

Statement on Human Rights on the Occasion of ASA's Centenary

August 17, 2005

As part of its mission as the national association for sociologists with more than 13,000 U.S. and international members, the American Sociological Association (ASA) has spoken often and taken significant actions in defense of sociologists and other scholars persecuted for their beliefs or scholarly activities. The ASA takes the celebration of its centenary (1905-2005) as an opportunity to reiterate its strongest support for the basic civil and political freedoms of peoples of all nations as articulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). As Nobel Laureate Thorsten Wiesel, fourth chair of the National Academies of Science Committee on Human Rights, said in 2003, "The UDHR is the anchor of our work and, given the international character of science and its pursuit of truth, it holds particular significance for us as scientists..." The ASA emphatically endorses these principles of basic human rights as fundamental to free scientific inquiry and human development.

The Association has a long-standing position of supporting the free exchange of ideas across national, state, cultural and social borders that is consistent with Article 19 of the UDHR that "[e]veryone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression [including the right] to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers." The Association deplores restrictions on the free movement of scholars and students and barriers to scholarly inquiry and exchange. Therefore, it seeks to reduce barriers through encouraging activities such as the First Global Colloquium of University Presidents that aims to build an international network of research universities that will bring the global academic community into discussions of pressing issues such as academic freedom and international cooperation on migration.

The Association affirms the principle that science is fundamental to designing and implementing successful international collaboration on human development. Therefore, it encourages the work of the world scientific community to achieve steady global progress on human rights through efforts to gain the release of all scientists who are unjustly imprisoned for their public speech or academic work. The world scientific community can achieve its human rights goals through activities of the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies, the Human Rights Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the efforts of individual scholarly organizations worldwide including our sister societies in the social sciences.

Sociological research shows that intellectual life and scientific inquiry have flourished not just in the presence of rights to free thought, expression, and association, but also where access to education is universal and basic human needs are met. Sociological research has demonstrated that poor and unequally distributed social, economic, political and cultural opportunities are among the principal determinants preventing the development of individuals and societies, and that these deprivations are especially severe for women and racial and ethnic minorities. However, as sociologist Craig Calhoun, President of the Social Science Research Council and former member of the ASA Council, has noted: "The work of social scientists is challenged especially sharply because it touches directly on contentious matters of political power, economic performance, cultural identity, and social welfare. Social science recurrently intersects with public controversies, and too often governments respond by trying to repress the work of scientists who raise uncomfortable questions or present data that disturb the dominant."

The American Sociological Association recognizes that the early 21st century and the beginning of the Association's second century of work on behalf of the profession and discipline of sociology represents a critical period in progress toward universal human rights, international cooperation, and the free exchange of ideas—scientific, political, social and cultural—during which the knowledge provided by the social sciences is especially needed.

Therefore, the American Sociological Association urges all governments to resist attempts to restrict scientific exchange within and across national boundaries and to actively promote dialogue, debate and discussion across all barriers to communication and collaboration, and to uphold the spirit and the substance of the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international agreements that affirm the importance of full equality of all peoples and cultures; social and personal security; health care and education; freedom to join trade unions and otherwise assemble; a just wage and an adequate standard of living; and the freedom to participate in and benefit from scientific advancement.

At its centenary, the American Sociological Association re-commits itself to vigorous pursuit of these goals through scientific scholarship, international exchange, the freedom of unjustly imprisoned or silenced scholars, and active promotion of human rights.