

Standing up for human rights more important than ever

Statement by UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem on Human Rights Day, 10 December 2020

Realizing human rights, equal and inalienable for every person, is the most just and meaningful goal of any society.

Human rights are universal principles, yet as Eleanor Roosevelt once reminded us, they begin in “small places, close to home.... Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.”

All around us is stark evidence of how failing to realize human rights in small places multiplies on a global scale.

We knew that was happening long before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the virus has placed a magnifying glass on structural racism, gender inequality and pervasive discrimination all over the world. When the virus pushed people into their homes, and put whole economies and societies on pause, racial and ethnic minorities and women and girls found their human rights even more imperiled.

In a sign of how close to vulnerability many women and girls are, they were the first to lose rights to safety, as rates of domestic violence soared. As children stayed home and people fell ill, new unpaid care burdens on women added to their already unfair share. Given overburdened health-care systems, reproductive rights, whether to access contraception or give birth safely, were constrained. A likely future of austerity and budget cuts could now disproportionately harm ethnic and racial minorities and further shrink the public services that women need most.

Today we celebrate Human Rights Day, held each year on the anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, shaped under Eleanor Roosevelt’s leadership. This year, a year fraught with so much difficulty, we must promise that we will do better.

Let us embrace human rights, each of us, and not just in laws and declarations, but in people’s lives.

The United Nations Secretary-General has issued “A Call to Action for Human Rights” reaffirming “that a culture of human rights must permeate everything we do”. For us at UNFPA, that means preventing and eliminating discrimination in all our work, providing quality services that meet international human rights standards, and holding ourselves accountable at all times.

For us as individuals, it means standing up, because that is our right. And when we cannot do it alone, we must do it together, and call on the people and institutions obligated to fulfil rights and provide protections.

Let us seize this day and the days to come. In Roosevelt’s words: “The world of the future is in our making. Tomorrow is now.”