The Vienna World Conference on Human Rights was the tipping point in the recognition of women’s rights as human rights. Before Vienna, feminists who sought this recognition were often dismissed as annoying or ridiculed when we sought human rights support for abuses like domestic violence, gang rape, or forced pregnancy.

In the two years leading up to Vienna, women campaigned in the global South and North to show why gender based abuses were the equivalent of other human rights issues and sought to demonstrate this through a variety of regional and global actions, including lobbying at regional preparatory meetings. Hearings were held where women testified to such abuses in their lives and how they fit the human rights paradigm. This culminated in the day long Vienna Tribunal on Women’s Human Rights which many government delegates as well as human rights activists credit with opening their eyes to the importance of women’s rights abuses. The VDPA affirmed women’s rights as full universal rights and opened the door for major work to integrate women and gender based abuses into human rights theory and practice.

In the two years after Vienna, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration Against Violence Against Women and the Human Rights Commission appointed its first Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its causes and consequences which have led to the development of a rich field on human rights standards regarding VAW.

Over the past 20 years, the office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and its mechanisms and human rights organizations have made considerable efforts to integrate gender perspectives into many other human rights issues. Ground was broken with the establishment of the International Criminal Court when the Women’s Caucus got gender based persecution and a gender quota for judges included in the founding statute. Many advances in human rights over the last two decades reflect growing gender awareness in areas like sexual violence in conflict, maternal mortality, and sexual orientation and gender identity.

While Vienna was a vital step forward in recognizing women’s rights as human rights, many challenges remain in taking this awareness to effective action against such violations. Few governments pay more than lip service to these obligations. The political will and resources needed are sorely lacking. Impunity for violence against women still rages. Action on socio-economic aspects of sex discrimination languishes as does realization of most socio-economic rights. Backlash against women’s claims to sexual and reproductive rights still blocks the realization of women’s rights. Attacks on women’s human rights defenders have increased as women are taken more seriously as agents of social change.

Nevertheless, the world has changed as women’s rights are taken more seriously as human rights and more women all over the world today are standing up for their rights. The Vienna conference and VDPA played a key role in advancing this human rights revolution.
The growing visibility of the NGO movement in recent decades has been accompanied by an increase in attacks aimed at deterring NGOs from exposing human rights violations. Often those attacks are condoned or even orchestrated by States.

The failure of States to protect in these instances undermines the call in the VDPA which urges that NGOs ‘involved in the field of human rights should enjoy the rights and freedoms recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the protection of the national law’.

ISHR is particularly concerned at the increasing level of attacks that defenders face when they engage with UN or regional human rights systems. These attacks have included media smear campaigns and death threats often from government officials. The reaction from the human rights systems has been weak, and States have not been held accountable to their obligation to protect. This failure from the human rights systems undermines the very standards they seek to promote.

The call for protection in the VDPA must be seen as not only a call on States but also on the human rights systems, to step in and ensure that States are fully assuming their responsibility to protect, and that human rights defenders are able to fully and freely cooperate with the UN and regional human rights systems.

Morten Kjaerum - Director of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), former Director of the Danish Institute for Human Rights, and former Member of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

When we all met in Vienna for the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in the summer of 1993, there was a high level of curiosity exploring the new international agenda after the end of the Cold War. Among the many delegates was a small group of representatives of national human rights institutions. This little group of national human rights institutions representatives symbolises what the Vienna conference was about: bringing human rights from the law books and international politics to the every day life of people.

The Vienna Conference represents a milestone in the struggle to mainstream human rights into the legislative processes, the work of courts, and the actions taken by the police and other officials. The national human rights institutions are key instruments in this process. In 1993, there were less than 10 such institutions worldwide; today, there are more than 100. And in a sense, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) is to the EU what the national human rights institutions are to the countries.

We have come a long way as regards the human rights accountability at the national level; the next challenge is to build a similar understanding of accountability at the local or regional levels. This is where people live and where human rights first and foremost shall be respected, protected and fulfilled.

Vitit Muntarbhorn - Professor at the Faculty of Law, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, former UN Special Rapporteur and former Board member of the International Service for Human Rights.

I attended the World Conference (at the time I was UN Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children) and witnessed the adoption of the consensus document in the form of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. That document created many ripples which are still felt today. First, at the conceptual level, the document acknowledged that while the world can bear in mind regional and national “particularities”, it is the duty of States to promote and protect human rights and freedoms. In other words, if there is a conflict between those particularities and the universality of human rights, it is the latter which must prevail. Vienna also interlinked between human rights, democracy and development.

Second, the document opened the door to new human rights institutions and mechanisms. The possibility of establishing the post of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was agreed upon at Vienna. This would be accompanied by the setting up of an office to take over from the previous UN centre for human rights. The document also opted for new human rights mandates such as UN Special Rapporteur on violence against
women. It went further by advocating the need for regional and national human rights institutions. The latter has inspired the setting up of many national human rights commissions in the Asia-Pacific region.

Third, the Vienna Programme of Action concretised substantively human rights on several fronts. Most famously perhaps, the notion that “women’s rights are human rights”. It raised the profile of child rights, the rights of persons belonging to minorities, the rights of persons with disabilities, freedom from torture, the concerns of other groups, self-determination, and the importance of human rights education.

Yet, Vienna was not an unqualified success. The term “indigenous peoples” was rejected, and the wording in the text has an “S” missing from it, alias “indigenous people”. This was due to the fact that some states did not wish to use the term “indigenous peoples” to avoid possible linkage with the rights of peoples to self-determination. Conservative states introduced a qualification to freedom of expression by subjecting it to national law. NGOs were prevented from effectively accessing the governmental conference, even though they had their parallel meeting nearby.

The lesson from Vienna is also that whatever Programme or treaties we have at the international level, the crunch is the implementation of human rights comprehensively at the national level. Given that we have to deal with power and its nexus with human rights, it is imperative to build checks and balances to prevent abuse of power and promote accountability, as well broad public participation in the realization of human rights. Worldwide, eternal vigilance is thus the key.

Chris Sidoti - international human rights consultant, Board Member of the International Service for Human Rights, and former head of the Australian Human Rights Commission.

The Vienna World Conference was a human rights market place where for the first time every human rights concern was articulated and heard, a unique gathering of all sectors, groups and interests, governments, international and national bureaucrats and people. It was easy to be enthralled and easy to be cynical. Great fun … but what good could possibly come out of it?

The cynicism was easy. The conference took place at three distinct levels, with a minimum of interaction among them. The top level (literally, because it was physically above everything else in the convention centre) was the VIP level where presidents and prime ministers, ministers and senior UN officials made pious statements about their commitment to human rights. Beneath it, literally in the bowels of the convention centre, was the drafting committee where diplomats and a few expert others worked away around the clock, in incessant session during the second week of the conference, to negotiate and agree on the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action. Then all around these rooms was the marketplace where NGOs and others advocated and argued.

In spite of it all the Vienna Conference produced the VDPA which, 20 years later, can be seen as the landmark achievement that it was not seen as at the time. For me four specific components are critical developments in human rights law and practice.

First, the VDPA put an end to any legitimate argument about the relationship between human rights and cultural or traditional values, declaring “All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated”. Argument persists, of course, as we see each year in the Human Rights Council, but it is no longer legitimate.

Second, the VDPA provided the basis for the new position of High Commissioner for Human Rights. This position has transformed the UN’s attitude towards human rights and led to the recognition of human rights as one of the three pillars of the UN.

Third, the VDPA endorsed strong, independent national human rights institutions in every State. In the 20 years since the Vienna Conference, the number of NHRIs has increased more than fivefold.

Fourth, the VDPA endorsed national human rights action plans as mechanisms for each State to set its own human rights priorities and adopt its own mechanisms and programs for the implementation of international human rights obligations. The practice since then has been mixed but NHRAPs continue to hold promise for
better promotion and protection of human rights, especially when reinforced through the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review process.

For more expert insights into the impact of the VDPA and the implementation challenges that remain, see ISHR’s VDPA anniversary edition of the Human Rights Monitor Quarterly.