

**Statement of the Center for Reproductive Rights
for
United States Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Hearing Titled “U.S. Presidency of the G20—An Opportunity to Champion Human
Rights”
Thursday, March 5, 2026**

Chair McGovern, Chair Smith, and Members of the Commission:

The Center for Reproductive Rights (“Center” or “CRR”) respectfully submits this statement for the record in connection with the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission’s hearing on “U.S. Presidency of the G20—An Opportunity to Champion Human Rights” to highlight the concerns posed by the Trump administration’s approach to human rights.¹

The Center is a global human rights organization that uses the power of law to advance reproductive rights as fundamental human rights which governments around the world are obligated to protect, respect, and fulfill. Reproductive freedom lies at the heart of the promise of human dignity, self-determination, and equality embodied in both the U.S. Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (“UDHR”).²

The Group of Twenty (“G20”) is a forum for advancing international cooperation among the world’s largest economies, comprising 85% of the world’s gross domestic product (“GDP”), more than 75% of global trade, and more than 60% of the world’s population.³ The annual G20 Summit represents an important opportunity to raise human rights issues with world leaders. This year, the G20 presidency is held by the United States, a country which boycotted the meeting in 2025 in South Africa under the guise of “America First.”⁴ In assuming the presidency, the Trump administration has the ability to set the agenda for the priorities for the forum.

The Center appreciates the Commission’s attention to the human rights dimensions of the U.S. G20 Presidency. However, the Center is deeply concerned that the Trump administration’s approach to human rights—centered on a “natural rights” framework that elevates a narrow set of rights while actively excluding and delegitimizing well-established human rights, all while committing systemic human rights violations and withdrawing from and undermining the multilateral bodies that make up the international human rights system—disqualifies the Trump administration as a credible champion of human rights on the world stage.

¹ “U.S. Presidency of the G20—An Opportunity to Champion Human Rights,” Tom Lantos Human Rights Comm’n, U.S. Congress, Mar. 5, 2026, *available at* <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/us-presidency-g20-opportunity-champion-human-rights>.

² See G.A. Res. 217A (III), U.N. Doc. A/RES/217(III) (Dec. 10, 1948) (hereinafter “UDHR”); *see generally The Constitutional Right to Reproductive Autonomy: Realizing the Promise of the 14th Amendment*, CTR. FOR REPROD. RTS., Jul. 26, 2022, *available at* <https://reproductiverights.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Final-14th-Amendment-Report-7.26.22.pdf>.

³ See *What is the G20 and why does it matter?* WORLD ECON. FORUM, Nov. 19, 2025, *available at* <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/11/g20-summit-what-you-need-to-know/>.

⁴ See Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, *The U.S. G20 Presidency: A Narrow Agenda in 2026*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELS., Dec. 19, 2025, *available at* <https://www.cfr.org/articles/us-g20-presidency-narrow-agenda-2026>.

Rather than an opportunity, the U.S. G20 Presidency under this framework poses a risk: that the United States will use its platform to advance a selective, ideologically driven vision of rights that undermines the universal human rights system and emboldens governments seeking to act with impunity and evade accountability under international law. This statement for the record addresses three interconnected issues: (1) the Trump administration’s natural rights framework and its departure from longstanding U.S. human rights policy; (2) the proper scope and limits of religious freedom under international human rights law; and (3) the consequences of this approach for U.S. global standing.

I. The “Natural Rights” Framework Narrows Longstanding U.S. Human Rights Policy

The Trump administration U.S. Department of State’s establishment of an “Office of Natural Rights” within the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (“DRL”) signals a fundamental and troubling departure from decades of bipartisan U.S. human rights policy.⁵ The administration’s “natural rights” framework defines rights as “God-given” and grounded in U.S. founding documents (some of which initially defined certain people as less human than others and excluded women),⁶ particularly the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights, rather than in the international human rights framework built over the past 78 years, anchored by the UDHR and human rights treaties.⁷ The UDHR itself is unambiguous on this point, and the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by consensus at the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, re-affirmed that “all human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated.”⁸ Any framework that sorts rights into a hierarchy is fundamentally incompatible with this foundational principle and with the United States’ obligations under international law.

The “natural rights” framework explicitly and selectively chooses so-called “unalienable” or “natural” rights, typically limited to life, liberty, property, and religious freedom, and discards others that are universally agreed upon by nation states in the international world order.⁹ In practice, this framing is used to delegitimize protections for sexual and reproductive health and rights, the human rights of LGBTQIA+ persons, and other vulnerable communities.¹⁰ All of these rights are firmly grounded in binding international human rights treaties, the authoritative

⁵ See 25-032 Congressional Notification Transmittal Letter, Pg. 19, Jun. 2025, available at https://federalnewsnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/CN_25_032.pdf;

⁶ U.S. Const. art. I, §2, cl. 3.

⁷ See Scott Busby and Charles O. (Cob) Blaha, *How the Proposed State Department Reorganization Guts U.S. Human Rights Diplomacy*, JUST SECURITY, Jun. 6, 2025, available at <https://www.justsecurity.org/114200/state-department-reorganization-human-rights/>; Desiree Cormier Smith and Jessica Stern, *The U.S. Helped Build the Universal Human Rights System. “Natural Rights” Would Tear It Down*, HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL CARR-RYAN CTR. FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, Dec. 10, 2025, available at <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/carr-ryan/our-work/carr-ryan-commentary/us-helped-build-universal-human-rights-system> (hereinafter “Cormier Smith”).

⁸ See World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, U.N. Doc. A/CONF.157/23, Jul. 12, 1993, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/vienna-declaration-and-programme-action>.

⁹ See Cormier Smith *supra* n. 7.

¹⁰ See *id.*

interpretation and consistent jurisprudence of United Nations’ (“UN”) treaty monitoring bodies, and the interpretive consensus of independent UN human rights experts.¹¹

During the Commission’s hearing on March 5, 2026, witness testimony called on the current Secretary of State Marco Rubio to adopt and build upon the 2020 Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights (“2020 Report”) and characterized then-Secretary of State Anthony Blinken’s 2021 decision to repudiate that report as a mistake to be corrected.¹² The Center respectfully but firmly disagrees. The 2020 Report advanced a false narrative that reproductive rights and other protections for marginalized communities lack grounding in international human rights law. That narrative is contradicted by the unequivocal and consistent positions of the UN Human Rights Committee, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (“CESCR”), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (“CEDAW”), and the Committee Against Torture (“CAT”).¹³ Specifically, the Human Rights Committee has repeatedly recognized that the state obligation to ensure reproductive autonomy arises from the right to life and the right to privacy enshrined in Articles 6 and 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (“ICCPR”), a treaty ratified by the United States.¹⁴ Reviving the “natural rights” framework and

¹¹ See *id.*; CESCR Committee, General Comment No. 22: (2016) on the right to sexual and reproductive health (article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), para. 11–21, U.N. Doc. E/C.12/GC/22 (2016); CEDAW Committee, Decision 57/II Statement by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on sexual and reproductive health: Beyond the 2014 review of the International Conference on Population and Development, at 85, U.N. Doc. A/69/38 (2014); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted Dec. 18, 1979, art. 16(e), G.A. Res. 34/180, U.N. GAOR, 34th Sess., Supp. No. 46, at 193, U.N. Doc. A/34/46 (1980), U.N.T.S. 13 (entered into force Sept. 3, 1981); CEDAW Committee, General Recommendation No. 24: Article 12 of the Convention (women and health), (20th Sess., 1999), para. 11, U.N. Doc. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.9 (Vol. II) (2008); CAT Committee, Concluding Observations: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, para. 46, U.N. Doc. CAT/C/GBR/CO/6 (2019).

¹² See Written Testimony of Mary Ann Glendon Learned Hand Professor of Law Emerita, Harvard University Former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See (2008-2009); Chair of the U.S. State Department Commission on Unalienable Rights (2019-2020); Former Member, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing on the “U.S. Presidency of the G20 –An Opportunity to Champion Human Rights,” Mar. 5, 2026, available at <https://humanrightscommission.house.gov/events/hearings/us-presidency-g20-opportunity-champion-human-rights>.

¹³ See generally *Breaking Ground: Treaty Monitoring Bodies on Reproductive Rights 2020*, CTR. FOR REPROD. RTS. (2019), <https://reproductiverights.org/resources/breaking-ground-2020-treaty-monitoring-bodies-on-reproductive-rights/>; CESCR Committee, General Comment No. 22: (2016) on the right to sexual and reproductive health (article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), para. 11–21, U.N. Doc. E/C.12/GC/22 (2016); CEDAW Committee, Decision 57/II Statement by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on sexual and reproductive health: Beyond the 2014 review of the International Conference on Population and Development, at 85, U.N. Doc. A/69/38 (2014); Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, adopted Dec. 18, 1979, art. 16(e), G.A. Res. 34/180, U.N. GAOR, 34th Sess., Supp. No. 46, at 193, U.N. Doc. A/34/46 (1980), U.N.T.S. 13 (entered into force Sept. 3, 1981); CEDAW Committee, General Recommendation No. 24: Article 12 of the Convention (women and health), (20th Sess., 1999), para. 11, U.N. Doc. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.9 (Vol. II) (2008).

¹⁴ See International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171; signed by the United States on October 5, 1977; transmitted by the President of the United States of America to the Senate February 23, 1978 (Treaty Doc. Exec. E, 95-2, 95th Congress, 2d Session); reported favorably by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations March 4, 1992 (Senate Executive Report No. 102-23, 102d Congress, 2d Session); Advice and consent to ratification by the Senate April 2, 1992; Ratified by the President June 1, 1992; Ratification of the United States of America deposited June 8, 1992; entered into force for the United States September 8, 1992. (hereinafter “ICCPR”); see also, *Siobhán Whelan v. Ireland*, Human Rights Committee, Comm’n No. 2425/2014, para. 7.8-7.9, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/119/D/2425/2014 (2017); *Amanda Jane Mellet v. Ireland*, Human Rights

the narrative outlined in the 2020 Report as the basis for U.S. G20 human rights engagement would represent a significant step backward for the United States and is fundamentally incompatible with the United States' obligations under international law.

II. Religious Freedom Is a Fundamental Right, But It Is Not Absolute, and It Cannot Justify Discrimination or the Denial of Reproductive Rights

The Center fully supports the right to freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental human right. This hearing's focus on mechanisms such as the Religion 20 ("R20") and the G20 Interfaith Forum reflects a legitimate interest in protecting religious minorities and promoting interfaith dialogue globally. The promotion of religious freedom must be grounded in the full international human rights framework, including the clear limits that framework places on the exercise of that right.

Under international human rights law, the right to freedom of religion or belief is explicitly not absolute. Article 18(3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ("ICCPR")—a treaty the United States has ratified—expressly provides that the freedom to manifest religion or belief may be subject to limitations when necessary to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.¹⁵ The Human Rights Committee has made clear that Article 18 does not permit the manifestation of religion or belief in a manner that gives rise to gender discrimination or that jeopardizes the rights of others to timely access quality health care, including sexual and reproductive health care.¹⁶

This is not a peripheral or contested interpretation. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief issued a report in 2020 specifically cautioned against the use of religious freedom and conscience claims to seek exemptions from laws protecting gender equality and non-discrimination.¹⁷ The Special Rapporteur expressed concern about institutions—including within the United States—invoking conscience exemptions to refuse to perform abortions, fill contraceptive prescriptions, provide gender-affirming care, or comply with anti-discrimination requirements.¹⁸ The Special Rapporteur urged governments to reaffirm that religious considerations do not justify human rights violations, and to ensure that laws permitting

Committee, Commc'n No. 2324/2013, para. 7.7-7.8, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/116/D/2324/2013 (2016); *K.L. v. Peru*, Human Rights Committee, Commc'n No. 1153/2003, para. 6.4, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/85/D/1153/2003 (2005); *L.M.R. v. Argentina*, Human Rights Committee, Commc'n No. 1608/2007, para. 9.3, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/101/D/1608/2007 (2011); Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 on the Right to Life, para. 8, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/GC/36 (2018).

¹⁵ See ICCPR *supra* n. 14.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22: The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Art. 18), para. 8, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4 (1993) ("Article 18.3 permits restrictions on the freedom to manifest religion or belief if limitations are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others....In interpreting the scope of permissible limitation clauses, States parties should proceed from the need to protect the rights guaranteed under the Covenant, including the right to equality and non-discrimination on all grounds specified in articles 2, 3 and 26.").

¹⁷ See HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL, Freedom of religion or belief- Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, paras. 44-47, 52, 54, 59-60, 63-66, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/43/48 (2020), available at <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/43/48>.

¹⁸ See *id.*

conscience-based refusals in health care settings do not have discriminatory effects or deny patients access to lawful services.¹⁹

The CESCR Committee, the CEDAW Committee, and the CAT Committee have consistently reinforced these limits.²⁰ They have made clear that where states permit conscience-based refusals by health care providers, they must establish effective regulatory and enforcement frameworks to ensure that such refusals do not in practice deny women and girls access to lawful reproductive health care.²¹ The CAT Committee has further found that denial or delay of safe abortion or post-abortion care can, in certain circumstances, constitute cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.²²

These internationally established limits are not in tension with religious freedom; they are what makes religious freedom compatible with the principles of equal dignity and rights of all persons. It is important to note that, as a general principle, the United States Supreme Court has also held that the free exercise of religion is not absolute.²³ A U.S. G20 human rights agenda that promotes religious freedom without acknowledging these limits does not advance the full international human rights framework; it advances a selective version of it that risks being used by other governments to justify discrimination and the denial of rights, including access to health care, to their own populations.

III. A Narrow “Natural Rights” Framework, Attacks on the Human Rights Infrastructure, and Abuses at Home and Abroad Undermine U.S. Credibility and Global Standing

For the United States to credibly advocate for human rights in any multilateral forum, including the G20, its own human rights framework must be consistent with the international standards it invokes. The “natural rights” framework fails this test. By grounding rights in a particular moral, religious, and cultural tradition rather than in the universal international consensus embodied in the UDHR, the Trump administration has undercut its own standing to speak on behalf of human rights abroad.

This is not a theoretical concern. The “natural rights” framework mirrors the very arguments used by authoritarian governments that have long invoked national sovereignty and “traditional

¹⁹ See *id.* at paras. 48, 69-77.

²⁰ See CESCR Committee, General Comment No. 22: (2016) on the right to sexual and reproductive health (article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), para. 11-21, 43, U.N. Doc. E/C.12/GC/22 (2016); Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 36 on the Right to Life, para. 8, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/GC/36 (2018); CEDAW Committee, General Recommendation No. 24: Article 12 of the Convention (women and health), (20th Sess., 1999), para. 11, 13, U.N. Doc. HRI/GEN/1/Rev.9 (Vol. II) (2008).

²¹ See generally *id.*

²² See CAT Committee, Concluding Observations: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, para. 46, U.N. Doc. CAT/C/GBR/CO/6 Jun. 7, 2019 available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/concluding-observations/catcgbrc06-concluding-observations-sixth-periodic-report-united>.

²³ See generally *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296 (1940); *Emp. Div., Dep't of Human Res. of Or. v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872, 879 (1990). While the U.S. Supreme Court jurisprudence on this topic is much more complex, we wanted to highlight the basic principle. The Center recognizes that the U.S. law and jurisprudence on this topic continues to change.

values” to justify discrimination and to evade international human rights accountability.²⁴ By adopting an analogous approach, the United States loses the principled basis from which to counter these narratives and risks lending them implicit legitimacy.

The Trump administration has withdrawn from, undermined, and actively attacked the multilateral bodies that make up the international human rights system: withdrawing from the World Health Organization (“WHO”); defunding the UN Fund for Population Affairs (“UNFPA”) and UN Women; disengaging from the UN Human Rights Council; and refusing to participate in the Universal Periodic Review, the mechanism through which all UN member states are held accountable for their human rights records.²⁵ A government that exempts itself from international scrutiny while dismantling the programs and institutions that give effect to human rights cannot credibly claim to champion them. At the UN, the practical consequences of this shift are already visible. The United States has increasingly aligned with Russia, China, and other authoritarian states in opposing resolutions, including about the right to health, gender and reproductive rights, all while historically close allies in the European Union, Canada, and much of Latin America continue to support the universality of the UDHR.²⁶

In addition, the Trump administration’s domestic record compounds this credibility deficit. Post-*Dobbs* abortion bans across numerous states have left women without access to essential health care, pregnant people losing their agency to make decisions about their own bodies and families, providers facing criminal prosecution for standard medical treatment, and pregnant people facing criminalization for pregnancy loss—a direct violation of the rights to health, life, and privacy under international law.²⁷ Attacks on transgender rights—including restricting gender-affirming care and barring transgender individuals from military service—violate internationally recognized protections against discrimination on the basis of gender identity, and provide cover to governments around the world pursuing their own discriminatory agendas.²⁸ Lastly, immigration enforcement practices including mass deportations without adequate due process,

²⁴ See Cormier Smith, *supra* n. 7.

²⁵ See e.g., Allison Lombardo, *Opting Out: United States to Stop Engaging with More UN Entities*, CTR. FOR STRAT. & INT’L. STUDIES, Jan. 15, 2026, available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/opting-out-united-states-stop-engaging-more-un-entities#:~:text=The%20withdrawals%20are%20most%20focused,all%20support%20to%20UN%20Wome>.

²⁶ See e.g., United States’ voting records from the Third Committee of the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly (2025) specifically for [A/RES/80/197](#), Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Optional Protocol thereto: amplified barriers in diverse contexts; [A/RES/80/180](#), Policies and Programmes involving youth; [A/RES/80/190](#), Rights of the Child; [A/RES/80/184](#), Improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas, available at <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4060887?ln=en>; Vibhu Mishra, UN commission opens with focus on justice for women and girls, U.N., Mar. 9, 2026, available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2026/03/1167107> (highlighting that the U.S. was the only nation state voting against the Agreed Conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women on the theme of access to justice for women and girls); James Landale and Patrick Jackson, *US sides with Russia in UN resolutions on Ukraine*, BBC, Feb. 25, 2025, available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c7435pnle0go>.

²⁷ See generally CTR. FOR REPROD. RTS., Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review of United States of America, Fourth Cycle, 50th Session of UPR, Human Rights Counsel, Nov. 2025, available at <https://reproductiverights.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/UPR-2025-Submission.pdf>; *Dobbs Got It Wrong*, CTR. FOR REPROD. RTS. Jun. 23, 2025, available at <https://reproductiverights.org/resources/analysis-dobbs-got-it-wrong/>.

²⁸ See e.g., *Bodily Autonomy Fact Sheet Series: Abortion, Gender-Affirming Care, and the Fourteenth Amendment*, CTR. FOR REPROD. RTS. Jul. 22, 2025, available at <https://reproductiverights.org/resources/bodily-autonomy-fourteenth-amendment-fact-sheet/>.

family separation, and the removal of individuals to countries where they face persecution, raise serious concerns under both US and international laws, including the fundamental right which is the prohibition on refoulement.²⁹ Particularly egregious are reports of pregnant, nursing, and postpartum people in U.S. immigration detention being denied prenatal care, subjected to solitary confinement and shackling, and suffering miscarriages—conditions that directly violate Article 25 of the UDHR, which recognizes that motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance, as well as the prohibitions on cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment under the ICCPR and the CAT.³⁰

Conclusion

The Center for Reproductive Rights submits this statement to place on the record our deep concern that the Trump administration is an unreliable and non-credible actor on human rights. A government that selectively applies human rights—elevating religious freedom and conscience rights, including in order to discriminate against others' rights, while actively excluding reproductive rights, the rights of LGBTQI+ people, and more—cannot credibly claim to champion human rights on the world stage. A government that selectively promotes certain rights over others in order to justify perpetuating human rights violations of health; life; equality; and freedom from violence; cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; among others, cannot credibly act as a human rights champion in a forum such as the G20.

The Center urges the Commission to use its platform to clearly affirm that:

- Human rights are universal, indivisible, and interdependent. No nation-state has the authority to create a hierarchy of rights, some of which should be respected and others discarded.
- Religious freedom is a fundamental right, but it is not absolute under international law and cannot be used as a justification for discrimination or for denying women and girls access to comprehensive reproductive health care. Any U.S.-promoted R20 or interfaith forum process that ignores these limits is not advancing human rights; it is advancing a selective version of it.
- The United States is bound by its obligations under ratified human rights treaties. The administration's rejection of treaty body interpretations it finds inconvenient is not a legal option, it is a violation of those obligations.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute the Center's expertise to the record to highlight the concerns posed by the Trump administration's approach to human rights and its lack of credibility as a human rights champion at the helm of the G20 Presidency.

²⁹ See generally *What's Happening to Pregnant, Postpartum, and Nursing Women in ICE Custody?*, CTR. FOR REPROD. RTS. Feb. 13, 2026, available at <https://reproductiverights.org/news/pregnant-postpartum-nursing-women-ice-custody/>; *The principle of non-refoulement under international human rights law*, U.N. HUMAN RIGHTS, OFF. OF THE HIGH COMM'R, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf>.

³⁰ See *supra* nn. 15, 17, 28.