



Manifesto: The Human Rights of Voice Hearers

Hearing voices: a long history of pathologizing, stigmatization and human rights violations

The hearing of voices without external sounds of voices is viewed by many people as a sign of madness, illness or disorder. In traditional psychiatry hearing voices has long been seen as a symptom of schizophrenia. In this view it was assumed that schizophrenia is a lifelong disease and that the voices had to be removed with treatment. Standard treatment consisted of prescribing 'antipsychotics'. Antipsychotics are substances that can lead to moderate, severe and in some cases even lethal health risks. Also, for a long time there was little or no space to talk about the experience of hearing voices and about traumatic experiences, which often is (a part of) the cause of the voices. Due to the label 'schizophrenia' recovery was deemed impossible. Many voice hearers have been told that they could not reach their goals in life, like living self-sufficiently, maintain a job or education, enjoy a love relationship and to have children. Many voice hearers have been subjected to coercive psychiatry, like forced admission to a psychiatric ward, isolation cells, forced medication, ECT, visitations and/or feeding. Although the last years changes have taken place in psychiatry, these views and practices still occur in lesser or more degree around the world. This traditional psychiatric perspective of hearing voices - that has no solid scientific basis - has contributed to the public view that hearing voices is a sign of illness, disability or madness as well. This has led to various kinds of stigmatization, exclusion and discrimination of voice hearers.

Taken together, it becomes clear that voice hearers have had to endure a long history of human rights violations. A situation that continues until today in many places.

The worldwide hearing voices movement: Emancipation of voice hearing

The international hearing voices movement sees hearing voices as a common human experience and that it is possible (to learn how) to live with voices. Hearing voices is not a symptom of a disorder or a disease, but is a human variation. Most voice hearers are able to live well with their voices. From this perspective, the hearing voices movement aims to emancipate and empower voice hearers. The principles and goals of the hearing voices movement are expressed in the Melbourne Hearing Voices Declaration (2013).

Goals of the 'Manifesto: The Human Rights of Voice Hearers':

- 1) To raise attention and recognition for the human rights violations that voice hearers have endured,
- 2) To make clear what the rights of voice hearers are,
- 3) To formulate concrete goals to realize a worldwide respect for the human rights of voice hearers and to prevent injustice.



Universal Rights of Voice Hearers

- Voice hearers have the same rights as every other human being. All human rights, as expressed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are applicable to individuals who hear voices; whoever you are and wherever you are.

Hearing Voices as a Normal Human Variation

- Hearing voices is a natural variation of human experience.
- Voice hearers represent the diversity of human kind.
- Hearing voices is an expression of the diversity of human experience.

Right to Live, to Freedom and Safety

- Voice hearers have the right to live, to be safe and to be free. Voice hearers must be protected against exploitation, violence, abuse and injustices. Voice hearers may not be subjected to torture or to cruel inhumane or humiliating treatments or punishments.

Right of Non-Discrimination

- Voice hearers may not be discriminated against because they hear voices.
- Voice hearing as a human experience should not at forehand be judged as a sign of disease or dangerousness.

Equal Rights

- Voice hearers should have access to the same options and choices to shape their lives as every other human being:
- The right to live independently, to be part of society, to receive education, to choose an occupation, to enjoy a good living standard, to have a family, to hold personal religion or opinions, and to enjoy and practice art and culture.

Right to have Personal Beliefs and Opinions

- Voice hearers have the right to hold their own beliefs and understandings about the nature of their voices.
- The understandings voice hearers have about their voices may not a forehand be seen as a sign of illness of madness.

Right on Gathering

- Voice hearers have the right to gather with other voice hearers and allies and to openly exchange opinions and to share experiences about voices and other subjects.
- Voice hearers have the right to access social support in a way that is reciprocal. They have the right to feel that they are seen and heard, and that their perspective is acknowledged.



Right on Information

- Voice hearers have the freedom to search for and receive information and may exchange information with every means of communication that they choose. This includes information about hearing voices and different approaches for learning to cope with hearing voices.
- To prevent stigma and injustice, society as a whole should pro-actively be exposed to positive and hopeful information about hearing voices and information about different opinions about voices and about different ways to cope with voices.
- Providing hopeful information about voice hearing, especially to young people, is necessary in order to prevent stigmatisation and the unnecessary pathologisation of young voice hearers.

Right to Health and Care

- Healthcare for voice hearers should provide human rights like freedom of choice, the right to be free and safe, to stay healthy and the freedom of speech.
- People who experience psychological, social and other problems with hearing voices have the right to be provided with good and human care and support, wherever they live.
- The experience of hearing voices, opinions about voice hearing, or the ways people cope with voices should not at forehand be pathologised.
- Self-help groups for voice hearers are a basic standard of care.
- The healthcare system should provide up-to-date, relevant and positive information about hearing voices and treatments.
- When psychiatric medication is suggested as treatment, the professional should provide sound, understandable and scientifically well-informed information - not only industry sponsored research, but also critical research - about how the specific medication works and what experiences can be expected. Positive and negative effects and health risks, both in the short and the long term should be discussed, as well as possible withdrawal effects when stopping the medication.
- Compulsion in care is against human rights. In potentially dangerous situations, society and healthcare professionals should supply safety and good care as well as honoring human rights.
- The provision of care should be chosen in freedom, on the basis of well-informed information and with the consent of the voice hearer. The voice hearer should have freedom of choice related to recovery goals and the type of treatment, care and support they receive.
- Voice hearers have the right to refuse certain treatments.
- Voice hearers have the right to access self-help, peer contact and peer support.
- Professionals who provide care for voice hearers should be trained in working with voice hearers.
- Professionals must be trained in human rights.
- Professionals who provide care should be trained by peer support workers and collaborate with peer support workers.



We will do our best to ensure that:

- Voice hearers are able to emancipate themselves.
- We will stand up for the rights of voice hearers together.
- Society will be well informed about voice hearing and human rights; especially voice hearers themselves, their friends and families, professionals, policy makers, politicians and lawyers.
- Voice hearers are an acknowledged minority group who need to be protected against injustice.
- Voice hearing and beliefs about voices will not be pathologised as a symptom of a disorder but will be seen as a human variation; and which in some cases can cause emotional distress, but with the right support can be lived with peacefully and profitably.
- We will provide refuges and safe spaces where voice hearers and their allies can meet each other to share experiences, ideas and information in an open way, and to undertake activities and activism.
- Healthcare professionals will be supplied with information about voice hearing, such as support from experts by experience and knowledge of different treatments to improve choice for voice hearers.
- We will stand up for freedom of choice in mental healthcare, including way voice hearers are approached and how professionals communicate with them, the way they cope with and give meaning to their voices, and who they want to be supported by and the ways they want to be supported.
- Voice hearers will get good support to access legal redress if their human rights are violated.
- National laws will be adapted to provide proper human rights for voice hearers.
- Guidelines and protocols in mental health care will be adapted to provide proper human rights for voice hearers.

Recognition and solidarity with people with other variations and with disabilities

- We recognize the rights of all humans, as documented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- We express our solidarity with people with other variations and with people with disabilities. Their human rights need to be respected.

