

## NEWS RELEASE

### Human rights at a crossroads: President of Open Society Foundations speaks at UP



*Binaifer Nowrojee, President of the Open Society Foundations (OSF), during a public lecture hosted by the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria.*

PRETORIA - There is an urgent need for a more resolute, strategic and unified global response from the human rights movement during “this unprecedented moment of mounting challenges, of regression and repression of fundamental human rights in many parts of the world.”

This was one of the key messages delivered by [Binaifer Nowrojee](#), President of the [Open Society Foundations](#) (OSF), during a public lecture hosted by the [Centre for Human Rights](#) at the University of Pretoria (UP) in collaboration with the OSF, one of the world’s largest funders of groups working for justice, equity and human rights.

The lecture, titled ‘The Future of Human Rights in a Changing World Order’, was delivered on 12 March 2025, ahead of South Africa’s Human Rights Day holiday on 21 March. South Africa also shines a national spotlight on human rights throughout the month, with March commemorated as Human Rights Month.

Reflecting on the state of human rights in South Africa, Africa, and globally, Nowrojee called for action. She said many questions are being raised about the future of human rights against a backdrop of escalating violations and widening impunity across the globe. “These violations have led to questions on whether the current approaches to human rights are still adequate and still effective,” she said.

Reflecting on the evolving landscape of human rights, particularly in light of Human Rights Day, Nowrojee noted that “threats to human rights and fundamental freedoms are increasingly complex, stemming from technological advancements, geopolitical tensions, and socio-economic disparities. Furthermore, in the changing world we find ourselves in, human rights are more at risk than ever before.” She said issues such as digital surveillance increasingly challenge traditional notions of privacy and personal autonomy.

Under these circumstances, Nowrojee argued that revitalising the human rights movement calls for a robust reimagining of human rights frameworks, a reimagining that incorporates intersectionality and considers the rights of marginalised communities. It should also embrace new rights that address contemporary issues, such as the right to a healthy environment and digital privacy. This would help acknowledge that human rights are not static but dynamic and responsive to the needs of society, she added.

### **Six critical shifts**

Regarding the future of human rights in South Africa and beyond, Nowrojee proposed six critical shifts that human rights workers must make to ensure that human rights are central to the future:

First, “we must ensure that our approach is guided by the demands of communities we serve”, she said, adding that human rights workers must ensure there is no disconnect from the realities of those whom human rights seek to serve. In this regard, there is a need to invest in grassroots movements, communities and individuals at the coal face of the fights for human rights, amplifying the voices that exist at the margins of society and ensuring that strategies to expand human rights are rooted in the lived experiences of those at the frontlines.

Second, she highlighted a need to modernise methods of work in relation to human rights, to make them more relevant. “We need to move beyond legal and technical ways of seeing human rights, distant from rightsholders, or standardised reports, conferences and performative tweets,” she said. She said human rights workers need to drive tangible change to enable the movement to shift power and disrupt the status quo.

Third, Nowrojee is convinced of the need to embed an intersectional analysis, one that connects race, gender, indigeneity and class struggles. “People do not see these struggles as separate and distinct in the way that the human rights movement often has, nor do they see human rights as limited to those of the individual,” she said. “This is a moment when we need to make rights relevant to the complexities of people’s struggles for justice and dignity.”

Fourth, she said the future of human rights depends on advocating not only for those living today, but also for generations to come. “Our human rights discourse must extend beyond the immediate and confront the existential threats shaping the world we will leave behind,” she said. “The degradation of the environment, the accelerating impacts of climate change, the risks of nuclear conflict and the unchecked rise of artificial intelligence (AI) all demand a more forceful and forward-looking response.”

Fifth, linked to the above, she said human rights workers must acknowledge that the future will largely take place in a digitised realm almost unrecognisable from the world that existed at the time of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. “Just as we have escalated global efforts around climate change and environmental justice, we must now do the same for digital rights and protections,” she said. “Technology has and is rapidly reshaping societies, yet our human rights frameworks are struggling to keep pace. Mass surveillance, algorithmic bias, digital censorship, and the monopolisation of online spaces by

powerful entities are threatening freedoms, deepening inequalities, and silencing dissent.”

Given these complexities, she said digital justice must be a core pillar of human rights advocacy. “Stronger privacy protections, equitable internet access, and transparent AI governance are essential to securing human rights in the digital age, including for children who will be entering this world of digital vulnerability.”

Lastly, she argued that human rights workers must invest in movement-building and transnational solidarity as a way to resist anti-rights agendas. “No country, activist or organisation can fight these battles alone,” she said. “We need Global South alliances that are relevant to the new world we are entering, to develop new institutions and bold strategies to meet our demands and the challenges of our time and beyond.”

In conclusion, Nowrojee encouraged her audience to envision the future of human rights as one without a straight line. “There are no clear, smooth, or predictable paths of progress. Our context is critical to guide us. Instead, there are often obstacles, setbacks, distractions, and defeats – the context can vary. In this regard, the work of human rights is never complete. Even when success is achieved, and feels secure, it can quickly be reversed. But this isn’t a moment to back down, retreat, or fall into despair. It is a time to renew our commitments to human rights and make them relevant to the moment we are in. It is time to unite and go forward with courage and determination.”

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## ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on its Hatfield Campus in Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also one of the largest producers of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP’s Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranked the University among the top five in Africa, as part of their [2024 World University Rankings \(WUR\)](#). UP was the only South African university featured in the [2023 World University Rankings for Innovation \(WURI\)](#), falling within in the 101-200 range of innovative universities.

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