



Human Rights Council (HRC)

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Purview:

The Council serves two primary functions: it sets human rights standards and it attempts to bring non-compliant countries into compliance through persuasion, capacity building and—if necessary—highlighting human rights abuses on the world stage. The Council also deploys Special Rapporteurs to monitor human rights and study topics of interest. While the Security Council, General Assembly and HRC often address similar issues, the HRC is limited to address the human rights aspect of the problem, not broader security and development issues.

Topics:

Consequences of child, early and forced marriage

Although long prohibited by international law and policy, the practice of child, early and forced marriage remains common worldwide. This practice [results from a structurally violent system](#) perpetuated by economic insecurity, gender inequality and disrupted social networks. Early and forced marriage [violates the rights of children](#) to education, freedom from violence, access to reproductive and sexual health care, employment, freedom of movement, and the right to consensual marriage. Most common among girls, child marriages are especially common in developing countries: [40 percent of young women](#) aged 20-24 in least developed countries were married before the age of 18. Child, early and forced marriage compromises the development of children and [leaves them vulnerable to domestic violence](#).

Since the founding of the United Nations, its human rights agenda has strived to uphold the rights of children. Starting from the assurance in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) that men and women of full age have the right to marry, and that marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses, the United Nations developed a trio of conventions that addressed various aspects of the problem of child, early and forced marriage: the 1964 [Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages](#), the 1979 [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) and the 1990 [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). Unfortunately, despite widespread adoption of these conventions, they were insufficient to fully resolve these challenges. Exceptions to prohibitions against child marriage in law [allow girls to be married before 18](#) if parents or judicial bodies give their consent, undermining legal protections. Although national and international law prohibit child marriage, legal systems based around religious or customary practices have not followed suit. International conventions often defer to custom and religion, creating exemptions which have slowed the movement to eradicate child, early and forced marriage worldwide. For example, In 2007, the Secretary-General [issued a report](#) with recommendations concerning forced marriage, noting how enforcement remained a challenge even after many States enacted laws prohibiting child, early and forced marriage. The report elaborated how States lacked the

resources necessary to adequately monitor and enforce their laws and procedures. More broadly, a lack of knowledge about the scope and prevalence of the practice at the national and international levels undermined efforts to monitor progress in addressing the issue.

The United Nations and the Human Rights Council recognize that child, early and forced marriages prevent people from living their lives free from all forms of violence and from accessing the right to education and the right to the highest attainable standard of health, including sexual and reproductive health. The Human Rights Council [adopted its first resolution](#) to strengthen efforts to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage in 2013. While the resolution called for a panel discussion with a focus on challenges, achievements, best practices and implementation gaps, it failed to provide Member States with clear, actionable and immediate solutions. In 2015, the Human Rights Council [approved a resolution](#) promoting urgency in strengthening efforts to prevent and eliminate child, early and forced marriage and detailed substantive measures to address the human rights violation. Shortly thereafter, UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund in 2016 launched the [UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage](#). As the most recent initiative by the United Nations to address child, early and forced marriage, the Global Programme works with governments to uphold the rights of adolescent girls in the 12 Member States that exhibit the highest prevalence of child marriage. By mid-2018, the programme successfully [delivered training and resources to over 5.5 million girls](#), exceeding the programme's original objective to reach 2.5 million girls by the end of the decade. The Human Rights Council continues to push for solutions to child, early and forced marriage, [adopting a resolution in 2019](#) that calls upon Member States to strengthen family responsive legislation at the national level, such as policies that provide for parental leave and increased flexibility in working arrangements, which aim to create an environment that enables women's full economic empowerment.

Looking ahead, the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), which aims to leverage momentum accumulated from years of capacity building by intergovernmental bodies like the Human Rights Council, [specifically includes the elimination of the practice of child, early and forced marriage](#) in Goal 5.3. Despite efforts to eliminate child, early and forced marriage, the implementation of international laws and policies has remained slow at the national and international levels. Approximately 650 million girls and women alive today [were married before their 18th birthday](#). Even so, the United Nations and Member States achieved some progress. In the last decade, the proportion of young women who were married as children decreased by 15 percent, from one-in-four to nearly one-in-five. The combination of social upheavals and [economic insecurities](#) make for the elimination of child, early and forced marriage a challenging global issue, but one that requires urgency to ensure the protection

of children. The Human Rights Council must address how Member States can implement policies and laws that protect children against early and forced marriages to allow children to live without the fear of maternal death, social isolation and domestic violence.

Questions to consider:

- How can the United Nations facilitate the implementation of existing laws in Member States that prohibit child, early and forced marriage?
- How can the Human Rights Council balance protecting human rights with respecting the culture and national sovereignty of Member States?
- What role does the eradication of poverty play in eliminating child, early and forced marriage?

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Human Rights and Climate Change

Climate change ranks among the greatest of threats to human rights. The environmental and economic consequences of climate change create a hazardous combination of threats that may enact an unfathomable toll on life and compromise human rights, especially for already vulnerable groups. The World

Health Organization estimates that malnutrition, malaria, diarrhea and heat stress—exacerbated by climate change—[will cause an additional 250,000 deaths per year](#) between 2030 and 2050. Furthermore, weather-related disasters, which will increase in frequency and severity if climate change remains unchecked, [have displaced 21.7 million people](#) internally each year since 2008. Climate change directly affects the social and economic determinants of health, reducing accessibility to clean air, safe drinking water, food and other necessities described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Human rights and climate change as a combined topic has only recently been addressed by the United Nations. The General Assembly convened the [United Nations Conference on Environment and Development](#) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. Known as the Earth Summit, the Conference brought together scientists and representatives from countries from around the world to discuss the impact of climate change on the environment for one of the first times at the United Nations. One tangible outcome from the Summit that still greatly influences today's discussions on the subject is the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) (UNFCCC), which [urged Member States to adopt national legislation](#) that protects vulnerable areas from climate change and pollution. The UNFCCC established the main framework for negotiating international treaties limiting greenhouse gas emissions. The [Conference of the Parties](#) to the UNFCCC convened its [third meeting](#) in Kyoto, Japan, in 1997 to operationalize the framework. This led to the adoption of the [Kyoto Protocol](#), which entered into force in 2005 and for the first time set legally binding emissions reduction targets for those Member States that ratified the treaty. While neither of these measures explicitly called out the connection between human rights and climate change, they recognized that changes to the environment will ultimately impact the general welfare of humanity.

After its founding in 2006, the Human Rights Council began tackling the increasingly important topics of human rights and climate change. In 2008, the Human Rights Council [requested a study](#) analyzing the nexus between human rights and climate change from the [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR). The [subsequent report](#), published in 2009, shaped the foundation for the international consideration of human rights and climate change. The report illustrated that climate change threatens the fulfillment of a wide range of human rights, such as the rights to life, health, water and adequate food. Furthermore, the report reemphasized the specific threat climate change poses to the rights of vulnerable individuals and groups such as women, children and indigenous peoples. Early strategies to counter climate change centered on the principles of adaptation and mitigation, and in light of the OHCHR report, it became evident that human rights must remain a central topic in addressing climate change. In February 2012, the OHCHR [convened a seminar](#) to address the impacts of climate change on the enjoyment of human

rights. The Human Rights Council sought to strengthen the cooperation between human rights experts and climate change experts as a cohesive unit to build a foundation for approaching climate change action through the lens of human rights.

In recent years, the United Nations has continued its work to emphasize the threat posed by climate change to human rights, although obstacles remain evident. The General Assembly adopted the [Paris Agreement](#) by consensus in 2015 at the [21st Conference of the Parties](#) of the UNFCCC, which set goals for the international community to limit global warming to less than two degrees Celsius and pursue efforts to limit the rise to 1.5 degree Celsius. While the 2015 Paris Agreement demonstrated the international community's continued concern about climate change, in many cases, current State policies are insufficient to meet these goals. Despite the landmark Paris Agreement, there is limited work being done to address human rights under climate change. For instance, while the 2015 Human Rights Council full-day panel discussion on climate change [recommended the appointment of a Special Rapporteur](#) on human rights and climate change, this has not yet come to fruition. In 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Special Procedures [Safe Climate Report](#) outlined the current status of efforts to meet the goals set in the 2016 Paris Agreement. Climate change poses a major threat to Small Island State populations, as well as indigenous populations within Member States. Small Island States are disproportionately affected by [rising sea levels](#), which threaten their very habitability. Indigenous populations are particularly vulnerable due to their connections with the environment regarding food, culture and water sources. Moreover, the report noted the connections between poverty and climate conditions, specifically that the decline of natural resources that support food sustainability, clean water access and energy access create conditions that fail to provide a high quality of life.

Unfortunately, those States and peoples who will [be the most vulnerable to these environmental changes](#) are among those with the smallest role in polluting greenhouse gases. Similarly, many of those most responsible for environmental degradation will, through wealth and fortunate geography, be insulated from the worst effects from climate change. A major challenge moving forward is motivating the wealthiest States to move toward achieving their greenhouse gas reduction targets to [prevent the worst of the harms](#) from befalling more vulnerable groups. While threats to human rights within the jurisdiction of a single state should be addressed by the individual State, with the international community playing a support role, climate change is a global problem that [requires coordinated international action](#) to address. Furthermore, Member States should consider how to involve indigenous communities whose rights are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate in the problem-solving process. Without the immediate implementation of widespread climate-focused policies

that reduce carbon emissions and resource depletion, the effects of climate change and inaction to combat climate change on the part of Member States will continue to infringe upon the human rights of those who are most vulnerable.

Questions to consider:

- How can the Human Rights Council address the disproportionate effects of climate change, specifically with respect to its impacts on human rights, across regions and peoples?
- What recourse should Member States have regarding the effects of climate change from other Member States?
- When considering climate change as an issue of human rights, how can vulnerable groups of people be represented in the decision-making process?

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