

Making a Movement

THE HISTORY
& FUTURE OF
HUMAN RIGHTS

Celebrating the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights at **75**

Featuring essays
from 90 Harvard
faculty & affiliates



HARVARD Kennedy School

CARR CENTER

for Human Rights Policy

Making a Movement

THE HISTORY AND FUTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Carr Center for Human Rights Policy
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Introduction



The first session of the United Nations General Assembly, held on January 10th, 1946 at Central Hall in London.



Mathias Risse

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In 2023, the international community celebrates the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The creation of such a document—its mere existence—must count among the greatest achievements in human history.

The UDHR gave rise to an enormous volume of international and domestic law that created judicial realities: institutions have been founded to protect and advance human rights, ranging from regional human rights regimes to the International Criminal Court; human rights standards have been used for performance assessments across many institutions; a sprawling system of civil society organizations has been created, again both internationally and domestically; and large numbers of people around the world have grown to care about human rights, one way or another.

The human rights movement will always register shortfalls much more than achievements and would miss its purpose otherwise. Regardless, the change that these decades of developments have brought is very real.

At the same time, we should never think of such improvements as permanent. People in power have ways of advancing their position at the expense of everyone else, and of finding people who can be paid off to help them sustain their power. At its core, the essence of the human rights movement is to help make sure power is used not to advance merely the causes of a few, but to secure a basic standard of living for everyone and to protect people's political and economic agency.

The mission of the Harvard Kennedy School is to build bridges between academic research and teaching and the world of politics and policymaking. The founding of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the School 25 years ago made sure that human rights remain part of this bridge-building.

The Carr Center is a small operation, but we are broadly connected and embedded at the Kennedy School and beyond. We set out to invite our colleagues to share their thoughts on a variety of crucial human rights issues (and on the success of the movement as a whole), capturing the connections of their work to the human rights movement. The result is an impressive mosaic of perspectives on human rights to which people from a broad variety of disciplines have contributed.

We are enormously grateful to all our contributors for taking the time to share their thoughts on such an incredibly important subject with our community.

This publication delves into the past, present, and future of the human rights movement, evaluating its successes and failures, and presenting potential areas of progress. Throughout the publication, you'll read pieces from 90 Harvard faculty, fellows, and affiliates as they evaluate the intersection of the UDHR and global human rights with the themes of racial justice, transitional justice, economic inequality, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, security, migration, changing political systems, climate change, advancing technology, and more. ■

1.

Looking Back on 75 Years

Since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the world of human rights has continuously shifted to meet the demands of an ever-changing society, becoming embedded in the global political and social fabric.



Max Bazerman

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Most readers of this volume would accept that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides appropriate normative insight about how all of us should behave. Here, I want to focus on the challenge of understanding and changing the behavior of individuals who do not follow the implied actions of this Declaration. It revolves around one of the simplest statements in the Declaration:

Article 7: All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Evidence shows that the vast majority of us regularly violate this article. We can all move toward greater support of human rights by addressing our ethical blinders.

In my research, I have studied how bounded ethicality leads even good people to engage in ethically questionable behaviors that contradict their own preferred ethics, including the failure to treat all with “equal protection against any discrimination.” One reason for our bounded ethicality is that we like others from our own group, whether that group is our family, neighborhood, school, ethnicity, city, or country. Social psychology shows that while hostility toward outgroups is real, in-group favoritism is far more pervasive and can be just as harmful. When we favor members of our group, it sometimes comes at the expense of others.

In his 2013 book *Moral Tribes*, Joshua Greene argues that there is an evolutionary logic to

why tribal behavior is so intuitive: in hunter/gatherer societies, relying on our local group, or tribe, may have been critical to our survival. And as we rely on our group, we may also begin to favor them over others. But an evolutionary logic does not justify tribal behavior today, particularly when it leads to sexism, racism, and hiring less effective people to work for our organizations.

One intriguing paradox of tribal behavior is that when those in the majority, who have more power, succumb to in-group favoritism, they often focus on the good they’re doing for in-group members and overlook how this leads to discrimination against out-group members. For example, suppose that a neighbor tells you that her son is applying for a job at your firm and asks you to put in a good word for him. You are happy to help out, though you don’t know the young man or his qualifications well. In your eagerness to be helpful, you overlook the fact that you may

Eleanor Roosevelt, chair of the Human Rights Commission, addresses delegates of the Drafting Committee on International Bill of Rights (which includes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) in an opening speech on June 9, 1947 in New York. Image credit: UN Photo.



be discriminating against more qualified, less privileged job candidates with your recommendation. The harm to out-group members fades from our attention. We sometimes develop such preferences with intention, but we more commonly develop them without any deliberation at all.

Psychologists Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald argue that those in power often implicitly favor their group over others when allocating scarce resources, such as funding, housing, or jobs, without being consciously aware of their favoritism or preferences. This implicit bias often results in violations of Article 7 of the Declaration. Implicit bias is rooted on attitudes people have about men versus women, whites versus Blacks, and so forth. Banaji and Greenwald use the word “ordinary” to clarify that the typical, or ordinary, thought processes we use to categorize, perceive, and judge information can lead to systematic preferences for our group.

As a result of our biases, even well-meaning individuals frequently fail to treat people outside our tribe with the equal protection specified by Article 7. Dolly Chugh, in her book *The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias*, highlights how well-intentioned people who believe in diversity and inclusion (whom she calls “believers”) still miss many opportunities to treat people equally. Chugh encourages us to go beyond believing that equality is appropriate to being “builders” who proactively undertake actions aimed at treating all people with dignity and respect. This includes taking responsibility for our mistakes and oversights so that we can confront our limitations and move toward equality. By following these suggestions we can come closer implementing Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. ■



Arthur Brooks

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, like the American Declaration of Independence, is an aspirational document: it defines goals and charts a course for steady progress toward greater human flourishing.

It is unrealistic to assume that the United States will achieve perfect liberty or happiness, nor that the world's nations will eradicate all elements of discrimination or fear. The point is that we know what improvement means in each case, and can move our nation and world in those directions.

The distinction between aspiration and achievement is lost on many, and leads to a lot of frustration and discouragement, both as individuals and as societies. When we set goals, we often see them as binary measures, so that anything less than 100 percent success is tantamount to, well, complete failure. Personally, if I don't achieve my career ambitions completely, I am a failure. And if nations fall short of true equality and freedom, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is nothing more than pie-in-the-sky. This is no way to live, personally—it makes life more about failure than success, and misperceives what brings happiness: progress toward goals,

not their ultimate attainment. And this is the wrong way to understand what makes for a better world.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a handbook for better, happier living in an imperfect, often-unhappy world. It shows us what progress means, and where we should focus to make it each year, even when times are most trying, as they are today. It shows us that greater happiness and love are possible by working to make just one person freer of fear and discrimination. It shows us where to restart our efforts after we have fallen short. It resets our gaze from downward toward the True North of a better world where people have more freedom, more opportunity, and less fear.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is our “owner’s manual” for a happier world. ■



Chile Eboe-Osuji

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The UDHR has been enormously successful. It will not be an overstatement to say that it has been the most important development in international law since the gains of the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

The Westphalian treaties are generally regarded as having signaled the march of international law as a formal framework of rights for states. Exactly 300 years later, in 1948, the UDHR signaled the formal recognition of human beings as subjects who enjoy rights in international law. In the 75 short years since, the UDHR and the norms it has spawned have done much to stake out a robust claim of dignity for human beings. So, all told, it has been a tremendous success.

Regardless, no human system is perfect—not even the human rights system.

One aspect in which the system needs updating is in the area of recognizing peace as the most fundamental human right of all. It is that basic because there's hardly any other right that you can meaningfully enjoy in any circumstance bereft of peace. People in Ukraine will tell you that, as will people in Gaza, and every other place where there's an armed conflict. The next update to the human rights framework then is to recognize peace as a fundamental right that you can enforce. It is a project to which I have devoted much attention since the end of my tenure on the bench of the ICC. ■



Alex Green

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When the late Nobel Peace Laureate Martti Ahtisaari visited Harvard in 2010, he remarked that a truly great peace agreement must be no more complex to read than the instructions for using a toaster.

Given the horrors of war and violence, many people heard this statement as an affirmation of the widely-held belief that the words which make a peaceful world must be practical, effective, durable, and easy to implement. When peace agreements fail, we say that they have failed to meet these terms, and by extension, we believe that the failure proves some kind of inherent flaw in the ideas and values expressed in the document that shapes all agreements in our time, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Nothing could be more incorrect.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created by people who believed in the very same things we believe today. They wanted accountability and justice. They knew that a universal language could not reflect just one group of people's way of thinking or writing. They knew that if their words were going to transform the world, those words would need to be the beautiful synthesis of ideas that can only arise when people come together from disparate walks of life and articulate the simple, shared values of humanity.

The language of human rights today, and the language of the agreements we produce in the name of that vaunted ideal, are cadaverous and shrill by comparison, and they reflect our failure to truly understand the world that produced the need for a universal declaration. That world had obliterated the lives of people who were not seen to be people. Above all else, the drafters of the Declaration knew that a better world was only possible if we called to those vulnerable and unseen people and welcomed them into the work of asserting a world of dignity and rights.

With few exceptions, the documents we see today are crafted with an entirely different audience in mind and a radically different conception of what shared humanity means. Today's agreements—the great-grandchildren of the Universal Declaration—speak to the powerful. We use language fit only for technocratic experts. We accept as a precondition that an individual or group's present influence over matters of war gives them pride of place when we consider the terms of peace.

The terms are as practical as those for using a toaster oven, but without any of the vision that Ahtisaari's broader point implied. After all, what do we use that toaster oven for? We use it for sustenance and we use it to transform our food into something just a little more enjoyable to eat. We take that food and we set it at a table where we have shared meals, where conversations hover above our plates, regardless of who we are.

The drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were not distracted by an apparatus. They recognized and revered the broader expression of humanity and its right to exist. They knew that they needed to assert their own power to stand above those groups who would steal the food off our plates, bully their way into the terms of peace, and degrade those ideals with the language of self-interest. As a result, 75 years later, those words still call to us to choose the more visionary path, and in their elegant, bold, simplicity, they admonish us for the fact that we do not. ■



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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was conceived under the sharp impression of the horrors of World War II and the Shoah.

At the same time, the UDHR, along with other foundational texts of the period—including the United Nations Charter and the Geneva Conventions—seeking to regulate and limit the effects of armed conflict, encapsulated a vision for a better, less violent, and more humane future. The Schuman Declaration of May 1950—broadly considered the foundational text of post-War European integration, aiming to make war “not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible”—follows in the same vein. The UDHR and the origins of the European Union share the same historical ferment.

Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), names as the EU's founding values “human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.” “In its relations with the wider world” Article 3 TEU mandates the EU to contribute to the “eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child.” Article 21 TEU stipulates, among its principles inspiring the Union's external action, a policy of “democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms.” In a 2018 publication, the European Parliament directly links the EU and its policies to the UDHR, stating: “[t]oday, the Declaration plays an important part in guiding EU external policies and is a useful reference for the way in which the EU conceives fundamental rights.”

Organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, however, highlight resur-facing tensions between the EU's expressed commitment to human rights and its failures to reliably

uphold them, for instance in the field of asylum and migration policy. In addition, they criticize the EU's shortcomings in addressing human rights violations in its own member states, not least relating to discrimination and intolerance against minority groups, poverty, and serious rule of law issues.

Scholarly studies suggest that the promotion of human rights is one motivation of European foreign and security policy, along with geostrategic motives and security concerns, as well as a variety of economic motives, such as trade and foreign investment, access to raw materials, and energy supply.

And there persists the disparity between EU law, Union declarations, and stated European intentions, on the one hand, and the realities of seemingly ever-recurrent humanitarian disasters and human rights violations and the EU's inability to effectively prevent or at least curb them, on the other. The EU had little to offer to halt the slaughtering and abysmal human suffering in the violently disintegrating Yugoslavia of the 1990s. Some quarter-century later, in the wake of Russia's full-fledged attack on Ukraine starting in February 2022, the atrocities in Bucha and Izyum only symbolize further nadirs of basic human rights catastrophes in Europe itself, and the Union's inability to properly preclude or counteract these violations.

Seventy-five years after their universal proclamation, and the EU's evolving foreign and security policy, human rights remain a project rather than a comprehensive, completed accomplishment. ■



Fredrik Logevall

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The UDHR stands as one of the most important documents in modern world history. Its effects have been profound, which is remarkable given that its limitations are plain to see. For one thing, the Declaration was not a treaty in the formal sense, and it did not create legally binding obligations.

For another, the rights it delineated were described in hazy, aspirational terms, open to varying interpretations, and national governments found it easy to sidestep those it deemed problematic. Imperial powers refused to promise independence to their colonial populations, and the United States did not commit itself to ending racial segregation. Several authoritarian states chose to abstain rather than vote for the Declaration.

Yet, from the start, the UDHR mattered enormously for the world. For the first time, humanity had a globally agreed upon document asserting that certain rights applied to all people everywhere, whatever their race, creed, religion, gender, or nationality. These rights did not need to be earned; all individuals were born with them. More concretely, the Declaration inspired

and laid the foundation for a broad array of legally binding human rights treaties—more than seventy, at last count. And there was also this: the mere act of spelling out universal rights in a major UN document made it easier for organizations and individuals to call injustice by its name, and to identify violations of human rights wherever they took place.

Today we're still a long way from realizing the goals laid out in 1948, and it's tempting in such a situation to turn cynical, to be dismissive of all documents that emerge from the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the General Assembly. The temptation should be resisted. Not all UN declarations are created equal. Whatever its limitations, the UDHR has been essential to the advancement of rights throughout the world. ■



Martha Minow

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Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948 must be acknowledged as a landmark because representatives of different religious, national, and legal backgrounds joined in rejecting the horrific war crimes of genocide by recognizing the dignity and worth of every human being, including the equal rights of men and women, freedom of speech and belief, and freedom from fear and want.

The distance between that Declaration and the reality for so many people around the globe—in terms of economic privation, governmental incursions on freedoms and rights, and new threats of private harms (hate speech, digital surveillance, gun use, pollution, etc.)—is enormous. That distance right now seems to be growing, given the fragility of democratic societies embracing individual rights, the numbers of wars and persistence of violence, and ongoing resource inequality (e.g., the 10 richest men in the world own more than the bottom 3.1 billion people).

The Declaration alone cannot close the distance between its vision and reality. It does not even provide an accountability mechanism to document the shortfall.

Nonetheless, the Declaration is not just a document sitting behind glass, framed on walls. Human rights once upon a time was just a phrase, then it became movements around the world, then it animated laws, organized commissions that engage in fact-finding and judgments, then it became something we talk about at dinner tables and teach to children who learn to infuse the language with their own energy and hopes. Human rights teaching, scholarship, advocacy, and institutions have given voice to dreams, changed lives, and planted seeds that continue to grow, even when the vision seems distant from reality. ■



Kenneth Roth

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Former Executive Director, Human Rights Watch (1993–2022)

What is the significance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as we celebrate its 75th anniversary? In my view, its most important contributions were to articulate a series of basic rights that are sought by people around the world, and to clarify that a government’s respect, or not, for these rights is an appropriate international concern.

The articulation of “universal” rights helped to undercut those governments that tried to pretend these rights were Western impositions. That claim comes up most commonly around the rights of women, and sexual and religious minorities. The Chinese government goes a step further, claiming that the entire human rights enterprise should not be universal but should vary according to each “civilization,” meaning each government’s self-interested interpretation of that civilization. As the Universal Declaration spawned defenders of human rights in virtually every nation, it helped to demonstrate that the only “imposition” was by conservative forces within each society seeking to preserve their privileged position and to repress those who sought to live differently or more freely.

As for the Universal Declaration’s establishment of human rights as an appropriate international concern, that didn’t stop governments from claiming that their human rights practices were an internal affair, but it undermined that defense. For many years, governments at the United Nations deemed it undiplomatic to criticize abusive countries by name. But with perpetrators not identified, no government felt pressure to reform.

This reticence reflected the view that the United Nations should only “promote” but not “protect” human rights—a view that found support in the wording of the UN Charter and was even endorsed by Western governments that worried about being held to account for colonialism by European powers or racism in the United States. Many governments maintained that the responsibility to

uphold human rights should be exercised by each government on its own, without the involvement of others—a view akin to China’s current position.

This reticence began to change in 1967 as governments called out South Africa’s apartheid. Key actors in this shift—and in mainstreaming the strategy of pressuring governments to respect human rights—were civic groups, or nongovernmental human rights organizations. It took the human rights movement to move beyond the quiet complacency of self-enforcement to the practice of commenting on governments that violate human rights, shaming them for their failure to live up to their vows, and generating pressure for change.

In short, the Universal Declaration was an important statement of principle. It reaffirmed that the quest by people to ensure respect for their rights is indeed universal. And it legitimized international commentary on whether governments treated people with the respect and dignity they deserve. But it took private citizens of the world, acting on this statement of principle, to bring it to life as a vehicle for defending people from governments who would rather be left on their own. Some abusive governments still occasionally resort to claims that human rights are an internal matter, but they are a minority, and their self-serving claims ring hollow. The claims are utterly ineffective in relieving these governments of pressure to uphold the rights of the Universal Declaration. ■



Jeffrey Seglin

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From 1935 until 1962, Eleanor Roosevelt, one of the drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), wrote a syndicated newspaper column called “My Day.” Until 1961, her column appeared six days a week. She cut back to three days a week a few months after she turned 76. The UDHR makes several appearances in her column, reminding us that she managed to juggle quite a few things while still managing to write.

I find Roosevelt’s prodigious output to be a particularly useful reference in courses I’ve taught on opinion writing where students are tasked with writing five opinion columns over the course of 13 weeks, a time period in which Roosevelt would have produced 78 “My Day” columns. Not many of her columns would pass muster as brilliantly crafted literary gems. But Roosevelt’s words provide a snapshot into issues about which she was passionate—human rights chiefly among them.

There’s an overlap between some of the tenets of the UDHR and the syndicated ethics column called “The Right Thing” which I’ve now been writing for 25 years. Article 1 of the UDHR holds that all human beings “are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” In “The Right Thing,” I try to examine how people use their reason and conscience to make ethical decisions.

Roosevelt regularly explored topics similarly in “My Day.” (She wrote more than 8,000 columns. At last count, I’m at 1,085 and only two years shy of her column’s run.) In her December 11, 1956, column, referencing UN Human Rights Day, Roosevelt wrote: “All kinds of rights are tied

together. If we fail to grant any one of them, we will find ourselves failing to achieve the full measure of human rights and freedoms, the goal we desire to attain.”

Two years later in a column marking the 10th anniversary of the UDHR, she wrote: “I think, too, it will prompt us to examine our own situation regarding these rights. How many do we really implement? How many do we care about? How many do we take the trouble to see that we individually live up to and that our communities live up to wherever we have a say in the matter?” Roosevelt used the UDHR to challenge us to remember that the Declaration’s words can only do so much, that it was the actions we took corresponding to those words that had far more power.

On this, the 75th anniversary of UDHR, it seems fitting to end with the challenge Roosevelt presented in that same “My Day” 65 years ago: “Whenever a violation of human rights, such as discrimination, takes place in areas where it is possible to be corrected, are we on the side of those who fight to do away with discrimination or are we among those who turn our backs and hope that somebody else will do the disagreeable job of standing up for things we know to be right?” ■



Sharath Srinivasan

Technology and Human Rights Fellow, Carr Center;
David and Elaine Potter Associate Professor, University of Cambridge

The “universality” of human rights seems to mask a straightforwardly Western story of its rise. Origin stories centered on Christian theology and European natural law traditions, and the modern proselytization of human rights within a Western-dominated liberal international order, all feed a skepticism of human rights as a bedfellow of Western domination of global elsewhere.

From the tradition’s emergence alongside empire and colonialism to the political economy of power in the international human rights movement, human rights might seem more of a parochial agenda than a truly collective aspiration. Indeed, many have questioned how “universal” the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was at the time of its adoption, when two-thirds of countries in the world were under the grip of colonialism, and given its drafters and early adopters skewed heavily to Northern and Western voices. Is the UDHR an anachronism, or merely an abstract and non-binding collection of noble words and sentiments?

Certainly not. Rather, human rights are alive and kicking in struggles around the world, from very local agitations in countries as diverse as Uganda, Iran, and the United States, to global causes concerning climate, race, and sexuality. Yes, human rights, and the UDHR especially, have baggage. Their past matters, but we cannot afford to be trapped in that past. Rather,

we do better to see human rights as a vital glue and connective tissue for a future world we all might wish to live in. Human rights, in their multiple iterations and interpretations around the world, are both a mirror on and a medium for our collective but diverse humanity. They are a crucial lingua franca of our times through which social justice claims are made, championed, and realized. At a time when human rights commitments are often threatened and challenged in the West, they are also being revitalized by new solidarities that cross peoples, countries, and cultures. Seventy-five years after the adoption of the UDHR, human rights have shown remarkable resilience as a dynamic and evolving language of contention that challenges domination. They remain a call to account that states, corporations, or other powerful actors may sometimes, but never always or forever, run and hide from. The universality of the UDHR 75 years on, then, is what people across diverse societies, contexts, and political situations are making of it. ■

Opposite: Drafting Committee on International Bill of Rights (Commission on Human Rights) at Lake Success, New York, on Monday, 9 June 1947. Image credit: UN Photo.



2.

Global Human Rights Accomplishments

Over the past few decades, there have been significant accomplishments made in the human rights movement that have pushed to make the world better for everyone in it.

Racial Justice



As we continue the centuries-long journey of tackling racial injustice in the U.S. and around the world, we must reimagine systems, institutions, and movements that will effectively promote dignity and equity for all.



Leslie Alexander

Racial Justice Fellow, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy;
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Professor of History, Rutgers University

In 1948, when the United Nations issued the Universal Declaration for Human Rights, they began with a seemingly basic and obvious premise: that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Yet, for its time, this simple notion threatened to fundamentally transform race relations in the United States.

For those who did not live through the early twentieth century, it can be hard to fully appreciate how much has changed in the past 75 years, especially for Black people in the United States. In the 1950s, if you were a Black person, nearly every aspect of your public life was segregated. Where you ate, where you slept, where you worshipped, where you shopped, and even where you stopped to take a sip of water was governed by systems of de facto and de jure segregation. Everything you did was subject to dehumanizing practices, like using the “colored” facilities or entering through the back door, simply because your life and your dignity were viewed as less valuable.

Following dedicated, sustained protest during the Civil Rights and Black Power eras, segregation laws were finally eradicated from our governing documents. And yet, the legacy of white supremacy—the ideology that buttressed slavery and segregation—still haunts American society and culture. Perhaps nothing has illustrated this sad reality in recent years more than the systems of policing and incarceration that plague poor Black communities across the nation. In fact, policing practices in the United States, such as the “no-knock warrant,” routinely violate numerous articles in the Universal Declaration, including the basic principles of: equal protection under the law; freedom from “cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment;” “arbitrary arrest, detention or exile;” and “arbitrary interference” with a person’s “privacy,

family, home or correspondence.” Worse, over the past decade, police officers have killed nearly 10,000 American citizens, with Black people being nearly three times more likely to be killed by police than White people.

While we might hope that conditions have radically changed since 2020, when we witnessed a global revolt against police violence following George Floyd’s murder, nothing could be further from the truth. In the past three years, nearly 3,000 people in the U.S. have died at the hands of police. More than 1,200 of those Americans were killed in 2022 alone, more than any other year in the past decade. And so far this year—at the end of October 2023—the police have already killed 974 people.

As a nation, we must decide that we are finally ready to exorcise the ghosts that haunt us. That we are committed to living up to the Universal Declaration’s fundamental ideals and to eradicating the demons of slavery, segregation, and white supremacy that have shaped our nation for generations. After all, as James Baldwin once wisely reflected, “not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed unless it is faced.” ■



Gloria Ayee

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Promoting and championing racial justice is crucial for effective human rights work. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a pivotal achievement in defining global standards for freedom, justice, and human dignity.

The framers of the UDHR understood that respect for human rights was obligatory for cultivating a more equitable and peaceful global society in the aftermath of the atrocities of World War II, and outlined a vision of what constitutes inherent human rights. While the UDHR did not explicitly name racism and racial discrimination as human rights violations, the Declaration laid the groundwork for establishing equality and non-discrimination as central tenets of international human rights law.

Enduring problems of systemic racism, racial injustice, and discrimination have undercut efforts to ensure human rights protections for countless individuals worldwide. Denying equal rights and fair treatment to people based on their racial or ethnic identity undermines the very idea of inherent human worth and dignity. Over the past 75 years, human rights treaties and conventions have expanded on the UDHR’s human rights framework to address issues of racism. Notably, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), adopted and opened for signature in 1965, was a major step forward in recognizing racism as an infringement on human dignity, and the convention codified formal state obligations to eradicate all forms of racial discrimination.

The UDHR’s principles have been invoked to confront racial discrimination globally—for example, during the fight against apartheid to challenge institutionalized racial segregation in South Africa, and to inform civil rights reform and anti-discrimination policies in the United States—illuminating how racial segregation laws flouted international human rights norms. More recently,

human rights experts have warned that racial profiling, police brutality, and the disproportionate use of force against African Americans constitute serious human rights violations.

While there have been some notable victories in global human rights campaigns through the incorporation of racial equality and non-discrimination principles into international law, more must be done to dismantle systemic and institutionalized forms of racism. Racial discrimination remains a pervasive problem globally, obstructing access to equal rights, including in criminal justice, education, employment, housing, healthcare, and political representation. The incongruence between the adoption of international human rights principles and the reality of the lack of their implementation is perhaps most evident in the considerable discrimination that Indigenous peoples, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups continue to face. It is imperative that human rights advocates intensify efforts to dismantle racist policies and ideologies through grassroots activism, coalition-building, and calls for accountability for human rights violations.

An unwavering commitment to championing racial justice and remedying inequities is needed to ensure the protection of human rights for all people. This requires acknowledging the relationship between historical harms and present-day racism. It also demands amplifying the voices of those who have been most affected by discrimination. Centering human rights protections in the fight against racism is key to actualizing the UDHR’s promise and vision of freedom, justice, and equality for all. ■



Keisha N. Blain

Professor of History & Africana Studies,
Brown University

In recent years, conservative lawmakers in the United States have led a nationwide campaign to supposedly rid classrooms of critical race theory. While the obsession over critical race theory is a new manifestation, it represents long-standing efforts to keep Black history—and the perspectives of Black writers—out of the classroom.

This impulse is motivated by a desire to insulate students from viewpoints that challenge the many white supremacist myths that dominate mainstream historical narratives. For many, the attack on critical race theory and African American history is rooted in a desire to shield students from the uncomfortable aspects of history and evade “sensitive” topics such as racism, white supremacy, and inequality. The legislation targeting critical race theory not only perpetuates lies in the classroom, but it will also hinder students’ ability to identify the forces of inequality and injustice within society. These bans are also meant to deprive students of color of the opportunity to see themselves within the nation’s history. And they are intended to discourage students from questioning the current distribution of wealth and power in the United States.

We can turn to Black history for lessons on how to respond in this moment. Black educators of the past also fought against white supremacist misinformation in the classroom and beyond. During the Civil War, Charlotte Forten, a Black educator from Philadelphia, offered classes to Black children who were recently emancipated by Union forces. She introduced

an array of diverse materials to broaden her students’ perspectives. She intentionally included lessons on the revolutionary Haitian leader Toussaint L’Ouverture to inspire her students with a positive representation of Black achievement over white domination.

Decades later, Carter G. Woodson, dubbed the father of Black history, established “Negro History Week” in February 1926 to recognize and celebrate the history of people of African descent in the United States. Woodson and others in the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History created and distributed books, lesson plans, and other curriculum materials for teachers to use with their students.

These are just a few of the diverse ways Black educators used the tools at their disposal to empower students and challenge attempts to distort public memory. We can learn from their examples, which is precisely why the study of the past is significant. We can only build a more just and equitable society—one that is firmly rooted in the principles laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—if we teach the unadulterated truth of the past in our classrooms. ■



Deirdre Bloome

Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

On this 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as we celebrate its achievements and seek to rectify where we have fallen short, I am pleased to have the opportunity to reflect on two points.

First, with regard to Article 4, that “no one shall be held in slavery or servitude,” it is clear that modern servitude remains an urgent global problem. Additionally, the legacies of past slavery interfere with many other rights, including “the right to just and favorable remuneration” (Article 23), which has been denied to millions of descendants of enslaved people, among others. How, precisely, historical slavery undermines contemporary rights remains an important area of investigation.

Second, with regard to Article 26, that “elementary education shall be compulsory.... and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit,” we are confronted with the question of when inequality is just. According to Article 26, all inequality in access to elementary education is unjust, while inequality in access to higher education is just, so long as it is between people with different “merit.” Critical engagement over which inequalities are (un)just is necessary for progress toward the fulfillment of the Declaration’s goals. ■



Attendants at Old Slave Day, Southern Pines, North Carolina, 1937. Portraits of African American ex-slaves from the U.S. Works Progress Administration, Federal Writers’ Project slave narratives collection, from the Library of Congress.



Yanilda María González

Assistant Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

In recent years, concerted mobilization by civil society organizations and grassroots communities around the world has laid bare one of the most pervasive and enduring human rights and racial justice challenges in many diverse democracies: police violence against racialized and impoverished communities.

A recent transnational workshop hosted by the Harvard Kennedy School highlighted civil society strategies against police violence and underscored the shared nature of the problem. Whether in Cali, Chicago, Caracas, Lagos, Paris, Santo Domingo, or São Paulo, workshop participants described rampant abuses and violence at the hands of police, concentrated against low-income Black youth in urban peripheries around the world.

The problem of racialized police violence is far from new, but the work of activists from affected communities and civil society organizations has placed it at the top of the public agenda. The careful work of survivors, families, and advocates in meticulously documenting abuses and sharing personal narratives has been essential for educating the public and policymakers alike about the magnitude and scope of police violence, as well as laying bare the stark racial and class disparities at the core of the problem. In making their case, activists around the world have drawn on human rights language to call for justice and denounce their governments for failing to protect them from police violence. As one mother of a victim of police violence in Brazil declared in a recent public hearing in São Paulo, “we live in a nation that claims to defend a democratic rule of law, but they violate the most important human right, [the right] to life.”

Human rights instruments and bodies have played an essential role in this work. Civil society activists and advocates the world over have used international human rights bodies to draw attention to racialized police violence as a grave human rights violation. Activists in Chicago mobilized an intergenerational coalition of community leaders to testify before the UN Committee Against Torture in 2014 to denounce that the Chicago Police Department’s “conduct constitutes torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment (CIDT) as defined by the Convention [Against Torture], and occurs at extraordinary rates, disproportionately against minorities, and with impunity.” More recently, Brazil’s Mothers of May - a collective of mothers of victims of police killings - and the human rights organization Conectas testified before the UN Human Rights Council to denounce a lethal police operation that resulted in nearly 30 deaths at the hands of São Paulo’s Military Police in August 2023.

While international human rights bodies and treaties have been rightly criticized due to the difficulty of enforcement, they have nevertheless been an indispensable tool in the struggle against police violence. Despite well-known limitations, the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights indeed provide “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations” that ordinary citizens can employ to denounce their governments for racist and unaccountable police violence. ■



Eric Henson

Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard University

My favorite writing about love among humankind is Martin Luther King Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. I can barely begin to convey to you how nearly every line resonates with me.

One line that is particularly relevant as we think about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 75 is that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” So simple, so clear, yet so powerful. We live today in a world where relativism dominates. Facts have become subjective, and scientific rigor is suspect. I reject this notion, and so should you, as injustice visited upon the weak and the outnumbered is certainly, over the long arc of time, a threat to justice for everyone, everywhere.

Nothing bears this out more than the maltreatment and abuse that Native people on this continent and others have long suffered at the hands of those stronger and more numerous. The text of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that the “inherent dignity and . . . equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom,

justice and peace in the world.” Yet, in my work I find that only the oppressed minority lives by this noble credo day in and day out. Those who have power are fickle, and nod to this ideal when it suits them, but when greed, domination, avarice, and force are more expedient, the chosen path seldom favors the downtrodden. This continually challenges my faith in humankind because it is so at odds with my own experience with Native people in nearly all settings.

My observation while in Native groups is that it is possible to be community-minded, caring for others, capable of sharing, and accepting of those who are meek always, including in the face of poverty and a lack of resources. I don’t know that I have ever heard it put exactly this way, but my personal American Indian point of view is that justice everywhere and always is the only viable path forward. Nothing less will do. ■



Margaret Huang

President and CEO,
Southern Poverty Law Center

In the 75 years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we have witnessed significant progress in the fight against racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance. Many communities who previously experienced these human rights violations have gained recognition, protection, and formal equality under the law. Yet, inequities and disparities still exist.

Today in the U.S., we see a range of evidence that racism continues to deny communities of color their full human rights. Whether it is in the persistence of higher maternal mortality rates for Black mothers, or the involuntary loss of land among Black farmers, or the refusal of government agencies to provide public services in languages other than English, or the rise in hate crimes against Asian and Pacific Islander communities

during COVID, each of these examples reflects the ongoing challenge to create a welcoming society that respects the human rights of all. Yet, I remain hopeful, especially listening to the leadership of younger generations, that these disparities will be overcome by those who see our shared humanity and shared future as innately connected to the principles of the Universal Declaration. ■



Alan Jenkins

Professor of Practice,
Harvard Law School

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights boldly asserts that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

The specific assertion of racial equality was particularly bold, even stunning, in 1948, a year in which Apartheid began in South Africa, segregation and lynchings reigned in the United States, and European colonialism gripped much of Africa and the Caribbean. Yet, in the aftermath of World War II and, particularly, the horrors of the Holocaust, the moral force and correctness of its tenets were manifest. As such, it served as both an aspirational ideal and a concrete demand.

That duality defined the progress and setbacks for racial equality in the decades that followed. In the United States, a courageous social movement demanded a “Second Reconstruction” that enshrined formal racial equality in our constitution, established laws and governmental institutions to safeguard equal opportunity, and significantly disrupted the overt racial hierarchy that had characterized our nation from its inception.

At the same time, white supremacist backlash significantly limited practical realization of the equality ideal. The United States government, even when it supported greater civil rights at home, intentionally neutered application of international human rights instruments within its borders. And the UDHR’s principles of equal economic, social, and cultural rights in the U.S. were ignored at best and vilified as un-American at worst.

That legacy is painfully evident today, with

people of color in the United States facing grossly unequal access to health, education, housing, economic mobility, and fair treatment in the justice system. Moreover, hate crimes against vulnerable racial, ethnic, and religious groups are on the rise.

Globally, while European colonialism has ended in most parts of the world and South African Apartheid has fallen, racial discrimination and ethnic persecution remain rampant, including regarding the treatment of Indigenous peoples and migrants. The scourge of genocide has reappeared with alarming frequency in the decades since the Holocaust. And even slavery continues to exist, with the International Labor Organization declaring that over 27 million people were in forced labor around the world in 2021.

Addressing today’s domestic and global racial justice challenges requires, among other things, building greater support and respect for human rights principles. Virtually every international human rights instrument adopted since the Universal Declaration requires racial equity in its implementation. In terms of garnering public support, there is much to build upon. The global outpouring of empathy and outrage after the murder of George Floyd made clear the demand for equal justice, dignity, and respect around the world. Channeling that energy toward concrete solutions is the central challenge facing human rights advocates in the 21st century. ■



Khalil Gibran Muhammad

Ford Foundation Professor of History, Race and Public Policy;
Director, Institutional Antiracism and Accountability Project, Harvard Kennedy School

Since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, anti-colonial activists in the United States and in numerous parts of the Global South have appropriated the language of human rights to challenge centuries-long forms of oppression and state violence.

Among the first to call upon the UN to intervene on behalf of thousands of victims of anti-Black terrorism was the Civil Rights Congress, founded by William Patterson. In 1951, a delegation led by the international labor activist and entertainer Paul Robeson delivered a UN petition written by Patterson to investigate the U.S. government for violating the human rights of Black citizens who “suffer from genocide.”

The petition was never taken up by the UN due to pressure from U.S. officials, but it did receive international attention, especially among Cold War rivals of the U.S. and anti-colonialists around the world. This was an early indication of America’s refusal to abide by new international human rights standards. And yet, despite the blatant hypocrisy of America’s racist treatment of its Black citizens after the defeat of Nazi Germany while claiming to be the leader of the democratic free world, international scrutiny contributed to the gradual demise of formal racial segregation beginning in 1954. One year later, African and Asian leaders from several countries, including Algeria, India, and South Africa, as well as African Americans, such as Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and the author Richard Wright, gathered in Bandung, Indonesia to pursue global decolonization. As one observer reported, the conference participants “deplored the policies and practices of racial segregation and discrimination which forms

the basis of government and human relations in large regions of Africa and in other parts of the world. Such conduct is not only a gross violation of human rights, but also a denial of the fundamental values of civilization and the dignity of man.”

Two years later, in 1957, Ghana became the first African country to gain its independence from colonial rule. Many others soon followed. In this moment, the UN also played an important role in bolstering the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, although the United States and other European nations opposed such efforts for decades.

Today’s resurgent white supremacy and white nationalism in the U.S. and in many parts of Europe pose severe threats to the already billions of vulnerable people of color who live with the legacies of slavery and colonialism in rich and poor nations. Although vulnerable people in rich nations have higher standards of living and longer life expectancies, they share in common with residents of poor nations economic and food insecurity, extreme exposure to environmental toxins, limited access to high-quality healthcare, and existential threats of climate-related disasters. Their own efforts to mitigate these severe problems by democratic means as well as migration are fueling authoritarian movements in a vicious cycle. ■



Victor Ray

Racial Justice Fellow, Carr Center;
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Civil rights movements have made massive, if often fragile, gains since the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Civil rights activists helped end South African Apartheid and Jim Crow.

Civil rights activists also had a hand in changing the legal landscape by making discrimination in many aspects of American life illegal. However, the quest for equality isn’t over, as racial inequalities still shape nearly every aspect of American life, from disparities in healthcare to inequalities in employment, education, and incarceration rates. These inequalities

deform our democracy and make it more difficult for those excluded from opportunities to accomplish their goals and live full lives. Unfortunately, attempts to ban teaching critical race theory or Black Studies will make persistent inequalities harder to tackle, and committed educators should reject calls to ban these vital areas of study. ■



“At the bus station in Durham, North Carolina.”
May 1940. Image credit: Jack Delano.



Allissa Richardson

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Associate Professor of Journalism and Communication, USC Annenberg

Seeing is believing. When I think of the long Civil Rights Movement for Black people in America, I know this to be true. I study how African Americans use mobile and social media to create their own news networks—especially in times of crisis.

And I trace their brilliant methods of communicating change, from slave narratives to abolitionist newspapers; from Black free press to Black glossy magazines; from frontline photojournalism at marches to sit-ins on the evening news; and from the grainy, horrifying camcorder video of Rodney King to today’s crisp, yet tragic witnessing of George Floyd’s last moments on a smartphone.

There might not have been any progress on racial justice in America without this kind of mediated proof.

The visual turn in the last century—during the early aughts of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (UDHR) 75-year existence—has made it possible for Black people to make compelling appeals for racial equality in America. When Black people have borne witness, with their cellphones especially, new counter narratives have formed, eventual truths have emerged, and families have gotten the closure they needed, in some cases, when official accounts provided none.

In this manner, Black Americans created a blueprint in the 2010s for all aggrieved groups:

use the smartphone to visualize the truth, so that no one can look away. Indigenous communities filmed their stands at the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 with their smartphones. The Latine community filmed terrifying Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids against them that same year, and well into the next. The #StopAAPIHate campaign of 2020 relied heavily on cellphone footage of Asian American elders being attacked senselessly. These are but a few examples of how seeing became believing for many historically marginalized groups in America.

My wish for the next 75 years is that we can cultivate a country that no longer needs viral videos to act, in line the UDHR’s vision of human rights. I hope we one day no longer require survivors of atrocity to first prove their humanity, then provide corroborating footage of their horrors. The true measure of our success as human rights leaders seems now to be that we believe marginalized communities when they show us their pain, the first time, to paraphrase the late Maya Angelou. When we truly see each other in this way, there might be no limit to the kind of just world we can imagine. ■



Desirée Cormier Smith

Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice,
U.S. Department of State

The creation of my role as the first-ever Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice at the U.S. Department of State is a testament to progress.

Established in June 2022, my new role was part of a whole-of-government approach initiated by President Biden on his first day in office to dismantle the entrenched disparities in our federal policies. Driven by a mandate of advancing the human rights of people belonging to marginalized racial, ethnic, and Indigenous communities, my team and I operate with a firm understanding that racism is a global scourge that no country is immune to—including the United States—and that it requires coordinated and sustained global solutions. Racism, ethnic discrimination, and xenophobia undermine democracy, impede economic development, and foster corruption and instability. Therefore, eradicating racism is not just the morally right thing to do, it is in our national security interest.

As we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights this year, the sad reality is that far too many people continue to have their basic human rights denied or violated simply because of their race or ethnicity. Complicating matters is the compounding intersection racism has with other identities that are also the targets

of oppression, such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, and disability status. Economic inequality is perhaps one of the most noticeable examples of systematic racism. People of African descent in Latin America and the Caribbean comprise one-third of the population, yet make up nearly 50 percent of its poor. A lack of racial equity endangers lives and weakens society. When we invest in inclusive economic development, we help reduce the likelihood of instability, violence, and mass migrations.

Conversations on economic harms often coincide with urgent concerns about the climate crisis. Climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized racial and ethnic groups, especially Indigenous communities. We seek meaningful partnerships with Indigenous peoples globally to protect the environment in ways that honor and incorporate Indigenous knowledge. Since being appointed a little more than a year ago, I have met with Indigenous leaders in Peru and Brazil, co-led the first meeting of the White House Sub-Committee on International Indigenous Rights, participated in the UN Permanent Forum

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Indigenous Peruvian women with alpacas, photographed in 2015. Image credit: SoleneCL.

Desirée Cormier Smith, continued

of Indigenous Issues, and launched the State Department’s Indigenous Youth Leadership Coalition—a brand new network to elevate the voices of Indigenous youth in global civic and political conversations.

In order to advance racial equity in a meaningful and sustainable manner, I cannot overstate the importance of hearing directly from the communities most impacted by racism. We are currently focused on drawing attention to the marginalization of Roma communities and elevating the work of prominent Roma activists in Europe. Equal rights for Roma must be part of broader regional strategies on security, human rights, and democracy. To help facilitate actionable solutions, I am proud of our work in establishing the Department’s first Roma Issues Working Group.

Undoubtedly, racism is a national security challenge with global consequences. As President Biden said, “advancing equity is not a one-year project. It’s a generational commitment.” Racism is ubiquitous and ever evolving, and we must evolve with it. I am inspired by all the modern-day racial justice warriors I encounter in my work across civil society, governments, and institutions who are sparking change around the world. While we still have much work to do to achieve true racial equality and justice, I must hold fast to hope. In the words of Black feminist writer bell hooks, “[h]ope is essential to any political struggle for radical change when the overall climate promotes disillusionment and despair.” ■



Sandra Susan Smith

Daniel and Florence Guggenheim Professor of Criminal Justice,
Harvard Kennedy School

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, we have witnessed a number of truly inspiring accomplishments, the result of civil rights and racial justice movements across the globe.

These include, but are not limited to, the decolonization movements in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean; the implementation of civil rights legislation barring discrimination on the bases of race, color, religion, sex, and/or national origin; the enactment of affirmative action policies; the end of apartheid in South Africa; and the adoption of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to protect Indigenous lands and cultures. That this is just a sampling speaks to the cataclysmic changes that movement activists and advocates have fought for over the past 75 years.

Clear signs of progress, however, should not overshadow the harsh fact that disparate and brutal treatment remains a fact of life for members of many communities defined by race, ethnicity, and class. In the United States, for instance, as systems of oppression and repression were dismantled during the civil rights era, they were replaced by other institutions of racial and class domination. Primary among them was the criminal legal

system, with race- and class-based over-policing; dehumanizing mass incarceration; and mass surveillance in targeted communities as the institution’s many tools of containment, control, and extraction.

Indeed, when the masses who have been warehoused in U.S. jails, prisons, immigration facilities, and juvenile detention centers are properly accounted for, what becomes clear is that much of the racial progress we believe we have made over the past 50 years—in educational attainment, employment and earnings, and the like—has been an illusion. Calls for abolishing the prison industrial complex will surely end the devastation that this particular system has wreaked on communities marked by race and class, but it will only be replaced by another system of racial and class domination unless and until white supremacy and racial capitalism are themselves defeated and replaced by systems that take for granted the intrinsic worth of every human being. ■

Transitional Justice

Over the years, transitional justice has become a key component of international efforts to engage in conflict management, peacebuilding, and atrocity prevention, in order to address the complex and wide-ranging needs of survivors and ensure that their human rights are protected and preserved.





Sanderijn Cels

Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

When we reckon with history, the right to information is essential. I teach at Harvard Kennedy School about these complex processes of reckonings while focusing on change agents' attempts to shed light on painful wrongs in the past. Together with my students, I investigate the many complex challenges that these change agents face in doing so.

Absent any information about what transpired, they are often unable to convince others that wrongdoings have actually taken place. If records of these wrongs ever existed, they have often been destroyed—not only by the offenders, but sometimes also by victims in an attempt to distance themselves from past events, fearing that documentation might endanger them and their offspring in the future. What little information remains "on the record" could be locked away in archives, categorized in obscure terms, tucked away in boxes, and left to deteriorate. For these and many other reasons, information about past wrongs is often hard to come by.

In such situations, the right to information is critical to force organizations to disclose what information they have left. Vindicating this right, however, is not always easy. Some claim that it does not exist—that there is no fundamental and unambiguous human right to information. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights deals with freedom of expression and refers only to the freedom "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." States must have enacted legislation to specify and strengthen this right, for example, in freedom of information and transparency laws.

Even then, many institutions could still frustrate access to their archives. Sometimes it could be an outright refusal, citing (national) security or privacy concerns; sometimes it could be

a matter of strategic fuzzification to make it impossible to retrieve a specific record; or it could be a matter of simply ignoring any requests.

The lattermost happens in Canada, for example, where Roman Catholic congregations once ran residential schools to assimilate and Christianize Indigenous children, who were subjected to the harshest treatments imaginable (including sexual abuses). Congregation leaders—and even the Pope—have apologized for the wrongs, but institutions still refuse to disclose their records.

There is evidence for hope, though. In recent decades, legal principles have been established to make access to official information the norm, especially in cases of serious human rights violations and crimes against humanity. The progressive Inter-American Court of Human Rights, for example, has played an important role: just this year, it forced the Bolivian government to open its military archives to enable the investigation into a forced disappearance that took place in the past, despite national legislation that restricted access.

These developments are important for change agents seeking to address past wrongs. Only when the right to information is guaranteed and can be vindicated in practice can they make legitimate claims about what happened, achieve historical justice, and even, perhaps, spark meaningful social change. ■



Susan Farbstain

Clinical Professor of Law;
Director, International Human Rights Clinic, Harvard Law School

When advocates discuss the importance of seeking justice for perpetrators of human rights abuses, we often emphasize the impact on societies and legal frameworks. Accountability matters because it shames and deters bad actors, calls attention to injustice, and sends a message that impunity will not be tolerated.

Accountability shapes the historical record, creates a shared understanding of past harms, and lays a foundation upon which societies can reconcile and recover. Accountability reinforces the legitimacy and effectiveness of international human rights law.

All of this is true. Yet, in my experience as a human rights practitioner, accountability matters most to the survivors who do the hard work of seeking justice.

When pursued strategically and thoughtfully, the process of demanding accountability empowers survivors and reinforces their agency as rights holders. They determine what justice means to them. They choose how to frame and share their lived experiences for advocacy or litigation. They decide how to engage with perpetrators, governments, or other stakeholders and how to respond to political or legal obstacles. In this way, the process of seeking justice shifts power dynamics, placing survivors on equal footing with the perpetrators who previously exerted control over them.

Demanding accountability also provides an opportunity for survivors to tell their stories, and to receive acknowledgment and validation in return. For some, sharing

these stories can be both gratifying and healing. When survivors are treated with sensitivity and respect, the public airing of past experiences can offer a sense of catharsis and release. Although often difficult and painful, many survivors are willing to revisit their suffering, even at great personal cost, because the act of speaking out is itself a victory.

By their example, survivors seeking justice often inspire similar efforts in other countries and contexts. Their campaigns and cases model what is possible and help creative advocates consider which strategies might be most effective. Survivors are at the heart of building a more inclusive, dynamic, and innovative human rights movement. Their efforts reinforce our shared purpose and remind us that we work best in solidarity and in community when we follow their lead.

In short, the process of seeking accountability carries political, cultural, and symbolic significance. These efforts become part of a public discourse that shapes broader understandings of justice and reinforces the value and relevance of human rights for all people. Demanding accountability does more than deliver specific remedies or advance legal frameworks. It makes human rights norms tangible. ■



Kathryn Sikkink

Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

This year, we celebrate not only the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) but also the 75th anniversary of the American Declaration of Rights and Duties of Man. The American Declaration was the first inter-governmental declaration of rights, adopted by 19 states in Latin America and the U.S. at a meeting in Bogotá, Colombia in April 1948, eight months before the adoption of the UDHR.

This anniversary is particularly important and poignant for me, in part because it is always forgotten, even by some of my colleagues in Latin America. But it is also poignant because many people continue to insist that human rights only come from the Global North and were later imposed upon the people of the Global South against their will. This insistence, while perhaps intended to be supportive of a more inclusive global order, has the paradoxical effect of erasing or negating important human rights protagonism from activists, diplomats, and jurists from Latin America. I have written about these protagonists frequently over the years, but their stories and struggles are still not well known. The American Declaration was built on the existing traditions and constitutions of Latin American countries, including the Mexican Constitution of 1917. The ideas of human rights and duties in the American Declaration were not “legal transplants” but rather nourished and cultivated by local aspirations.

When I first started studying Latin America in the early 1980s, all the countries of the region were authoritarian, except Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Colombia (although Colombia

was experiencing a long civil war). Today, with all the troubles democracies continue to face in the region, it is a region primarily of democracies, with a small handful of fully authoritarian regimes, including sadly Venezuela. This change hasn’t come easily; constant vigilance and activism are needed to sustain it. Even so, Freedom House codes Uruguay, Chile, and Costa Rica today as being more democratic than the U.S., a finding that was unimaginable when I lived in Uruguay in 1976.

At a recent talk, our visiting Robert F. Kennedy Professor at Harvard Kennedy School, Dr. Fernando Limongi, presented some new facts about democracy in Latin America today. Since 1989, there have been 136 presidential elections in democracies in Latin America. Of these, 118 presidents completed their terms, but only 6 of these were interrupted by clear coups, while others were impeached or resigned. Despite some of these interruptions, there were no suspensions of the electoral calendars. The struggle for ensuring respect for human rights and democracy embodied in the American Declaration 75 years ago continues throughout the region. ■



Mykhailo Soldatenko

Transitional Justice Fellow, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy;
Visiting Researcher, Harvard Law School

Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine poses a plethora of challenges for the transitional justice field, from criminally prosecuting the Russian political leadership for the crime of aggression to ensuring the payment of reparations to the victims.

One of the complex issues facing Ukraine that received relatively modest attention in policy and legal discussions is how to deal with Ukrainian citizens who helped Russia wage war.

Following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ukraine amended its criminal code to prosecute a sweeping spectrum of collaboration activities with the enemy. The chosen approach is often overinclusive, leading to significant risks of criminal responsibility for people who, for example, performed actions necessary to satisfy the population’s critical or humanitarian needs in the occupied territories or were coerced to cooperate with the occupation authorities somehow. While the approach requires significant calibration, it is equally important that the dangerous collaboration with the enemy is deterred and punished, considering the overwhelming security

risks and public demands to deal with the collaborators effectively. Accordingly, the anti-collaboration policy should strike a delicate balance between reaching the security aims of dealing with dangerous collaborators and avoiding the unjust prosecutions of people in the occupied territories. In addition to respective changes to the criminal code, the combination of criminal prosecutions of dangerous collaborators with administrative lustration (temporary ban from holding public positions) for a broad spectrum of compromising cooperation with the enemy may be a sensible long-term way forward. Together with colleagues from Harvard and the University of Toronto, we explored the lustration route in our *Foreign Affairs* piece. It is important to continue discussions of different dimensions of this issue, as there are no fully baked optimal solutions on the table. ■



Sri Lestari Wahyuningroem

Transitional Justice Fellow,
Carr Center for Human Rights Policy

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights boldly asserts that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”

The transitional justice movement has successfully introduced and expanded the discussion on the interrelationship between accountability, the resolution of past human rights violations, and their relation to democracy and a healthy peace. In the last decade, several measures to resolve past human rights violations have included holding states accountable. For example, the prosecution of state leaders was unimaginable until the 1980s. In other words, the transitional justice movement opened up the realization that state leaders are not immune if they abuse their power against their citizens.

Human rights activists observe that, as long as individuals responsible for violations are not held accountable, there is no incentive to change their behavior or guarantee that they will not be repeated in the future. This is why the accountability of leaders and human rights violators is important, not only for law

enforcement, but especially for setting a standard in society about the need for respect for human rights.

Transitional justice in its early development focused on official state initiatives, particularly prosecution. Later, several other measures also developed, such as truth commissions and reparations. However, many factors contribute to the success or failure of transitional justice in a particular country, such as the nature of democratic transition, or the legacy of authoritarian regimes in the democratic era. It is not uncommon for results to fall short of expectations and even fail altogether, reinforcing impunity. For this reason, a different approach has begun to emerge that looks at civil society grassroots initiatives or bottom-up transitional justice. This approach is generally taken when the state is still in denial about past wrongs or is aimed at bringing about structural change from the injustices experienced by victim groups. ■

Opposite: The International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague in 2019. Image credit: Oude Waalsdorperweg.



Economic Equality



Widening gaps in the distribution of income and opportunity around the world have profound effects on equity, deepening the divides between socioeconomic classes and preventing many from improving their economic status.



Julie Battilana

Joseph C. Wilson Professor of Business Administration, Harvard Business School;
Alan L. Gleitsman Professor of Social Innovation, Harvard Kennedy School

As we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the publication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), we must celebrate this key milestone and all the progress that has been made while also recognizing how much is still to be done in order to secure the dignity and freedom of people across the globe.

As an organizational scholar studying work within organizations, I have seen the critical role that human rights have played, and continue to play, in efforts to shape how corporations conduct themselves.

As our colleague at the Harvard Kennedy School John Ruggie, who contributed to bringing the connection between human rights and business into focus through his work with the United Nations, wisely noted, recent debates on the purpose of the corporation are “an indicator of directional change, if not a final destination.” Indeed, while progress has been made, we remain far from a final destination on the full incorporation of human rights into business practices across the globe. My own research connects most directly to Article 23 of the UDHR, which states that “[e]veryone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.”

In particular, my colleagues Isabelle Ferreras, Dominique Méda, and I launched the #DemocratizingWork global initiative in April 2020. #DemocratizingWork is now comprised of over six thousand scholars and practitioners from around the world. We agreed that if there was one lesson we had to learn from the pandemic, it was that we must collectively place people and the planet back at the heart of our economic and social systems.

To do so, we built on our research and we united around three key principles that could offer a compelling path forward to redesigning our economic systems: first, democratize organizations by giving workers the power to have a real say in the direction of their workplaces; second, decommodify work by ensuring everyone’s right to work is respected; and third, decarbonize the economy to help ensure a healthy environment for generations to come. The UDHR is most directly tied to the second of these principles, the decommodification of work, which our initiative directly grounds in the UDHR’s conceptualization of work under just and favorable conditions as a fundamental right.

But the key insight our initiative leverages is that any one of these three principles (democratizing organizations, decommodifying work, and decarbonizing the economy) alone is not sufficient to drive the fundamental change necessary to address the grave challenges that we collectively face. Indeed, in order to do so, we must recognize that these three principles are interdependent. We will not be able to decarbonize the economy if we do not help workers to transition from polluting industries to greener ones, while ensuring their fundamental right to just and favorable work conditions and enabling them to participate in the process of planning and enacting this societal transition. Human rights are at stake more than ever as we join forces to create a new model of organizing that is more just, more democratic, and greener. ■



Martha Chen

Associate, Mittal South Asia Institute, Harvard University;
Co-Founder and Board Member, WIEGO

Through several articles, the UDHR established the right to work, favorable remuneration, a standard of living adequate to ensure health and well-being, the right to social security, and economic rights indispensable for justice and dignity. However, in today's global economy, these articles have not been upheld, especially in low-income and emerging economies.

The majority (61%) of all workers globally are informally employed: more so in emerging economies (67%) and especially developing countries (90%). The majority of informal workers are self-employed or dependent contractors for supply chains and platforms. The majority are from poor households without adequate health, education, and basic services. By definition, informal workers lack social protection contributions or worker benefits through their work.

Going forward, informal workers and dependent contractors need to be hired or contracted on fair terms with adequate pay. Informal self-employed workers need the right to work in public spaces or their own homes and basic infrastructure services at their workplaces. All informal workers need social and legal protection. ■

(The source for the statistics is International Labour Organization. 2018. Women and Men in Informal Employment: A Statistical Picture, 3rd. Edition.)



Mark Fagan

Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

Human rights abuses are rampant in supply chains. While the world has focused on the consumer aspects of supply chain failures during and post-COVID, less attention is paid to addressing human rights abuses ranging from poor working conditions to child labor to outright slavery.

In Harvard Kennedy School’s course “Supply Chain Management: Climate, Poverty, and Human Rights,” students are exploring human rights abuses in supply chains and how they can be reduced. The students examine the root causes at the macro-level: systemic poverty, migration, and lack of institutional enforcement

of law. At the micro-level, pressure from customers and the quest for profits drive firms to abandon moral principles. The students also explore response strategies being employed ranging from building consumer awareness to shareholder activism to pressuring industry trade groups to seeking legal remedies. ■



Child laborers wash rocks in a gold mine in Morona Santiago, Ecuador, 1990. Image credit: Maurizio Costanzo.



Jeffrey Frankel

James W. Harpel Professor of Capital Formation and Growth,
Harvard Kennedy School

I do not work on human rights, and I am an outsider to academic literature. But I have views. In my view, the language of human rights is not useful for achieving reductions in global poverty. I imagine that only an economist would say such a thing.

There are four ways that I think I hear people use the word “rights”:

(1) First, as a natural law of divine providence: “I know that group X has a right to Y, because God told me so.” Discussion in this case is probably not useful.

(2) “There has been an agreement that people have a right to Y.” If anyone thinks they have been denied the right, they can appeal to some institution—it need not necessarily be written down. I like this second definition the best, even if human rights specialists disagree.

(3) “I propose that Y be made a right.” It is useful to distinguish between a right that has been agreed upon and a proposal that it should be agreed upon. But I won’t be pedantic about this distinction.

(4) “I think goal Y is really, really important.” This is often what people truly mean.

I can’t emphasize strongly enough that I think reducing poverty around the world is the most important economic objective of our time. It should be a top priority. But that doesn’t mean that designating the elimination of poverty as a right is useful. It is an imprecise use of language, to begin with. Moreover, I don’t think it is expedient, and it could even be counterproductive.

Consider now four cases to illustrate the distinction between how important a goal is and whether it is appropriate to use the language of rights:

(1) Something that is truly important and where the language of rights is appropriate. Example: Freedom from torture.

(2) Something that is important, but where calling it a right doesn’t really fit. Example: Safety from auto accidents.

(3) Something that is not important, but where the language of rights is appropriate. In the game of Monopoly, if you pass “Go,” you are entitled to \$200. If this right is violated, you can point to the rules on the box and appeal to the other players.

(4) Something that is not important, and where the language of rights is not relevant. I would like to win a Monopoly game. But winning isn’t a right.

What is the harm in saying everyone has the right to be free of poverty? Why do I say it can actually be counterproductive? One point is that applying rights language too broadly can undermine the credibility of other important rights agreements, such as the provisions in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which we observe the 75th birthday this year.

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The Berlin Wall. Image credit: Immo Wegmann.

Jeffrey Frankel, continued

But the point I wish to emphasize stays inside the sphere of economics: applying rights language to poverty reduction sends the wrong signals to countries as to the most important things they can do to make economic progress.

Three historical examples. First, in the aftermath of decolonization in the 1960s, and as an outgrowth of so-called dependency theory, developing countries demanded a new international economic order. The United Nations General Assembly formally adopted the concept in 1974 and adopted a “Declaration on the Right to Development” in 1986. Developing countries wanted “technology transfer,” financial transfers, and “just and equitable” determination of commodity prices. These nebulous wishes were never going to be realized. In the meantime, they diverted the countries’ attention from what they needed to do to raise the standard of living of successive generations of their citizens: macroeconomic stability, rule of law, and the other best practices that we teach about here at the Kennedy School.

Next, in 1990, Germany reunified. At the time, productivity in East Germany was only 1/3 of what it was in the West. But the government adopted the principle that Easterners were entitled to the same standard of living as Westerners. Specifically, Chancellor Helmut Kohl decided that East German marks were to be converted into West German marks at an unrealistic parity of one-for-one and then pushed for East German workers to get the same wages as West Germans. As an implication, with East German workers 1/3 as productive as their counterparts, unit labor costs started out 3 times higher in the New Lander. The high costs discouraged private investment in the East. This slowed subsequent economic growth there and may help explain why, 30 years after unification, productivity in every eastern state remains lower than productivity in every western state (0.75, on average) and why unemployment remains consistently higher.

A final example. In India in 2005, a new law guaranteed every rural household 100 days of employment each year. Economists have judged this program an inefficient way of shifting income to the poor.

Rights can be wishful thinking. ■



Jason Furman

Aetna Professor of the Practice of Economic Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted, there has been enormous progress in reducing extreme poverty and in people’s access to better health, well-being, and economic security. In 1948, more than half of the global population lived in extreme poverty; today it is about one-tenth.

Global life expectancy has risen from less than 50 years to more than 70 years—with much less inequality in life expectancies between countries than was the case 75 years ago. Global inequality—the inequality between people all over the world without regard to national boundaries—is considerably lower today than it was in 1948.

This has happened less because of reduction in inequality within countries—in fact, inequality within countries is generally higher today than it was in 1948. Instead, it has happened because of a reduction in inequality between countries—particularly, but not entirely, due to the fact that growth has been faster in poorer economies like China and India than in richer ones like the United States and the European Union.

The progress is still incomplete as large parts of the world, most importantly Sub-Saharan Africa, have been left out of much of it. And “extreme poverty” itself is a very limited benchmark—about \$2 per day per person—that falls well below what is needed for a dignified economic life in just about any country in the world. Moreover, in some countries—especially many advanced economies—progress has slowed dramatically as the increase in inequality has

offset any of the benefits of what has been a relatively slow overall pace of growth.

Further progress will require stronger growth and greater economic inclusion, with the ratio of the importance of these two depending on the situation. A country that is growing at 10 percent a year, like both China and India have done in the recent past, can still have a big increase in inequality while doing much better in providing housing and food for its citizens. For the poorest countries in the world, trying to achieve these sorts of growth rates is essential. Economists have increasingly emphasized the many ways in which rule of law, respect for rights—including human rights and property rights—and openness to disruption, rather than permanent control by the political ruling class, are all essential for economic growth.

Higher-income countries could not do anything to raise their growth rates to 10 percent annually and, in many cases, it is hard to imagine them being able to grow even at 2 percent annually. For these countries, reducing inequality is the biggest lever they have to expand opportunity, dignity, and access to food and housing. ■



John Haigh

Co-Director of the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government,
Harvard Kennedy School

In the spring of 2021, the Georgia State legislature enacted a bill that many felt disproportionately restricted the voting rights of people of color. Imagine you are Ed Bastian, the CEO of Delta. Your company flies global routes, you are headquartered in Atlanta, a significant portion of your employees are people of color, and you have received significant tax benefits from the state legislature. How do you respond?

Corporations have an obligation to deliver high performance for their shareholders and other stakeholders—customers, employees, and suppliers. High performance does mean delivering on near-term financial results, and it means taking a longer-term perspective and building the strategic platforms necessary to develop a highly functioning, sustainable business.

But corporations also have an obligation to do so with high integrity, including addressing fundamental breaches of human rights. At a minimum this means adhering to laws. But they should also behave with some measure of their moral obligation to society. The right to vote could be seen as a pillar of our democratic system, and blatant attempts to suppress votes are offensive to our core democratic values. That would be true regardless of whether the votes being suppressed are liberal or conservative. These are difficult tradeoffs within corporations, and it is much more complicated than simply “doing good.” But there are thresholds for moral behavior, and companies do have an obligation to speak up and act when those moral thresholds are crossed.

There are examples where companies have taken a strong stand on moral grounds. Consider apartheid in South Africa and the role corporations ultimately played in changing the system. In the 1980s, American companies, after long quiescence, became more vocal in opposition to apartheid. This was due to strong anti-apartheid sentiment in the United States—stimulated by the moral power of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s—and to the widely publicized attempts by the South African government to suppress protections against discrimination with violence that echoed repressive acts by the Southern states in America.

By the mid-80s, more than 125 American companies had signed the “Sullivan Principles” that committed these global corporations not to follow apartheid: the principles banned discrimination in the workplace and sought to achieve greater pay and supervisory roles for Black workers. Implementation of the principles was, for some years, the benchmark by which U.S. companies were judged in determining whether investors, both in the U.S. and around the world, should divest.

Bus with 'Boycott Apartheid' signage in London, 1989.
Image credit: Al Maghi.



To many critics, however, the Sullivan Principles only meant that international companies continued to operate in South Africa and, in so doing, continued to support the economy and to sustain an apartheid government. By the late 1980s, a combination of international economic sanctions against South Africa, vocal divestment campaigns at visible shareholders like universities, and continued protests and violence in South Africa, led many international corporations, including most American global companies, to exit South Africa. Apartheid ended in 1993.

At its core, for businesses, the issues around human rights involve a combination of corporations acting prudently on behalf of their stakeholders—building the long-term strategic base for their companies. But it also means having a sense of moral thresholds, understanding when those thresholds are crossed, and acting with a sense of purpose to protect the core values of society and humanity. ■



Anders Ditlev Jensen

Associate Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

I did an interview recently, in the context of a Center for International Development initiative, to “summarize and disseminate” my work. I was asked what my personal motivations were for working on tax capacity in developing countries—that is, building an administratively feasible tax system which raises a meaningfully large amount of taxes to fund critical public goods and services while improving equity, minimizing economic distortions, and imposing a tolerable administrative burden.

One of my motivations is that a well-functioning tax system is a powerful tool to curb income, market-based inequality. It is certainly not the only way, but it remains a feasible and effective way (certainly in developing countries, given the constraints on other government policies). But my second motivation is that tax capacity, through the funds it raises, can provide citizens with access to a basic set of public goods and services which, in turn, support human dignity.

In the interview, I said that, to me, it was a human right for all citizens in all countries of

the world to have (economic) dignity, and that the state played an essential role in achieving this. In this regard, I think of my work as potentially helping to secure dignity for all. At the same time, it is crucial to ensure that taxes collected are indeed spent on things which help ensure dignity for all citizens in an equal and unconditional manner.

With a view towards ultimately trying to uphold human rights, these two challenges (tax capacity and spending capacity) are inherently linked and more work is needed to simultaneously make progress on both fronts. ■



Eliana La Ferrara

Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

At its core, development economics seeks to enhance the well-being of individuals and communities, a goal inherently aligned with the principles of human rights. Some of the constraints to development that contemporary societies face are not simply driven by lack of access to resources, but also by social and political factors that limit individuals’ ability to benefit from economic opportunities.

Being interested in the role of social norms and political constraints, my work delves into the very fabric of societies, where human rights are embedded and often contested. Indeed, in my research I have often found that combating the infringement of human rights—in addition to being a desirable goal in and of itself—can be crucial to achieve effective development policies.

For example, harmful gender norms such as child marriage, female genital cutting (FGC), and violence against women persist in many countries despite the existence of laws against them. In recent work, I have investigated whether the abandonment of such harmful practices can be facilitated by the introduction of “mildly harmful” alternatives. On the one hand, these alternatives could serve as potential “stepping stones” toward complete cessation: individuals or communities that would not abandon the practice outright may be persuaded to shift to a sufficiently similar alternative. On the other hand, the risk is that this intermediate option becomes an “absorbing state,” in the

game-theoretic jargon: that is, a new stable equilibrium in which human rights are still violated, albeit to a lesser extent.

Other work I have done focuses on the intricate relationship between mining firms and conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa. In particular, I have studied the reaction of stock markets to the unexpected death of Jonas Savimbi, the rebel group leader in the Angolan civil war, in 2002. This war was the theater of severe human rights violations. Somewhat surprisingly, the stock market perceived this conflict resolution as “bad news” for diamond mining companies holding concessions in Angola. A potential explanation is that, for those firms that had learned how to operate in a conflict environment, the instability created by the war actually provided a sort of “barrier to entry” and also shielded the sector from pressing requests to increase transparency. These findings highlight the need to consider the complex interplay between political stability, corporate interests, and human rights in the evaluation of post-conflict economic landscapes. ■



Matthew Lee

Associate Professor,
Harvard Kennedy School

When thinking about human rights, my instinct as an organizational scholar is to think about specific businesses, non-profits, and government organizations—how do their activities, their leadership, and the way they are regulated serve to exploit or liberate human beings?

Human rights are inseparable from organizations because we live in a society of organizations—we are employed by organizations, consume the products and services of organizations, and are ruled by organizations. Perhaps nobody recognized this with greater acuity than our late Harvard Kennedy School colleague Professor John Ruggie, who spent the better part of his career developing and advocating for normative principles to govern business practices related to human rights.

One of my own research interests is understanding the role of private activism in relation to governmental efforts to encourage businesses to follow human rights principles. Government regulation with regard to business and human rights has come a long way in the last decade, particularly when it comes to human rights reporting requirements. But a lack of resources and political will leads to laws

with insufficient regulatory “teeth,” effectively relying on private, non-governmental organizations to pressure businesses into compliance. One field experiment I conducted in the U.K. found that private activism in the absence of enforcement is ineffective in promoting compliance with such regulation. In short, such laws are necessary but not sufficient in the absence of enforcement.

A hopeful view will see this research as an opportunity for learning and forward progress. We enjoy enormous benefits as a society from the freedoms we grant to private organizations, but in so doing, we also put the individual freedoms of workers and others at risk. We must continue to invest in a clear, evidence-based understanding of what works to affect positive change in both voluntary action and policy design. Then, we must work to implement it. ■



Jane Nelson

Director, Corporate Social Responsibility Initiative,
Harvard Kennedy School

Over the past twenty years, the Corporate Responsibility Initiative has focused its research and outreach on the role of business in respecting human rights and supporting global development goals, including the types of governance structures needed to improve corporate impact, transparency, and accountability in these two areas.

In 2005, our Faculty Chair, the late Professor John Ruggie, was appointed as the United Nations Secretary-General’s Special Representative on Business and Human Rights. John and his small team, including Harvard students and fellows, undertook research, pilot projects and nearly 50 consultations with businesses, governments, and civil society organizations on five continents to develop a framework for better managing business and human rights challenges. In June 2011, the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (the UNGPs) were unanimously endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council. They are based on three complementary and interdependent normative pillars:

- The state duty to protect against human rights abuses by third parties, including business;
- The corporate responsibility to respect human rights;
- The need for greater access by victims to effective remedy, both judicial and non-judicial.

Today, the UNGPs are recognized as the authoritative global standard on business and human rights. They continue to inform actions being taken by governments, intergovernmental bodies, companies,

financial institutions, global sports bodies, industry associations, and human rights organizations. These range from the way the UNGPs are being embedded into voluntary corporate responsibility practices, and industry-wide norms and standards to their integration into legally binding trade agreements and mandatory corporate reporting requirements.

As we mark the 75th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, understanding and advancing the public policies and private sector practices required for effective implementation of the UNGPs is more important than ever. The following three areas of research and outreach will continue to be essential.

Corporate actions. At the level of individual firms, what types of company policies, due diligence processes, incentives, and corporate governance and business models are most effective for embedding respect for people’s rights and dignity into core business activities and value chains? How can the UNGPs be explicitly integrated within and made central to the actions corporations are taking to meet their climate, nature, diversity and equity goals, and their commitments to support the Sustainable Development Goals?

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John Ruggie at Press Conference on Business and Human Rights in Geneva, 2011. The Forum on Business and Human Rights was the largest global discussion to date on how governments and businesses are moving to address the impacts of business activities on human rights.

John G. Ruggie was the Berthold Beitz Professor in Human Rights and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School (2009-2021), Affiliated Professor in International Legal Studies at Harvard Law School, and Faculty Chair of the Corporate Responsibility Initiative. Image credit: Eric Bridiers.



Jane Nelson, continued

Stakeholder engagement. What are the most effective and accountable models of stakeholder engagement by companies and industry organizations, with a particular focus on engagement with “affected stakeholders” whose rights are directly or indirectly impacted by business activities, including human rights defenders. Models may include direct consultation to understand their lived experience, dialogue processes to identify measures needed to address potential harms, and gaining feedback on the effectiveness of these actions, as well as the establishment of credible grievance and oversight mechanisms at the company level. Engagement can also include industry-wide alliances and partnerships with governments, trade unions and nongovernmental organizations to achieve greater leverage for respecting human rights along global value chains.

Public policies and regulations. What are the most effective models for integrating the UNGPs into evolving public policies, regulations, and legislation, including mandatory corporate reporting requirements? As our former senior fellows and co-founders of Shift, Caroline Rees and Rachel Davis, commented in an article they co-authored with Professor Ruggie, “The UNGPs envisaged that a dynamic mix of approaches

by states would be needed to transform how businesses behave on a global scale. This included both mandatory and voluntary measures—encompassing everything from authoritative guidance for business, to positive incentives, to sanctions and appropriate forms of liability. It also included measures at both national and international levels. This expectation has begun to gain momentum.” There are important lessons to be learned and shared as more governments integrate the UNGPs into mandatory measures, such as the EU’s Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive and national and state-level legislation to prevent child labor, forced labor, and modern slavery in corporate value chains.

Despite the progress that has been made by public, private, and civil society organizations to implement the UNGPs, we are reminded daily of business-related rights abuses. There is a crucial ongoing need for scholars and practitioners to work together, both in holding companies to account for their impact on people’s rights and dignity, and in working constructively with the companies, financial institutions, and industry initiatives that are committed to playing a leadership role in respecting human rights. ■



Richard Parker

Emeritus Lecturer, Harvard Kennedy School;
Senior Fellow, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy

Have human rights been important to my Harvard teaching over the past 30 years? Yes. But the reason why is at once personal, professional, and pedagogical.

I was born in late 1946, just as Eleanor Roosevelt and her UN colleagues began drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As I came of age in the 1960s, the murders of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were searing—and defining—moments. Well before the words “human rights” gained currency, their underlying ideals led me in college to both civil rights and anti-Vietnam War work. Then, through my friend Ginetta Sagan, I became an early “human rights activist” for a fledgling Amnesty International. Soon after, as a young journalist and cofounder of *Mother Jones*, I admiringly reported President Carter’s proclaimed “human rights” refocus of foreign policy (but then soon enough became a critic of his inconsistencies in Central America and Iran).

My switch from journalism and politics to teaching at Harvard re-centered the idea “human rights” for me in a new way. I’m an Oxford-trained economist whose Keynesian teachers had underscored the ways “human rights” avant la lettre shape developing economies. At Harvard, friendships with Amartya Sen, Ben Friedman, Columbia’s Joe Stiglitz, and—perhaps most importantly—John Kenneth Galbraith re-cultivated in me that sense of economics, not as a hard “science,” but as an art in the most sophisticated sense—technical, yes, but also aesthetic and moral.

Working for Senator Kennedy in the late 1980s before coming to Harvard, I had traveled extensively in the collapsing Soviet Empire. I had been appalled by the human costs of Soviet economics—and then found myself a

vehemently vocal critic of “shock therapy,” the remedy several Harvard economics colleagues were pioneering as the one-size-fits-all “solution” after Communism’s collapse. The fiasco of Yeltsin, the disastrous human costs of Russia’s economic collapse, and the consequent rise of Vladimir Putin were shock therapy’s collateral damage.

My disagreements with the shock therapists—and its underlying assumptions about the omniscience and omnipotence of “markets”—proved foundational to my teaching. Six years later, after the Millennium Development Goals were launched in 2000, they became an important second pedagogical leg for me because they made a human-rights-based economics for the enormous developing world as important as it had been for the collapsing communist world.

With each new crisis, from the Great Recession to the COVID shutdown, I’ve been able to introduce what I think of as “human rights economists” and their work to appreciative students: from Amartya Sen’s work on human “capabilities”, to the pioneering work of Thomas Piketty and his colleague; to Raj Chetty’s by-now massive data analysis on the costs of our still-growing inequalities; and of course to Angus Deaton’s poignant exploration of our soaring “deaths of despair,” i.e. deaths that affix individual human faces to abstract inequalities data.

Human rights, in other words, have been central to my teaching of economics and economic policy. I can’t imagine my teaching otherwise. ■



Dani Rodrik

Ford Foundation Professor of International Political Economy,
Harvard Kennedy School

The UDHR pointed the way to a different kind of globalization, one that might have put labor rights and working conditions on the forefront of global economic cooperation. Instead, under the Bretton Woods regime, we got a trade and foreign investment-centered globalization that left labor rights entirely to domestic policy makers and to national political settlements.

This was not entirely a bad thing. Those advanced democracies where the governing coalitions practiced some form of social-democratic Keynesianism did pursue strategies that were broadly beneficial to labor. Wages and working conditions generally improved in those settings. This was even true of the U.S. until the mid-1970s. But in many other countries, such as natural resource exporting countries or those pursuing export-oriented industrialization based on cheap labor, labor rights were repressed—or at least remained secondary. So, until the 1980s, the picture was a mixed one for the world as a whole.

In the 1990s, we moved to a different phase of the global economy, which I have called hyper-globalization. The social-democratic consensus evaporated in the advanced countries and international corporations got the upper hand. The threat of offshoring production became a vehicle through which wages and labor rights could be repressed everywhere. Some countries (and China in particular) managed to use the world economy strategically to foster rapid economic growth—and eventually rising wages—but the broader context of labor rights was hardly encouraging.

We are now at yet another turning point in the global economy. The Biden administration talks about a worker-centered globalization. This is a positive change. But whether we will come closer to achieving the full potential of the UDHR remains to be seen.

The period since the 1990s was one where income gaps within countries rose practically everywhere. The sole exception was Latin America, the most unequal region in the world, where inequality remains high. But divisions in society went beyond income gaps; there was also an increase in social, cultural, and political gaps between the winners in the new, hyper-globalized economy, and the losers or laggards. These gaps in turn enabled authoritarian, right-wing populists to gain ground in many countries. Paradoxically, international integration produced national *disintegration*.

The only way we can address this is by rebalancing our economic priorities. This entails putting good jobs, the climate transition, and re-integrating the lagging regions and segments of the workforce at the center of our economic policies. ■



Jay K. Rosengard

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Harvard Kennedy School

In many low-income countries, most households and businesses do not have access to formal financial services. Low-income families and microenterprises lack the same financial services required by the top of a country's economic pyramid, namely: bank payment services for domestic transfers and foreign remittances; bank savings instruments for income smoothing and asset accumulation; bank loan products to generate additional income and investment; and financial risk management tools like health and crop insurance to decrease vulnerability to external shocks.

Consequently, they are compelled to use more expensive and less effective semi-formal and non-formal financial services. The unbanked majority's lack of access to formal financial services deprives it of financial tools essential for generating the economic gains of higher income families and larger firms. This takes place in the widespread context of substantial increases in GDP with concurrent widening of income and wealth gaps, a significant macroeconomic cost of financial exclusion.

In contrast, an inclusive financial system ensures equal opportunity to utilize services essential in managing household and enterprise finances

regardless of income level or size of business, a fundamental human right in creating a nation of shared prosperity. Efforts to make financial systems more inclusive entail innovations in financial product design, delivery, and regulation compatible with the unique characteristics of these neglected but potentially profitable markets. Successful financial inclusion initiatives mitigate financial marginalization by promoting economic empowerment of the excluded, enabling full participation of all in a nation's economic growth to generate more equitable and sustainable development. ■



Mark Shepard

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Harvard Kennedy School

The right to healthcare sits at both an essential and a uniquely challenging place within the human rights lexicon. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognized that access to medical care is a key part of the “right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.”

Nearly all high-income countries have enacted this right through some form of universal coverage in a compulsory national health insurance system. But in the U.S. context, the right to healthcare has been controversial because of its association with specific reforms on the political left, including the Obamacare reform passed in 2010 and Sen. Bernie Sanders’ “Medicare for All” proposal. Because of its political polarization, U.S. society is still divided on whether there is a right to healthcare, much less how it should be enacted.

As a health economist who studies the challenge of universal coverage, I find three observations helpful in this issue. First, access to basic healthcare is a human right that is widely recognized and acted upon, even when it is not legally codified. Even in the U.S., where almost 30 million people officially lack health insurance, a large “safety net” health system cares for the uninsured, at a cost that is 60-75% as high as in formal health insurance. But this system is chaotic and stressful for both patients and doctors. Our best evidence suggests it leads to meaningfully higher financial distress and premature mortality.

Second, governments can implement the right to healthcare more efficiently and fairly if they enact a coherent system for universal health insurance. Such a system ensures automatic coverage in basic health insurance, with no need to pay premiums or fill out complex paperwork to get enrolled. Health coverage would be a right and a given, rather than a burden and a hassle.

Third, the institutions of universal coverage vary with national context and can allow for a significant role for both governments and markets. For instance, Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands all provide universal coverage through private health insurers that compete in organized markets. Australia and the U.K. provide universal public coverage but allow (and often encourage) people to buy add-on private insurance to pay for extra care. Universal coverage is not one-size-fits-all.

The reality of a right to healthcare, and the efficiency and equity of universal insurance systems suggests that the U.S. is ripe for reform. The wide range of global models suggest that—if politicization can be overcome—the U.S. can find a path to universal coverage that fits our national values and history. ■

*Emergency room, VCU Medical Center West Hospital.
Image credit: VCU Libraries.*



Historically Marginalized Groups

There are many subsets of the population around the world who have experienced historical difficulties in enjoying the full spectrum of human rights, including women, LGBTQ peoples, people with disabilities, and imprisoned peoples.





Diego Garcia Blum

Social Change Fellow, Center for Public Leadership,
Harvard Kennedy School

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights predates the birth of the modern LGBTQ rights movement, and yet it is a statement that encapsulates the essence of its shared aspirations—for LGBTQ people to live with dignity, in freedom and security, and protected from discrimination.

These ideals created a framework through which LGBTQ people could communicate their own struggle with themselves and with the world. The set of policies usually associated with LGBTQ rights—discrimination protections or same-sex marriage—are simply the legal means to assert the rights outlined in the declaration. This is why, as Secretary Clinton said, “gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights.”

Over the past two decades, notable progress has been made in LGBTQ human rights in North America, Western Europe, and some parts of Latin America. However, even in these places, there are still gaps in discrimination protections, ongoing disparities in the well-being of LGBTQ youth, and active movements opposing these rights—especially for transgender people.

Unfortunately, progress in these regions has also sparked a backlash in places where LGBTQ acceptance is scarce and often criminalized. Most alarming is a new set of laws that aim to outlaw LGBTQ advocacy. In May of 2023, Uganda passed a law that not only outlawed LGBTQ advocacy, but also identifying as LGBTQ. Similar laws have been introduced in legislatures all over the world. In some countries, existing laws that outlaw same-sex relationships are now being used to suppress advocacy as well.

These repressive measures are often rooted in myths, misconceptions, and misunderstandings about LGBTQ individuals, including beliefs that being LGBTQ is a choice, a condition that can be “fixed,” a Western invention, or an immoral social

influence. In many places, these misunderstandings go unchecked, spreading from leadership and amplified by the media. Identifying and dispelling these myths is necessary in safeguarding the rights of LGBTQ individuals. The concerted effort to challenge these myths involves not only highlighting the inherent falsehoods but also emphasizing the understanding that sexual orientation and gender identity are natural aspects of human diversity. This recognition underscores the urgency for education and awareness campaigns that foster a more inclusive and accurate understanding of LGBTQ lives.

Even in the most challenging situations, advocacy becomes a beacon of hope. Progress in the Global North resulted from courageous individuals who shattered centuries of collective silence to share their truths. These activists risked everything to narrate their stories and champion their human rights. In countries where advocacy is entirely prohibited, acceptance of LGBTQ individuals remains critically low with minimal signs of improvement. It is crucial for the international community to safeguard the right of LGBTQ individuals to freely express and advocate for themselves everywhere and protect them from violence perpetrated by society and state.

Academics, human rights advocates, diplomats, and leaders must fervently work to dispel the falsehoods that stigmatize LGBTQ individuals. By dismantling these misconceptions, we can pave the way for a society that respects and upholds the human rights of LGBTQ individuals, free from the shackles of unfounded biases and discriminatory ideologies. ■



Iris Bohnet

Albert Pratt Professor of Business and Government;
Co-director, Women and Public Policy Program, Harvard Kennedy School

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 was a major achievement for humanity, including women. “Women’s rights are human rights,” as Hillary Rodham Clinton and many others have said before me.

It would take more than two decades before women in my home country, Switzerland, were granted the right to vote in 1971, but the expansion of women’s voting rights across the world certainly was key to women’s advancement in the 20th century. In addition, many countries moved towards equal treatment under the law, for example, granting women the right to own property.

The other two milestones of the last century were the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the international treaty adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by 189 countries at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. These both launched important efforts towards closing gender gaps in health (including reproductive rights), education, political participation, and economic opportunity around the globe. The global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) provided an additional push in 2015 with Goal 5 focused on gender equality.

Finally, the growth of social movements across the world has been a catalyst for gender equity, from women’s rights uprisings in Iran to the #MeToo movement started by activist Tarana Burke in the

United States. #MeToo, for example, shed light on sexual violence by encouraging survivors to speak out, had ripple effects in many other countries, and is testimony to the power of social movements.

Data suggests that we have made much progress in closing gender gaps in education and health, including increased enrollment and retention of girls in educational institutions and improving healthcare access for women and girls. This is not to say that this work is done or that the world has not experienced backlash. Think of countries such as Afghanistan, where girls’ education now is limited to the first six grades and child marriage has increased, and the United States, where the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, ending the constitutional right to abortion.

However, overall, gaps in education and health have narrowed the most across the world. In contrast, women’s advancement in the political and economic spheres has been slow. Disparities in wages between men and women persist in basically all parts of the world (with Iceland and other Nordic countries having made the most progress). EPIC, the Equal Pay International Coalition, reminds us that, despite the Equal Remuneration Convention of

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First Lady of the United States Hillary Rodham Clinton giving her speech at the United Nations Fourth World Congress on Women in Beijing, China, 1995. She said, "If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, let it be that human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights, once and for all." Image credit: Sharon Farmer, White House Photograph Office.



Iris Bohnet, continued

1951, pay equity has not been achieved, and much more work is required to successfully address discrimination, bias, occupational segregation, and gender differences in career advancement. Across the board, women remain underrepresented in positions of leadership and power, affecting not only their income but also their influence in society. Better policies allowing people to combine work and family are needed, including parental leave and flexible work arrangements. In addition, the world has only made limited progress in combatting gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual assault, female genital mutilation, and human trafficking.

While this is not an exhaustive list, I will conclude by pointing out the need to collect data to better understand and address the experiences of all humankind, including how sex, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, age, disability, religion, nationality, and many other characteristics intersect and affect people's lived experiences. Technological developments such as AI pose both new opportunities and new challenges for gender equity. This is where a human rights approach is urgently needed. Only if we first agree on acceptable standards and then test and evaluate the impact of new technological tools to make sure they meet our agreed-upon norms before they are unleashed on society (much like we test new medications in clinical trials), will AI be able to make all of our lives better. ■



Brooke Ellison

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MPP '04, Harvard Kennedy School

“Nothing about us, without us.” This centuries-old demand was resurrected in the 1990s as the centerpiece of the disability rights movement. At the heart of this rallying cry is the idea that persons with disabilities must be included in decisions, policies, and conversations that affect them. Although this request is simple in its logic and articulation, it has proven difficult in its acceptance and execution.

The list of policy measures and social positions devoid of disabled people's voices is, unsurprisingly, much longer than the list of those that have included them. People with disabilities have existed as the pariahs and the stigmatized. More so than perhaps any other population, social construction has shaped the understanding of people with disabilities. For example, for many years, disability was understood to be an exclusively medical issue: the manifestation of some health-related state of unwellness, making people with disability the regrettable or substandard version of the physio-normative, able-bodied individual. Although society has subsequently learned the false correlation between physical impairment and physical unwellness, the logical consequences of such visions of disability take no great insight or fortune-telling abilities to predict, and the stigma with which people with disabilities have been living is an artifact of this social engineering.

The status of people with disabilities was neither a prescriptive outcome nor an accident. When people are understood to be the evildoers or the cursed, the unwell, contagious, or the vulnerable, policies to marginalize these people are not only likely but seemingly necessary. History has born this idea out, time and time again. The passage and ratification of the Universal Declaration

of Human Rights (UDHR) in December 1948 was a humanitarian triumph combating this very idea. The UDHR made a resounding statement that atrocities like genocide and systematic annihilation of people ought to be categorically prohibited on an international scale. The disregard for human life and the debasement of human value that gave rise to these atrocities were the byproduct of several lines of insidious social thought, most prominent among them eugenics.

Eugenics gained traction by putting many people, but most significantly people with disabilities, in its crosshairs. Eugenics' proponents argued that civilized societies had a responsibility to preserve the sanctity of the social fabric through policies encouraging the marriage and procreation of the “fittest individuals,” thereby minimizing the presence of those considered to be genetically inferior—most notably, people with disabilities. Calls for the prioritization of “fit individuals” quickly became synonymous with calls for the eradication of unfit individuals, and it was not long before prominent social thinkers, public intellectuals, and policymakers broadened this idea to include more extreme human rights abuses perpetrated against disabled people, such as state-sanctioned institutionalization, forced sterilization, euthanasia, and genocide.

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Brooke Ellison, continued

The passage of the UDHR marked a critical transition in the recognition of human dignity. True achievement of this vision could not happen without including people with disabilities, who represent 15% of the global population (1 billion people). Consequently, following the UDHR's passage, organizations, like the UN, attempted to elevate the lives of disabled people. For instance, the UN named 1981 the International Year of Disabled Persons, which culminated in the World Programme of Action Concerning Disabled Persons (WPA). This plan called for national, regional, and international orchestration to equalize opportunities for disabled people, and rehabilitate and prevent disabilities, with the goal of establishing "full participation and equality" for people with disabilities. Critical understandings came out of this work, including that "equalization of opportunity" was a concept rarely ever considered relevant to disabled lives, and that disability should no longer be considered an isolated issue but, rather, a part of services and protections provided to everyone.

When we think about "disability issues" we frequently think about issues that are somehow unrelated to the general population, and the human rights discourse is no exception. Although the protections and freedoms called for in the UDHR apply to all of humanity, people with disabilities have long experienced disproportionate deficits in these freedoms, and this reality has existed as an afterthought. Human rights conversations and disability rights conversations have, instead, existed in separate but parallel realms, undermining our efforts at inclusion and shared humanity. When we approach disability as a separate conversation, we

view fundamentally human issues as "special issues," and we absolve ourselves of both the responsibility and the privilege of developing communal and universal interventions that make human rights attainable for everyone.

After 75 years of progress in human rights, the work to integrate disability and human rights continues. The road has been long with much distance ahead, but there are growing signs of hope and progress. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which grew out of the WPA, made significant inroads in combating the moral and medical interpretations of disability, and has taken a valuable sociocultural and human rights perspective that centers the needs of disabled people as part of a larger human rights conversation. The CRPD has placed a long-overdue human rights frame on disability. But we need to do more, in more ways that include people with disabilities not as the social detriments they have been understood to be but, rather, as the vital and valuable parts of the social fabric that they are. As we commemorate and celebrate the 75 years since the passage of the UDHR, may the next 75 years be with this critical shift in thinking at its fulcrum.

Not "nothing about us, without us," but "nothing without us." This is and ought to be the vision of disability rights in the decades ahead. Human rights are not separate from the lives of people with disabilities but are part and parcel to them. Disability rights are not an entity unto themselves that we can either choose or not choose to pay attention to depending on societal preference. Disability rights are human rights, and one cannot meaningfully exist without the other. ■



Francis Hartmann

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In 1948, at the time of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, prisoners in the United States were not acknowledged to have rights. In effect, they had none. In 2023, their rights are acknowledged. In the history of prisons in the U.S., there were those, who by reason of benevolence or pity, advocated for better treatment of prisoners.

Most often, the focus was not on this person here and now, it was on who this person might become if reformed. The person themselves was chattel. There was no discussion of the imprisoned person having rights. That is no longer so. There has been a positive trajectory away from non-recognition and neglect towards the acknowledgement of the rights of prisoners as human beings.

In the 1950s, the Nation of Islam pursued freedom in the practice of their religion within prisons. This generated the conversation about prisoners having rights rather than being commodities. Prisoners were no longer to be dealt with only as prison policy makers and prison administrators wished, with the only boundary being whether the administrators could act without fomenting a revolt within the prison. In 1964, the Supreme Court ruled that state inmates have the right to sue under the

Civil Rights Act to redress wrongs done to them. In 1976, the Supreme Court ruled that prisoners have the constitutional right to adequate medical care. In 1983, the Court ruled that prisoners have the constitutional right to be free from cruel and unusual punishment.

There are arguments about how beneficial the effects of the prisoners' rights movement have been. That work and dialogue will play out over time. More important is that these persons are human beings and, as such, have rights. It is no longer about how progressive or altruistic the state is. These persons have rights.

The trajectory towards prisoners' rights [in the United States] is a manifestation of the Martin Luther King Jr. dictum that "[t]he arc of the moral Universe is long, but it bends towards Justice." The work is far from finished, but it is about human rights, not about benevolence. ■



Maria Kuznetsova

Scholar at Risk,
Carr Center for Human Rights Policy

I am a human rights defender and democratic activist from Russia. The greatest lesson I have learned so far is that violence never remains confined to the space you initially allow it. Russian civil society has been actively raising awareness internationally about human rights abuses inside Russia for about two decades. In parallel, Georgians and Ukrainians have been forcefully and persistently highlighting their own struggles against invasions since 2008 and 2014.

Through Russia's example, we have seen that the global community has long employed an "appeasement of the dictator" tactic—cooperating with Putin even after the murders and assassination attempts on opposition leaders, the closure of independent media and human rights organizations, and the attacks on Georgia and Ukraine.

Like many other human rights defenders, I cannot return to my home country due to a possibility of imprisonment. I had to leave Russia before the invasion of Ukraine. Most significant pro-democratic organizations were either shut down or labelled as foreign agents well in advance, with many opposition leaders arrested months before February 24th. Such an attack is not possible without first eliminating any opposition that can protest domestically. Talking to many international leaders in the months before the invasion of Ukraine, I saw a huge reluctance to act. This inaction proved costly for humanity as a whole. So, here is

what I want to say: violence never stays inside. Violence won't stay in Donbas, Abkhazia, or the Xinjiang Uyghur region; it will spread far beyond "deathworlds" when authoritarian states feel they will go unpunished. I strongly believe that world leaders should stop dividing dictators into "ours" and "theirs" and see authoritarianism as a global threat, especially in a century of rapid technological and economic growth, where new surveillance and control technologies make peaceful regime change even harder.

We should closely listen to human rights defenders and support them—they are the litmus test of society, sensing first when society begins to ail. At this stage, the worst consequences can still be averted, but this requires decisiveness, collaboration, and international pressure. The UDHR proclaims universal rights that apply to all humans without discrimination. Now, more than ever, we should support those on the frontlines of human rights defense. ■



Erich Manser

Digital Accessibility Consultant,
Harvard Kennedy School

As a person with a disability, I find it challenging to objectively assess the 75 years of global human rights efforts since the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). On one hand, the general status of disability in society appears to have progressed, and those of us with visible disabilities seem more likely to be viewed as having inherent value and dignity. On the other hand, disability as a topic remains difficult for many people to talk about, often meaning it is therefore overlooked or avoided.

Even in the early text of the UDHR Preamble (Article II), disability is not listed among protected characteristics, but is rather inferred with a catch-all (e.g. "or other status"), which is still how it frequently gets included today. This creates the perception of disability as being a "second-class" status, while failing to properly recognize the broad spectrum of human ability, upon which each of us will undergo variability and change over the course of our lifetimes.

The net effects become clear when we look at how persistently disability unemployment remains way above the overall average,

despite laws enacted to counteract this, or at how a majority of websites are still not accessible to disabled users nearly 25 years after global standards for equitable access were introduced.

While a Universal Declaration of "the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" is admirable, it will never deliver on its full potential if any one of our marginalized populations is not explicitly named. ■



Michael Ashley Stein

Executive Director, Harvard Law School Project on Disability;
Visiting Professor of Law, Harvard Law School

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is an unparalleled milestone—the pathbreaking foundation of global human rights laws and practices—and justifiably should be celebrated. Nonetheless, the UDHR is not universal as to what identity attributes it enumerates as specifically protected from discrimination, relegating the unlisted remainder to an omnibus “other status” category.

The choice of what groups to enumerate are in harmony with both contemporaneous and subsequent understandings of human rights insofar as disability was consigned to “other status,” if it was considered at all.

My time over the past two decades as co-founder and executive director of the Harvard Law School Project on Disability (www.hpod.org) has focused on bringing persons with disabilities, who number some 1.3 billion individuals worldwide, within the ambit of international human rights law protections. These efforts include participating in the drafting of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; testifying to the UN Security Council in support of what would become Resolution 2475 on the protection of persons with disabilities in armed conflict; advocating for recognition of disability within the Sustainable Development Goals; contributing to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’ draft General Comment on situations of risk; preparing legal submissions to the Inter-American Court on climate change and disability; actively consulting with governments on their disability laws and policies; working with disabled peoples’ organizations and non-governmental organizations in over forty countries; advising

an array of UN bodies and national human rights institutions; bringing landmark disability rights litigation globally; and producing well over 200 pieces of related scholarship. I am also extremely fortunate to teach related subjects at Harvard Law School, Harvard Kennedy School, and Harvard Medical School.

All this is enormously positive, and yet many challenges remain to achieving universality. For example, there seems to be little appetite among those drafting the developing UN treaty on crimes against humanity or the evolving UN treaty on business and human rights to include disability. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, as manifested through the annual COP conferences, has yet to designate a disability constituency. And the process of moving toward a UN treaty for the protection of older persons—a group with significant empirical overlap with the disability community, and another effort to which HPOD contributes—has been glacially slow, leaving older persons to seek their rights as individuals protected via “other status.”

So, there has been much progress towards making the UDHR universal, but much still remains to be achieved. ■



Tina Kempin Reuter

Director, Institute for Human Rights; Director, Social Science and Justice Research;
Professor, Political Science and Anthropology, University of Alabama at Birmingham

A human rights approach to technology dictates that access and inclusion are at the forefront of discussions around usage, development, and implementation. For example, with regard to persons with disabilities, there is no doubt that technology has made a difference in their quality of life.

Video sign language interpretation, captioning, screen readers, telehealth, e-governance, and accessible emergency services have revolutionized access for people with disabilities. Mobile technology, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and sensors have the potential to remove barriers and serve as tools for persons with disabilities to escape social isolation, enable them to communicate and collaborate, reach independence and self-determination, achieve better health outcomes, and participate in political and social discourse.

The arrival of technology has revolutionized access for persons with disabilities to a wide range of services, enabled them to customize their work environments, and allowed their participation in global, national, and local governance through collaborative virtual networks. At the same time, technology can never be a simple answer to marginalization because, even when technology is made available to marginalized groups, what usually happens is inclusion in the margins while underlying issues of marginalization remain unaddressed.

For people with disabilities and other underrepresented groups, political power, social status, income, education, and labor-force participation are generally good predictors of access (or lack of access) to technology. In this case, overreliance on technological tools can contribute to the digital divide and reinforce already-existing social divisions, patterns of structural violence, and power relations.

Further, access to technology strongly depends on the type of disability. While assistive technologies for deaf and hard of hearing, blind and visually impaired, and mobility-impaired people have been mainstreamed and have flourished in recent years, solutions for people with intellectual, developmental, and psychosocial disabilities lag far behind. Tech companies consider accessibility to be a small outsider market even though innovation and investment in this sector has been shown to have wide benefits to consumers without disabilities (e.g., older people).

Moreover, the absence of laws and policies in combination with attitudinal barriers and the stigma attached to marginalization contribute to the continued exclusion of disability-related topics in mainstream technology development. A human rights approach to technology dictates that these issues be addressed. Technology is not by definition “human friendly,” empowering, or, as tech companies often argue, apolitical. Technological solutions that do not include an equity and inclusion lens and that see people, especially those at the margins, as obstacles to innovation and implementation, exacerbate social problems and lead to human rights violations. However, if diverse stakeholders, including those at the margins, are involved in all parts of the planning, creation, and implementation process, technology can truly benefit and provide solutions for marginalized groups. ■



Sarah Wald

Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

As Hillary Clinton notably affirmed in her 1995 speech in Beijing, “[w]omen’s rights are human rights.” And so, on this 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is useful to look back at those 75 years on gains made by women and on where we still need to focus.

In many ways, the history of women’s moves towards equality, particularly in the last century in the United States, has been “two steps forward, one step back.” It is undeniable, as noted recently by Nobel Prize laureate Claudia Goldin, that in the last 50 years or so, there are many ways in which “... women won.” In so many realms—the workplace, electoral and community life, military service, social and civic spheres, personal freedoms, and a greater range of life options—women have made huge gains. Women’s participation rate in the labor force (ages 25 to 54) was 77.6 percent in May 2023 (in 1950, the overall rate for women was 34 percent). In 2023, the participation rate of mothers of children under 18 years old was 75 percent. In 2021, 58 percent of college students were women. Twenty-eight percent of Congress currently is women (in 1971 it was 3 percent) and women are increasingly leaders in the public sphere as mayors, college presidents, business leaders, artists, and scientists.

But progress is not a straight line. It is true that since 1986, the Supreme Court has recognized that sexual harassment in the workplace is an employment equity issue with legal protections; it is no longer a “personal” issue unrecognized by the law. But, as the “MeToo” movement showed, sexual harassment is still endemic and hard to root out of the workplace. Women are no longer routinely fired from their jobs when they become pregnant. Yet, at the same time, the U.S. is far behind its global neighbors in providing paid family leave and supporting childcare. Many more occupations and careers

are open and welcoming in the more junior levels to women, but with women comprising, e.g., only 22 percent of equity partners in law firms, and roughly 10 percent of CEOs in Fortune 500 corporations, the highest levels of many professions are disproportionately male.

Especially troubling is the attempt to roll back reproductive rights in the U.S. with the *Dobbs* decision in which the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*. The one optimistic trend from this huge loss is the commitment and stamina of women who have turned from the courts to the legislative arena and have worked for state constitutional protections to secure these rights, all of them successful so far.

The reasons for the rocky pace of progress in women’s rights are complicated and nuanced. Just a few factors include the divisions among women on many issues related to equality (as Claudia Goldin notes, differences among women as to their positions on women’s rights are greater than the differences between men and women), and what Stanford Sociologist Cecelia Ridgeway notes as the “sticky” problem of unequal household labor which seriously affects women’s equality outside the family.

The Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School is a tireless resource for research and outreach promoting effective human rights policies worldwide. The refusal to forget that those are also—and always—women’s rights is a powerful tool in the move forward. ■



Demonstrators at the 2017 Women's March on Washington in Washington, D.C. According to organizers, the goal was to “send a bold message to the new [Trump] administration on their first day in office, and to the world, that women’s rights are human rights”.
Image credit: Vlad Tchompalov.

Security and Migration



From threats to national and international security to the migration of groups across national lines, our shared borders have the potential to surface many human rights issues at the citizen and national levels.



Dana Born

Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

Preserving and protecting human rights stands as the cornerstone of the United States military's ethos. While the vast majority of service members uphold these principles, there have been isolated cases where the ethical conduct of a few clashed with the military's long-standing commitment to safeguard the human rights of all. In these instances, accountability and transparency are crucial towards restoring what is right, and the military's reputation as a moral force for good throughout the world.

During my tenure at the United States Air Force Academy, faculty members returning from deployments integrated their experiences into classes, aiming to instill a "whole person" standard in cadets. This approach focused on preparing future leaders to navigate operational environments without compromising fundamental principles of armed conflict. Notably, my service in Afghanistan involved mentoring Afghan counterparts and advocating for basic human rights, especially in supporting Afghan women to aspire to a life where they might enjoy the same rights as women elsewhere.

My leadership approach prioritizes authentic leadership over the traditional transactional model, emphasizing values, ethical behavior, and recognizing the humanity in every individual. This aligns with the core principles

underpinning human rights, advocating for the dignity, rights, and freedoms of all individuals. My research and writings further delve into the intersection of leadership, character development, and the fundamental role of human rights within these realms.

In Harvard Kennedy School's Senior Executive Fellows program, tailored for high-ranking professionals, human rights find a pivotal place in the curriculum. We emphasize ethical leadership, decision-making, policy formation, and governance that uphold and respect human rights. Through discussions, case studies, and specific modules, the program addresses human rights as a critical component of principled public leadership and effective policy implementation. ■



Gordon Hanson

Peter Wertheim Professor in Urban Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

Although most democratic countries consider freedom of movement within national borders to be a basic human right, freedom of movement across borders is much more contentious. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) encompasses the right of egress (the right to move abroad and to return from abroad) but not the right of ingress (the right to enter and to reside in another sovereign nation), except to seek asylum from persecution.

Tight entry restrictions in high-income nations, which are permissible under the UDHR, have enormous consequences for global material well-being. The typical individual who migrates from a low-income nation to the United States, for instance, sees their real income increase by a factor of four. Perhaps the strongest argument against embracing the right of ingress is that freer international migration, even if it would raise global average well-being, would plausibly reduce the living standards of at least some destination-country citizens. Yet, existing precedent indicates that adverse distributional consequences would not preclude incorporating the right to ingress as a basic human right.

The United Nations has not shied away from endorsing human rights provisions that have direct consequences for the material well-being of individuals in a society. The UDHR includes articles that assert positive freedoms to enjoy an education, favorable work conditions, social security, and protection against unemployment, each of which imply tax and regulatory burdens that substantially change the distribution of income within a nation. The right to ingress would be another such positive freedom. By endorsing a right to ingress only for those who qualify for asylum, the United Nations is silent about what is perhaps the most effective individual strategy for raising one's standard of living. ■



Joseph S. Nye, Jr.

Dean Emeritus, Harvard Kennedy School;
Author, *A Life in the American Century* (Polity Press, January 2024)

Realists sometimes complain that human rights interfere with American power in the harsh world of international relations. However, a sophisticated realist understands that, in addition to hard military and economic power, the soft power of attraction is also important. And human rights not only define us as a people, but they can also enhance our soft power.

Survival and security are not the only important aspects of world politics. Polls show a majority of Americans also want the United States to pursue altruistic, humanitarian aims internationally. Many Americans have a general sense of a human community and support a foreign policy based, not just on international legal obligations, but upon moral considerations. While foreign aid in general is not popular, public support for international economic and public health assistance was strong enough for presidents to consistently maintain such policies. For example, George W. Bush's initiatives related to AIDS and malaria in Africa stand out as moral policies which enjoyed such support. The extent of Good Samaritanism may be limited, but contrary to the skeptics' views, helping others is one of the foreign policy objectives for which American presidents have found public support.

There is more contention when verbal or economic support for human rights, or curtailment of military sales to a country such as Saudi Arabia, offends authoritarian leaders and obstructs other aspects of American foreign policy. Such disputes over values are normal and to be expected in a democracy. Americans have a degree of cosmopolitan concern about human rights in China or Myanmar, but human rights and democracy promotion cannot be the sole focus, as Jimmy Carter discovered. Foreign policy involves trade-offs among many objectives, including liberal values. Otherwise, we would have a human rights policy instead of a foreign policy.

Trade-offs among priorities and objectives are at the heart of an effective foreign policy, and this creates problems not only for our human rights values but also for our soft power. Nothing dissolves soft power more effectively than charges of hypocrisy. The result is that human rights are an essential part of foreign policy, but their effective inclusion is never an easy task. ■

Opposite: Administrator of USAID Samantha Power traveled to East Africa in July of 2022, in a region where unprecedented drought pushed millions to the brink of starvation.

USAID is an independent agency of the U.S. government that is primarily responsible for administering civilian foreign aid and development assistance. With a budget of over \$27 billion, USAID is one of the largest official aid agencies in the world and accounts for more than half of all U.S. foreign assistance.



3.

The Future of Human Rights

The human rights movement must continue to evolve with the changing demands of our society, especially in the face of changing political systems around the world, rapid advancement of technology, and the looming threat of climate change.

Shifting Political Systems

As political systems around the world become more polarized, and in the face of waning democracy and rising authoritarianism in many nations, it is imperative to understand how these changes will affect global human rights frameworks.



Jeeyang Rhee Baum

Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

Scholars and policymakers view corruption as a major barrier to economic and human development, as well as to good governance. There is little disagreement that corruption has a detrimental impact on the protection of human rights. Corruption not only leads to violations of specific human rights, but also represents a structural impediment to their protection.

To control corruption, countries throughout the world and international organizations have dedicated resources, passed laws and conventions, and set up anti-corruption institutions. However, such efforts have been met with mixed results at best, and corruption scandals around the world continue to topple governments and threaten political stability.

The connections between corruption and government performance—in democracies and autocracies—are complex and not

well understood. Anti-corruption reforms sometimes may even inadvertently undermine democracy, by, for example, facilitating greater cronyism. Corruption hinders the human rights of all individuals in a society, but vulnerable and marginalized groups may suffer disproportionately. To the extent that corruption undermines a state's ability to provide public services essential for the realization of human rights—like the rights to health, education, and an adequate standard of living—anti-corruption efforts remain as crucial as ever. ■



Archon Fung

Director, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation; Winthrop Laflin McCormack Professor of Citizenship and Self-Government, Harvard Kennedy School

The UDHR was one of humanity's milestone achievements. Its global affirmation of the preeminent importance of human dignity has guided and constrained the behavior of governments, international organizations, advocates, and, most importantly, the major and minor tyrants who would violate individuals' rights for the sake of their own aggrandizement.

It is common to conceive the progress of human rights as marching in tandem with democracy's expansion—freedom against authoritarianism. But many assertions of rights diminish democracy's scope. A right to housing, for example, requires someone to provide housing for every individual. The resources required for that provision as a matter of right are no longer available for a democratic society according to its values and priorities. A strong right to freedom of expression, as constitutionally required in the United States, is commonly understood to restrict democracy from prohibiting hateful speech (as distinct from direct threats or incitements to violence).

Many societies rely upon courts and judges to protect rights against encroachment by democratic majorities. But when they do so, they raise what John Hart Ely called the "counter-majoritarian difficulty": how can it be that a tiny number of people (e.g. the nine members of the U.S. Supreme Court) over-rule the will and the judgment of many more (e.g. the 300 million or so people in the United States)? This is the question that those on the pro-life side of the abortion debate have asked themselves since *Roe* was decided in 1973. It is also the question that progressives ask themselves about the wide protection for gun rights and the reigning interpretation of the American Constitution that largely prohibits the regulation of money in politics on the ground that contributing and spending money in campaigns is a form of speech and so a protected right.

As we see in the case of reproductive rights, court-mandated protection can undermine the legitimacy of a right, and ultimately its stability, by precipitating social and political backlash. In the summer of 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned its 1973 *Roe* ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. Removing women's constitutional right to choose abortion sparked intense debates in many states and in the country as a whole about how extensive reproductive choice should be. Since *Dobbs* was decided, voters in California, Vermont, Michigan, and Ohio have entrenched reproductive choice in their state constitutions. Voters in three more states used direct democracy to strengthen reproductive rights. But legislatures in many states have also restricted access.

For rights to be truly secure, they must be ingrained in our hearts as well as guarded by our jurists. This first-best path of rights that are championed by democratic majorities rather than imposed upon them is never easily achieved and sometimes out of reach. But history shows many examples in which the advance of democracy and rights go together: women's suffrage in 1920, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Perhaps the fundamental contribution of the UDHR was to inscribe those aspirations in the hearts of everyone around the world. ■



Doug Johnson

Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

“UDHR Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” Although there is much progress to celebrate after 75 years, the widespread use of torture by Russian soldiers in Ukraine evokes the wildest nature of human cruelty.

Some would argue that the use of torture was an expedient search for information that armies need when fighting a fast-evolving war. Yet, the evidence from Bucha and many other areas liberated from Russian forces indicates that this was no precision instrument but rather a tool of spreading fear and terror to control occupied peoples.

There was a time of optimism that the norm prohibiting torture was widespread and secure. President George H.W. Bush even prepared to throw down a challenge at the World Human Rights Conference in 1993 to lead a campaign to finally end torture completely by the year 2000. The panic induced by 9/11 moved the U.S. in a 180-degree turn with American officials justifying cruelty to gain information quickly and devaluing the Geneva Conventions as quaint and old-fashioned. We learned that torture yielded no uniquely useful information. But it led other

countries to follow our lead and effectively damaged America’s standing in the world. Although acknowledging that torture was used, the failure of the Obama Administration to hold the architects and perpetrators of torture accountable for breaking national and international law further weakened America’s soft power.

Perhaps the Russians learned that they need not hesitate to use torture as a tool of their foreign policy. The country that would have been first to criticize its practice no longer had the moral standing to protest.

That these two powerful nations violated the spirit and letter of the UDHR is a reminder the struggle for rights is not won. Like freedom itself, every generation must enter the fight to move our societies from ideals into practice. ■



Alex Keyssar

Matthew W. Stirling Jr. Professor of History and Social Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

Although political rights are often regarded as distinct from “human rights,” Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights maintains that everyone “has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.” This right will be exercised “in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”

Notably, the two previous articles (19 and 20) of the Declaration proclaimed the importance of other rights commonly deemed essential to democracy: freedom of opinion and expression, as well as freedom of association and “peaceful assembly.” The 1948 Declaration, in effect, proclaims that everyone has the right to live in a democracy.

Given the division of labor (and labels) that characterizes the academic world, I have generally not identified myself (or been identified) as a human rights scholar. Nonetheless, my research and teaching, for the last quarter century, have been focused on the evolution of democracy, and democratic rights, in the United States and around the world.

In 2000, I published the first edition of *The Right to Vote*, an exploration of the complex and contentious history of that right in the United States; since that time, I have been engaged in numerous efforts

to protect voting rights in this country. More recently (2020), I published *Why Do We Still Have the Electoral College?*, an attempt to explain why the U.S. has retained a presidential election system that violates fundamental democratic norms (e.g., “equal suffrage”). I have taught courses on these subjects at HKS and also teach an international course about the up-and-down history of democracy across the globe from the golden age of Athens to present-day.

One of the themes of that course (and of my writing) is that the history of democracy is not unidirectional, that there are advances and contractions in political rights, that many democratic regimes fail—and are replaced by authoritarian governments of one type or another. Indeed, we find ourselves currently in a period when many democracies (and perhaps democracy itself) are under pressure and not faring very well. Faded into memory are the

continued on the following page

Voting rights demonstrators at the 1963 March on Washington. The march, which was attended by a quarter of a million people, was the largest scale civil rights protest yet held in the United States. Image credit: Marion S. Trikosko and the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division.



Alex Keyssar, continued

halcyon days of the 1990s when western political analysts and politicians were broadly confident that democracy and democratic rights would prevail everywhere—or nearly everywhere. Instead, we inhabit a world where some democratic regimes have been overturned (not a new phenomenon) and there is backsliding in many others, often as a result of unsatisfactory economic performance, resurgent nationalism, and (relatedly) the stresses of ethnic and religious differences, intensified by widespread flows of mass migration.

This backsliding does not necessarily (or even commonly) involve the cancellation of elections or condemnations of democracy. Instead, what is happening is the loosening of constraints on those who wield government power and the chipping away of institutions, norms, and rights that

make genuine democracy (and competitive elections) possible: restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly; the undermining of a free press and an independent judiciary; a reluctance to grant citizenship or voting rights to long-term immigrant residents (or even to minority groups); the removal of key offices from democratic control; and the dominance of electoral campaigns by monied interests with ties to dominant political factions.

If these trends are not reversed—and if history is any guide—one can expect that other human rights, as articulated in the Declaration, will find themselves under siege as well. Democracy cannot guarantee that all human rights will be universally respected, but its absence—or erosion—bodes ill for the principles that the United Nations embraced in 1948. ■



Liz McKenna

Assistant Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

To live a flourishing life, humans need dignity, agency, and power. In my work, I try to understand what makes those essential features of our full humanity possible, and I repeatedly find the answer in democratic organizing.

To take a few examples from Brazil, rural landless and urban homeless workers—dispossessed groups with limited access to the resources we would expect to determine success—have built powerful social movements that have transformed key environmental, housing, and educational policies. To only focus on their policy wins, however, is to miss what distinguishes them from the episodic mass mobilizations that have come to dominate the 21st century.

Inclusive, self-governing, social movements that forge solidarity across lines of difference and wield power strategically over the long haul are precious and rare. Their absence, in my view, goes a long way toward accounting for why democracy—and therefore human rights—remain in such precarious positions in many places around the world. ■



Rural landless worker in Brazil. Image credit: Cicero R. C. Omena.



Rana Mitter

S.T. Lee Professor of U.S.-Asia Relations,
Harvard Kennedy School

One of the most notable effects of greater Chinese involvement in international organizations, such as the United Nations, is a shift in the definitions of human rights. China’s leaders have been keen to argue that economic well-being is the “first human right,” and individual civil liberties are, by implication, secondary to this. Greater wellbeing is, of course, essential for human flourishing. But the current Chinese position doesn’t reflect its own history.

When P.C. Chang, one of China’s most important modern philosophers, was part of the process that produced the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he was quite clear that the Confucian tradition included concern for the individual’s rights, not just those of wider society (after all, part of that tradition is about self-cultivation of the individual to become a better, more moral person). The Communist Party itself debated these issues over the twentieth century, with the feminist writer Ding Ling making a powerful case in the 1940s that women’s rights could not be regarded simply as a subset of class-based rights. Mao silenced her eventually, but that did not make her point any less important—and

her successors are behind phenomena such as the online feminist assertion of rights in the 21st century (such as the “rice rabbit” online movement of 2018—that phrase is pronounced Mi Tu or “me too” in Chinese).

Of course, China’s governmental position on economic rights is worth listening to, because of the country’s success in reducing poverty since the 1970s. But China’s own history—and present—shows that the desire for individual rights of self-expression, political dissent, and choice of identity (gendered, ethnic, class-based) is not something imported from abroad—it is part of China’s revolutionary history, and it is part of its global present. ■



Célestin Monga

Visiting Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

The main reason for the disappointments and constant uneasiness about the Democratic ideal is the trilemma preventing its full implementation. It is indeed impossible for any society to achieve ethical democracy, as stated for centuries by political philosophers and theorists and codified in a set of general principles by the international community since the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while also having efficient political institutions and giving full voice to all the people’s choices (through universal suffrage).

These three objectives are impossible to achieve simultaneously.

Protecting human rights for everyone is certainly a worthy human goal, if not a noble illusion. But it will always come at a very heavy cost. The reason is that human rights and democracy rely on a set of (largely fictional) characters: well-informed, educated, and politically engaged citizens; an independent and ethical—if not infallible—

judiciary; benevolent political entrepreneurs working towards the common good while protecting the individual rights of those who disagree with them; and a robust and trusted media that is constantly shedding light on all the uncomfortable truths regardless of their own political affiliation and sources of funding. Humans can send smart machines to other planets, but they have not yet created these four characters to uphold universal human rights. ■



Mark H. Moore

Research Professor,
Harvard Kennedy School

For the last 50 years, I have been developing the concept of “public value” (and an analytic framework called the “strategic triangle”) as a guide for public leaders trying to improve environmental, economic, social, and political conditions. I began talking about “creating public value” as the goal of government in the era of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

In defending the value of government as an institution, the idea of public value ran counter to the rising tide of radical libertarianism. The term was intended to be a direct rhetorical challenge to a new right-wing orthodoxy.

The central concept was “value” because both the right and the left of the political spectrum used this word to justify government action. The right demanded concrete evidence that the government was producing something of value—tangible results rather than feckless aspirations, false promises, and failed initiatives. The left wanted a government that would pursue conditions consistent with the moral values of a “great society”: an end to poverty, improved healthcare for all, equal educational opportunity, etc.

The word “public” was important because it insisted on John Dewey’s idea of an articulate public that could speak to the question of what would be good and just for all—not just individuals, interest groups, or ideological factions. Calling into existence a public capable of understanding and acting on its own interests and values as an interdependent whole was the essential challenge of

democratic governance, and the main reason to distribute political rights to individuals. When asked what constituted public value, I usually focused on the dimensions of value that seemed to be at stake with respect to a particular public problem, taking care to incorporate concerns about justice and fairness at both the individual and aggregate social level. I proposed a “public value account” as an alternative to cost/benefit analyses that measured individual-level material benefits and economic and financial costs with minimal attention to concerns about effects on individual rights, or economic, social, political, or environmental justice. Unfortunately, nobody seemed prepared to implement such a tool. In seeking a more solid basis for my ideas, I turned to a document to which I had previously paid only cursory attention: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Therein I found an extensive answer to the question of what constituted public values—both substantive and procedural—worth treating as rights regulating our relationships with one another and directing our collective attention to the conditions in which we lived.



While most political debates about public policy seem to focus on what kinds of material benefits ought to be provided to needy or marginalized populations, and how efforts to do so could affect economies and the status of the relatively privileged, these concerns are relegated to only a few points in the UDHR. Most of the document focuses instead on what we should reasonably expect from and owe to one another, and what we might aspire to as a good and just society beyond increases in prosperity (however distributed among individuals and classes). In this respect, the document seems more fully human than our usual instrumental calculations about fitting ends to means and calculating the net value of a given initiative in economic or financial terms.

Above: Pennsylvania Army National Guard and Food Bank temporary staff pack boxes of food at Monroeville Convention Center in May 2020. Image credit: Governor Tom Wolf.

Recently, an article entitled “Public Value is Unknowable” appeared in the journal *Public Administration Review*. I agree, insofar as we define “knowable” as objectively demonstrable through some kind of universally accepted evidence and logic.

But if we stay with the idea that what constitutes public value is a question that hangs over every public policy choice, that question gains power by demanding a contingent answer that includes concerns about justice for individuals and society as well as welfare by the usual metrics.

The UDHR is a great reference point to begin answering that question. ■



Gautam Nair

Assistant Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

One way a political scientist might evaluate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is to ask: would the world have been worse off had the UDHR never been written and ratified?

The wars, genocides, atrocities, and crimes of the decades that followed the Declaration's signing might suggest that it has been a paper shield, and that power and interests have invariably triumphed over values. I believe that this view is misguided and underestimates the power of ideas. The Declaration created a vocabulary and agenda for activists and political entrepreneurs to hold governments of all stripes to account for the protection, dignity, and inclusion of the vulnerable and destitute.

Success should not be measured against the lofty standards of our ideals but considered in light of the imperfections of the real world of limited political possibilities. India, the political context I am most familiar with, illustrates this claim. Human rights have often been ignored or violated in a vast and fractious polity that has contended for decades, and indeed from its inception, with ethnic and economic conflict. Yet, the articulation of these rights in a democratic context has arguably limited coercion and violence and created a framework for the peaceful resolution of disputes, not only through political settlements, but also through redistributive programs of employment, food, and welfare that have addressed some of the underlying causes of these conflicts.

Political outsiders often promoted these programs using the language of rights (to employment, education, or food, for example) before they were championed by parties and governments. India ought to shed some of the legacies of a coercive colonial state and fully embrace individual rights (alongside responsibilities) to build a better democracy.

If there is one worry I have about how its well-wishers (especially in the West) have sought the realization of the Declaration, it is that they have sometimes over-emphasized the vote and civil society, to the neglect of effective states and political parties. Chaos, disorder, and ineffective government can sometimes be a graver threat to human rights. Nevertheless, upon re-reading the UDHR, I was struck by its ambition ("universal") and its vision of a better world. Its drafting and ratification required political entrepreneurship and hard work. In a world threatened by nationalism and conflict, I am happy to celebrate this 75th anniversary and hope that this extraordinary document steers us towards a better future. ■



Meghan O'Sullivan

Director, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs; Jeane Kirkpatrick Professor of the Practice of International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School

This is an opportune moment to reflect on the relationship between human rights and American foreign policy. Not only is it the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but the world is also moving into a new geopolitical landscape. After thirty years marked by broad cooperation between powers and progressive economic integration, the world now faces much greater fragmentation and geopolitical uncertainty.

The conversations of the last decade about how to shore up the liberal international order have given way to a sense that that order is less likely to be repaired than it is to be supplanted by something yet to be defined. At this time of shifting power, many are eager, or at least willing, to jettison some of the institutions and architecture that have defined the global arena since 1948.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, fortunately, has weathered this shift from a largely cooperative international environment to a more deeply competitive one, where the risks of great power conflict are real. But it is reasonable to ask what role human rights and dignities play in an era dominated by intense competition between the United States and China. Realists may argue that human rights and values need to take a back seat in American foreign policy in order to ensure that the United States is able to secure its interests in these prickly times.

Yet, in practice, it would be a mistake to downgrade the importance of human rights and other such values at this time, for many reasons. For example, the building of broad coalitions will be central to America's ability to counter China in areas where its influence is seen as inimical to its interests. Countries will not be motivated to join and sustain such coalitions if they perceive the purpose is solely to shore up American power. Instead, they will be moved to protect and advance a system underpinned by certain norms and values of which the protection of human rights has been essential.

Maintaining the protection of human rights as central to American foreign policy in an era of great power competition does not mean that U.S. policy cannot be supple enough to meet the complex challenges of the time. The Cold War period is replete with examples of how American presidents and policymakers can both champion values and negotiate with regimes that do not respect them at the same time. This new era is likely to require the same approach. ■



John Shattuck

Professor of Practice in Diplomacy, Fletcher School, Tufts University;
Former Senior Fellow, Carr Center

Attacks on democracy in Europe and the United States have been stimulated by a surge in anti-democratic populism. Populism is rooted in economic rebellion by people left behind due to the loss of jobs, stagnating incomes, austerity programs, and cuts in social welfare, all of which are the by-products of globalization from which elites are seen to be benefiting.

It is also rooted in cultural rebellion by people who feel threatened by minorities, outsiders, and refugees whom democratic elites have been seen to be promoting.

These rebellions have deep roots in three forms of disruptive economic and social change. First is the market revolution aimed at stimulating economic growth by deregulating the economy and drastically cutting government spending on social security, resulting in unprecedented levels of economic inequality. Second is the civil rights revolution, which strengthened democracy by broadening the participation of previously excluded groups, but which sparked a counterrevolution by the dominant white, mostly male former political majorities. Third is the digital

revolution, which has created a vast increase in communication, leading to the rise of social media echo chambers and the spread of disinformation.

These three revolutions have fundamentally altered the playing field of democracy. Market deregulation has led to a loss of shared benefits of economic growth and huge inequality between the top 10% and everyone else. Backlash against the civil rights movement has led to the toxic politics of racism, sexism, and bigotry. And the explosive growth of social media has led to a loss of common narratives based on facts and truth, and the spreading of lies and propaganda. These developments have combined to stimulate populist-nationalist attacks on democracy in the U.S. and Europe. ■



Stephen Walt

Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs,
Harvard Kennedy School

Conceived and written in the shadow of a horrendous conflict, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is a monument to humanity's efforts to limit the tyranny of the strong over the weak and defenseless. That its ideals have yet to be fully realized should not lead us to disparage the hopes that inspired it and the efforts of its defenders.

Yet, one must still ask: why has humanity failed to live up to the Declaration's lofty principles?

For starters, the Declaration extols the rights of individual human beings and makes no distinction among them. But human beings are not atomized individuals; we are social animals with a powerful tendency to privilege our own group over others. A declaration proclaiming universal rights is thus in some tension with each nation's tendency to put its own citizens and interests ahead of others'. Moreover, these same principles can also be used to justify ambitious crusades against any government that fails to respect them.

Furthermore, security is often precarious in a world where no agency or institution exists to protect states from each other. Governments of every kind will ignore well-intentioned declarations and well-established norms

if they believe that adhering to them might leave them vulnerable.

It follows that getting states to respect human rights is not the road to peace; it is peace that will make them more inclined to respect rights. When states are at war and fearful for their own survival, they will violate human rights norms with depressing frequency. Sadly, this is true for liberal democracies and autocracies alike. When states are not at war but still feel threatened by foreign rivals, they are more likely to crack down on dissenters, spy on their own citizens, torture perceived foes, and infringe on other liberties, justifying all of these actions as regrettable necessities.

Accordingly, the best way to make the ideals of the Universal Declaration a reality is to do more to build a peaceful world. ■



Yuri Maximovich Zhukov

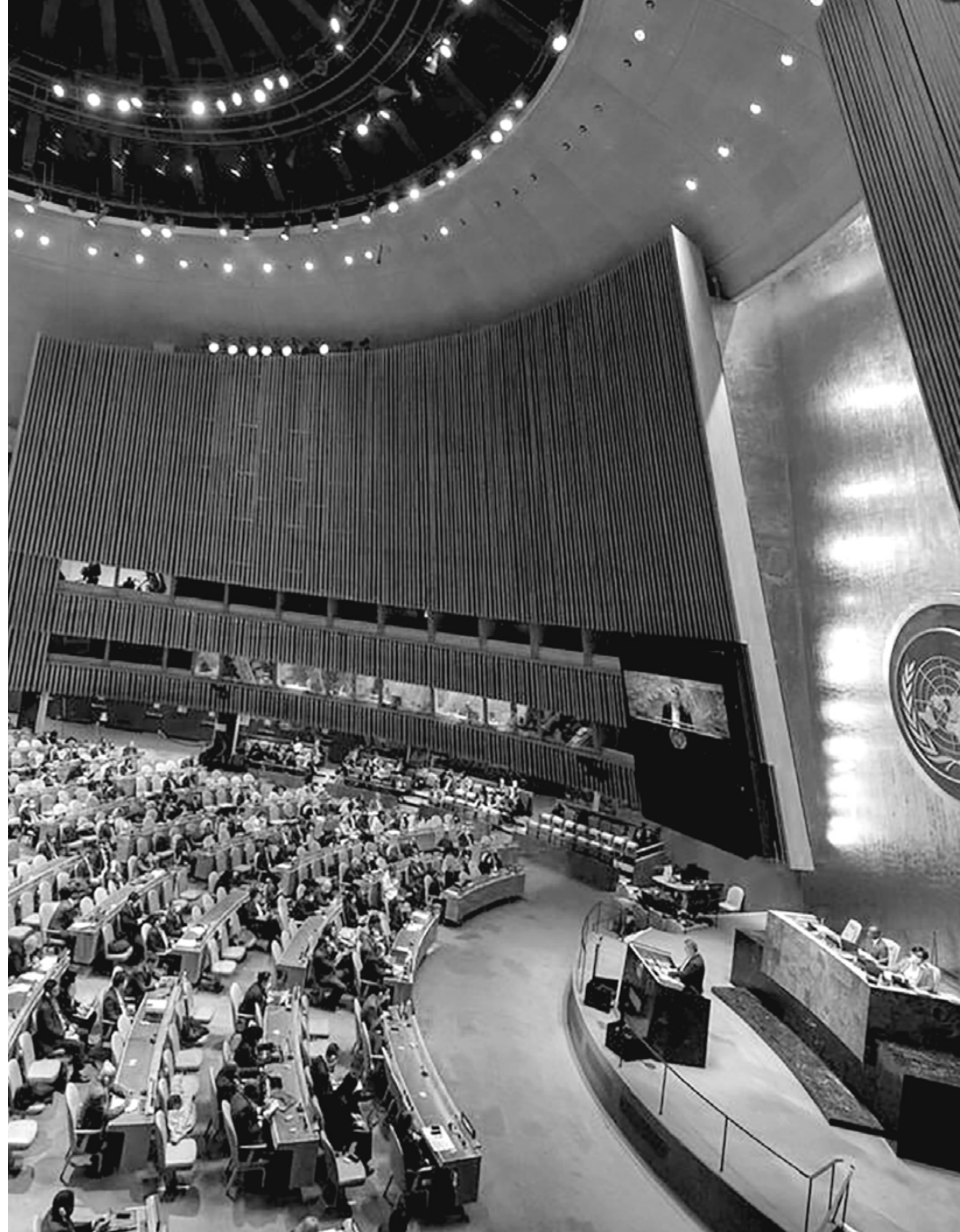
Visiting Associate Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

I study political violence, armed conflict, and repression. As such, my research focuses on many of the actors who created a demand for this Declaration—through their actions before and during World War II—and on actors who continue to violate the spirit and text of the Declaration to this day.

It is tempting to view this open disregard for human and civil rights as evidence that declarative, non-binding documents cannot deter or constrain behavior. Yet, the same actors who flout and mock the Declaration through their deeds often go out of their way to hide the Declaration from public view. The Soviet Union arrested dissidents

for distributing the text of the Declaration, and Russia has arrested anti-war activists for similar activities. These efforts suggest that, at a minimum, repressive regimes see the ideas embedded in this document as a threat to their legitimacy. It is easier to violently cling to power when one's subjects are not aware of their rights. ■

Opposite: The United Nations General Assembly Votes to Suspend Russia's Membership in Human Rights Council in April of 2022. Image credit: UN Photo/Manuel Elías.



Advancing Technology



Technological advancements have inevitably profound implications for the human rights framework. While, in many scenarios, technology can help move the human rights agenda forward, there are even more instances where technological developments have equal capacity to undermine human rights efforts.



Alexandra Belias

Technology and Human Rights Fellow, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy;
Head of Product Policy and Partnerships, Google DeepMind

The phenomenon of AI-generated disinformation is growing and, with it, so are concerns around the spread of illegal and harmful content. One key concern is how this could impact elections, especially as in 2024 we'll be seeing major elections in the U.S., U.K., E.U., India, etc. There is a risk that bad actors could now be able to generate false and misleading information more quickly and at a greater scale, and that they can create more personalized and targeted forms of disinformation.

The question is what mitigations could be put in place. Technical solutions are being developed to identify AI-generated media, but they would benefit from being standardized via initiatives such as the Partnership on AI's Responsible Practices for Synthetic Media.

These technical solutions are not a silver bullet, and it will be important for government, industry, and civil society to work together to define the goals and desired technical attributes of provenance standards. ■



Sheila Jasanoff

Pforzheimer Professor of Science and Technology Studies,
Harvard Kennedy School

The relationship between science, technology, and human rights is embedded in the oldest myths of Western civilizations, from Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden because they ate the forbidden fruit of knowledge to Prometheus' fateful decision to bring fire to humankind.

Implicit in these stories is a paradox that lies at the heart of moral inquiry in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS): how can we ensure that expanding the frontiers of knowledge and toolmaking will emancipate rather than hurt or enslave humanity? STS embraces the notion that knowledge and technologies which are good for humanity should protect the fundamental pillars of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)—dignity, liberty, equality, and brotherhood—not diminish or compromise them.

One strand of concern in the field of STS, therefore, centers on points in the development of science and technology where potentially harmful consequences get embedded into the very facts and designs that emerge from making and applying knowledge. These can be extraordinarily diverse. The causes of rights-endangering development that reduce equality or damage brotherhood can range from deliberate acts to carelessness or institutional blindness. For example, promoting crop biotechnology based on scientific demonstrations of safety may seem justified from the standpoint of feeding the world population or fighting climate change. Yet, the failure to consider the impacts of a technology that favors industrial-scale agriculture at the expense of small farmers may have disproportionate effects on people's economic rights, as well as their right to a safe and healthful environment. Through ideas such as "responsible research and innovation" or "upstream risk assessment," STS seeks to

identify the reasons for designers' possible narrowing of vision, and thereby to build a wider concern for human rights into the early stages of technology development.

STS, however, is also concerned with problematic shifts that may occur when developments in science and technology impinge on the qualities that make us human. In this respect, the field tracks the UDHR's focus on dignity and liberty. Will the expansion of research on lab-created embryos or the generation of machines that displace human interaction reduce our respect for human dignity and the freedom to develop our personalities through our own choices? These concerns draw STS into exploring the theoretical foundations that justify the rights protected by the Declaration—as an adjunct to more conventional traditions in moral and political theory.

Last but not least, STS is concerned with the future, as both science and technology operate in human lives to articulate and empower destinies not within the reach of our predecessors. As long as inequality remains a stubborn foundation of our social world, the capacity to imagine and confect alternative futures is not equally distributed around the world. To give voice to human aspiration—an urge that surely animates the UDHR—one should note explicitly, as STS does, that the right to anticipate good futures is itself an ethical obligation that we owe to one another as members of the species that we call "human." ■



Hong Qu

Adjunct Lecturer,
Harvard Kennedy School

Throughout the pandemic, as a Chinese American, I was stigmatized and glared at by strangers: passengers sitting next to me wanted to change seats and Uber drivers refused my ride requests.

Wherever I went, I sensed anti-Asian hate from a few passersby upset at me for somehow causing "kung flu" to ruin their lives. Such blatant racial profiling radically altered my research in Artificial Intelligence (AI) fairness.

AI, as conceived by entrepreneurs and engineers, will inevitably reinforce injustice arising from colonialism, racism, and other forms of stigmatization which otherize people perceived to be inferior. Many tech executives excuse their products' harmful output by emphasizing that their platforms mirror flaws in human nature and society. They confidently put on their technosolutionist blinders hoping for the advent of an AI superintelligence with robust data, processing power, and self-supervised learning.

In view of these grandiose prognostications, we need to ask: What happens to human rights when AI determines how we live our lives?

Algorithms already influence our beliefs, purchases, and life chances. For instance, search engines and social networks amass, mine, predict, and curate personalized content by comparing our behavior with trillions of data points from billions of users. Hate speech runs amok online, propagating violence against marginalized groups in real life.

Unless computer scientists concede the misguided vanity of using inherently biased historical data to compute an imaginary utopia, they can't live up to their social responsibility. Without guidance from humanists, the arc of history will veer to a flatline because software code locks in values from the past. Thus, AI systems preclude the realization of Article 7 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Biased AI poses tremendous risk to fundamental rights and social justice. Although machines apply rules impartially, human developers are morally fallible and neglect historical context, dictating self-serving terms for AI to determine winners and losers and solidify their—and their customers'—privilege in society.

In my opinion, AI poses a barrier to the enactment of universal human rights. For example, we cannot depend on generative AI to dissuade people from stigmatizing and marginalizing minorities, no matter how cleverly a chatbot dramatizes the "veil of ignorance" reasoning to urge its interlocutor to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. In other words, AI won't sway us from sinning. Humanity climbs a steep incline to equalize and uplift people who have been persecuted, oppressed, and disadvantaged. It is up to us—not some hypothetical, moral AI—to collectively acknowledge injustices of the past, reconcile with the need for affirmative algorithms to counteract complex legacies of internecine conflict and mutual obligation, and to insist on inclusion and belonging for all while vigilantly condemning discriminatory, derogatory, and harmful behavior committed by humans and AI alike. ■



Ayushi Roy

Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

Federal, state, and local government agencies are responsible for delivering critical services to Americans in need. Yet, billions of dollars in public benefits fail to reach millions of vulnerable families every year. Instead, the human rights to food, water, shelter, healthcare, and just working conditions are negotiated daily.

Technological advances in the public sector were initially focused on enabling a "digital front door" and improving the delivery of critical services—the administration of government programs changed in nature from in-person offices to paper correspondence, to online forms, and even mobile applications. The rapid growth of AI and Large Language Model (LLM) might allow some of these programs to leapfrog previous delivery challenges, digest tomes of regulations, and expedite eligibility screening for benefits.

However, the introduction of new products, software, and technologies has also accompanied an uptick in new frameworks for governance. The mantras of iteration, continuous improvement, modular development, silo-breaking cross-functional teams, and user-centered design reveal the opportunity of modern

product development practices to improve not only what is delivered (an app or a tool) but how public agencies think about implementation. Constituent-centered product thinking is now the first step to reshaping a U.S. social safety net designed of, by, and for our people. Continuous Integration and Continuous Delivery (CI/CD) practices are now transposed to inform the value of feedback loops between policy design and policy implementation.

Across the \$350B in State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, \$500B in the Inflation Reduction Act, \$1.2T in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and \$2.2T in the CARES Act, the U.S. has more money set aside now for implementation and for families than ever before. Building in the public interest is about more than building lines of code, it's about building public trust and dignity. ■



Soroush Saghafian

Associate Professor,
Harvard Kennedy School

To understand the promises and risks of technological advancements, we shall first comprehend that we live in a “technopoly.” In a technopoly—a term popularized by Neil Postman in his 1992 book *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*—society is characterized by an unmindful faith in the inherent goodness of technology.

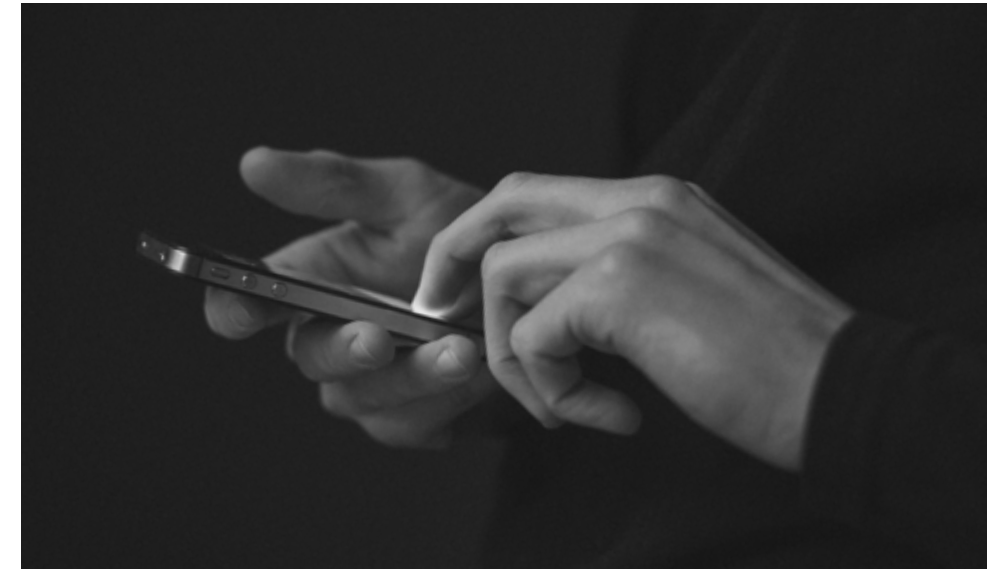
It is, therefore, not surprising that in a technopoly, discussing the risks of technological advancements is often taboo. As technology advances, civilians and scholars often observe a mixture of promises and risks concerning human rights. Promises are unbounded and include improved quality of life, enhanced education and awareness, increased rates of social mobilization, and superior expression and communication, among others. While the promises are unbounded, so are the perils. One of the perils arises from the fact that many decisions that affect our daily lives are being increasingly made by highly nontransparent algorithms. These algorithms are now widely accessible to many working in the field of AI and Machine Learning. I teach many of these algorithms to my own students, showing them their incredible performance in various domains. Being nontransparent here does not mean that we cannot comprehend them or teach our students how to develop or use them. Rather, it means that their rules of reasoning are often not clear to various stakeholders, including their users or those affected by them.

Notably, it is a significant human rights concern when one’s life is affected by an algorithm with nontransparent rules of reasoning. As the privacy law expert Marc Rotenberg argued during a Knowledge Café

event organized by UNESCO, “at the core of modern privacy law is a single goal: to make transparent the automated decisions that impact our lives.” Emphasizing a human rights concern, Rotenberg reminded the audience that “[a]t the intersection of law and technology, knowledge of the algorithm is a fundamental right, a human right.”

Although the digital revolution has made the use of AI technologies capable of transferring large amounts of data into actionable decisions more important than ever, the overall trend has been less-than-desired. In fact, while early bestseller books like *The Naked Corporation* (2003) discussed that transparency would soon alter all aspects of the economy and markets, we are facing paradoxical outcomes, such as what the philosopher Shannon Vallor calls the “Technological Transparency Paradox.” Summarizing this paradox, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* notes that:

“Those in favor of developing technologies to promote radically transparent societies, do so under the premise that this openness will increase accountability and democratic ideals. But the paradox is that this cult of transparency often achieves just the opposite with large unaccountable organizations that are not democratically chosen holding information that can be used to weaken



democratic societies. This is due to the asymmetrical relationship between the user and the companies with whom she shares all the data of her life. The user is, indeed, radically open and transparent to the company, but the algorithms used to mine the data and the 3rd parties that this data is shared with is [sic] opaque and not subject to accountability. We, the users of these technologies, are forced to be transparent but the companies profiting off our information are not required to be equally transparent.”

The rapid advancements in Generative AI, and especially Large Language Models such as OpenAI’s GPT-4, Anthropic’s Claude, Google’s Bard, and Meta’s LLaMA 2-Chat, have intensified the concerns related to transparency. This is particularly the case because these so called “foundation models” are primarily built using highly nontransparent AI methodologies such as “transformers.”

But transparency is not the only human rights concern when it comes to recently developed AI tools. These tools can be used for the rapid spread of disinformation, which can undermine democratic processes, foment social division, and endanger individuals’ basic rights to access genuine information. They can also exacerbate inequalities, especially given

that access to them is unevenly distributed, leading to a significant digital divide where marginalized communities are left deeply behind. These tools could also displace large swaths of the workforce, leading to colossal economic instability, challenging the right to work, and threatening a minimum standard of living for many.

Finally, these tools can lead to significant discriminatory outcomes, potentially reinforcing existing social inequalities and violating basic rights to equity and non-discrimination.

In a technopoly, therefore, it is vital to carefully balance the enthusiasm for technological progress with critical oversight and well-designed regulations to ensure that advancements do not violate various aspects of human rights. In closing, however, I would like to end on a happy note. While these technologies could be extremely perilous, I believe with the right approach to oversight and careful regulations they will soon thrive and prove themselves as essential tools in improving many aspects of our lives. ■



Bruce Schneier

Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

Technology doesn't change people, but it changes affordances. Things become easier or harder, cheaper or more expensive, either individually or at scale. This is how I think about human rights in the Internet age. We can imagine many ways in which the Internet can affect human rights, but the two specifics that my work consistently returns to are privacy and free expression.

Computers naturally collect data about their actions, which is data about the people using those computers. As data storage and processing have become cheaper, more of this data is saved and used. This is all surveillance data, and the level of wholesale broad surveillance possible today is simply staggering—just think about how much your smartphone knows about your behavior. Protecting human rights in this environment requires deliberate actions by governments, actions that go against the surveillance capitalism business model of the Internet.

Modern computer networks are easy to censor, either individually or en masse. We're living in a world where tech platforms have unprecedented power to silence individuals and groups or permit hate and dangerous speech that results in the silencing of individuals and groups. This can be targeted to specific individuals, or as broad as government-mandated Internet shutdowns in a large geographic area.

Protecting human rights means ensuring unfettered access to the Internet, both to send and to receive. It means access to true information, free from propaganda and disinformation. It also means personal safety that allows for free expression.

This year's most striking technological advances are in the area of artificial intelligence. And once again, affordances are changing. Surveillance has long been easy, but eavesdropping on actual human conversations was still difficult. AI's ability to understand and summarize will change that. AI will make disinformation more effective, and censorship easier and more effective (again, because of AI's ability to understand beyond individual words). These technologies will largely reside in the hands of powerful corporations and governments—many of whom do not have human rights as a priority.

The Internet isn't naturally compatible—or incompatible—with human rights. It's a disruptive technology that allows us as humans to either strengthen or diminish human rights. We can be deliberate as we build it, choosing implementations that strengthen human rights. Or we can ignore human rights as we build these technologies, allowing those who either don't care or are actively hostile to human rights to prevail. My work has long been to advocate for the former. ■



Jonathan Zittrain

George Bemis Professor of International Law, Harvard Law School;
Professor of Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School; Professor of
Computer Science, Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences

The public/private divide complicates bringing a human rights framework to bear on new technology.

Traditionally, our human rights are construed to limit the activities of public authorities—in particular, to limit their use of legal coercion and, if escalated, force.

But the last thirty years of digital technology's expansion has happened in a particularly privatized way: "regular" companies have built and continually adjusted the scaffolds of our speech, our relationships, and our commerce. Figuring out when governments—to advance human rights—can and should push companies to shape their services differently, especially when the common balancing tests around speech give muddy results among multiple contesting individuals, is a difficult yet worthy problem.

The 2011 UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights represented a welcome

new layer of thinking around firms' responsibilities here. But filling in the blanks is enormously difficult, especially when, say, social media platforms or makers and deployers of AI Large Language Models could undertake any number of actions (or inactions) that affect how people form beliefs about the world or enter into conflict with one another.

What might be more promising are entirely new institutions and institutional relationships, not directly grounded in national authorities or international governance bodies, to better reinforce notions of dignity and thriving that underpin the aspirations of a universal human rights regime. Mapping and testing out what those institutions and relationships could look like is the core of my current work. ■

Climate Change

An aerial photograph of a floating village, likely in Southeast Asia, showing numerous small, colorful houses and structures built on rafts of bamboo and other materials. The rafts are densely packed and extend across a large body of water. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a cloudy sky. The overall scene illustrates the impact of climate change on coastal communities.

The ramifications of climate change are predicted to be widespread on a global scale, threatening water and food security, housing, health, and raising the potential for conflicts in the face of scarce resources.



Stephen Ansolabehere

Frank G. Thompson Professor of Government,
Harvard University

America’s energy and industrial systems are already changing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and to make production cleaner and more economical.

The shift away from fossil fuels and toward new technologies and industries will create enormous economic dislocations for many communities and new opportunities for others—and these changes will be painful and difficult to adjust to.

One need look no further than West Virginia to gain a glimpse into the potential problems that communities will face. The massive shrinkage of the coal industry over the past 25 years has displaced workers and fueled

a public health crisis, as the decline in tax revenues has handcuffed the state’s ability to address the resulting social problems. Such challenges loom over communities across the United States, including the industrial mid-West, the Gulf Coast, Appalachia, and the Mountain West, as the energy and industrial transition in the U.S. accelerates. One goal of the work Harvard University is doing through the Salata Institute is to gauge the magnitude of these problems and identify strategies to help communities get ahead of them. ■



Gaurab Basu

Director of Education and Policy, Center for Climate, Health,
and the Global Environment, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health

The 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should give us all a moment to pause and reflect on this important moment in history. Seventy-five years ago, the world came together after being devastated by war, fascism, and genocide to commit to a deeper interconnectedness in international law.

The principle of human rights is simple—that because everyone has dignity, they are afforded rights that transcend any national border.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a critical moment to define universal rights, yes, but even more it began an experiment to explore whether we, as humans, can pursue a social contract that honors every person’s humanity. We should take time to recognize that, despite this milestone, the world continued to reel from the impacts of structural racism, dictatorships, and colonialism around the world. Despite this document, the world continued to extract from our natural resources, which decades later produced the profound new threat of climate change.

Seventy-five years later, it is still very unclear whether we will fulfill the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Climate change is fundamentally an issue of health equity and human rights. It increases the risk of extreme weather events, food insecurity, water scarcity, infectious diseases, extreme heat, air pollution, mental health disorders, and forced migration. Our global response to climate change will shape health and social stability for generations to come.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights should not be a static document, but rather a call to action that challenges the world to continually identify the risks to humanity and cultivate the ambition to actively transform the world towards health and justice. This will require us to understand that the health and human rights of human beings are dependent on the health and well-being of our planet. ■



Linda Bilmes

Daniel Patrick Moynihan Senior Lecturer in Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School; US Member, UN Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA)

Dag Hammarskjöld famously said that the United Nations “was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell.” I reflect on this often in my role as the United States’ member of the United Nations Committee of Experts on Public Administration (CEPA).

There are 24 countries in this body, and we advise the UN on ways to advance and to remove institutional barriers to implementing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs are a set of goals, metrics, and indicators that the 193 UN member countries adopted in 2015 and hope to achieve by 2030. They intertwine with the earlier Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides a normative framework that underpins the values and principles embedded in the SDGs. Many of the SDGs are connected directly to human rights, including Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 2 (Zero Hunger), Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being), Goal 4 (Quality Education), Goal 5 (Gender Equality), Goal 10 (Reduced Inequality), and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The other SDGs are related to critical components of these, such as clean water and the environment.

Together with my colleagues on the CEPA, I am focused on the implementation of the SDGs. For example, I work on developing tools to measure the budgetary resources allocated to women in society (Goal 5) and on developing tools for measuring natural capital and adapting economic statistics to incorporate ecosystem services. I also work on broadening the use of concessionary finance for climate adaptation, which is related to Goal 13 (Climate Action), Goal 14 (Life below Water), and Goal 15 (Life on Land). The system is far from perfect and the UN itself can be a challenging environment with many competing priorities. But whatever the specific topic, the guiding light and inspiration is always based on the principles laid out by UDHR, and the belief that there is a set of fundamental human rights that people are not only entitled to have, but need to have as a precondition for achieving the basic goals that the UN has embraced. ■



Martha Davis

University Distinguished Professor of Law, Northeastern University; Fellow, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy

Climate change is already triggering a cascade of negative impacts on water security worldwide. Access to sufficient, clean, affordable water and adequate sanitation is a critical human need as well as a basic human right.

Yet, UNICEF reports that already about 1.42 billion people worldwide—including 450 million children—do not have enough water to meet their daily needs, and the number is likely to grow. As we already see around the globe, changing climate patterns exacerbate extreme weather events. Sometimes extreme weather causes floods, contaminating water supplies. Climate change may also cause extreme droughts that shrink available water resources. Inadequate access to clean water, combined with rising temperatures, increases the risk of diseases like cholera and typhoid. Rising sea levels may also make fresh water salty. Water scarcity contributes to population migration, a growing challenge

worldwide. Because water is necessary to life, communities may compete for access to shrinking water supplies, leading to confrontations and even conflict.

The Sustainable Development Goals single out clean water and sanitation for all as a critical component of a sustainable future. While some negative impacts of climate change are inevitable, it is within our power to fight for sustainability through political channels and to establish policies providing more equitable access to water and sanitation, sharing the burden in recognition of the human needs and human rights that we all share. ■



Henry Lee

Director, Environmental and Natural Resource Program, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs; Senior Lecturer in Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School

The United Nations has repeatedly stated that climate change has clear and immediate implications for human rights. Certainly, its impacts affect the lives and well-being of people around the world.

Sudden onset events, such as more intense storms, floods, and wildfires, directly threaten personal security, while slower forms of climate degradation affect access to food, potable water, sanitation, and livelihoods. Internationally, there is relatively broad—though not unanimous—belief that these damages threaten basic human rights. However, there is far less consensus on who is responsible for protecting and fulfilling these rights.

While governments in richer countries have the financial ability to move funds and protect the more vulnerable segments of their population, such is not the case in Bangladesh, Somalia, or Vanuatu. If we accept that all people deserve to be protected from climate-induced disasters, do the developed countries that historically contributed the most to the greenhouse gas concentrations have a moral obligation to protect the lives and well-being of populations vulnerable to the damages of climate change in the poorer regions of the world?

Consider the floods that devastated Pakistan in 2022. That summer, Pakistan received 190 percent of its average rainfall in July and August, resulting in floods that submerged one-third of the entire country. A World Weather Attribution study found that climate change likely contributed to the extreme monsoonal rainfall. The deluge killed 1,700 people, displaced 8 million people from their homes,

and destroyed huge swathes of agricultural land and infrastructure. Reconstruction will take years and cost over \$16.3 billion, according to a Post-Disaster Needs Assessment conducted by the Government of Pakistan with support from the Asian Development Bank, the EU, the UN Development Programme, and the World Bank.

There is broad agreement that it is not reasonable to expect Pakistan, or other poor countries, to shoulder the costs of climate adaptation and damage by themselves. What should be the obligation of the developed countries? In past international forums, they have committed billions of dollars to this cause, but these commitments have not always been honored. Further, the costs ten years hence will be much higher. The domestic politics within these wealthier nations makes it all but impossible for them to accept that their taxpayers have any liability for climate induced damages in Pakistan or any other developing country.

These questions are fraught with moral hazard implications, and disagreement over how to answer them seems to have stalemated the implementation of the Loss and Damage Fund established at COP27 in 2022. But as the damages from climate impacts mount, and the threat to a portfolio of human rights grows more acute, it is critical that the international community reach some sort of compromise. ■



Natalia Linos

Executive Director, FXB Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard University

The climate emergency directly threatens the ability of people to enjoy and realize their fundamental human rights—from the right to health, to the right to food, the right to adequate housing, water and sanitation, and a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment.

It is no hyperbole to consider the climate crisis an existential threat which will compound and dramatically exacerbate existing inequalities, with oppressed and marginalized groups and those living in poverty bearing a disproportionate impact.

Conflict and distress migration are also expected to rise as extreme heat, droughts, and disasters make more places increasingly uninhabitable. Justice and

equity (both inter-generational and intra-generational equity) must be at the center of all climate mitigation and adaptation efforts. This includes ensuring that as we transition to a “green” or “blue” economy, we do not replicate extractive practices that undermine human rights (for example, the use of child labor in cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo) because of the urgency for action. ■



Dustin Tingley

Professor of Government,
Harvard University

Countries and people that are vulnerable to both the physical impacts of climate change and the impacts of policies designed to reduce climate change will now be exposed in a unique way. One can think of places like the Gulf Coast in the United States (heavily reliant on oil and gas production) and Indonesia (heavily dependent upon coal) as examples.

In some of my previous research, I referred to these places as “cross-pressured,” as they want to mitigate the effects of climate change, but those same steps can cause significant economic strains. Of course, in these places, the least well-off people and communities will bear the brunt, and ongoing policy discussions need to keep this front of mind.

Importantly, these disruptions are not simply economic; they entail the disruption

of communities with rich cultural histories and social bonds. As we move forward—climate change is already happening at a magnitude and pace that is faster than some anticipated—exposure will change. While many could point to a rising sea level, more and more people are exposed to wildfire smoke, for example. How communities and societies adapt to these and other rising risks, while at the same time securing economic and social prosperity, will be a crucial question. ■



Fran Ulmer

Senior Fellow, Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School;
Former Chair, U.S. Arctic Research Commission

The accelerating rate of climate change in the Arctic has been well documented by dozens of scientific research projects and papers that have described in some detail how changes are already impacting people.

For Arctic Indigenous people, the dramatic changes in the north have profound health, safety, cultural, and food security ramifications. For example, the Inuit people rely to a large degree on the harvest of natural resources (fish, birds, berries, and marine and terrestrial mammals) for food and cultural practices. Animal species’ health and range distributions have been altered by less sea ice, earlier spring and later winter conditions, altered migration patterns, etc., which means less certainty and availability for Inuit harvesting.

Additionally, permafrost, which underlies much of the Arctic region, is thawing, creating unstable landscapes, causing collapsing buildings and eroding coastlines, which have combined with other changes, like increased flooding, to make some villages no longer safe places to live. As a result, over two dozen Alaska villages have been identified by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as potentially hazardous, and several have already begun to move. The rights of Indigenous people, like the Inuit, are being impacted already, and if current trends continue, the damage will only become more dramatic. ■

4.

Additional Thoughts on Human Rights

The human rights movement is not confined to the aforementioned themes—in fact, there are innumerable avenues through which human rights frameworks intersect with our lives.



Khalil Abdur-Rashid

Muslim Chaplain, Harvard University;
Public Policy Lecturer, Harvard Kennedy School

Human rights in the Islamic tradition are derived from the Quranic scriptural reference regarding the inviolability of the human being, “We have honored the children of Adam” (*Quran 17:70*). This inviolability is grounded in theological terms, and not an aspect derived from natural law nor sovereign state law.

It is not something that is granted by an earthly entity but something which is already given to each human being by the Divine, and requires safeguarding. Violations of human rights require intervention of the proper authorities capable of restoring such rights, and this is where the justification for good governance emerges in Islam.

The Islamic tradition broadly posits that human rights are first derived from the human condition of either being a person of faith or at minimum, being a person who is predisposed to having faith—and as such—religion itself must be protected. Religion is viewed in the Islamic tradition as the vanguard of human rights, and not the other way around. As the text of the Quran reads, “if God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God’s name is invoked much, would have been destroyed” (*Quran 22:40*). This verse is interpreted by many scholars to indicate that religious life is the bedrock of human flourishing and therefore it must be protected at all costs. Therefore, the understanding of human rights in Islam begins with the primacy of preservation of faith and religion, considered the foremost human right and one that justified the birth of other rights.

After the preservation of faith, the most central principle governing human rights in Islam is the preservation of life. The understanding of life is not only restricted to human life, but that of animals, plants, and the planet as well. After preservation of life comes the right to the preservation of the intellect, which includes access to education.

Following that right, the preservation of the family emerges, which includes the right to marry or divorce, the right to inherit, the rights of parents, and the rights of children. Next, the preservation of property including specifically the right to own property. Women and children, including the unborn fetus, possess full property rights and inheritance rights in Islamic jurisprudence. Finally, the preservation of dignity, which includes protections against various forms of debasement, guarantees what we call today due process (including the presumption of innocence), the right to safety and social security, and the right to political asylum. In the modern era, human rights in Islam have expanded to include the right of freedom of conscience. This right is justified by the interpretation of the Quranic verse, “there is no compulsion in religion” (*Quran 2:256*). This right would include freedom of thought and expression, as well as even universal suffrage.

Rights in Islam are further categorized as essential (meaning life sustaining), necessary (meaning life enabling), and tertiary (meaning life enhancing). Essential human rights in Islam protect people from death and inhumane suffering. Access to food, water, medical care, safety, and shelter are regarded as essential human rights in Islam. Necessary human rights protect against undue hardships however, their absence does not immediately cause death. Access to education and gainful employment may be regarded as necessary human rights. Finally, tertiary human rights are needed for human thriving and wellness and may include things like access to green spaces and the right to travel abroad. ■



Matthew Baum

Marvin Kalb Professor of Global Communications,
Harvard Kennedy School

Americans have long had an ambivalent relationship with human rights. In the abstract, most support the concept; 80% in a 2018 IPSOS survey said they believed in the idea of human rights, the highest percentage of any of the advanced democracies included in the survey. Yet, in times of crisis, Americans throughout history have embraced policies that seemingly fly in the face of this value.

In 1942, 93% of the public approved of internment Japanese Americans. In 1954, 89% supported firing communists if they were teaching in a college. Nearly two-thirds of Americans, in turn, supported using torture “often” or “sometimes” to gain information from suspected terrorists in a 2016 Reuters/IPSOS poll. Moreover, human rights are typically a low salience issue in the U.S. In a series of 2023 Gallup polls, for instance, only 1-2% of voters rate LGBTQ+ rights as one of the nation’s most important problems, while, in polling by Yougov between 2020 and 2023, just 5% to 12% of the public rated “civil rights and civil liberties” as among the nation’s most pressing issues.

The relatively low priority Americans place on human rights-related issues, combined with their propensity to compromise on this principle during times of crisis, makes it difficult to hold elected leaders to account for their performance on human rights. Even

episodic instances of gross human rights violations, which sometimes prompt spikes in the public salience of the issue, tend to be fleeting and their electoral significance uncertain at most.

Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that, while the U.S. is frequently a global leader in human rights rhetoric, its policies paint a decidedly more mixed picture. For instance, the U.S. has failed to ratify several landmark human rights-related international treaties, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Meanwhile, several states in the U.S.—including Arkansas, Iowa, New Jersey, and New Hampshire—have enacted legislation weakening child labor laws.

On the issue of human rights, the U.S. is arguably a study in contradictions. ■



Candace Bertotti

Adjunct Lecturer of Arts of Communication,
Harvard Kennedy School and Harvard Business School

When a concise, dramatic presentation on human rights inspires you to think differently, learn more, and act, that is the potential of skillful communication.

When a heated human rights discussion is transformed through respect and candor, that is the power of skillful dialogue.

When a leader speaks out against violated agreements, and policies and procedures change as a result, that is the influence of accountability.

Strategic public speaking, respectful dialogue, and candid accountability are crucial skills for continuing to influence progress in human rights for the next 75 years. ■



Incoming Secretary General Antonio Guterres takes an oath of office at the United Nations on January 1 2017, in the 71st session of the General Assembly. Image credit: UN Photo



John D. Donahue

Raymond Vernon Senior Lecturer in Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

When I was invited to contribute this note, my first thought was that human rights are distant from my work, which mostly involves quotidian questions about the allocation of public tasks across organizational forms.

Should nations or international organizations set labor standards for traded goods? Is it better or worse for K-12 education when charter schools compete with conventional public schools? When is it okay for private groups to manage public parks?

But upon reflection, I realize that human rights norms have a subtle but profound influence on such inquiries. Long ago, I bought Christopher Alexander's *Notes on the Synthesis of Form* from the used book rack. One of Alexander's illustrations struck me deeply then and has stuck in my mind since. He relates how Slovakian peasant weavers had long made gorgeously patterned shawls using a sparse palette of natural dyes. In the last century, synthetic dyes, in a sweeping spectrum of hues, reached Slovakian villages. One might expect that this would have made the shawls even more beautiful. But instead, the patterns became coarse, clumsy, and garish. The sudden expansion

of options over-matched the weavers' skill. Artistry often requires boundaries. So, too, with policy design. Sensitivity to human rights—however incomplete—takes some options off the table. Trade regimes that permit working toddlers to death aren't on the menu of live options. When they can't exclude needy students, we can calibrate charter schools' performance more accurately. And so on.

Enabling better policy analysis isn't prominent among human rights advocates' goals, but it's nonetheless among their accomplishments. If every aspiration becomes a right, of course, the number of feasible alternatives can dwindle to zero. But we are far from that point. As society haltingly declares some options out of bounds on human rights grounds, the challenge of coherent social choices eases just a bit. ■



Deborah Hughes Hallett

Adjunct Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

Data and data analysis are staunch supporters of human rights. Data can spotlight inequities and statistical inference can illuminate the relationships between human rights and policy choices.

Numbers bring inequities into sharp focus. For example, there is a stark contrast between the U.S. maternal mortality rate of 24 deaths for every hundred thousand live births and Ireland’s five deaths per hundred thousand. And Ireland is no outlier: other countries with developed health systems all have lower maternal mortality rates than the U.S. (CDC). The data insists we ask why.

Delving deeper in the U.S. data shows that 55 Black women die per hundred thousand live births. This means that childbirth is more than twice as lethal for Black mothers in the U.S. as it is for white mothers. What is wrong? Equally horrifying: a mother in Nigeria is over 500 times more likely to die in childbirth than a mother in Norway. Why are we not taking maternal mortality more seriously?

Statistical inference also illuminates some long-standing controversies. The existence

of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has been challenged for its expense and uneven reach. However, inference clearly suggests the prosecution of alleged human rights violations at the ICC corresponds to an increase in countries’ own investigations (G. Dancy & F. Montal). Thus, even skeptics may conclude the ICC rises to the challenge of its creation.

Corruption is a source of misery for millions. Hard to identify directly, statistical analysis can nevertheless point to sources of corruption and measure its impact (C. Liu & J. Mikesell). Both are essential to designing policies that curb corruption and creating the political will to use them.

Thus, human rights are a natural component of courses in data science and statistics. At the Harvard Kennedy School, they are an essential component. ■



Julia Minson

Associate Professor of Public Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School

My field—behavioral science—sits at the intersection of two competing intellectual traditions. The normative tradition arising from economics, philosophy, and formal logic, attempts to generate prescriptions for how people ought to behave. The descriptive tradition, most directly stemming from psychology, captures how people violate these prescriptions at every turn.

Nowhere is this tension more apparent to me than in the study of conflict, fairness, and justice. Most people readily subscribe to the values embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, enthusiastically endorsing a set of normative beliefs about dignity, equality, and security. Yet, when it comes to specific cases of conflict, bloodshed, and injury, we quickly forget these shared dictums and claim that we are somehow more deserving of the guarantees of the Declaration than those on the other side.

Despite the frequency with which warring factions impose contradictory interpretations on the same events, what amazes me most is individuals’ seeming inability to discuss these differences in a thoughtful, or at least a civil, manner. This challenge—of enabling individuals with deeply opposing views about right and wrong, black and white, just and unjust to sit down and have a thoughtful dialogue—is what motivates my research program.

Because if we consider certain ideas to be so sacred that we cannot tolerate debating them, what options remain? The answer is provided by every bloody conflict being fought around the world in the name of justice and dignity. When dialogue about issues that are the most precious to our sense of self fails, the options of last resort used to force our beliefs and values onto disagreeing others often violate the very rights which we consider inviolate.

Thus, my colleagues and I continue to seek ways to enable people to ask questions, debate, and reinterpret, even when that questioning involves ideas that seem beyond the pale of debate. Because as long as people disagree, they will continue to see their side as uniquely more entitled to fairness and consideration. And as long as both sides of a conflict feel that way, conversation continues to be the most reliable bulwark between them and catastrophe. ■



Julie Boatright Wilson

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Harvard Kennedy School

In the United States, the field of child welfare does not explicitly frame its mission or activities in terms of human rights, though it often articulates its mission as focusing on the rights of the child.

While there are many social service programs that focus on strengthening the family through the provision of income, housing, and social services, child welfare is focused on the protection of children from abuse or neglect on the part of their parents or caretakers. The current system was designed with a focus on physical abuse, building on the then new X-ray technology and other medical assessments to identify abuse. The theory was that the abuse could be detected, the abuser identified and punished, and the child healed.

Over time, the definition of abuse was expanded to include emotional abuse and many forms of neglect. Mandated reporters, such as teachers or police, are now required to report cases of potential parental abuse or neglect so the state could investigate. If it is determined that harm had occurred, the perpetrators are punished and, in extreme

cases, the children are removed from the care of their families and placed in foster care or institutions, with the potential of terminating parental rights and freeing the children for adoption by another family.

One of the unintended consequences of this system is that many struggling parents who would benefit from food, social services, or other support programs hesitate to access them for fear of being reported as neglecting their children. Thus, as structured, the U.S. child protection system and the potential threats it embodies make it difficult to focus on a human rights strategy. As much as government agencies and service providers want to focus on human rights as an overarching framework for setting goals and establishing practice, moving in this direction is challenging because of the underlying child protection framework. ■

Opposite: Children of United Nations staff members take a closer look at the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the General Assembly on December 10th, 1948. Image credit: UN Photo.



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