

We Can't Wait: We Must Mobilize Religion and Belief to Advance Women's Rights

**Declaration of the Carter Center's Human Rights Defenders Forum
June 27-29, 2013**

We gather at The Carter Center at a moment when violence against women and other gender based violations of human rights are prevalent in every part of the world. We urgently call on all believers to work individually and within their communities to take action toward full equality, justice, and human dignity for all.

We gather to consider how engagement with our respective communities of faith and belief can bind us in a common effort to work for human rights, dignity, and wellbeing for women and men. Two years ago The Carter Center first convened a gathering to explore how religion and belief can be mobilized effectively to this end. Today, we have furthered this goal by exploring how sacred texts and their application in communities around the world can achieve a vision in which all of God's creatures, girls and boys, women and men, can live with dignity, mutual respect, and in full equality.

The Power of Text

The world's religions contain a wealth of wisdom in their sacred texts, traditions, and practices that are an enormous source of knowledge for good. Their ongoing interpretation and practice are a source of joy, wisdom, and courage for both individuals and communities. While they provide the foundation for and the moral obligation to protect human dignity, they also are often interpreted and applied in divisive and oppressive ways. Therefore, long before Enlightenment philosophers branded the secular concept of "human rights," the idea of rights was rooted in our many religious texts and traditions.

Leadership

Religious leaders are often charged with being the custodians of religious teaching, and they have been the ones to communicate and exemplify these textual and traditional groundings for our duties toward one another.

Throughout history, men have largely served as leaders and guardians of religious communities, assuming the responsibility and authority of interpretation, juridical power, and the application of sacred text in daily life. Women and girls' equal participation in religious life, including their engagement with sacred texts, must be understood as crucial.

It is imperative we do this, not only to reclaim the insights of half of our communities, but because we see the unfinished task as deeply harmful. We come together because we see appalling conditions of inequality, violence, and injustice that too many women face daily. If we

are to expand the circle of dignity to include every human being within and among the world's religions and traditions, textual and practical wisdom must consider women's voices. We are confident in the boundless capacities of our texts and traditions, for we know that religious traditions and teachings contain the wisdom to challenge the way the world is structured. We believe that in the teachings of religions can be found the courage to imagine the world as just, peaceful, and abundant.

The Challenge

The scourge of violence, including sexual and gender-based violence in the home, in public spaces, and in warfare and other forms of State-sanctioned violence, should not be accepted as a normal fact of life. Human society has evolved in many ways, and we must chart a path to nonviolence in all our affairs if we are to progress. In every part of the world, horrifying incidents should challenge faith communities to address how brutality can occur, and how faith communities and leaders can confront this failure of private and public morality.

- After World War II, the nations of the world formed the United Nations with the commitment to advance peace and human rights as global norms. In parallel, ecumenical efforts have been waged to respond to the dehumanization of war. Despite these important developments, violence is becoming increasingly normalized. Nations and groups have too often chosen to wage war in place of dialogue to resolve conflicts; societies often resort to violent forms of punishment for crime in place of rehabilitation and compassion.
- As a result of conflict within societies and between nations, religions, and other groups, fear has led many communities to turn inward, to yearn for an imagined past which reinforces regressive norms and honors the most conservative textual interpretations. Fear can lead to rejecting ties with others and can thwart progress, rational arguments, or emerging scientific insights.
- Around the world, women and girls often do not have adequate access to health care specific to their bodies and their needs, including reproductive care, too often leading to preventable illness and premature death. Women and girls who bear children face particular risks and, for far too many, pregnancy is laden with risk and tragic loss.
- Legal, social, and cultural norms applied to girls and women often do not offer adequate protection from violence or inequality in the family and in society, and leaders in the community best placed to advance reforms fail to challenge these situations and often

even support them.

- In countries where religion is a source of law and public policy, particular interpretations of sacred text can lead to discriminatory and unjust rules which are presented as divine law, infallible and unchangeable; women's efforts at law reform to achieve equality and justice are demonized as an attack against religion or sacred text itself.
- With the growth of global trade and international travel, the proliferation of human trafficking threatens the lives of millions of victims of this pernicious form of slavery.
- Lack of access to education and independent economic opportunities feminize poverty and lead to premature marriage and trafficking of females, preventing women from realizing their God-given potential and from contributing their innate talents to society.
- Girls and women are often excluded from leadership in religious, political, and other public roles, further marginalizing and subjugating them.

Reason for Hope

While these facts disturb us, we know that when religious and traditional communities and leaders, individuals, and associations take concerted action great progress is made.

Although the protection of human rights is fundamentally an obligation for the State, the influence of religion, tradition, and culture is so strong that they must be engaged if we are to address these problems. Human rights organizations have historically neglected a vast array of potential allies by disregarding the importance of faith, while religious institutions have not recognized the divine foundation of what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls us to do. A profound opportunity exists for mutual recognition of the fundamental compatibility of human rights principles and moral values.

The Call

We call on people of faith to place the well-being of women and girls at the center of their understanding of moral duty. Women and men must work as equal partners to build a more just world.

To that end:

- We call on individual believers and faith communities to advance universal human rights and equal dignity for all and to reject violence and stigmatization of victims. Men in particular have a moral duty to prevent and combat all forms of violence, as they bear the majority of the responsibility for these acts.

- We call on religious and traditional authorities to guide their communities to align their spiritual and social lives with the promise of universal human rights, duties, and human dignity and to focus on religious traditions and texts that support this task.
- We call on our colleagues in the human rights community to reach out to and engage people of faith as they bring religious wisdom and lived traditions to the task of supporting the dignity and full equality of women and girls.
- We call on all people and governments to commit themselves to peaceful resolution of conflicts, to avoid war while pursuing universal human rights.

In conclusion, there is no incompatibility between devotion to religion or belief and the pursuit of universal human rights and dignity. In fact, we believe sacred texts and the living traditions of our faith communities are the richest source of vision for a world in which human rights are fully honored. We resolve to strive together to achieve reciprocity among all people and to honor our moral obligations to each other through mutual respect and concerted action.