

FIDH commits to a de-colonial approach for the defence of human rights

Acknowledging and confronting legacies of past and present colonial structures for the full realisation of our common humanity

Introduction

The **International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)** acknowledges that since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Rights on the 10th of December 1948, significant progress has been made in advancing the universality of human rights globally. However, the global human rights order continues to be overshadowed by past colonial legacies as well as ongoing forms of colonialism¹ such as the multi-layered racist, religious, imperialist and settler colonialism affecting the peoples of Palestine.

The present reality of the continued impacts of colonialism necessitates FIDH articulation of its commitment to a de-colonial approach to its work, which will ensure that we confront the unjust historical colonial structures and practices, as well as the coloniality which persists and inhibits the realisation and the enjoyment of human rights and dignity by all persons.

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514, Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and People, adopted on 14 December 1960², is a founding text of international law on decolonisation, which reinforced the inalienable right to self-determination for all peoples under colonial rule, and declared colonialism in all its forms is incompatible with the UN Charter and international law. By following its lead, We, the **International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)**, meeting at our 42nd Congress, reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that universality truly encompasses the pluriversity³ of diverse human experiences, guided by the principles of indivisibility, interdependence and realisation of human rights. However, we recognize that these rights cannot be fully guaranteed and realised until the existing paradigm of global inequality and inequity, rooted in legacies of colonialism and the more insidious coloniality, is dismantled.

Today, despite advances in international human rights and humanitarian law, colonial and neo-colonial legacies continue to hamper the realisation of human rights. Structures of domination, economic and social inequalities and inequities, annexation policies and the logic of power persist in often invisible, renewed or even tolerated forms, globally.

From this perspective, a de-colonial approach is essential to enable the full realisation and enjoyment of human rights. By tackling historical and structural roots of inequality, by deconstructing the dynamics and mechanisms of domination, we better understand the factors which hinder the actual access of individuals and peoples to their rights. Such an approach contributes to strengthening the universality of human rights by recognizing lived realities and multiculturalism of the colonised peoples.

1 Colonialism can be defined as « a practice of domination, to extend and maintain control over areas and their peoples, by another people, through claiming superiority and dominance ». Though « both colonialism and imperialism were forms of conquest that were expected to benefit Europe economically and strategically », it is important to differentiate between them. Read more about these definitions here : <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>

2 Read the General Assembly resolution 1514 here: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-granting-independence-colonial-countries-and-peoples>

3 "The concept of pluriversity has gained significant attention in recent years, particularly in the context of the Global South. At its core, pluriversity refers to the coexistence of multiple worlds, epistemologies, and ontologies, challenging the dominant Western-centric view of a single, universal truth." Read more here: <https://www.numberanalytics.com/blog/pluriversity-global-south-guide>

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In recognition of the realities set out above, in June 2023, FIDH took a decision to internally introspect on the effects of past and current colonial legacies in the lived realities and experiences of those affected by empires and the historical patterns which have continued to manifest in relation to coloniality. This process was grounded on various conversations structured in the form of a global tour from different regions of the world relevant for this exercise. The first conversation presented colonisation from the point of view of the French coloniser, both historically and contemporarily, analysing the consequences and impacts of French colonisation and neo-colonialism in particular, and of European empires in general. The tour then continued to Africa to discuss the extent of colonisation (of knowledge, minds, bodies, land, culture, etc.), its impact to this day in terms of coloniality, and the resistance movements that are still trying to deconstruct and reconnect African cultures and systems of thoughts. The various forms and challenges of pan-Africanism and the Ubuntu philosophy⁴ were widely debated. In the Americas, the discussion explored the intersectionality of the struggles for decolonisation and resistance to different forms of oppression. The links between de-colonial, feminist and indigenous struggles for identity were highlighted, demonstrating the importance of the intersectional approach in the de-colonial debate. In Asia, the conversation focused on two practical cases illustrating two distinct realities. On the one hand, the colonisation of India, its realities and consequences for the Indian population. Secondly, the situation in Kashmir, a region occupied since 1947 by India, Pakistan and China, each of which claims sovereignty over the territory. To this day, the Kashmir is not only suffering the consequences of an unsuccessful decolonisation process, but above all colonisation by these three regional powers. During the conversation on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, a cross-cutting discussion took place on the experience of the various colonisations in the Maghreb, as well as the persistence and even reinforcement of certain practices from the colonial era in post-colonial states.

This resolution is therefore guided on the findings and lessons learned during the global tour. It also sets out the next steps on the follow-up action that will ensure the practical implementation of the resolution by FIDH.

Key findings

1. The persistence of colonisation and prolonged occupations

Colonisation is not limited to the past. It persists in the forms of prolonged occupation, denial of the right to self-determination, and the plundering of natural resources, and political, cultural and economic rights.

- **Palestine.** Israel's settler-colonial apartheid regime, systematic oppression and the ongoing genocide in Gaza, have been widely denounced by UN bodies and NGOs. Since the 1948 Nakba, the Palestinian people have continued to be subjected to all forms of oppression and be deprived of their fundamental rights, including self-determination and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and land. The diplomatic, financial and military support given to the State of Israel, the occupying power, mainly by certain Western States⁵, as well as the impunity it continues to enjoy in the face of the ongoing genocide, illustrate the double standards which undermine the legitimacy and efficacy of international law.⁶

- **Kashmir.** This region, claimed and administered by India, Pakistan, and China, has been denied the right to self-determination since 1947. Under Indian administration, the region is subject to militarised occupation

⁴ Read more on the Ubuntu philosophy here : <https://tutufoundationuk.org/about-us/>

⁵ In this document, the expression 'Western states' is used in its geopolitical sense. The article 'Occident' in the glossary *Géococonfluences* of the *École normale supérieure de Lyon* defines and explains the evolution of this term. Excerpts: "The West is a toponym linked to geopolitics, vague and common, initially referring in a self-centred way to the countries of Western Europe and their extensions in North America (the United States and Canada), and even Australia and New Zealand, according to imprecise and extremely variable boundaries. [...] It is then the underlying idea of an opposition between the West and the rest of the world (summarised by the expression "*the West and the rest*") that poses a problem. This vision is an extension of the frameworks of thought that prevailed throughout the colonial era and into the 20th century, justifying domination through racial ideology and Europe's civilising mission. It has experienced something of a resurgence in the countries of the 'global South' but also with the development of postcolonial studies. On this issue, read more here: <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/11/07/2024/west-should-not-be-sole-leader-endeavour-global-south-perspectives-reforming>

⁶ These serious and systematic violations of international law include illegal settlements in the West Bank, restrictions on movement, arbitrary arrests and legal discrimination. The conflict, which has lasted for more than half a century, is marked by an international failure to address its deep roots. However, legal initiatives such as South Africa's recourse to the International Court of Justice, the order adopted by the latter in January 2024, as well as the international arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court, testify to the persistence and vigor of international law as a last bulwark against these violations.

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characterised by severe restrictions on freedoms, mass surveillance, prolonged suspension of digital freedoms, and violent crackdowns on all dissent. Since the abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution in 2019, the settlement policies implemented risk irreversibly altering the composition of the population and identity of this part of Kashmir. Under the Pakistani administration, residents face on-going restrictions on political participation, freedom of expression, and local autonomy, limiting the exercise of their fundamental rights.

- **Western Sahara.** Moroccan colonisation, denounced by numerous United Nations resolutions, persists despite the commitments made in the 1991 ceasefire. The Sahrawi people remain deprived of their right to self-determination, while human rights defenders are regularly harassed and imprisoned.
- **Tibet.** The cultural, religious and political repression carried out by the Chinese government is intensifying. The banning of the Tibetan language in schools, the surveillance of places of worship and the imprisonment of Tibetan intellectual figures, all constitute practices which appear to be attempts of forced assimilation.
- **Overseas territories attached to France, the Netherlands and Denmark (OCT)⁷, as well as in the outermost regions (OR) of certain Member States of the European Union⁸.** Their populations are faced with limited political and economic autonomy, and a loss of effective sovereignty in several areas. Despite their constitutional link with European States and their status as citizens of the Union, these territories remain subject to the control of the States to which they belong over key competences such as defence, foreign affairs, justice or internal security⁹. This situation encourages the exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of these States, hinders the economic emancipation of indigenous peoples¹⁰ and restricts full and complete access to human rights guaranteed by European and international instruments¹¹.
- Beyond the cases mentioned, the list of **non-self-governing territories** recognized by the United Nations¹² attests that the decolonisation process remains unfinished. Several of these territories, mostly under the control of the United Kingdom or the United States, combine a lack of political self-determination with a central role in the global economy as offshore financial centers. By serving as a haven for tax evasion and the concealment of resources generated in the countries of the Global South, these territories participate in a renewed form of economic domination, perpetuating colonial dynamics in contemporary legal and financial forms.

These situations are not marginal: they highlight the limits of international regulatory and justice mechanisms, which struggle to guarantee the full realisation of human rights in the face of persistent regimes of colonial and neocolonial domination.

7 According to the European Union, 13 Overseas Countries and Territories (OCT) are located in the Atlantic, Antarctic, Arctic, Caribbean and Pacific regions. All are islands, and one of them has no permanent population. They are not sovereign countries but depend to varying degrees on the three Member States with which they maintain special links, namely Denmark, France and the Netherlands. Read more here: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/overseas-countries-and-territories_en

8 The outermost regions of the European Union (ORs) are territories that belong to Member States of the European Union but are located in areas that are more or less distant from Europe. There are nine of them: five French overseas departments (Martinique, Mayotte, Guadeloupe, French Guiana and Réunion), one French overseas collectivity (Saint Martin), two Portuguese autonomous regions (Madeira and the Azores) and one Spanish autonomous community (the Canary Islands). The European Union recognises that the ORs *"have to deal with a number of difficulties related to their geographical characteristics, in particular remoteness, insularity, small size, difficult topography and climate. They are economically dependent on a few products (often agricultural products or natural resources). These features act as constraints on their future development potential."* More information on the situation of the ORs and the EU strategy can be found on the European Parliament's website: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/100/regions-ultraperipheriques-rup->

9 The 13 OCTs are legally external to the European Union but institutionally linked to their respective states, which retain decision-making power in sovereign areas. This organisation limits the scope for local sovereignty and perpetuates contemporary forms of political subordination.

10 The natural resources (mining, fishing, land) of many territories are exploited primarily for the benefit of metropolitan areas. This dynamic prevents autonomous economic development and contributes to the marginalisation of indigenous peoples in local economic governance.

11 In the ORs, although integrated into the Council of Europe, certain instruments protecting social rights, such as the European Social Charter, remain inapplicable without an express declaration from the State. This mechanism creates legal inequalities between residents of the overseas territories and those of mainland France. In New Caledonia, despite the progress made under the Noumea Accords, tensions surrounding self-determination reflect the persistence of unresolved political and identity issues.

12 Official list of Non-Self-Governing Territories according to the UN, updated by the Special Committee on Decolonization (C-24), available here: <https://www.un.org/dppa/decolonization/fr/nsgt>

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FULL REALISATION OF OUR COMMON HUMANITY**2. Capitalism, exploitation and colonial legacies**

Capitalism, in its historical and contemporary forms, has been and remains a central driver of colonisation, the exploitation of resources and people. The accumulation of capital was built on the enslavement of populations, the dispossession of land and knowledge, and the destruction of societies and ecosystems, largely by European colonisers. Since the 15th century, European colonial conquest has been accompanied by slavery, pillage, the commodification of living things, and the establishment of unequal exchange circuits. This process has also resulted in an epistemicide. This is the « *erasure, devaluation or systematic destruction of knowledge systems, languages and worldviews specific to colonised societies, in favor of Eurocentric knowledge* »¹³. Even today, extractivist logic, the financialisation of the economy and the commodification of life perpetuate structural inequalities and inequities, fueling the global ecological crisis. Large multinational companies and investment funds continue to exploit natural and human resources, often to the detriment of the rights of indigenous peoples, local populations, workers, women and young people, and of nature. Precariousness, forced migrations, and the criminalisation of land and environmental defenders are direct consequences of these dynamics. The current climate crisis illustrates the continuity of capitalist extractivist logic. The countries of the Global North, historically responsible for the majority of greenhouse gas emissions, have prospered on the basis of an economic model based on the massive use of fossil fuels and the exploitation of the Global South, which is today suffering the full consequences of this ecological injustice. This situation reveals the urgency of a just transition, based on the recognition of historical responsibilities, the establishment of mechanisms for reparation, redistribution and solidarity to finance climate adaptation without creating new forms of debt. This implies more generally, a paradigm shift. One which no longer depends on fossil fuels, which respects planetary boundaries and which simultaneously puts all resources at the service of the realisation of human rights.

3. Post-colonial states which reproduce the logic of domination

In some cases, colonisation reinforced state structures which had pre-colonial hyper-centralisation of power. This exacerbated the invisibility of minorities, and the use of force as a tool of governance. In many cases, post-colonial elites have re-purposed this logic for their own benefit. In North Africa, for example, states such as Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Morocco still use the spectre of “terrorism” to repress political opposition and the defence of human rights: the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADHDH) has been dissolved, hundreds of prisoners of conscience are detained, and press freedom remains severely hampered, while the popular Hirak movement has been violently repressed in Algeria, as has the Rif movement in Morocco. In Tunisia and Egypt, the gains of the 2011 revolutions have been gradually dismantled with the return to authoritarian regimes, tolerated by Western powers under the guise of economic or military cooperation, the fight against migration flows, or various other security-related arguments. This political repression and these human rights abuses often relies on legislative and security tools inherited from colonial law, confusing the republican order with the reflexes of colonial domination. In Turkey, the government has also appropriated this logic to violently repress protest movements and silence critical voices, with a view to strengthening central power at the expense of ethnic, religious, and gender minorities, thus dismantling years of democratic progress and advances in human rights, with the implicit agreement of Europe, which uses them for its own security, economic, and defence interests.

Furthermore, the economic structures established during the colonial era for land control and natural resource extraction continue to be reproduced today. Many post-colonial states, often under pressure from global neo-liberal logic, remain confined to the role of exporters of raw material without local processing or privileged access to processed products, which keeps them at the lowest level of the value chain and deprives them of any sovereignty over their natural resources. Mining illustrates this persistence. For example, in the territories of Western Sahara, phosphate mining largely benefits the Moroccan authorities without benefiting the Sahrawis. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the exploitation of cobalt, essential to energy transition technologies, is carried out under conditions which violate human rights. In Chile, the massive extraction of copper and lithium has contributed to exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and devastating fragile ecosystems, to the detriment of indigenous peoples such as the Mapuche.

¹³ Read the following articles to learn more about the phenomenon of epistemicide : <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/04/13/epistemicide-intellectual-genocide-and-eurocentric-modernity/> and <https://nyslibrary.libguides.com/c.php?g=1357224&p=10305425>

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This neo-colonial logic is also evident in agriculture. In Sudan, for example, vast mega-farms owned by Emirati and Saudi investors are grabbing large areas of agricultural land, often in the context of armed conflict, to export their crops to the Gulf countries, without the local Sudanese populations actually benefiting from them. Far from fulfilling the right of peoples to self-determination and allowing populations to choose their economic and social model, these practices perpetuate a systemic dependency and a model of accumulation inherited from the colonial period, in which social and environmental factors continue to be ignored.

Finally, the after-effects of empire continue to fuel systemic racism in many states in the Global North. The legacy of racial hierarchy imposed by colonial empires continues to be experienced today. Structural racism is reflected in unequal access to rights, serious racial and ethnic disparities in brutal policing and in the criminal justice systems, as well as the persistent marginalisation of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.

The transatlantic slave trade, in particular, profoundly shaped societies organised around the concept of “race,” the effects of which persist in the United States, the Caribbean, and Latin America. This reality requires an intersectional approach to human rights, articulating struggles against colonialism, economic exploitation, and racism. The European migration policies perpetuate racial, economic and social profiling of people from former colonies by limiting their freedom of movement, through the imposition of discriminatory restrictions. These dynamics are also found in the treatment of sub-Saharan migrants by post-colonial North African states, which is often marked by repression, discrimination, and exclusion, testifying to the persistence of post-colonial racism in the region.

4. International financial institutions, over-indebtedness and colonial debt

Many formerly colonised states remain locked in structural dependence on international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Bank, which favour the interests of creditors and dominant economic powers. Since the 1980s, the World Bank and IMF-imposed structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and their accompanying economic reforms, significantly weakened the ability of states to guarantee the economic, social, and cultural rights of their populations. Sometimes, these forced them to violate their international and regional obligations, including those of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Unlike civil and political rights, which require abstention, these rights require affirmative action by states. A case in point is the Franc CFA zone. The CFA franc limits the economic autonomy of almost all former French colonies in Sub-Saharan Africa by requiring them to maintain a significant portion of their financial reserves in the Banque de France. This domestically benefits French businesses and the government of France. This system reinforces the dependence of these countries on France, and greatly limits their financial independence¹⁴. This is part of coloniality.

The debt of the countries of the Global South is partly colonial debt, born of economic structures designed to serve the interests of the metropole. Several independent states have had to assume the debts contracted by their former colonial regimes. The case of Haiti is emblematic. In the 19th century, France imposed an indemnity of 150 million gold francs on the first independent black state as “compensation” for the loss of its plantations. This permanently jeopardised its development. This unequal treatment continues today. After the Second World War, West Germany benefited from a halving of its debt and a cap on its repayments¹⁵, while countries like Sri Lanka and Ghana devote between 30% and 40% of their public resources to repaying their debt, without a comparable solidarity mechanism. Moreover, the volume of wealth historically extracted by colonising countries is rarely documented or considered in discussions of debt. For example, British colonialism in India extracted approximately \$45 trillion between 1765 and 1938 through forced taxation, export manipulation, and monetary domination, diverting these resources to Britain rather than re-investing them in India.

In Latin America, the legacy of monetary colonialism persists in dependence on the US dollar. Countries such as Argentina and Brazil are experiencing repeated economic crises linked to exchange rate volatility, inflation, and high borrowing costs, exacerbated by the monetary policy decisions of the US Federal Reserve. Today, the dollar's dominance reflects the continuity of monetary colonialism in a globalised financial context, creating a structural

14 On the CFA franc in particular, and the role played by currency in global inequalities in general, read *Africa's Last Colonial Currency: The CFA Franc Story* (London: Pluto Press, 2021). Excerpts available here: <https://taxjustice.net/2021/03/22/the-cfa-franc-as-a-vivid-symbol-of-colonial-continuities-in-francophone-africa/>

15 Through the London Debt Agreement of 1953, negotiated by Germany's former war-time allies including the United Kingdom, France and the United States, who formed the Tripartite Commission on German Debt. Read more here: <https://www.cadtm.org/How-Europe-cancelled-Germany-s>

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dependency for trade and debt in the countries of the South. The dollar's near monopoly in oil transactions, the "petrodollar," forces these countries to constantly acquire dollars to import petroleum products, exposing them to external shocks such as currency crises, inflation, and interest rate increases decided in the United States, which can trigger financial instability and debt crises. These practices reveal a clear power imbalance between dominant institutions and borrowing countries, which are largely excluded from decision-making. The IFIs continue to serve the interests of creditors, with the United States holding de facto a veto at the IMF.¹⁶ It is essential to fundamentally reform these institutions, particularly their decision-making processes, to break with the logic of debt, conditionality, and austerity, which are contrary to human rights. These reforms must guarantee equal access to decision-making, the cancellation of illegitimate debts, equitable access to Special Drawing Rights¹⁷, and the transformation of financial flows into unconditional and non-debt-creating financing.

Adding to this financial debt is a massive, often ignored, ecological debt. The countries of the Global North, responsible for nearly 92% of excess CO₂ emissions, have prospered thanks to a development model based on the exploitation of resources of the Global South. Today, it is the countries of the Global South which are suffering the worst consequences of climate change. This includes desertification, rising sea levels, and climate disasters. Yet, these states, often the least responsible, are forced to finance their adaptation and ecological transition on their own, under the pressure of unfair financial debts. Researchers have estimated that wealthy nations owe a climate debt of \$192 trillion to lower-income countries, as a result of their responsibility for climate change¹⁸. This double penalty — economic and ecological — illustrates how the international economic order continues to reproduce relationships of domination and structural injustice. The recognition of this ecological debt must be accompanied by mechanisms to finance the energy transition in vulnerable countries, without creating new forms of neocolonial dependency.

5. Colonial legacies of patriarchy: invisibility of women and the need for a de-colonial feminist reading

Colonialism was not only deployed in the economic and political spheres: it also reinforced, legitimised, and sometimes reconfigured patriarchal structures within both colonised and coloniser societies. Colonial domination relied on hierarchical gender relations, imposing sexist norms derived from Western culture while instrumentalising women in systems of social, moral, and cultural control. This process contributed to disqualifying or erasing endogenous forms of female social organisation and knowledge, while assigning rigid gender roles. It is nevertheless essential to emphasise that, in Western societies themselves, some major advances in women's rights — such as the right to vote, access to education, or participation in public life — have indeed taken place, often at the cost of long struggles. However, these advances have coexisted with a hierarchical vision of femininity, in which the figure of the "modern" white, educated, and urban woman has been erected as the universal norm. This construction not only marginalised, black, brown,, poor, or colonised women, but also served as an ideological justification for the colonial enterprise, presented as a "civilising" colonial mission, including in the name of women's liberation. Even today, women in post-colonial contexts continue to face specific forms of oppression at the intersection of patriarchy, structural racism, neoliberalism, and colonial legacies. They are often invisibilised in dominant narratives, excluded from decision-making processes, faced with precarious employment, and stripped of their capacity to act politically. This marginalisation is particularly pronounced in rural areas or informal sectors, where access to essential public services and decent working conditions remain insufficient.

A de-colonial feminist reading is therefore essential to understand how gender oppression intersects with racist, economic, and imperialist logic. It invites us to recognise the struggles of women in and from current and former colonies — particularly in national liberation movements, resistance to occupation, or contemporary social struggles — as central and not secondary. This also implies implementing reparation policies capable of eliminating structural inequalities and inequities, through access to decent work, social security, justice, land, and political representation.

In Tunisia, for example, rural women in marginalised regions endure appalling working conditions in the informal

16 Read more here : <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/pam/pam53/pam53.pdf>

17 The Special Drawing Rights (SDR), are an international reserve asset of the IMF, that supplements official reserves of its member countries. The current IMF SDR allocation formula-based quotas give more SDRs to richer countries and few to the low and middle-income countries that need them the most in times of crises.

Read more here: <https://sustainablefinancelab.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/334/2023/12/An-African-Perspective-on-IMF-Special-Drawing-Rights-Rechanneling-Proposals-Opportunities-and-Challenges.pdf>

18 Read more here : <https://climatenetwork.org/2024/09/20/us5trillion-owed-to-global-south-by-global-north-due-to-the-climate-crisis/> and <https://theconversation.com/cop29-climate-finance-deal-why-poor-countries-are-so-angry-244341>

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agricultural sector, while being particularly affected by precariousness of the sector. This situation is exacerbated by current conservative policies which relegate women to the domestic sphere, limit democratic dialogue, imprison and force into exile dozens of women politicians and human rights defenders, and restrict the work of feminist organisations—thus compromising their fundamental rights and their ability to act collectively.

Recognising the intersecting effects of colonialism and patriarchy also means opposing the use of “tradition” to justify the control of women’s bodies and social roles. A truly de-colonial feminist approach, on the contrary, requires articulating social justice, historical memory, and gender equality, while challenging the abstract universality of a Western feminist model which ignores diverse colonial, cultural, and social trajectories.

6. Recognising Homophobia as a Colonial Legacy

Homophobia is deeply rooted in colonial history. Many laws and social norms that criminalise or stigmatise LGBTQI+ people were introduced through colonial rule and continue to shape attitudes and legal systems today. Recognising homophobia as a legacy of colonialism is essential to combating intolerance and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. Efforts to advance LGBTQI+ rights are often dismissed as a “Western agenda,” yet in many cases, it is colonial-era laws—not local culture—that laid the foundation for repression. Challenging this legacy is crucial to achieving true equality and justice.

7. Recognise and combat Islamophobia as an emanation of colonial thinking

The colonial view of Islam and Muslim peoples has been a central tool of ideological justification, allowing domination and exploitation to be presented as forms of civilising benevolence. Disseminated by educational institutions, scholarly representations, public policies, as well as by certain religious movements and cults of Christian inspiration, this vision has lastingly shaped collective imaginations.

Even today, these representations influence political discourse and practices toward Muslim populations, particularly in the Global North. Islam is frequently perceived not only as a religion, but also as a vector of cultural and political otherness, fueling persistent forms of mistrust, stigmatisation, and systemic discrimination.

The geopolitical turning point of September 11, 2001, marked a major intensification of this dynamic. Under the guise of the “global war on terror,” Western states legitimised prolonged interference in the internal affairs of several Muslim-majority countries, often in defiance of international law. These interventions were justified by a globalised security discourse, but in reality served economic, political, and military interests, thus extending, in new forms, the colonial logic.

Domestically, this context has facilitated the normalisation of Islamophobic discourse and policies in Western societies. The conflation of Islam with violence and security threats has justified the adoption of laws and measures disproportionately targeting Muslim communities. This has included increased surveillance, restrictions on religious freedoms, invasions of privacy, and stigmatisation in the media and public policies. These measures have created a regime of exception in which the principles of equality and freedom are suspended or recognised on condition of adherence to dominant Western cultural norms.

This differential treatment is particularly visible in the context of migration policies. Muslim populations, or those perceived as such, from Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia are often stigmatised, as foreigners and as Muslims. This dual labelling fosters legal exclusion (restrictions on the right to asylum, tightening of the right to residency, naturalisation conditional on “proof of integration”) and social exclusion (discrimination in employment, education, housing). It contributes to reinforcing the idea that certain categories of people, because of their origin or religion, are intrinsically unable to be assimilated in the “civilised” Western world.

From a legal perspective, Islamophobia, as a “particular form of racism directed against Islam and Muslims,” is similar to xenophobia or anti-Semitism. However, this equivalence is generally not recognised in practice and political discourse. And while fundamental legal instruments, including the European Convention on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, enshrine freedom of religion, the right to equality and non-discrimination, and respect for human dignity, Islamophobic discourse and practices frequently escape legal condemnation or are justified in the name of higher

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interests, such as national security, social cohesion, or secularism.

This differential treatment, compared to other forms of racism or religious hatred, reveals the existence of an implicit systemic bias towards Islam and Muslims in Western Europe. Stigmatising discourses, specific restrictions affecting Muslim religious practices (particularly clothing), or discriminatory migration policies indirectly targeting nationals of Muslim countries, bear witness to this. This asymmetry in the application of the law calls into question the universality of legal protections, legitimises a hierarchy of rights according to real or supposed affiliations, and reflects the persistence of neocolonial structures of domination in international relations as well as in internal citizenship regimes.

8. Rethinking international solidarity

In light of these findings, FIDH believes it is necessary to re-think international solidarity practices. Too often, these practices are characterised by a Global North – Global South relationship, shaped by funding from Western States. Western States, complicit in current domination, devoid of historical understanding, can inadvertently perpetuate paternalistic, neocolonial, extractivist paradigm. In this regard, it is also appropriate to question the very notion of “development,” whose scope is all the more insidious because it often imposes itself as a universal self-evident truth, while remaining largely shaped by Western standards. This notion has thus been used, in a subtle but persistent manner, to legitimise policies of interference, extraction, and domination, to the detriment of the autonomy and priorities of the communities concerned.

While international normative frameworks have evolved since the Second World War, particularly in the context of decolonisation, their development often continues to reflect primarily Western perspectives. This reality is regularly highlighted by various actors from the Global South, who call for greater recognition of their experiences, needs, and visions in building a more inclusive and equitable international order. Taking these demands into account when considering international solidarity is an essential step in ensuring its legitimacy and effectiveness.

It is therefore essential to build solidarity based on listening, reciprocity, co-creation, and the recognition of activist and popular knowledge, particularly in feminist, ecological, social, and de-colonial struggles. This solidarity must promote alternative economic models based on social and environmental justice, the participation of local communities, the recognition and valuing of traditional and indigenous knowledge, and horizontal international solidarity, while adopting the perspective of a just transition and avoiding epistemological extractivism.

Conclusion: Universality of human rights and the need for inclusivity

The question of the universality of human rights is particularly important, given its complex history and the context in which it was developed. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, was drafted at a time when many peoples were still under colonial domination, and has long been perceived as the expression of primarily Western values, stemming from European liberal traditions. This historical reality has fuelled persistent criticism. The universality of human rights has sometimes appeared as an instrument for imposing external standards, or even legitimising unequal power relations, to the detriment of the realities, knowledge systems, and aspirations of colonised peoples.

Yet, from the outset, the UDHR has also been influenced by currents of thought systems from Asia, Africa and the Americas. The importance of social interdependence, solidarity, collective well-being, and the recognition of collective rights and the right to self-determination have contributed to broadening and enriching the scope of human rights. In the following decades, the active participation of post-colonial states in the development of new international instruments – such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, or the Declaration on the Right to Self Determination – confirmed that the universality of human rights is based on the recognition of shared values, while respecting the diversity of cultures and experiences.

However, the vision of an inclusive universality remains hampered by coloniality, the persistence of paradigms and practices of domination, and the sometimes selective or instrumentalised application of human rights – all of which continue to fuel debates about the actual scope and capacity to serve as a lever of emancipation for all peoples.

ACKNOWLEDGING AND CONFRONTING LEGACIES OF PAST AND PRESENT COLONIAL STRUCTURES FOR THE 9/9
FULL REALISATION OF OUR COMMON HUMANITY

This is why the universality of human rights should be enriched by the plurality of voices, experiences and struggles. Universality therefore requires that human rights be applied without discrimination.

Universality can serve as an instrument of emancipation and global justice if it fully integrates the contributions of formerly colonised peoples, recognises and values the diversity of contexts and frees itself from the coloniality inherited from the past.

Next Steps

FIDH thus commits to developing a de-colonial and effective approach to human rights, commensurate with historical and contemporary challenges. In taking this commitment to adopting a de-colonial approach in the implementation of our vision, mission and mandate, we imagine a situation where the Federation's actions meaningfully contribute to a more just, inclusive and equitable global social order.

FIDH will act on three complementary levels:

- Continue our institutional reflection and the framing of our de-colonial thinking and approach towards institutional practices and actions,
- Develop external recommendations and practical actions addressed at decision makers, states and international institutions, with the intention of promoting more inclusive international and regional normative frameworks, and ensuring respect for the rights of everyone, individually or collectively,
- Consolidate steps 1 and 2 above in a strategy and action plan that will provide practical guidance for FIDH, member organisations, partners and other institutions on the Federation's de-colonial approach.

This further work will be advanced by the incoming International Board, elected at the 42nd Congress, and the International Secretariat, which will develop a specific strategy and action plan on decolonisation, with the effective consultation and participation of the Federation's member organisations.