

UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna 1993



Report on conferences held in Vienna to mark the 30th anniversary of the World Conference

2023 saw two anniversaries of events crucial to the current world order:

- the 75th anniversary of the signing of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** in 1948
- the 30th anniversary of The **UN World Conference on Human Rights**, held in Vienna in 1993. The World Conference affirmed the universality and indivisibility of human rights and resulted in the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, a common plan adopted by all UN members for the strengthening of human rights. This led to the establishment of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, the strengthening of CEDAW and the role of NGOs, and many other important initiatives. The World Conference affirmed that the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights.

To mark these anniversaries, various conferences were held in Vienna in the second half of 2023:

- **Vienna World Conference 30 Years On: Our Rights – Our Future**, organised by the Austrian Foreign Ministry with the OHCHR – 5-6/6/23
- **UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna 1993 – Strengthening Imperatives 30 Years After**, organised by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute and the University of Vienna, in cooperation with a large number of national and international research institutions and organisations and experts - 27-29/9/23*
- **International Conference on the Human Rights of Older People** – 29/11-1/12/23
- **Vienna Human Rights Conference 2023 – From the Universal Declaration 1948 to the Human Rights Cities of Today** - 10-11/12/23

Speakers and panellists included leading international human rights experts, defenders, practitioners, politicians, diplomats and civil society representatives. Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, delivered statements / a keynote address.

*During this conference, panels were held on:

- Combating Climate Change – What role for Judiciary and Civil Society?

- Minority Rights after the Vienna Declaration – Positive Progress or Missing in Action?
- Women’s Rights are Human Rights
- Human Rights (HR) in the Digital Age
- Human Rights of LGBTI Persons – Far from Universal Recognition?
- Regional Perspectives on Human Rights from the Global South
- Business and Human Rights
- Realising the Human Right to Science – Threats, Challenges and Possibilities
- Respecting and Ensuring Human Rights of Migrants and Refugees – Challenges and Good Practices
- Human Rights Protection within the EU – The EU’s Role
- Reform of the UN Treaty Bodies
- National Human Rights Institutions – Bringing Human Rights Home



Podium Discussions covered

- The Legacy of the World Conference on HR – *In memoriam* Felix Ermacora
- Ombuds Institutions as Human Rights Stakeholders
- Human Rights Defenders – How Civil Society Makes a Difference
- Conference Outlook – The Universality of Human Rights is beyond Question?



I will not report on all these subjects – relevant websites are listed at the end – but I thought it would be interesting to cover the background to the World Conference and provide some comments about the great progress achieved there for women’s rights.

Background

The UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 as a ‘common standard of achievement for all peoples

and all nations’. Even today, it is quite a thrill to read this great document. ‘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...’

The Cold War, divisions between the ‘Global North’ and the ‘Global South’ impacted the subsequent interpretation and prioritisation of Human Rights, and it was only after the fall of the iron curtain that there could be a further leap forward. This came with the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights, held in Vienna. Representatives of 171 States, 2 National Liberation movements, 18 intergovernmental organizations, 6 ombudsmen, 11 United Nations bodies, and multiple NGOs participated.

The World Conference adopted the ‘Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (VDPA)’. This important document reaffirmed the universality of human rights and recognised the

indivisibility and interdependence of civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural rights. Poverty, racism, terrorism were addressed as infringements of human rights. Special attention was given to the rights of women and the girl-child, minorities, indigenous peoples, children, disabled persons, refugees, migrant workers. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was established for the promotion and protection of all human rights. Amongst the measures relating to the equal status and human rights of women was the creation of the role of Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls.

The World Conference was a **milestone** in terms of the **involvement of civil society**: Not only was it attended by more than 1,500 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and more than 3,000 national and international representatives, but 400 parallel civil society events were held in addition to the general conference. On top of this, a separate floor for NGOs was set up in the same building, which meant that it was possible for civil society to exert a strong influence on the outcome document. Women's organisations were well organized and particularly effective. Over 500.000 signatures were collected (this was before the internet!) for '**womens rights are human rights**'.

Now, 30 years after the World Conference, the entire international order, including human rights, is under great pressure. Universal human rights are countered by sovereignty claims. War, armed conflict, great power confrontation, the challenge to democracy through dictatorships in many countries and emerging populism have set back the spirit of universality that inspired the World Conference and the VDPA. This more pessimistic scenario - where Human Rights constitute an aspiration rather than a reality: where current conflicts, including Russia/Ukraine, Israel/Palestine, and the Sudan - pose such challenges to Human Rights: and where there continues to be such impunity for those who suppress Human Rights - formed the background to the discussions at these 2023 conferences.



L – Volker Türk speaking by video; the Conference banners; R – CSW Vienna Reps, including Elisabeth Francis, GWI, with Reem Alsalem, UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls

Women's Rights

The 1993 World Conference was a great leap forward for Women's Rights. Women's organizations were particularly effective in their advocacy. For the first time there was a clear formulation that 'Women's Rights are Human Rights'. The VDPA called for the eradication of all forms of discrimination against women, both hidden and overt. It stressed

the need to eliminate violence against women in public and private life, eliminate all forms of sexual harassment, exploitation and trafficking in women, eliminate gender bias in the administration of justice, to eradicate conflicts that may arise between the rights of women and harmful practices, cultural prejudices and religious extremism. The VDPA made clear that violence against women is a human rights violation.



Reem Alsalem, talking at the 28/9 Event

An inter-active discussion on '**Women's Rights are Human Rights**' took place on 28/9, looking at 'the role of women's NGOs at the UN World Conference in 1993, the achievements and challenges regarding women's human rights then and now'. The organizers (including the Vienna NGO CSW Committee and the Committee on Sustainable Development, in both of which GWI actively participates) 'wanted to look back at the 1993 World Human Rights Conference and reflect on the achievements and challenges we are facing now in realizing women's human rights and holding governments accountable for their national, regional and international women's human rights obligations.' Special guest was Reem Alsalem, the current UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls.

In her speech, Reem concentrated on her mandate, what she can do and achieve. She referred to statements that she has made to the UN and EU, especially 'Parental Alienation and the link to domestic violence' and 'Domestic violence and custody rights'. She has called for further measures such as single-sex spaces and services, including women's shelters, support groups and services for victims of violence, as well as women's safety and dignity in prisons and health care facilities.



Other speakers at this event addressed human rights challenges with women asylum seekers and refugees; migrant women, including undocumented women and survivors of trafficking; women, peace and security; women and development co-operation; torture inflicted by non-state actors; violence against women and children, the role of shelters.

Conclusion

It was a privilege to be able to attend these conferences – and to reflect on how much was achieved at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights – the optimism and universality that it represented, the great success that women's organizations had in driving the recognition and inclusion of women's rights - and how this was used to make so much progress in the years following. However, it is sobering to reflect on recent, emerging challenges to International Human Rights, the pushback, the many ongoing breaches of

Human Rights Law, and the impunity of transgressors. Looking back at the motto from the 25th anniversary conference *Building Trust, Making Human Rights a Reality for All* - this is now more an aspiration rather than a global reality.

Elisabeth Francis
GWI Representative UN Vienna



Panels at the Conferences, including the meeting on Women's Rights are Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948

<https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

The World Conference on Human Rights Vienna 1993

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/history/vienna-declaration>

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/vienna-declaration-and-programme-action>

'The UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna 1993 – Strengthening Imperatives 30 Years After'

Vienna World Conference 30 Years On: Our Rights – Our Future

https://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Menschenrechte/Gesamtkonzept.pdf

Human Rights Conference December 2023

<https://www.wien.gv.at/menschen/integration/menschenrechtsstadt/pdf/humanrights-conference-2023.pdf>

International Conference on Human Rights of Older Persons 2023

<https://ageing.at/en/conference/ichrop-2023>