, Mexico, Turkmenistan and Zambia, among other countries, are collecting census data on persons with disabilities, a critical step to safeguarding their rights.

In crises, UNFPA stands with the most vulnerable women and girls and young people, who play an essential role in the pursuit of peace and security by working to prevent, address and respond to rights violations. In all humanitarian contexts, UNFPA is working to defend the rights of women and girls through shared principles of justice, equality and compassion. In Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine and other places of urgent need, UNFPA is distributing clean delivery kits to ensure safe birth and postnatal care. We are also providing displaced women and girls of reproductive age with dignity kits to maintain proper hygiene and meet their menstrual health needs.

75 years since its adoption, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reminds us that we must never relent on our core values nor lose sight of the world that we seek. On this Human Rights Day, and on every day, let us do all we can to deliver the promise that it holds of a better world where everyone can enjoy all the rights to which they are entitled.