The values of Catholic Social Tradition on human dignity and solidarity resonate with Eleanor Roosevelt’s thoughts, above, regarding the drafting and adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. After her husband, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, died in 1945, she took on a global role as a human rights advocate. She was the first U.S. delegate to the newly formed United Nations and chair of its Human Rights Commission. The creation of the UDHR in 1948 was the fruit of her leadership and commitment.

In her 70s and impacted by the challenging war years and the illness and death of her husband, Eleanor Roosevelt nevertheless took on the task of working with delegates from different countries, cultures, and religions to promote human rights. After the Depression and the violence of World War II, with the torture and death of so many people under the Nazis, the world needed to work in a unified way to ensure that people would not suffer in these ways again. World leaders decided to complement the founding U.N. Charter with another document, this one a road map to guarantee the basic rights of each individual in every nation. These were rights that Catholic leaders had been discussing in encyclicals and pastoral letters since modern Catholic Social Tradition began in 1891.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was developed and written in less than two years. At a time when the world was divided into eastern and western blocs, finding common ground on the central message and particular rights to be articulated became a daunting task. Eleanor Roosevelt navigated the difficult road to consensus on both the overarching message and the specifics within the document. She lobbied to ensure that the rights outlined included social and economic rights as well as political rights. She believed that the rights to food, education, health care, housing and labor opportunities were as important as freedom of speech and assembly, again echoing Catholic Social Tradition.
An Advocate for Economic Justice

In the drafting and passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt brought to the table years of experience that began when she had to serve as her husband’s surrogate in many political meetings and negotiations when he was paralyzed by polio. She also brought to the U.N. table her experience from years of being an advocate for the poor, oppressed and marginalized in the United States.

Eleanor Roosevelt developed a deep understanding of the struggle for social and economic justice and for the civil rights of all people as her husband’s representative, as a leader of many organizations and as a journalist with a daily newspaper column read by millions. She traveled the nation and met laborers struggling for dignity, fair pay and just working conditions. She developed a deep concern for workers’ rights, a central concern running through all major documents of Catholic Social Tradition. She met with miners and laundry workers, farmers and factory workers, in the spirit of Pope Francis’ call to encounter people on the margins of society.

Equal Rights for All

In a time when racism was commonplace, Eleanor Roosevelt made bold moves to promote the dignity of Americans of all races. When the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow African-American opera singer Marian Anderson to perform in their concert hall, Eleanor Roosevelt set up a nationally broadcast concert at the Lincoln Memorial. This is just one example of her promotion of equality and civil rights. She pressed for the establishment of the Fair Employment Practices Commission and advocated for the integration of the U.S. military during World War II.

Less known is Eleanor Roosevelt’s promotion of women. She actively advised her husband to appoint talented and committed women to federal posts. These included Frances Perkins, FDR’s Secretary of Labor, who implemented many of the social support systems we have today such as Social Security and unemployment benefits. These are important components of economic justice.

Participation for the Common Good

While Eleanor Roosevelt was born in 1884 into privilege, the loss of her parents at an early age contributed to her understanding of what it means to be an outsider. After being educated in the United States and England, she worked at a settlement house for poor immigrants and their families on the Lower East Side of New York City, near where Dorothy Day opened the first Catholic Worker House of Hospitality.

Eleanor cared about those in poverty as a young woman, but became a wife and mother in a time that well-born married women neither worked nor advocated in public. She overcame both tradition and her own fears as she matured and re-entered public life. She often was described as shy and retiring when she was young. She wrote about her fear of public speaking and participating in groups. But she was determined to face her fears and develop the skills she needed to contribute to the common good. She is a role model for participation in national and global efforts for the common good of all.

“Human Rights are not only violated by terrorism, repression or assassination, but also by unfair economic structures that create huge inequalities.”

Pope Francis
Shining a light

Reality of violence against women is overwhelming, but there is hope

Sexual- and gender-based violence, whether it takes place in homes, on the streets, in sex industries or war zones, affects women of every nation, belief, class, race and ethnic group. It is silenced by custom, institutionalized in laws and state systems, worsened by increasing militarization, and passed from one generation to the next.

The Facts

Violence: According to a 2013 global review of available data, 35 percent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence, either with an intimate sexual partner or with someone who is not their husband or partner. Studies show that up to 70 percent of women in certain nations have experienced physical and/or sexual violence.¹

Genital Mutilation: Approximately 140 million girls and women in the world have suffered female genital mutilation or cutting.²

Trafficking: Millions of women and girls are caught in modern-day slavery. Women and girls represent 55 percent of the estimated 20.9 million victims of forced labor worldwide, and 98 percent of the estimated 4.5 million forced into sexual exploitation.³

Sexual Harassment: In the United States, 83 percent of girls aged 12 to 16 have experienced some form of sexual harassment in public schools.⁴

Rape: One in four men surveyed for a U.N. study in Asia and the Pacific admitted raping at least one woman.⁵

Child brides: More than 64 million girls worldwide are child brides, with 46 percent of women aged 20 to 24 in south Asia and 41 percent in west and central Africa reporting that they married before the age of 18. Child marriage, resulting in early and unwanted pregnancies, poses life-threatening risks for adolescent girls. Pregnancy-related complications are the leading cause of death for 15-to-19-year-old girls.⁶

CASE STUDY: Bride kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan

This image of a woman with her mouth taped, a symbol of the silencing of kidnapped brides, was made for the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence Campaign.

The practice of bride kidnapping is widespread in Kyrgyzstan and many other nations. Some consider it a tradition. “According to these traditions, when a Kyrgyz man wants to get married, he picks a bride and starts to arrange her kidnapping. This is a grave violation of human rights. Women often experience physical violence and rape. They feel humiliated and see themselves as property,” explains Kamilla, 37, a volunteer with the Women Support Centre, a grantee of the Fund for Gender Equality.

According to Centre data, at least 11,800 women and girls are forcibly abducted every year in Kyrgyzstan, with more than 2,000 of these victims reporting being raped as well. Only one out of 700 cases is pursued by the justice sector, says Rimma Sultanova, an expert with Centre. She calls that a statistic emblematic of the ineffective law enforcement and justice sector. Only one in 1,500 cases of abduction results in a judicial sentence.

In late 2012, the Kyrgyz parliament toughened the penalty for bride kidnapping. The new sentencing guidelines range up to 10 years. The offense previously was punishable by a maximum three-year prison term. Almazbek Atambayev, Kyrgyzstan’s president, approved the change on Jan. 26, 2013.⁷

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CASE STUDY: Women are hope of new Syria

A line of Syrian refugee women, some carrying children, cross into Jordan from southern Syria.

Syrian refugee women can play a key role in shaping the future of their war-torn homeland, the protection chief of the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) told a London conference on Dec. 4, 2013.

“Despite the conflict, horrors and human rights abuses they have escaped in Syria, refugee women have an amazing motivation and determination to be a positive part of shaping Syria’s future,” said Volker Türk, UNHCR director of International Protection.

More than 80 percent of the more than 2.2 million Syrian refugees are women and children, Türk said. This is a particularly vulnerable population facing serious protection risks such as early marriages, child labor, isolation and lack of livelihoods, he said.

“I was absolutely struck [when] meeting a Syrian teacher who had lost her husband and was supporting her three children by making and selling candles in an abandoned shopping mall in Lebanon. Amidst this misery, she had built a small business and was strikingly positive. I saw in her the future of Syria,” he said.  

Displacement: 80 percent of all refugees and displaced people are women. Rape and sexual violence targeting women and girls are routinely used not only to terrorize women, but as strategic tools of war and instruments of genocide.

Current Crises:

1) Syria and Lebanon: Women refugees from Syria are being sexually harassed by employers, landlords, and even faith-based aid distributors in Lebanon, Human Rights Watch said. Human Rights Watch interviewed a dozen women who described being groped, harassed, and pressured to have sex.

2) Democratic Republic of Congo: Armed conflict has continued for nearly 20 years in the DRC, especially in the eastern provinces. Women human rights defenders have provided grassroots assistance to civilians, but their work exposes them to imminent threats of violence. Civilians face persistent human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law, ranging from unlawful killings, rape and sexual violence, and arbitrary detentions to indiscriminate attacks, intimidation, and looting.

Sources:

- U.N. Trust Fund to End Violence against Women
- Amnesty International
- U.N. Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
- Human Rights Watch

Additional resources:

- Orange the World in 16 Days campaign
- Association for Women’s Rights in Development
- Unite to End Violence Against Women

Endnotes
2) Ibid.
3) Ibid.
4) Ibid.
8) Amnesty International
HUMAN RIGHTS DAY
DECEMBER 10
Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, the Universal Declaration states basic rights and fundamental freedoms to which all human beings are entitled.

Positive Vibes - Human Rights
Statement by Eleanor Roosevelt
Articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
Article 1
Everyone is free, and we should all be treated in the same way.

Article 2
Everyone is equal despite differences such as skin color, gender, religion, or language.

It’s Not Okay by Laura Cheadle
Article 3
Everyone has the right to life and to live in freedom and safety.

Article 4
No one has the right to treat you as a slave, nor should you make anyone your slave.

What is Modern-Day Slavery?
Article 5
No one has the right to hurt or torture you.

Article 6
Everyone has the right to be treated equally by the law.

Article 7
The law is the same for everyone. It should be applied in the same way to all.
Article 8
Everyone has the right to ask for legal help when their rights are not respected.

Article 9
No one has the right to imprison you unjustly or expel you from your own country.
Article 10
Everyone has the right to a fair and public trial.

Article 11
Everyone should be considered innocent until guilt is proved.

Article 12
Everyone has the right to ask for help if someone tries to harm you, but no one can enter your home, open your letters or bother you or your family without a good reason.

Human Rights Video: Innocent Until Proven Guilty
Article 13
Everyone has the right to travel as they wish.

Article 14
Everyone has the right to go to another country and ask for protection if they are being persecuted or are in danger of being persecuted.

Article 15
Everyone has the right to belong to a country. No one has the right to prevent you from belonging to another country if you wish to.

Dream to Belong by Andres Useche
Article 16
Everyone has the right to marry and have a family.

Forced Marriage Continues in Many Countries

Article 17
Everyone has the right to own property and possessions.

Song of the Land

Empowering Women Through Land Rights
Article 18
Everyone has the right to practice and observe all aspects of their own religion and change their religion if they want to.

Religion & Religious Intolerance
Article 19
Everyone has the right to say what they think and to give and receive information.

Article 20
Everyone has the right to take part in meetings and to join associations in a peaceful way.

Article 21
Everyone has the right to help choose and take part in the government of their country.

I am a Ripple of Hope

Speak the Truth, even if your voice shakes.
Article 24
Everyone has the right to rest and leisure.

Article 25
Everyone has the right to an adequate standard of living and medical help if they are ill.
Article 26
Everyone has the right to go to school.

**Signs for a Good Education**

Article 27
Everyone has the right to share in their community's cultural life.

**Advancing Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**
Article 28
Everyone must respect the social order that is necessary for all these rights to be available.

Article 29
Everyone must respect the rights of others, the community and public property.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights - Article 29
Article 30
No one has the right to take away any of the rights in this declaration.

Human Rights: The Beginning by Hannah -li
REFLECTION QUESTIONS

• How does the concept of universal human rights relate to the church's proclamation of human dignity and solidarity?

• What are some similarities between Catholic Social Tradition and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

• Identify some basic teachings in the Gospel that relate to basic human rights. What is the difference between helping the poor and oppressed because they need charity and helping them because they have basic human rights?

• Which human rights issues interest you? Why?
Sign the Petion: “Tell Israel – Don’t Blockade Students”

End the Humanitarian Crisis in Syria

Urge Your Senators to Support Closing Guantanamo

Join Human Rights Watch in promoting human rights for all peoples by signing the following letters:

- Help Protect Domestic Workers
- U.S. Join Global Women’s Rights Treaty
- Ratify Child Soldiers Treaty
- International Olympic Committee: Rights Reforms Needed
God of Justice

You have given all your children human dignity and human rights. Help us to recognize the dignity and the rights of all our sisters and brothers.

Open our hearts to hear your teachings, open our eyes to the suffering of those who are denied their basic economic, political and social rights.

Let our voices join in declaring all humanity is sacred, all human rights must be respected.

Amen

Choose Life by Colleen Fulmer