

# Human Rights

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*Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms to which every person is entitled including the rights to life, liberty, and personal safety, security from violence, and freedom from slavery and discrimination. Ensuring that all humans receive their rights is not possible as long as our economic system is driven solely by the profit motive.*

## WHY A JUST SOCIETY CANNOT BE BUILT WITHOUT RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

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The freedoms we take for granted in America – the right to free speech; the right to life and liberty; the right to freely pursue meaningful employment, and so on – may seem commonplace to us, but they are far from the norm for many people on the planet. In fact, far more humans live in countries where human rights are not respected. As a result, there is widespread suffering around the globe as millions of humans cope with a reality that is far from just.

## WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?

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To understand what is meant by the term human rights, it may be helpful to break it down to its basics.

- **Human:** This applies to any human being, whether man, woman, or child, regardless of race, nationality, ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or status.
- **Rights:** These are the freedoms to which all humans are entitled or should be allowed.

In an ideal world, human rights are the freedoms to which a person is entitled simply because they are human. No one has to earn their human rights. You cannot buy human rights. They are simply endowed to every human being the moment they are born.

Human rights are often enacted through legislative or judicial decisions, though they can also come into being through the development of cultural norms or customs. When embedded in international law, these principles are often referred to as human rights. Those principles that are in place as a result of national or municipal laws are usually referred to as civil or constitutional rights.

Examples of human rights on both international and national scales include the following:

- Freedom of religion
- The right not to be tortured
- The right to a fair trial when charged with a crime
- The right to engage in political activity
- The right against being enslaved
- The right to live in an environment free of pollution
- Freedom of expression

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- The right to engage in meaningful employment
- The right to receive a good education

Human rights are often canonized in law when humanity identifies a right as extremely important and/or when it perceives a common and serious threat to a good. The most important example of this is the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was established in 1948.<sup>1</sup> Human rights laws lay down obligations of governments to take certain acts when the rights of an individual or group are being violated. You can also see this in the US Declaration of independence of 1776, which guarantees individuals the freedom to pursue life, liberty, and happiness.

## **Why Upholding Human Rights is Important for the Wellbeing of Humanity**

Protecting human rights means preventing individuals from experiencing political, social, and legal abuses, providing the right conditions for pursuing prosperity and happiness, and ensuring the opportunity to achieve fulfilling work and healthy lifestyles. Most importantly, human rights protect individuals and groups from subjugation and discrimination, and ensure everyone has a voice in the political process and in the creation of a civil, fair society.

But human rights are often violated for selfish gains. Violation of human rights has resulted in some horrific atrocities throughout history. From the Holocaust in Europe during WWII to apartheid in South Africa, when human rights are set aside for political, economic, or personal gain, humanity suffers. This can be seen on both large and small scales – from domestic violence to slavery, child abuse to racial extermination, gender inequalities in the workplace to the enforced relocation of ethnic groups.

On the other hand, when human rights are upheld, humanity is empowered to flourish and reach for higher goals. Some of the benefits of upholding human rights include:

- The feeling of being safe and protected from harm
- Receiving fair and equal treatment
- Being free to take an active part in building community
- Choosing a lifestyle as you wish
- Receiving treatment that protects your dignity

Humans who live and thrive in safe, healthy communities that respect human rights are more productive, contribute more to the creation of a just society, and foster an intelligent, prosperous next generation. Humanity achieves its greatest accomplishments when human rights are upheld.

But as we mentioned, human rights are not universally upheld, even in developed countries like America. We'll go through a few different types of discrimination – gender, racial, social, and age-related discrimination – to illustrate the negative impact human rights violations have on human society as a whole.

## **Women and Girls and Human Rights**

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Violation of human rights results in the marginalization of entire groups of people based on gender, ethnicity, race, religion, and so on. The issue of human right violations against women is a serious and daunting one. In both developing and developed countries, women are exposed to discrimination, abuse, and subjugation in every level of life – from home life to political life. Here are some of the most common ways you'll witness gender discrimination in modern society:

- **Inequality in amount of work:** Oxfam estimates that women work 60 to 90 hours weekly, which is usually more than men within the same community. In most cases, women do unpaid, household-related work during the majority of these hours.<sup>ii</sup> By and large, most women work as well as take on domestic responsibilities, such as caring for children, maintaining a household, cooking meals, and fetching water.
- **Wage inequality:** Women generally are underpaid and perform low-status jobs compared to men. As a result, women's estimated earned income is 30% less than men in the Middle East and North Africa, 40% in Latin America and South Asia, 50% in sub-Saharan Africa, and 60% in East Asia and industrialized countries.<sup>iii</sup>
- **Domestic inequality:** In both developed and developing countries, women experience inequalities in the home with regards to decision making on important issues like health care, household purchases, education, and family dynamics. This is due to the fact that women have little control over income and assets, lower levels of education, and extreme age gaps (many women marry young and are paired with much older men).<sup>iv</sup>
- **Crimes at home:** In the USA, every 15 seconds a women is battered, usually by her husband or domestic partner.<sup>v</sup> Domestic violence is a major problem worldwide, yet to date, there are 127 countries that do not criminalize rape within marriage.<sup>vi</sup>
- **Inequalities before the law:** One in three women (about 1 billion women) have been beaten, coerced into sex, or abused.<sup>vii</sup> In many countries, women are not afforded the same rights under the law as victims. For instance, women in many countries are assumed to be the guilty party when they are raped, and in some cases are put to death for their "crimes." Often referred to as "honour killings," thousands of women are killed because they "allowed" themselves to be raped.<sup>viii</sup> Additionally, because of lower incomes and immobility (with relation to family obligations and access to finances), women are often not able to report crimes or appear in court in their own defense. And by and large, most courts are presided upon by men who often rule prejudicially against them.<sup>ix</sup>
- **Sexual violence:** Up to 47% of all women report that their first sexual intercourse experience was forced. In the US, every 90 seconds a woman is raped.<sup>x</sup> War and conflict also heaps inequalities on women. For instance, sexual violence is often used as a tactic of warfare as a way of spreading disease, to achieve forced impregnation, and to terrorize communities.<sup>xi</sup>
- **Inequality in politics:** Worldwide, there are fewer women in politics, and in many regions, women are still forbidden from participating in the political process, with prohibitions against things such as voting. Women account for only 14% of government ministers

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worldwide, yet studies show that the peace process and conflict resolution are far more effective when women are involved.<sup>xii</sup>

- **Forced migration:** Environmental degradation, economic disparities, and conflict force people to migrate from their ancestral homes to new regions. Adult women constitute 50% of all migrants worldwide. Many are enslaved in the sex trade, and millions more migrant workers face dangerous working conditions.<sup>xiii</sup>

As serious as these human rights violations against women are, those against female girls are perhaps even more tragic and egregious. Girls, who are often unable to defend themselves, are subjected to all kinds of violence and discrimination because of their gender.

- **Child marriage:** Many girls are pressured into marrying and bearing children while they are very young. There are 82 million girls worldwide who will marry before they are 18 years of age – as early as 10 years old. Giving birth at a young age and giving birth frequently (some give birth every single year) creates significant health problems for these girls. Today, only 53 countries have a lower legal marriage age for women than for men.<sup>xiv</sup>
- **Sexual violence:** Young girls married or not, are often subjected to sexual violence and physical abuse, including female genital mutilation (FGM) and sexual trafficking. FGM is the act of intentionally altering or causing injury to female genital organs for non-medical purposes, and can include partial or total removal of external genitalia.<sup>xv</sup> There are 140 million girls and women living with FGM worldwide.<sup>xvi</sup>
- **Education:** Education for girls is often not considered important. As a result, if funds for education are limited, a family is more likely to send their male children to school rather than their female children. Of the 101 million children worldwide who didn't attend primary school in 2007, the majority were girls.<sup>xvii</sup>
- **Gender selective abortion:** In many countries, boy babies are preferred to girl babies. As a result, 10 female babies out of 1,000 are killed or die in infancy due to neglect.<sup>xviii</sup>

Women play crucial roles in fostering community knowledge, raising children, and protecting local environments. Even more women act as household heads, having to earn an income and raise their children without the help of a male partner. When the human rights of women are violated, it becomes much more difficult for women to fulfill their responsibilities and build into their children and communities. Protecting the rights of women is therefore extremely important for the health of the human species.

### Racial and Ethnic Diversity, Social Status, and Human Rights

Women and girls aren't the only people who experience discrimination and violation of their rights. Race, ethnicity, and social status are all troubling issues throughout the world, resulting in a variety of negative outcomes.

- **Increased poverty:** There are many causes of poverty, but no doubt those who are discriminated against because of their race are more likely to experience poverty. Discrimination can keep people out of high-paying jobs and/or may result in higher rates of

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taxation, both of which add an undue economic burden based on race or ethnicity. In the US, blacks earn 38% less than whites, and Hispanics even less.<sup>xix</sup> Racial discrimination may account for one-third of the wage difference between whites and blacks in America.<sup>xx</sup>

- **Legal discrimination:** Many laws and judicial systems are impacted by racial views. In the US, for instance, blacks and Hispanics make up 25% of the population but make up 58% of the prison population. African-Americans are six times more likely to be incarcerated than whites.
- **Political limitations:** In 2000, 61 countries reported political killings, 63 countries reported having prisoners of conscience, and 125 countries tortured political prisoners. In many countries, citizens are monitored (phones tapped, emails read, mail opened) by the government to censor information and to silence those who think differently.<sup>xxi</sup>
- **Victims of crime:** Social status and race often prejudice one group of people against another, resulting in violence. The caste system in South Asia, for instance, impacts 240 million people who are considered “untouchable” (Dalits). Every year, 100,000 Dalits are victims of a crime, including murder, rape, arson, and other acts of violence – most of which are as a result of the Dalits trying to rise above the social injustice.<sup>xxii</sup>
- **Economic limitations:** Governments and individuals will frequently impose economic disparities that disadvantage people based on race, ethnicity, or social status. The Dalits in South Asia, for instance, are denied access to land, “employed” like slaves, and prevented from using certain public facilities such as water wells.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Race, ethnicity, and social status are all used by humans to subjugate those with whom they disagree or feel superiority over. Any time human rights are violated, those individuals and communities are disadvantaged and humanity as a whole suffers as a result.

### Children and Human Rights

Children are also frequently victims of human rights violations. Small and vulnerable, these little humans experience extreme poverty, hazardous working conditions, abuse, and endangered health.

- **Poverty and education:** Children do not have control over finances and therefore cannot choose whether they will attend school or not. Orphans and those from low-income families are often denied the opportunity to learn because the adults in their lives do not deem the expenditure important enough. Not surprisingly then, children living in slums have a much lower school attendance rate than those living in richer areas.<sup>xxiv</sup>
- **Health:** 1 billion children are deprived of one or more essential services necessary for survival; 148 million children under the age of five are underweight; and 8.8 million children died before their 5th birthday in 2008. The reason for the compromise of a child’s health is usually because household income is low. Further, if the child is a girl, if the family lives in a remote rural region, or if the mother’s education is poor, it is far more likely that the child will not receive proper medical attention when it is required.<sup>xxv</sup>

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- **Slavery:** Children have the right to play and get an education, but they're often forced to work as slaves against their will. Small and vulnerable, children often lack the physical strength and presence of mind to protect themselves against predators that would take advantage of them. Either their parents sell their children to pay off a family debt, or children are kidnapped and forced to work the sex trade, in dangerous industries like mining, as child soldiers, or as beggars on the streets. Every year, 8.4 million children work as slave laborers, prostitutes, or soldiers, and 1.2 million are kidnapped, sold, or smuggled.<sup>xxvi</sup>

As they say, children are our future. If we raise our children believing that human rights are not important, what kind of society will that produce? It is important to emphasize from a young age that children value human rights by protecting the least of these among us.

### HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE CONSUMPTION ECONOMY

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So how does the current fast consumption economy contribute to the problems of human rights violations? The cheap product economy in which we live values low prices above all else, corners are cut throughout almost every industry in order to churn out more and more goods at ever lower prices. It should come as no surprise then, that corner-cutting results in all kinds of violations of human rights. There are many points at which the current structure disadvantages humans by reinforcing systems that rob individuals and groups of their basic rights.

#### EXTRACTION AND PRODUCTION IN THE FAST CONSUMPTION ECONOMY AND ITS IMPACT ON HUMAN RIGHTS

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Cheap goods can only be made when the materials, labor, and processes used to create them are as inexpensive as possible. In order to produce these inexpensive goods for the market, companies violate human rights all throughout both the extraction and production phases of the fast consumption economy.

- **Violation of the right to receive a living wage:** Perhaps the biggest problem of a globalized economy is that many corporations fail to provide a living wage to their employees in an effort to reduce costs for the production of cheap, low-quality goods. This violation of human rights reinforces the cycle of poverty which disadvantages the poor. As a way of illustrating the lack of living wage for the poor, consider that most workers in developing countries must spend 60% of their income on food, leaving very little for other necessities like shelter, clothing, health care, and education.<sup>xxvii</sup> A living wage is one that provides enough income to cover all of these expenses, yet when big businesses choose profit over paying producers and employees fairly, they violate this basic human right.
- **Violation of the right to safety:** Many companies that produce cheap goods force employees to work under unsafe conditions because it would cost too much to pay for safety equipment or use processes that would guarantee protection. Children in particular are vulnerable. For instance, children are used to crawl into tiny, tight spaces in the mining industry under very dangerous, hazardous conditions without any physical protection.

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They're also often responsible for spraying toxic chemicals on agricultural crops, again without gas masks or protective outerwear. Similar conditions are found in all kinds of industries where both adults and children work. These kinds of conditions violate the right to feel safe and protected during the course of their work day.

- **Violation of the right to education:** Cheap labor is the key to producing cheap products, and who can work for the least? Children. That's why you'll find children working throughout the value chain rather than being permitted to attend school. They are often forced to work by their parents who need the extra income to support the family. Likewise, children are often kidnapped to serve as soldiers or slaves or are sold into slavery to pay off family debt. This violates their opportunity to receive an education that would help them achieve greater success as adults.
- **Violation of the right to dignity:** Within many factories and sweatshops, individuals are mocked and marginalized based on gender, ethnicity, religion, race, or social status. Those who resist this kind of mistreatment are usually dismissed from employment. This type of verbal abuse violates their right to be treated with dignity.
- **Violation of the right to association:** The right to associate affords employees the freedom to work together to fight for better labor conditions on the job. But many large corporations discourage and even prohibit the formation of unions and labor groups within their companies in order to prevent employees from banding together to demand higher wages and benefits. Corporations bust unions using many tactics: they use intimidation and threats of violence; they hire people on a temporary basis so they don't have time to form unions; industries will blacklist people who have a history of organizing unions; they interfere with union bargaining and organization; they criminalize labor activists; and they exploit migrants and children by using them to replace union workers.<sup>xxviii</sup> This violates their right to speak into the corporate political system, and ultimately limits their ability to change their employment conditions.
- **Violation of the right to natural resources:** In many regions, indigenous groups who have lived on ancestral lands for generations are forced to relocate when governments give away or sell their land to large corporations. This violates their right to own property and use the natural resources on their land as they wish. Further, the work of these corporations often results in pollution of soil, air, and water, which leaves the land degraded and often unfit for human habitation, which further impoverishes people living in the region. This violates their right to environmental justice.
- **Violation of the right to self-expression:** The mass production system values the fast, systemized methods for producing goods that are uniform and cookie cutter. Millions of identical products roll off the production line made by machines. This production method steals the opportunity to be self-expressive from those making the products. Denying individuals the right to creativity and artistry creates unsatisfying, unfulfilling work which has a negative impact on emotional wellbeing and productivity.

The violation of all of these rights has obvious consequences for people. Most importantly, it prevents them from rising above poverty and achieving a healthier, more fulfilling quality of life. At

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Hearts, we think this is a short-sighted way to do business. When human rights are respected, humanity as a whole flourishes and we all benefit from our collective efforts.

### Disposal in the Fast Consumption Economy and Human Rights

There are also egregious violations of human rights during the disposal of goods within the fast consumer economy. Many of the human rights violations evident during extraction and production phases – living wages, dignity, education, association – are also seen during disposal of wastes. In addition, here are a few of the ways that the disposal habits of consumers impact the poor by robbing them of their human rights. As with production, cheap and inexpensive is the primary concern for waste disposal companies, and that creates plenty of incentives for violating human rights as we you'll see:

- **Violation of right to a clean environment:** Wastes that contain toxins and hazardous materials are often shipped to poor and marginalized communities where legal systems and lack of education prevent them from achieving proper disposal. This includes things such as highly toxic nuclear waste, electronic waste, and even landfill waste. As a result, soil, water, and air are polluted in the poor communities, to which these wastes are shipped, contributing to health and environmental problems and further reinforcing poverty.
- **Violation of right to safety:** Receiving and processing of wastes that contain dangerous materials creates hazardous working conditions for those disposing of consumer and industrial waste. For instance, e-waste is often shipped to countries where environmental and labor standards are very relaxed. In fact, children often do the work of smashing electronic waste apart to get at tiny quantities of materials that are hazardous to touch or inhale, including lead, mercury, cadmium, and so on.<sup>xxix</sup>

It is clear that the cheap goods economy and the quick disposal methods used in our consumption-based system do not work for the good of human rights.

## ETHICAL BUSINESSES WORKING TO PROTECT HUMAN RIGHTS

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Every human is entitled to receive basic freedoms and living conditions that ensure a high quality of life. These human rights – which guarantee individuals the ability to seek an education, earn a living wage, live and work in safety, protect themselves from violence and hazards, and manage their local ecosystems – are afforded to individuals equally, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, social status, or economic position. When human rights are upheld, humanity is able to foster healthy, sustainable communities, and work toward higher goals, such as global peace and prosperity.

Like the anti-slavery movement in the US centuries ago, the slow production, anti-sweatshop movement in today's market has the potential to truly transform the way goods are produced and consumed. Today's sustainable and ethical companies are imposing a variety of principles to ensure they do not violate human rights. The following are some of the basic philosophies these companies follow:

- Ensure all workers can freely choose their labor.



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- Pay special attention to giving marginalized individuals opportunities for advancement, including women and minority groups
- Work to achieve equal rights and opportunities in the workplace based on gender, race, age, and ethnicity.
- Ensure that no individual or entity is permitted to take advantage of employees by preventing abuses like physical violence, sexual violence, and child labor.
- Provide programs that empower marginalized groups and individuals to assist them in rising above discrimination and poverty.
- By ensuring a living wage, help producers overcome poverty, which makes it possible for them to afford other human rights, such as clean water, adequate shelter, basic education, and sustainable health care.
- Give marginalized peoples a voice to help them contribute to the development of a more just society. Cooperatives, fair trade systems, and micro loans empower people to express their desires, form unions to fight injustices, and encourage active political participation.
- Ensure no force is used, including bonded or prison labor, and no child labor.
- Give employees opportunities to develop unique, creative ideas to encourage self-expression.
- Give people the right to own land on which they have been settled for generations, and to manage that land according to their own wishes. History has shown that traditional and cultural wisdom often favors the preservation and protection of the natural world, with an eye to the health and wellbeing of future generations.

There are several ways businesses can organize themselves to ensure they foster human rights. Adhering to ethical standards such as those provided by fair trade organizations is one such method that ensures human rights are honored and upheld, and it's a system we support enthusiastically at Hearts. We also support cooperatives that empower entire communities as a way of ensuring equality and human rights.

Micro loans can also be incredibly powerful when working to preserve human rights. By lending small amounts of money to individuals or groups to help them get their small businesses off the ground, micro-loans afford producers the dignity of trust and give them the opportunity to control and direct their own economic fortunes.

The good news for small producers that work with companies like Hearts is that those that uphold human rights standards tend to outperform competitors, despite the fact that they must charge higher prices in order to achieve the quality and fairness demanded by ethical consumers. In general, those companies that uphold human rights standards achieve 9.8% higher returns on equity and 3.5% higher return on assets. Over 10 years, shareholders of companies that honor human rights standards receive an average of 63.5% greater returns.<sup>xxx</sup>

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## ETHICAL LIVING TIPS FOR SUPPORTING HUMAN RIGHTS WITH A MINDFUL LIFESTYLE

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1. **Choose fair trade:** Products like coffee, fashion, fruit, and flowers can all be purchased with a fair trade label to ensure they are produced without violating human rights. Look for reputable organizations that provide strict standards for upholding human rights to set your mind at ease when eco shopping.
2. **Tell your politicians you value human rights:** The best way to make change that sticks is to be politically active. Tell your political representatives that you want to see legislation that prohibits the import of products that are made by companies or in countries that violate human rights.
3. **Volunteer for human rights:** Get involved with an organization like [Amnesty International](#) to support their work in the arena of human rights. You'll learn a lot about the issue when you get involved and make a difference in the lives of those who are suffering because their human rights are being violated.
4. **Make sure your business upholds human rights:** Whether you own your own business or work for an employer, dig into the practices used by your company to see whether there are any human rights violations and fix them when you find them.

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