

## **The Future of Human Rights**

Moderator: Eric D. Weitz, Dean of Humanities & Arts, City College of New York  
Monday, 5 Oct, 6:30-8PM, City College of New York

By Charlette Lopez

On 5 October, in preparation for the Future of Human Rights lecture series, Mr. Weitz convened a panel of Human Rights activists who discussed the history of Human Rights while addressing what can be done to improve the future of Human Rights. All speakers agreed on “accountability,” and that “Human needs and Human Rights issues needs to be essential globally.” The aim of the event was to empower students and civil society to utilise their knowledge on Human Rights issues globally and to be proactive by campaigning against violation of Human Rights so that States can be held accountable.

The panel included Aryeh Neier, President Emeritus of the Open Society Foundations. He stated that his view on “The Future of Human Rights,” is as a result of the history. He has been part of Human Rights movement for over four decades. He argued that Human Rights movement began from mid-1970s and was intended to protect the society. In 1970, the Human Rights movement started because of global condemnation. He gave example of Human Rights issues such as apartheid that occurred in South Africa and said that Ms. Gay McDougal was instrumental in bringing down apartheid by increase pressure on the US Government and urging US companies to disinvest from South Africa, with the aim of crippling the South African economy and weakening the Government at that time. He mentioned that as a result, Nelson Mandela became the president of South Africa ending apartheid. Thus leading to a golden age of Human Rights movement.



Moreover, Mr. Neier also argued that while Genocide in Rwanda, and Yugoslavia did occur, it led to Human Rights movements and ad hoc organizations being created to fight violations of Human Rights.

Lastly, he stated that NGOs has been instrumental in impacting on the way governments conduct Human Rights policies, however our present Human Rights situation is not favorable, and therefore a lot of work needs to be done.

Distinguished speaker Ms. Gay McDougall was another panelist. Ms. McDougall has served as the first United Nations Independent Expert on Minority Issues and also served as an Independent Expert on the UN treaty body that oversaw compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, during which time she negotiated the adoption of General Recommendation XXV on the Gender Dimensions of Racial Discrimination, which requires governments to report explicitly on the situation of women impacted by racial discrimination. She played a leadership role in the UN Third World Conference against Racism.

Ms. McDougall stated that there has been positive changes over the past 20 years. She argued that there has been various international institutions both at Global level and Regional level, UN treaty bodies have been created, Human Rights Committees, regional institutions and national institutions of human rights. She stated that though human rights movements have significantly made positive changes, however there has not been enough implementation and accountability.

She argued that issues such as environmental degradation, gender inequality, racial and ethnic discrimination are ongoing. She stated that she continues to hear from civil society in these movements saying that more implementation is needed. She argued that US is really behind on these movements. Moreover she argued that we see a country where billions of people go hungry, we have the capability, the resources to help, but we are not being productive on “Human Dignity.”

Her argument on moving forward for “The Future of Human Rights,” is to do some productive thinking, to focus on redistributing resources so that inequality is not as great as before. She argued that, “Human needs and Human Rights issues needs to be essential.” Her last statement was that the Post 2015 Agenda and SDGs at the UN is great because the SDGs document was put forward by governments to make some changes, however it is not really creating accountability for governments to do what they really need to do.

Ms. Martina E. Vandenberg was another distinguished speaker. Ms. Vandenberg is the founder and president of The Human Trafficking Pro Bono Legal Center (HT Pro Bono). Vandenberg has spent nearly two decades fighting human trafficking, forced labor, rape as a war crime, and violence against women. She emphasized ground work which includes individuals. She stated that she is a practitioner of Human Rights and has worked with the Russian confederation and with Human Rights movements in 1990’s working on Kosovo. Her job was to find victims of rape and war crimes. She gave a story of a woman who was gang raped by Kosovo militias. This woman testified against Slobodon Milosevic. She said that the woman was courageous and brought positive changes.

Ms. Vandenberg explained that her job is to sue government and civil lawsuit to fight and end impunity. She stated that, “We must continue the fight against impunity.” Moreover she shared that her clients tell her all the time to, “Never, never, never give up.” Therefore, “we should not give up to continue fighting equality for all.”

The discussion prompted several important takeaways. Civil society, ad hoc movements, and students must keep in mind to not give up and keep fighting for Human Rights globally. Even though there has not been a lot of changes, we are moving in the right direction through mobilizing people, campaigning for gender equality, and for sustainable development. We must raise awareness and keep pressure on governments to hold them accountable for violation of Human Rights.