

**Statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay  
on**

**Human Rights Day  
10 December 2009**

The concept of non-discrimination lies at the heart of human rights.

For this reason, it has been designated the official theme of this Human Rights Day, which occurs every year on the anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. And for this and many other reasons it should be an unofficial theme every day, every year, for everyone.

Twenty-six of the Universal Declaration's 30 Articles begin with the words "Everyone..." or "No one..." Everyone should enjoy all human rights. No one should be excluded. All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Non-discrimination must prevail.

Today, we have a whole range of rights-based international treaties imbued throughout with the concept of non-discrimination. These include, for example, Conventions on the rights of the child, rights of people with disabilities, rights of refugees and of migrant workers; Conventions dedicated to the elimination of racial discrimination and discrimination against women; as well as treaties dealing with labour, health and religion. These legally binding standards are complemented by important UN declarations detailing minority rights and the rights of indigenous peoples.

These international laws and standards are supported by thousands of national and regional laws and institutions. Quite a few countries now have truly universal education, and a smaller number have universal public health systems. Taken together all of this marks an extraordinary celebration of humankind's ability and aspiration to create a world of equal opportunity and equal treatment under the law. And many millions of people have benefited as a result.

People of all sorts have something to offer. When we embrace diversity, we bring extra richness and depth to our societies.

Yet discrimination is still rampant.

Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours and produce half of the world's food, yet earn only 10 percent of the world's income and own less than one percent of the world's property. Despite significant improvements over the past century, women and girls are still discriminated against to some degree in all societies and to a great degree in many. Every day countless numbers of women are sexually or physically abused, and the vast majority of their abusers go unpunished and future abuse is undeterred.

Minorities in all regions of the world continue to face serious threats, discrimination and racism, and are frequently excluded from fully taking part in the economic,

political, social and cultural life available to the majorities in the countries or societies where they live.

Similar problems face the estimated 370 million indigenous people who make up five percent of the world's population, but 15 percent of its poorest people. They are often marginalized, deprived of many fundamental rights – including land and property – and lack access to basic services.

Racial and ethnic discrimination are also to be found all across the planet, and remain one of the most dangerous forms of discrimination. Left unchecked, or actively fanned, they can all too easily lead to hatred, violence, and – in the worst cases – push on up the scale to full-blown conflict, crimes against humanity and genocide.

Discrimination based on religion or belief can be equally destructive. In certain countries, members of certain groups are restricted in how they can exercise their religion or belief and deprived of their fundamental rights. In extreme cases such conditions may lead to sectarian violence, killing and conflict. Stereotyping can lead to stigmatization and isolationism.

Refugees and migrants are widely discriminated against, including in rich countries where men, women and children who have committed no crime are often held in detention for prolonged periods. They are frequently discriminated against by landlords, employers and state-run authorities, and stereotyped and vilified by some political parties, media organizations and members of the public.

Many other groups face discrimination to a greater or lesser degree. Some of them are easily definable such as persons with disabilities, stateless people, gays and lesbians, members of particular castes and the elderly. Others may span several different groups and find themselves discriminated against on several different levels as a result.

Those who are not discriminated against often find it hard to comprehend the suffering and humiliation that discrimination imposes on their fellow individual human beings. Nor do they always understand the deeply corrosive effect it has on society at large.

Discrimination feeds mistrust, resentment, violence, crime and insecurity and makes no economic sense, since it reduces productivity. It has no beneficial aspects for society whatsoever. Yet we continue to practice it – virtually all of us – often as a casual reflex, without even realizing what we are doing.

I would therefore like to encourage people everywhere – politicians, officials, businesses leaders, civil society, national human rights institutions, the media, religious leaders, teachers, students, and each and every individual – to honour Human Rights Day 2009 by embracing diversity and resolving to take concrete and lasting actions to help put an end to discrimination.