



# Building Solidarity Toward Equality for All

## Human Rights Defenders Forum

October 12-15, 2019

The Carter Center, Atlanta, Georgia

## Introduction

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The Carter Center will convene its 12<sup>th</sup> annual Human Rights Defenders Forum, “Building Solidarity Towards Equality for All,” from October 12-15, 2019, building on themes from previous gatherings. At the 2018 Forum “Restoring Faith in Freedom,” activists and experts at the gathering produced rich discussions and ideas around the indivisibility of all human rights—that civil and political rights, as well as economic and social rights, form a global “social contract” through which people can mobilize in solidarity in order to achieve greater equality among all classes, races, genders, and nations. The gathering brought to light the insight that inequality is worsening partly due to the failure to integrate all rights within the movement and that human rights defenders who work on widening economic inequality and the increasingly unequal treatment of people of color, migrants, and refugees, women, and the poor face especially difficult obstacles in their work.

The discussions at the conclusion of the 2018 Forum resulted in the conclusion that to make progress, it will require sustained efforts to strengthen networks and support systems for activists working under such grave threats. The statement also urges the *recommitment* not only to the ideas put forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights but also to the notion that *all rights are connected*. President Carter stated, “I’m afraid if we retain our present *indifference* to human rights violations, we will encourage violations to grow even more rapidly than they have been in the past few years.”

One message from the 2018 Forum was that peoples’ movements are organizing more than ever before and are resisting with some success. Despite the dire circumstances, it was pointed out that movements are rising up, and people are organizing to resist authoritarian governments and trends. All those gathered asked that serious thought be given by international organizations like The Carter Center to how we can more effectively and consistently amplify human rights defenders’ voices and protect them from persecution resulting from their activism.

The 2019 Forum will provide a platform for in-depth consultations on the most pressing actions that must be taken by governments, civil society, intergovernmental bodies, and others to address the urgent need for more sustainable and effective solidarity mechanisms to protect defenders and amplify their voices and narratives at the local and global levels.

Further, the Forum will continue solidarity discussion with a specific focus on challenges faced by women’s human rights defenders as well as explore the indivisibility of all human rights through specific examples in which the realization of civil and political rights impact the enjoyment of economic and social rights and vice versa. Panelists will be asked to share

learning and practice based on advocacy and advancement of these intersecting human rights. Themes to be examined include:

**Reinforcing the Frontlines Through Solidarity:** Although attacks on human rights defenders have always occurred, these attacks have extended in scope and have also begun to arise in previously liberal societies as the growth of populist, nationalist politics and politicians continue to emerge on a wider scale. The growing amount of Human Rights Defenders murders recorded across all regions is a particularly distressing trend. In 2017, Front Line Defenders documented the killing of 312 defenders in 27 nations. Michelle Bachelet, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated at Human Rights Defenders World Summit last October:

*“And every case of an attack on a human rights defender constitutes an attack on human rights – the rights of us all. In recent years, we have seen a very serious increase in these attacks, including the most brutal and flagrant murders of people who stand up for justice and the truth. In some cases, people engaged in working with the United Nations are subjected to reprisals and intimidation by their Governments because of that work. In more and more countries, the civic space – in which there is access to information, where there can be free and open discussion, and people can join with others to participate fully in political and social life – is being eroded, dismantled, or even completely shut down.”<sup>1</sup>*

This discussion will identify challenges and opportunities for human rights defenders working on economic, social, and political inequality as they continue to face increased risks and shrinking space in their communities and their countries.

**Equality is Indivisible:** The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted over seven decades ago, which gave rise to two main Covenants, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. At the creation of the UDHR, it made no distinction between sets of rights, nor did it define any implicit hierarchy of rights. In most recent times, however, the fundamental principles of the UDHR, that is, its universality and indivisibility – are being contested to the degree that would hardly have seemed imaginable ten years ago. The concept of the human rights framework was based on the understanding that *ALL* human rights should be achieved in order to ensure the dignity of all humans. Moreover, improving one right facilitates and advances others right. Similarly, the deprivation of a right adversely impacts the others. The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, 1993 which reaffirms the indivisibility and interdependence of Human Rights states that

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23794&LangID=E>

*All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis. While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>2</sup>*

This discussion will deepen our understanding of the interdependence of civil and political, and economic and social rights to help defenders better integrate their work. The Carter Center is well placed to explore these “forgotten rights” because, during his Presidency, President Carter signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, emphasizing their complementary obligations.

**Increasing Women Defenders’ Access to Spheres of Influence:** Women Human Rights Defenders are frequently ignored or slandered in attempts to intimidate or stop them from carrying out their duties defending human rights. Women’s rights organizations have also reported increase politicization of women’s rights issues which makes it more and more challenging to make progress on the rights of women and girls. Their safety for the protection and advancement of human rights continues to be volatile. They are also exposed to specific risks in addition to the general risk of threats, attacks, and violence faced by all human rights defenders. The Special Rapporteur in his 2019 report on the situation of human rights defenders stated that

*“The experiences of women defenders are diverse. They promote and protect human rights in very different circumstances. In doing so, they generally face greater risks and challenges than men do – risks that are gendered and intersectional. Aside from gender, aspects of their identities, such as age, religion, ethnicity, class, immigration or legal status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and the way those aspects intersect shape the way women human rights defenders are perceived and treated. Women defenders are not just targeted as individuals; they are also targeted because they belong to networks, collectives, and movements, and attacks against them are meant to serve as warnings to others. Some of the risks and violations they experience have not been sufficiently understood, analysed, documented and exposed; some have not been treated as legitimate human rights concerns.”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, June 25, 1993, part 1, para. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Situation of women human rights defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, March 2019, para. 35.

The Forum will explore and address the particular difficulties faced by women in this field. It will also explore ideas to push for more robust mechanisms to support women rights defenders' work at the local level and in global forums.

**Forum Participants:** Participants include frontline activists from more than 25 countries, including the United States, working on human rights violations, women peacemakers working to prevent and recover from violent conflict, international NGOs that support human rights activists, religious leaders resisting repressive policies, influential analysts/authors, and selected government and U.N. policymakers and representatives.

**Forum Format:** The Forum consists of two parts—workshops on days 2-3, and public panel discussions on day 4. President Carter will preside over the public portion.

**Workshops (Oct. 13-14):** 2-Day Workshops Will Examine these Topics:

- Reinforcing the Frontlines Through Solidarity
  - What is Solidarity and How Can We Achieve It?
  - Global Protection and Gaps
- Equality is Indivisible
  - Interdependence and Indivisibility of Human Rights
  - Human Rights for All
- Increasing Women Defenders' Access to Spheres of Influence
  - State of Threat against Women Rights Defenders
  - How Can Women Rights Defenders Get Support to Where it is Needed?

**Public Forum (Oct. 15):** President Carter will open the public Forum on October 15 with reflections about current challenges to human rights. After an overview report from the previous days' workshop discussions, which will highlight forward-looking strategies, interactive and conversational panel discussions will go into greater depth on the same topics. During the concluding session on October 15, a statement from the conference will be issued, outlining the challenges and recommendations for action by governments and civil society. Concluding remarks will be made by President Carter and others. The final session will include a Q&A with President Carter during which press, audience members, and viewers of the Facebook Livestream may submit written questions about the concluding statement and human rights.

**Forum Outcomes:**

- **Concluding Statement:** The statement will be communicated to governments in order to impact deliberations taking place during the anniversaries of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Human Rights Defenders Declaration, and

recommendations will be analyzed in keeping with obligations of the Sustainable Development Goals.

- **Press Coverage:** Previous Forums have generated considerable interest by the press and resulted in a wide coverage of the issues discussed. Given the current global political context, as well as the landmark human rights anniversaries being celebrated, it is reasonable to expect a high degree of interest in President Carter's observations and the assessments and recommendations generated at the Forum.
- **Continuation of Conversations and Networking:** Forum discussions will continue through the Carter Center's *Forum on Women, Religion, Violence, and Power* Roundtable Series. This web tool will amplify the voices of human rights defenders and peacemakers, building a community of practice among Forum participants from this year, as well as the previous conferences.