

United Nations Human Dignity Day

Explanatory Note

Proposed Resolution of the United Nations General Assembly

Establishing an International Day Affirming Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere

[working group draft of 2023.03.20]

Human Dignity Day: Executive Summary

It is proposed that the United Nations General Assembly adopt a resolution establishing 10 June as an International Day Affirming Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere, to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and to complement the United Nations observance of Human Rights Day each year on 10 December. The purpose of the resolution and designation of Human Dignity Day is to reaffirm and reiterate the fundamental importance of human rights and to emphasize that equal human dignity of everyone everywhere is the foundational principle of human rights and that every person is of value and is worthy of respect. Having two commemorations on opposite ends of the UN's annual calendar will help reinforce the importance of the goal articulated in the preamble of the UDHR of "keeping this Declaration constantly in mind".

Human Dignity and Human Rights: Background

The tenth of December 1948 marked an important milestone of human achievement: the unanimous adoption by the United Nations General Assembly of the UDHR. Adopted in the aftermath of two global World Wars, the UDHR declared itself to be "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance".

Seventy years after the adoption of the UDHR, the scholars, human rights experts and political and religious leaders who adopted the Punta del Este Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere stated in Article One of that Declaration, "The inherent human dignity of all people and the importance of respecting, promoting, and protecting human dignity for everyone everywhere is the foundational principle and the key objective or goal of human rights". In reaffirming the UDHR, the creators of the Punta del Este Declaration noted that the drafters of the UDHR were representatives of a variety of legal and cultural backgrounds from all over the world. The drafters found in the universal value of human dignity a concept that expressed the intrinsic worth of each human being. Human dignity was the key universalizing value that guided Eleanor Roosevelt and the Human Rights Commission in their three years of discussion and drafting, and it became the organizing heart of the UDHR, as well as of the Punta del Este Declaration 70 years later.

In 2023, the world commemorates the 75th anniversary of the UDHR. The United Nations recognizes 10 December each year as "Human Rights Day." The concept of human dignity played an important role in forging agreement about the articulation and specification of human rights during the drafting

process of the UDHR. With the onset of the cold war, and very different historical and cultural understandings of rights, human dignity became a central rallying concept that helped overcome significant disagreement about the form and content the UDHR should have.

The Importance of Anniversaries and Commemorations

As the United Nations explains on its website relating to Human Rights Day: “International days and weeks are occasions to educate the public on issues of concern, to mobilize political will and resources to address global problems, and to celebrate and reinforce achievements of humanity.”¹ While the UN calendar has numerous days and weeks that commemorate important values, the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the UDHR provides an important opportunity to reiterate, refocus and reinforce human rights. Dignity invites us to remember and observe our human duties towards the other and towards society as well. Just as human dignity proved to be a unifying concept during the difficult and contentious negotiations that led to the creation of the UDHR, it can also be a concept that helps unify and unite the world in our day, at a time of intense political division and divisiveness.

The alternative would be to ensure that the theme of the upcoming Human Rights Day is human dignity. However, considering the urgent need to revive the importance of human rights and the centrality of the concept of human dignity to human rights, ensuring a stronger focus on human dignity may be the only way forward.

Having an annual day focused on human dignity for everyone everywhere and using the concept to strengthen human rights will help refocus the human rights project and work towards its universalism, driven by the common understanding of the immeasurable value of every human being.

The annual day could serve to explore the different aspects of human dignity and its meaning, bringing to the table various human stories about vindications as well as violations of human dignity. Related activities may deepen social formation and ethics based on cultures of human dignity.

The Foundational Role of Human Dignity

The drafters of the UDHR were representatives of a variety of legal and cultural backgrounds from all over the world, working at a time when the horrors of World War II were fresh in the world’s memory.

While they strongly agreed that “never again” should the world be plunged into the darkness of world war, and while the horrors of the war’s atrocities were in the forefront of their minds, the drafters nevertheless profoundly disagreed about the content and definition of rights.

They found in human dignity a concept that was truly universal and that vividly expressed the worth of each human being. Human dignity became the lodestar that guided the Human Rights Commission over three years of discussions and drafting, and it became the organizing heart of the Declaration.

When the drafting process reached an early impasse, recalling the presence of human dignity in the UN Charter’s Preamble helped focus the drafters of the UDHR on the most universally recognized principle of human dignity as the foundation for human rights. The significant role of human dignity is enduringly evident on the face and in the structure of the UDHR. True understanding of personal dignity brings a

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/human-rights-day>

balance of human rights and obligations. The wording of both the Charter and the UDHR reflect the foundational nature of human dignity:

- The Preamble to the UN Charter declared that the United Nations was being created not only to “save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to [humankind],” but also “**to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person**, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small”.
- Human dignity was so important as a foundational principle that the first sentence of the preamble of the UDHR states, “**Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity** and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”.
- Further highlighting the centrality of human dignity, Article One of the UDHR declares, “**All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights**. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”

Human dignity is the foundation of the first and most fundamental human right – the right to be human and to be treated with the respect and regard due to all persons because they are human.