The Melbourne Declaration for Gender Equality: A Guide

This Guide is designed to stand alongside the Melbourne[1] Declaration for Gender Equality as a practical and political companion text. It does not repeat the Declaration in full, but sets out the analysis behind it, explains why these commitments matter, and shows how they can be taken forward in practice.

Both the Declaration and the Guide were created for the wider field of actors and institutions that aim to positively shape gender equality. In this document, "we" refers to those of us working across this wider gender equality ecosystem and its institutional architecture.

The gender equality ecosystem

We use 'gender equality ecosystem' to describe the wider field of movements, institutions, actors, and policy spaces working to advance gender equality worldwide. This includes feminist movements, women's rights organizations, organizations of persons with disabilities, grassroots and locally led groups, governments, multilateral institutions, development agencies, philanthropy, international financial institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), researchers, advocates, service providers, policy actors, and allies. These actors do not hold the same power, but together they shape what becomes possible for gender equality globally.

The **gender equality ecosystem** has helped secure important gains in health, education, gender equality, humanitarian response, and global norm-setting. Many people within it have worked with courage, commitment, and solidarity.

At the same time, much of this ecosystem — particularly its institutions — has too often operated through unequal power relations and funding and accountability models shaped by colonial assumptions about the Global Majority. In turn, these dynamics weaken locally rooted leadership and allow States to evade their obligations.

The Melbourne Declaration calls on us to reckon with this reality and transform what comes next.

This Guide sets out the political analysis behind the Melbourne Declaration and explains the shift it is calling for across the gender equality ecosystem. It is grounded in consultation, feminist analysis, and the lived experience of those most affected by injustice, and is intended to support reflection, endorsement, and implementation across different parts of the ecosystem.

The Declaration and the Guide are not new inventions. Rather, they build upon a long history of feminist and anti-colonial declarations, conventions, and movements. They also draw on global and regional human rights conventions and political declarations. It is also important to acknowledge that the Declaration and the Guide do not and could not speak on behalf of feminist movements in their entirety. They do not

[1] We acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Peoples of the Kulin Nation, Traditional Custodians of the unceded lands of Narrm, the Woi-wurrung name for Melbourne, where WD2026 takes place.

purport to address every global challenge, nor can they be a universal solution for all sectors and movements.

The Declaration and the Guide were shaped through 32 global consultations involving 650 participants, alongside input from coalitions and collectives.[2] While they are being launched at the Women Deliver 2026 Conference (WD2026), the work will continue long after the Conference closes. Following WD2026, the focus will shift from vision to practice as endorsing actors begin putting these commitments into their strategies, funding, advocacy, and partnerships. These documents will evolve through ongoing consultations and conversations to support pledges and implementation.

Working alongside other movement-led efforts

We do not present the Melbourne Declaration as the only effort of its kind, or as more important than other feminist and movement-led work. Rather, we see it as one contribution within a wider landscape of declarations, manifestos, outcome statements, and collective demands advancing gender equality globally and regionally. We aim to work collaboratively and in solidarity with these efforts, to learn from them, and to amplify their insights.

In that spirit, we recall and welcome the important work of the UN Treaty Bodies and the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council in clarifying and advancing States' human rights obligations, as well as their close collaboration with civil society organizations. We also recognize and uplift the following feminist- and movement-led declarations, manifestos, calls to action, and protocols as important resources that help ground, inform, and strengthen this work.

- *Manifesto for Adolescent Girls' Rights*
- *The Feminist Health Systems Charter: A Call to Action for Rights-Based, People-Centered Care*
- *Ubuntu Declaration and Call to Action*
- *Pacific Feminist Strategies for Liberation: An Urgent Call to Action*
- *Pacific Feminist Charter Action Plan*
- *Feminist Accessibility Protocol*

A Note on Language

We aim to be mindful and intentional in the language that we use — striking a balance between respecting and upholding the language so many before us have fought for and moving away from exclusionary jargon.

[2] See *Community-Led Insights from Local Consultations: Contribution to the Feminist Playbook*, *African Regional Convening toward Women Deliver 2026: Outcome Statement*, *and Pacific Pathways: Advancing Gender Equity in Eye Health in the Pacific: Delegate Outcomes Summary*

Section 1: State Responsibility and Obligations

This Declaration centers the State because it is the primary duty-bearer under international human rights law, with obligations to respect, protect, and fulfill the human rights of every person. This must include access to and delivery of essential services such as education, health care, and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

States are also the only actors with the reach to uphold rights for entire populations. That is why their obligations matter, and why accountability is essential.

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.

We acknowledge that human rights include all fundamental rights enshrined in international law, agreements, and norms, as well as their continued expansion through ongoing struggle, including rights related to bodily autonomy, freedom from violence and discrimination, and access to essential services.

However, States can fall short, often profoundly. They discriminate. They deny people essential services. They may criminalize care. They actively oppress those whose identities or choices they refuse to recognize. This Declaration does not excuse these failures. It demands transformation. We still aim for States to fulfill their obligations because the alternative leaves billions of people without rights and protection.

We also recognize that the relationship between States and people is not simple or uniform. In places colonized by Global Minority powers, including much of the Americas, Australia, and the Pacific, First Nations, Indigenous, and Aboriginal peoples often contest the legitimacy of State sovereignty itself. They assert Nation-to-Nation relationships that predate the State and cannot be reduced to it. They hold the right to self-determination, including the right to govern themselves, define their own priorities, and determine what rights and services mean within their own communities and on their own terms.

In addition, many of today's State borders were imposed through colonial conquest. They divided peoples, ignored existing governance systems, and created boundaries that many still experience as artificial and illegitimate. The consequences of those imposed boundaries are not only historical. They continue to shape who belongs, who is excluded, and whose rights are recognized within any given State.

This Declaration recognizes this diversity and complexity. It does not flatten these realities or pretend they are resolved. And it holds firm that regardless of context, States retain obligations to the people. These obligations do not disappear because a State is contested, imperfect, or unjust. They become more urgent.

Why collective voice and movements matter

States are not the only actors that shape whether rights are realized in practice. But they are the primary duty-bearers, and they must be held to account. That is why a vibrant, progressive local and national civil society is essential. It serves as the collective voice of the people, helps define demands, and creates pressure for accountability.

This is especially important because rights are not protected equally. Systems of oppression and discrimination shape whose needs are recognized, whose rights are defended, and who is excluded from public services, public life, and public accountability.

Some groups face much higher barriers to accessing essential services, such as health care and education, experience structural discrimination from the State and other systems, and bear the burdens of harmful coping strategies in response to poverty, conflict, crisis, and the climate crisis. These groups include, but are not limited to, adolescent girls, people with diverse SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics), people with disabilities, and Indigenous, Aboriginal, and First Nations peoples. Advocacy movements led by those most affected by injustice are therefore critical. These leaders bring lived experience, political analysis, and practical knowledge that should guide what rights, demands, and priorities the wider gender equality ecosystem must focus on next.

Across the gender equality ecosystem, these movements are already demanding change so that their rights are respected, protected, and fulfilled by the State and by the institutions that shape the conditions in which rights are won or denied. For example, *The Manifesto on Adolescent Girls' Rights*, authored by adolescent girl leaders, advances a transformative narrative that recognizes adolescent girls as rights-holders in the present and centers girls' diversity, leadership, human rights, and their right to a safe and enabling environment.

Wider forces shaping rights, accountability, and action

Several wider contextual factors shape the world in which we operate. They affect both the wider gender equality ecosystem and States' ability and willingness to meet their human rights obligations.

- **Climate crisis:** The climate crisis is not a standalone environmental issue. It is shaped by the same systems of extraction, colonialism, discrimination, capitalism, and patriarchy that undermine rights and public accountability. It places disproportionate pressure on lower-emission States' ability to provide protection and services, while disproportionately harming adolescent girls, women, and gender-diverse people, who often face the greatest impacts with the fewest resources to cope and recover. As several specific rights — including the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, and the rights to life and health — are significantly impaired by climate change, States must use all means at their disposal to avoid activities that cause significant damage to the climate system and exercise heightened vigilance and strict due diligence.[3]
- **Exploitative economic systems, debt, and austerity:** The capitalist economic system operates on extractive models that exacerbate inequality and environmental harm. States tend to privatize key public services and no longer provide essentials like housing, health care, education, and a healthy environment. Access to fundamental services becomes dependent on market forces rather than universal entitlement. The exploitative economic system — along with others, such as colonialism — also drives attacks on land rights. Territorial dispossession and the erasure of Indigenous knowledge systems are active forces shaping what rights are available and to whom. The result is deepening inequality and the denial of rights, especially for those already most underserved.

[3] International Court of Justice, Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change, Advisory Opinion, 23 July 2025, General List No. 187, https://icj-web.leman.un-icc.cloud/sites/default/files/case-related/187/187-20250723-adv-01-00-en.pdf.

- **Rising fascism and authoritarianism:** Rising fascism, authoritarianism, and fundamentalism are driving attacks on human rights, democracy, bodily autonomy, and civic space. These forces often target gender equality and SRHR first, but their aim is broader: to weaken progressive civil society, public accountability, and the wider human rights architecture. The far right is also deliberately co-opting feminist language, presenting simple, clear narratives that present a structural threat to the gender equality ecosystem.
- **Digital and technological systems:** Digital and technological systems are increasingly shaping civic space, accountability, and the conditions for collective voice. Through surveillance, censorship, and deliberate internet shutdowns, authoritarian actors weaponize digital tools to suppress dissent, silence movements, and undermine cross-movement organizing. At the same time, weak regulation of digital platforms, limited control over data, and a lack of transparency around algorithms have allowed digital spaces to become sites of gender-based violence, discrimination, and harm, with too little accountability for technology corporations.
- **Modern militarization and conflict:** Governments are increasingly diverting resources toward militarization and war — often framed as a matter of security — rather than investing in people's rights and needs. Ongoing and protracted armed conflicts intensify these dynamics, driving mass displacement, civilian deaths, sexual and gender-based violence, and the erosion of international humanitarian norms and laws.
- **Patriarchy, racism, and ableism:** Patriarchy, racism, discrimination, and ableism are deeply entrenched systems of oppression that shape whose rights are upheld, whose leadership is recognized, whose knowledge is treated as authoritative, and whose lives are treated as disposable. They structure institutions, public policy, and social norms in ways that normalize violence, undermine bodily autonomy, devalue care, and reinforce exclusion. These systems particularly harm adolescent girls, women, gender-diverse people, racialized groups, Indigenous communities, and people with disabilities and must be understood as central to how injustice is organized and maintained.
- **Crisis of multilateralism:** Movements and organizations advocating for gender justice and human rights have long used United Nations (UN) and multilateral spaces to create space to amplify demands, secure accountability, and advance global norms and standards. However, the UN is not effectively living up to the aspirations of its Charter. It has long been constrained by geopolitical and economic agendas, power imbalances, colonial legacies, and the non-implementation of political agreements. Today, multilateral systems are under attack and are increasingly being used by anti-rights actors and autocrats to advance their agendas. Massive reductions in Official Development Assistance (ODA), the rerouting of resources toward defense, and the weakening of global institutions by States themselves have all contributed to the severe weakening of multilateralism.

In addition to these broader contextual pressures, **dynamics within the wider institutional architecture of the gender equality ecosystem** also weaken States' ability to meet their human rights obligations and distort accountability. This critique is not a dismissal of the real gains secured across the gender equality ecosystem or of the courage, skill, and commitment of many of the individuals working within it. Important progress has been won through this ecosystem. But individual effort and institutional structure are not the same thing. Too many of the dominant systems, incentives, and power relations within the wider institutional architecture have limited what this work can achieve and too often weakened accountability to people rather than strengthening it.

Colonial legacies and professionalization in international development

Much of the wider institutional architecture in which this work takes place was built on colonial power dynamics that continue to shape who controls funding, whose knowledge is treated as authoritative, who makes decisions, and who bears the consequences over which they have little to no control. Ultimately, too much of this work has operated on a model of charity rather than solidarity. That model creates hierarchies, deepens dependence, and distances institutions from the people and movements whose demands should shape the work.

Over time, organizations across our sector have also become more reliant on donor-driven agendas, reporting requirements, and professional norms that narrow political imagination and distance institutions from local movements and community priorities. Our work has too often been de-politicized, contained, and made less capable of challenging the very systems it should be helping to transform.

Neoliberalism and structural adjustment

Neoliberalism — the dominant political ideology over the past 40 years — maintains that human wellbeing is best advanced within a minimal State. It seeks to cut public expenditures for services such as health and education, even as policymakers often claim such services are unaffordable while enacting tax cuts that benefit the wealthy.

Neoliberalism has gone hand in hand with structural adjustment programs — brutal policies imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund during the 1980s and 1990s that required "developing" countries to cut spending on public services, privatize industries, deregulate their economies, and take on massive debt.

These policies sit within a wider global financial system that continues to weaken many States in the Global Majority. Unsustainable debt burdens divert public resources away from essential services, human rights protection, and climate adaptation. Global tax systems also allow multinational corporations and the ultra-wealthy to extract resources from Global Majority States and avoid paying their fair share.

By weakening States' ability to provide basic services; respect, protect, and fulfill human rights; and meet the demands of the people, this system has created space for international development and gender equality institutions to substitute for the State in ways they cannot sustain and for which they cannot be held publicly accountable.

Rise of anti-rights actors

Far-right coalitions and anti-rights networks have built a transnational infrastructure designed to influence national, regional, and global policy; shape judicial appointments; and control narratives, institutions, and political processes. These actors — including conservative think tanks, religious fundamentalists, well-funded lobbyists, and grassroots movements — are strategically embedding themselves across all levels of power, from national courts to UN expert bodies.

Their approach is systematic and long-term. They are infiltrating executive, legislative, and judicial spaces; investing in legal education and using the courts to drive legal change; lobbying diplomats; and placing aligned actors within multilateral and UN mechanisms in order to reshape international law from within. Their strategy for rolling back human rights often begins with attacks on gender equality and SRHR, using them as entry points to weaken the broader human rights architecture.

This agenda includes undermining bodily autonomy and the rights of adolescent girls, adolescents, women, and people with diverse SOGIESC; rolling back access to safe abortion; opposing comprehensive sexuality education; eroding trans rights; and reinforcing rigid gender stereotypes and harmful masculinities. These attacks are not isolated. They are coordinated efforts to narrow civic space, weaken democratic accountability, and roll back hard-won gains across the wider human rights agenda.

Overly centralized and outsized funders

With weakened States, a relatively small pool of funders — including private philanthropy, multilateral agencies, and ODA donors — has taken on an outsized role. They wield significant influence over priorities, decision-making, and the implementation of services.

This has often meant that funders' priorities outweigh those of States, communities, and movements, reinforcing colonial systems and structures. It also makes the wider ecosystem deeply vulnerable. As we have seen, all it takes is the shifting priorities of one major donor for the entire system to destabilize.

Illustrative example: global health

The global health sector offers a clear example of what happens when the obligations of the State are taken up by well-intentioned multilateral agencies and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) that rely heavily on ODA to fund their work. In these systems, priorities are often set primarily in the Global Minority, where many institutions are based and where much of the funding originates.

While these institutions provide critical health services to billions around the world, those priorities are often not set by the people those systems are intended to serve. As a result, they may fail to meet the needs of populations with distinct health needs and experiences of discrimination, including adolescent girls, people with disabilities, and people with diverse SOGIESC.

The fragility of this model became painfully apparent in early 2025, when many Global Minority governments significantly cut ODA, leaving people in the Global Majority without care and life-saving commodities. This is one example of why rights cannot depend on donor priorities alone, and why durable public accountability and State responsibility remain essential.

The Feminist Health Systems Charter: A Call to Action for Rights-Based, People-Centered Care, developed by a cross-sector feminist coalition, offers one example of how health systems can be reimagined around human rights, gender justice, and public accountability.

Section 2: The Future of the Gender Equality Ecosystem: Our Shared Vision

Taken together, the dynamics set out above point to the need for a strategic reorientation across the gender equality ecosystem. The six commitments in the Melbourne Declaration are not a generic wish list. They are a response to the specific failures, distortions, and power imbalances outlined in this Guide. This section explains the rationale for each commitment and the shifts in practice that would be needed to take them forward.

1. Orient our work around States' obligations and public accountability

This commitment focuses on ending routine substitution for the State and strengthening durable forms of public accountability so that States are pushed to meet their obligations and other powerful actors are answerable for how they shape outcomes.

- **Donors, philanthropic funders, INGOs, development agencies, and other international actors must orient their approach to gender equality.** We must move away from replacing national governments whenever possible toward actively supporting and strengthening them in meeting their human rights commitments and obligations. This ensures that national governments, as primary duty-bearers, genuinely drive the agenda, in collaboration with national-level civil society and movements, for the welfare of their populations, reflecting local priorities and contexts. Development aid must be strategically deployed to reinforce, rather than undermine, the State's capacity to provide essential public services, thereby preventing the outsourcing of State obligations to external actors and fostering sustainable, rights-based governance.
- **Develop a robust framework of accountability, developed in cooperation with civil society, in which States are held accountable for fulfilling their human rights obligations, and international actors are held responsible for the impacts of their decisions, financing, and practices.** This requires the establishment of transparent monitoring, reporting, and evaluation mechanisms that are jointly developed and implemented. These mechanisms must be capable of identifying gaps, addressing failures, and ensuring that all stakeholders — from donor agencies to recipient governments — are answerable for their actions and commitments.
- **Strategically engage multilateral systems as an accountability tool.** States make up multilateral systems, and these systems should serve as an important mechanism for civil society to hold States accountable. We will therefore support reform and revitalization efforts to ensure they are informed by civil society and result in more inclusive, equitable systems. We also recognize the danger of further ceding the multilateral space to anti-rights movements and autocrats.

2. Create the conditions for collective voice and social justice to thrive

This commitment focuses on ensuring that local and national civil society and social justice movements have the space, safety, access, legitimacy, and power to organize, advocate, and hold States and institutions to account.

- **Significantly increase the proportion of funding that flows directly to organizations in the Global Majority, including those led by women, adolescent girls, youth, activists with disabilities, Indigenous peoples, SOGIESC groups, and other groups facing systemic exclusion.** This commitment addresses historical inequities in funding distribution, which often see resources filtered through multiple intermediaries, diluting impact and increasing overhead. By directly funding local organizations, philanthropic institutions acknowledge and leverage the unparalleled expertise, contextual understanding, and innovative solutions that exist within communities closest to the challenges, ensuring resources are deployed efficiently and effectively where they are most needed.
- **Shift from traditional, often paternalistic, funding models to providing flexible, long-term, unrestricted, and direct financial support to local human rights defenders, movements, and organizations.** This must include dismantling power imbalances, decolonizing funding approaches,

and ensuring funding strategies are genuinely locally led and rooted in rights-based frameworks, thereby fostering sustainable, equitable, inclusive, and self-determined outcomes. Quality funding empowers organizations to build institutional capacity, respond dynamically to evolving needs, and pursue their self-determined agendas, thereby fostering genuine autonomy and sustainable impact.

- **Shift power and resources to amplify the political role of local and national civil society as the collective voice that holds States to account.** In addition to funding, national and local civil society and feminist movements require protected civic space, political protection, recognition, and organizing power**.** This requires intentional partnership with civil society and feminist movements in the Global Minority. Rather than centering themselves, those Global Minority actors can play a critical solidarity role — such as advocating against discriminatory and oppressive laws and practices in their own contexts, especially as they pertain to genocide, migration, asylum, economic exploitation, or arms transfer; opening, when needed and requested, political and financial doors; amplifying policy demands led by the Global Majority; mobilizing and shifting resources; and amplifying expertise and leadership from the Global Majority.

3. Confront unjust economic systems that deepen inequality and undermine rights

This commitment focuses on how the gender equality ecosystem can challenge the extractive global economic system that currently undermines human rights and erodes State responsibility.

- **Challenge sovereign debt regimes, austerity, and extraction that weaken States and undermine rights.** We reject these measures as political choices that shift the costs of crises onto women and communities most affected by injustice, undermine public services, and erode democratic accountability.
- **Reject the notion that aid, especially from Global Minority governments, is charity.** Funding provided by Global Minority governments should be understood as part of reparations for centuries of colonialism and exploitation, and the ongoing impacts of the climate crisis on countries — primarily in the Global Majority — that contributed the least to it. We also recognize that ODA from Global Minority governments has significantly decreased in recent years and will likely not return to previous levels. What remains should be directed toward Global Majority governments to meet their human rights obligations.
- **Formally recognize all forms of care work** — paid and unpaid, for people and for the planet — as the essential infrastructure that underpins our societies and economies. This involves making the invisible work of care visible, valued, and supported through public investment and social policy.
- **Progress must be measured differently.** We must move beyond gross domestic product (GDP) as the primary measure of progress and adopt frameworks that measure wellbeing, social health, and ecological integrity.
- **Ensure essential goods and services remain public** — affirming that housing, health care, education, and a healthy environment are fundamental rights that States have a human rights obligation to provide. We challenge the privatization of public services and the handing over of State obligations to NGOs.

4. Transform institutions to center local priorities and accountability to people

This commitment focuses on who makes decisions, how funding is allocated, and how data and knowledge systems are decolonized.

- **Philanthropic institutions must cede decision-making power to movements and communities, altering traditional donor-recipient dynamics.** This includes involving diverse community leaders and movement and civil society representatives in setting funding priorities, designing grantmaking strategies, and evaluating impact. Mechanisms such as participatory grantmaking, co-creation processes, and ensuring diverse representation on governance boards are crucial. This means shifting from philanthropic control to genuine partnership, rooted in respect for lived experience, local expertise, and the inherent right of communities to self-determination over their development.
- **Decolonize data collection, analysis, and knowledge production.** This involves challenging and dismantling biased methodologies, indicators, and narratives that often originate from the Global Minority and perpetuate patriarchal, racist, ableist, discriminatory, and colonial power dynamics. It advocates for data sovereignty, supports community-led data initiatives, and promotes ethical data governance frameworks that prioritize the rights, agency, and needs of underserved communities. By valuing and integrating diverse ways of knowing and local knowledge systems, this commitment aims to create a more equal and representative evidence base for development policy and practice, ensuring that solutions are contextually relevant and driven by those most affected.

5. Stand united against militarism and for peace and justice

This commitment focuses on refusing complicity in the normalization of war and the instrumentalization of rights to justify conflict.

- **Militarism is not an isolated phenomenon; it is deeply intertwined with other systems of oppression.** It often promotes patriarchal norms by valorizing aggression and traditional gender roles, perpetuates colonial power dynamics through intervention and resource control, and serves exploitative economic interests by fueling arms industries and conflicts over resources. Recognizing these connections is crucial for dismantling militarism. This also requires rejecting the instrumentalization of the rights of girls, women, and gender-diverse people to legitimize militarized agendas, occupation, or war — as well as the weaponization of militarized masculinities to recruit men and boys as instruments of war.
- **Those most affected by conflict and insecurity often possess invaluable insights and solutions for building lasting peace.** This means actively including and empowering women, girls, Indigenous communities, racialized groups, people with disabilities, and gender-diverse individuals in all stages of peace and security initiatives, from conflict prevention and resolution to post-conflict reconstruction. Their perspectives are essential for creating inclusive and effective strategies.

6. Root our transformation in solidarity and contribute to dismantling systems of oppression

This commitment focuses on how the gender equality ecosystem internally transforms in order to effectively center local and national leadership and counter injustice.

- **Civil society and feminist movements must critically examine and reform their own organizational structures, practices, and internal cultures.** This commitment involves actively dismantling internalized patriarchal, colonial, ableist, discriminatory, and neoliberal logics that may perpetuate hierarchies, exclusion, or unsustainable working models. By ensuring our structures reflect the inclusive, care-centered, and equitable principles advocated externally, we can build more resilient, authentic, and impactful movements.
- **Building powerful and enduring alliances across diverse sectors, borders, regions, and issue areas is paramount for achieving systemic change.** This commitment involves forging solidarity with movements advocating for gender, climate, racial, disability, labor, and Indigenous justice, recognizing that our struggles are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. True solidarity goes beyond collaboration; it requires shared analysis, mutual respect, equitable power-sharing, and a commitment to collective action that amplifies the voices and priorities of the most underserved. Such alliances strengthen our collective power, broaden our reach, and enable us to challenge entrenched systems of oppression more effectively.
- **We commit to building principled solidarity across movements and constituencies**. We recognize that our struggles are interconnected and that greater collective power requires collaboration across differences.

Annex: Principles that Inform the Declaration

Across the 32 global consultations that shaped the Melbourne Declaration and this Guide, people kept returning to these principles as the political grounding for the work. The six commitments address different systems and call for different kinds of change, but these principles anchor them in a common vision.

The multiple dimensions of accountability

Accountability is both a central commitment of the Declaration and a necessary principle. Accountability means that we are answerable to each other — reciprocally, not selectively — and that power holders are answerable to rights holders. It is multi-dimensional: operating simultaneously across four relationships that are structurally interconnected and mutually reinforcing:

- States to their populations
- Corporations and donors to the communities their resources are meant to serve
- Multilateral institutions (and the States that comprise them) to feminist movements and civil society
- The gender equality ecosystem to itself

Collective voice and movement leadership

Rights are not secured by institutions alone. They are won, defended, and expanded through the demands, organizing, and leadership of feminist movements, civil society, and those most affected by injustice. Reorientation therefore means creating the conditions for collective voice to shape priorities, define accountability, and influence what becomes possible.

Solidarity

The Declaration rejects a model of charity that creates hierarchy, dependency, and distance from the people most affected. It calls instead for solidarity: a political commitment that should connect and hold the gender equality ecosystem together.

Solidarity is the political commitment that should connect and hold the gender equality ecosystem together. It is not a posture but a long-term commitment that requires dismantling the structural conditions that undermine it: donor dependency, organizational competition, and Global Minority dominance of agenda-setting. It means decolonization not as framing, but as the actual redistribution of power, resources, and agenda-setting authority to the Global Majority.

The consultations also made clear that solidarity is about how the gender equality ecosystem relates to external actors and how we relate to one another. Ideological policing, purity politics, and competition for resources can weaken collective power and political agency. Solidarity, therefore, has to be practiced across institutions, movements, and constituencies, and understood as both transnational and cross-movement, across geographies, generations, and struggles. Gender equality, climate justice, disability rights, racial justice, and other movements are interconnected fronts of the same fight.

Inclusion, intersectionality, dignity, and respect

At the heart of the Declaration is a vision of a world where every person is recognized as fully human, with a rightful place in society and political life, and as fully deserving of dignity, respect, and care. This includes the full and unconditional inclusion of women and girls of all identities; trans, intersex, and gender-diverse people; persons of all abilities and all ages; racialized and Indigenous communities; migrants, refugees, and displaced people; and all those whose humanity, leadership, and rights are too often denied, excluded, or made conditional.

The consultations made clear that inclusion and intersectionality must mean more than presence. Advisory seats do not provide decision-making authority. Consultation does not amount to co-design. Representation without resources results in tokenism. An intersectional approach asks who is being left out, who is being made to adapt to systems not built for them, and what needs to change so that those most affected by injustice can shape decisions, influence outcomes, and exercise real power.

Accessibility must also be understood as infrastructure, built into systems and budgets from the outset rather than retrofitted later.

Autonomy and freedom

Freedom and autonomy are indivisible. They cannot be selectively applied, contextually negotiated, or qualified by geography, culture, or religion. Bodily autonomy is the foundation: every person's right to make decisions about their own body, health, and life without coercion, interference, or institutional gatekeeping. Trans rights, SRHR, and disability justice are equally non-negotiable and inseparable dimensions of the same principle. SRHR must be understood as a political demand, not merely a programmatic one. Economic freedom is a prerequisite, not a parallel concern. Freedom and autonomy are not won once and held. They are the non-negotiable grounding beneath every other commitment in this Declaration.

At a time when activists and movements face increasing threats, repression, burnout, digital surveillance, legal harassment, and gender-based violence, collective security is essential. Sustaining transformation means sustaining the people and movements making it possible.

Accessibility as a baseline

Access — to decision-making and movement spaces, accountability mechanisms, essential services, and public life as a whole — is a prerequisite to full and equal citizenship. Accessibility is a fundamental human right, not an optional add-on. It must be understood as infrastructure, built into systems and adequately funded from the outset, rather than retrofitted later.

Planning and budgeting for accessibility requires recognizing and addressing the range of barriers that prevent meaningful inclusion of those most impacted by structural exclusions, including girls, women, and gender-diverse people with disabilities; racialized and Indigenous communities; trans, intersex, and gender-diverse people; migrants, refugees, and displaced peoples; and adolescent girls. This includes assessing physical and digital environments, information and communication systems, sensory and safety measures, and economic, geographic, and time-zone access.

The consultations made clear that accessibility is a non-negotiable — not a burden, but an essential part of building inclusive communities and movements.

Care as a principle and a structural demand

Care must be understood as both a principle and a structural demand. Across the consultations, it came up again and again, especially in conversations about justice, decolonization, and economic transformation.

Care is a political and economic issue. The care economy must be funded and valued. The deeply gendered burden of care must shift from individuals to collective systems. Care must be understood as a shared responsibility across communities and institutions, rather than being assigned, as it so often has been, to women alone.

Care must also be visible in how we organize ourselves. That means prioritizing empathy, safeguarding, and mental health as part of organizing practice. It means treating disagreement as collective work, calling each other in and centering accountability rather than divisive call-out culture, and committing to listening and openness across difference as real accountability practices. How we show up to each other is part of the transformation we are trying to build. We must develop strong practices to protect activists from harm, while also fostering cultures of mutual support, care, and regeneration within movements. It means valuing rest, mental health, self-care, and communal wellbeing as part of long-term struggle.

Justice, democracy, and civic space

Justice, democracy, and civic space are not background conditions. They are active sites of struggle that the gender equality ecosystem must defend, expand, and embody. Across diverse consultations from Chiapas to Kathmandu to Nairobi, participants named the shrinking of civic space, sharp political repression, and the rise of fascism and anti-rights movements as immediate structural threats. Gender equality is a core democratic principle, not a secondary priority, and treating it as such means refusing the double standards

by which human rights obligations are selectively applied depending on political convenience, donor relationships, or strategic alliances. Justice cannot be contingent.

Internally, this demands the same standard: the gender equality ecosystem cannot defend democratic principles externally while reproducing hierarchies, exclusion, and authoritarian dynamics within its own structures and processes. The organizations, movements, and institutions that make up this ecosystem must be as democratic in how they operate — in decision-making, resource allocation, and accountability — as in what they demand of States and multilateral systems.

Hope and joy

The Declaration is grounded in the belief that another world is possible. The consultations made clear that hope and joy are political practices that sustain the capacity to keep fighting when progress is slow, contested, and reversible.

Hope is the political choice to keep open the possibility of a different world, even in the face of regression and loss. Joy is part of struggle. For those facing the greatest structural exclusion, claiming joy is a political act and a refusal to be reduced to survival and suffering alone.

A gender equality ecosystem that is serious about inclusion must make room for hope and joy as organizing principles.