

The Melbourne Declaration for Gender Equality

Rebalancing the Ecosystem for Accountability, Rights, and a Future of Gender Equality

A world where States respect, protect, and fulfill human rights; where feminist movements and civil society have the resources, space, and legitimacy to hold States accountable; and where the wider gender equality ecosystem aligns its resources and influence behind that work.

We — the undersigned from across the gender equality ecosystem¹ — commit to centering States' human rights² obligations to all people and the planet in our work. This unquestionably includes the provision of essential services and respect for the rights to bodily autonomy, freedom from violence and discrimination, open democracies, and all other fundamental human rights enshrined in international law, agreements, and norms, as well as their expansion.

We recognize that a vibrant, progressive local and national civil society is essential for holding States accountable to their human rights obligations and for serving as a vital channel through which people can organize, advocate, and demand change. We also recognize the obligation of the State to be responsive and accountable to these movements. We commit to grounding our work in support of this relationship between the State and the people, to holding States to account, and to helping create the conditions for social justice to thrive. This starts with centering and resourcing the priorities, knowledge, language, and political aims of those most affected by injustice and intersecting inequalities — including all girls, women, and gender-diverse people.

¹ **The gender equality ecosystem refers to the wider field of actors, institutions, movements, and policy spaces that shape gender equality outcomes, including feminist movements, women's rights organizations, grassroots and locally led groups, governments, multilateral institutions, development agencies, philanthropy, international financial institutions, NGOs, researchers, advocates, service providers, policy actors, and allies.** These actors do not all occupy the same position within systems of power, but together their decisions, resources, and influence shape what becomes possible.

² **Human rights are the universal, inalienable, indivisible, and interdependent rights and freedoms to which all people are entitled.** These include civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights — including the right to freedom from discrimination, coercion, and violence, and the right to health, education, bodily autonomy, safety, security, livelihood, and civic participation. States are obligated to respect, protect, and fulfill human rights without discrimination and with equality.

Why this declaration now

We make this declaration at a moment when the wider field of actors and institutions shaping gender equality outcomes is in crisis. Governments and political actors are actively rolling back, ignoring, and undermining human rights — including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), bodily autonomy, democratic rights, and civic space. At the same time, girls and women are being criminalized on the basis of poverty, social status, or survival behaviors, amid climate collapse, biodiversity loss, war, genocide, and fascist geopolitics. Multilateral systems are under attack, and anti-rights actors are using them to advance their agenda. Rising authoritarianism, fundamentalism, and fascism aim to weaken progressive civil society and accountability mechanisms. The global economic system imposes debt burdens and austerity, which can limit some States' ability to invest in public services, development, and the fulfillment of rights, even when there is political will. States increasingly pour resources into war and militarism rather than investing in people's rights and needs. This moment demands that we come together with a long-term strategy for transformation.

What must change

We celebrate and recognize victories secured across gender equality, feminist movements, child and adolescent rights, climate justice, disability justice, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) rights, racial justice, Indigenous people's rights, and many more. But we also recognize that the wider field in which much of this work now sits has been shaped by histories of colonialism, racism, and neoliberalism. Donors, philanthropy, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and the multilateral system have helped build and sustain a model where accountability is directed more to funders than to people, where philanthropy itself is too rarely held accountable to the people it claims to serve, and where INGOs all too often substitute for the State in the delivery of essential services and the fulfillment of human rights.

In short: the systems that have shaped the gender equality ecosystem are crumbling. And they have not always worked for the majority of adolescent girls, women, and gender-diverse people. This moment offers an opportunity to completely overhaul these systems, creating people-centered, decolonized alternatives grounded in the unalienable human rights of all people. That rebuilding must center feminist movements and local civil society.

We commit to:

Orienting our work around States' obligations and public accountability

We will focus our role on creating the conditions in which States uphold their responsibilities and in which people, civil society, and social movements can demand that States respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of all people and the planet. We know this shift will take time. Too many people do not or cannot get essential services from their States now because the State discriminates against them, does not provide the services people need, or has no interest or intent to serve all people.

Creating the conditions for collective voice and social justice to thrive

We will ensure local civil society is adequately resourced, politically protected, globally connected, and locally rooted. We will ensure that the priorities, knowledge, language, and political aims of those most affected by injustice shape our work. We affirm that our work should be shaped by and accountable to social justice movements and constituencies whose demands make change possible, and that it should work to dismantle systemic inequalities and barriers to access, challenge unjust power structures, and advocate for the human rights of all people.

Confronting unjust economic systems that deepen inequality and undermine rights

The current global economic system is built on extraction and the concentration of wealth, exacerbating inequality and environmental and ecological harm. We will challenge debt burdens, austerity policies, and the global financial rules and systems that deepen inequality, undermine States' ability to provide essential services and uphold their human rights obligations, and threaten the wellbeing of people and the planet.

Transforming institutions to center local priorities and accountability to people

We will challenge models shaped by donor expectations, priorities, indicators, deliverables, and reporting cycles. Our work will hold national and multilateral institutions accountable and center locally defined priorities, movement leadership, and accountability to people, civil society, and those most affected by injustice.

Standing united against militarism and for peace and justice

We refuse to be complicit in the normalization of war and the instrumentalization of the rights of girls, women, and gender-diverse people to justify conflict and violence. We also stand against the weaponization of militarized masculinities to recruit men and boys as instruments of war, creating conditions that deeply harm all people, including through sexual violence as a weapon of war.

Rooting our transformation in solidarity and contributing to the dismantling of systems of oppression

For too long, much of the gender equality ecosystem has operated on a model of charity that creates hierarchies in funding, agenda setting, and decision making. Solidarity, by contrast, recognizes that we are all interdependent. We root our work in solidarity across movements and borders; center the Global Majority; and contribute to dismantling patriarchy, sexism, ageism, misogyny, racism, capitalism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and colonialism — including as they show up in our sector, deny people their rights, and undermine justice.

The world we are building

This is a world where every person can fully enjoy their human rights, including the rights to a clean and healthy environment, bodily autonomy, and freedom from violence, discrimination, and coercion.

The leadership and rights of those most affected by injustice are centered, respected, and upheld, and they can meaningfully participate in all decisions. This must include adolescent girls, women, and

gender-diverse people facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including those who are disabled, Indigenous, racialized, young, and trans.

It is a world where health, education, and other essential services are free, quality, accessible, and appropriate, and where those most affected by injustice shape the decisions that affect their lives.

In this world, States and multilateral institutions uphold their obligations, civil society flourishes while remaining locally rooted and connected across borders in solidarity, and institutions across the gender equality landscape help build the conditions for justice, accountability, and lasting change.