

Activity 1A: The Human Rights Challenge



Students are introduced to the concept of human rights and consider situations in which human rights may be violated. Students begin to learn about the human rights issue that is used as an example throughout the unit, child labor, by watching and responding to a PSA on human rights abuses that also violate child labor laws. They learn about a range of other human rights issues by analyzing a series of scenarios.

Sequence

1A.1	Students view and discuss a PSA about child labor.
1A.2	Students read and analyze scenarios about human rights abuses around the world.
1A.3	The class discusses the human rights scenarios.

Materials Needed

- PSA about child labor (see *Advance Preparation*)
- Computer and digital projector or monitor
- Physical or digital copy of a Lewis Hine photo (see *Advance Preparation*)
- **Handout 1: Human Rights Challenges Around the World**
- **Handout 2: Unit 6 Overview**
- **Handout 3: What Are Human Rights?**

Activity 1A: The Human Rights Challenge

1. Show and discuss the PSA.

As an introduction to the unit, show students the PSA about child labor law violations.

Ask students the following questions:

- Do you think it's acceptable for children as young as the ones you saw in the video to be working? Why or why not? At what age do you think children should be allowed to work?
- What kinds of circumstances might lead to children working in countries around the world?

Possible answers: *Children may need to work out of economic necessity to provide income for their families, or because their family owns a small business or farm and they are expected to participate in the work, or because they have been taken from their families and are being forced to work.*

- Are there other rights that you think children should have regardless of where they live or their circumstances?

Show students the Lewis Hine photo you selected. Ask students:

- When do you think this photo was taken?
- Where do you think this photo was taken?

If students do not know, tell where and when the photo was taken. Remind students that child labor was once common in the United States, as well as in other countries around the world. As students will learn during the unit, the rights of children have evolved in the United States and around the world over time, in part because of *advocacy campaigns*—organized efforts to raise awareness and seek to change policies and laws about human rights issues—and other efforts to codify acceptable practices in domestic and international law.

Tell students that throughout this unit, they will focus on the rights of both children and adults around the world and the role that international law and *treaties*—formally concluded and ratified agreements—play in protecting those rights.

2. Have student work in teams to read and analyze scenarios.

Ask students the following:

- What are *human rights*?

Write their responses on chart paper. Tell students that they will spend more time in this session considering human rights, as they look at possible human rights violations around the world. Post the chart paper for students' reference.

Divide the class into pairs or teams, and give students **Handout 1: Human Rights Challenges Around the World**. Assign each team two of the scenarios on Handout 1 to read and respond to. Have students write their answers to the three questions on the handout on a separate piece of paper.

Note: Although students are only responsible for reading and responding to two of the scenarios during class, ideally they will have a chance to look at and reflect on all the scenarios in Handout 1. You may want to have them read the remainder of the handout for homework.

Opportunities for Integration: Geography and Technology

Consider working with social studies, science, and technology teachers on the geography of human rights challenges around the world. Students can locate countries where individuals and groups are being exploited, identify characteristics (environmental, political, cultural, and economic) that contribute to the situation, and look at scientific and technological tools being used to address the issue. Students can also create an interactive map of the world that links their human rights research with relevant geographical information. See *Media Resources*.



3. Discuss the scenarios as a class.

Ask students:

- Were there any situations described in the scenarios you read that surprised you or that you were unfamiliar with?
- Were there any issues that you hadn't thought about as human rights issues before? If so, which ones?

Point out that throughout this course students have grappled with questions about right and wrong, the rule of law, and the balance between individual rights and the good of the community. Explain that they will now examine questions about human rights and the rule of law from a global perspective. They will revisit their definition and expand their understanding of human rights by looking in-depth at the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Distribute **Handout 2: Unit 6 Overview**. Go over the handout, and answer any questions students have about the unit.

Homework: Distribute **Handout 3: What Are Human Rights?** and have students read it before the next class session. Optionally, you can also have students read the rest of **Handout 1: Human Rights Challenges Around the World**.





Handout 1: Human Rights Challenges Around the World

The scenarios in this handout describe real situations that are happening now or have taken place around the world. Read the scenarios that you have been assigned and answer the questions below for each scenario:

- Do you think this situation violates human rights? If so, why?
- What organization or government body do you think should be responsible for investigating and addressing the human rights violations (if any) that you identified?
- What circumstances might lead to these kinds of human rights violations?

Record your answers on a separate piece of paper.

Scenario 1

In a western African nation, boys as young as seven are recruited to fight in the country's civil war. Some of the boys are threatened with violence against themselves or their families if they don't become soldiers; some have had family members killed, sometimes in front of their eyes; and some are promised financial gain. The boys use machetes and rifles to fight. Some of them are given drugs, such as amphetamines and marijuana. As soldiers, they are forced to kill or mutilate their "enemies," some of whom are boys as young as themselves.

Scenario 2

In a Western democratic nation, agencies within the government have used waterboarding as a means of extracting information from prisoners, often in the hopes of getting information about potential terrorist attacks. *Waterboarding* is a form of torture in which a person is strapped to a board, with the feet raised above the head, and material such as cloth or plastic often placed over the face. Water is then poured onto the person's face, which creates the sensation of drowning, causing a state of panic. Waterboarding can cause extreme pain, lung damage, and psychological effects, including post-traumatic stress, anxiety, and depression.

Scenario 3

In an Eastern European country, young and often poor women are promised high-paying jobs and a better life if they allow themselves to be transported (illegally) to another country in Western Europe or North America. However, once they arrive, they are forced into prostitution, often through violence or the threat of violence, by the people who promised them jobs. These women are victims of *human trafficking*, a modern form of slavery. They may earn little or no money. Some of them are held prisoner with no means of escape. Many have had their identification papers taken from them and are told that if they go to the authorities, they will be deported or put in jail.

Scenario 8

In a central African nation, tensions between two different ethnic groups—one the majority in the population, and the other the minority—have existed for many years. The government is run by people from the ethnic majority, and a group of people from the ethnic minority have formed a rebel organization to oppose the government. Shortly after the government signed a peace accord with the rebels, the president's plane was shot down. Although it's not clear who shot down the plane, people from within the government immediately blamed the rebels, and they organized a campaign to kill not just those from the rebel group, but any member of the ethnic minority.

The wave of violence spread across the country, and although it was started by people from militias, ordinary civilians from the ethnic majority also joined in. About 800,000 people were killed, up to three-quarters of the population of the ethnic minority, along with people from the ethnic majority who opposed the killings. (Organized campaigns such as this to eradicate a group of people based on their ethnicity are called *genocide* or *ethnic cleansing*.)

Scenario 9

In a country in the Middle East, the government has banned the forming of independent *labor unions*—groups of workers who are empowered to bargain with employers about wages, benefits, hours, and other working conditions. The only labor organizations that workers can join are those that are sponsored by the government and who don't have any real power to bargain with employers. Some people within the country have attempted to organize independent labor unions anyway. The leaders of these groups are often arrested and jailed. In addition, workers who protest or strike often face violence from government security forces.

Scenario 10

A South American country wanted to take out a loan from an international financial institution. The financial institution decided that it would not give the country the loan unless it agreed to *privatize* its public water system in some cities, meaning that the water system would be sold to and run by a private corporation, rather than the local governments. The financial institution said this was because the people running the water system were corrupt, the system was inefficient, and the poor people in the cities weren't getting water. The country agreed and sold the rights to the water system to a company run by a large multinational corporation. After taking over the water system, the company raised water prices, and some customers saw their bill double, making it difficult for poorer customers to pay. As a result, ordinary people do not have easy and regular access to water from their own community. The company said that it needed to raise prices to help pay for the construction of new water lines to reach customers who didn't have access to water.

Scenario 4

A Western democratic nation has set up a detention facility for prisoners of war who are captured in an armed conflict being fought in another country. The nation's military leaders say that these prisoners have links to terrorist organizations. The military will not provide any evidence to support this claim, saying that it would compromise national security to do so. Many of the prisoners have not been charged with a specific crime, have not been brought to trial in either a civil or military court, and are being held in the detention facility indefinitely. Some of the prisoners have been in detention for several years, with no indication of when they might be tried or set free.

Scenario 5

In an East Asian nation, an artist has become well-known for documenting problems with the nation's political system through his art. His work exposes the injustices he sees in the country, and he uses social networking to organize virtual protests. The country's political leadership does not allow citizens to openly express opposition to the government. In the past, the artist has been threatened and badly beaten by the police. More recently, the government demolished the artist's studio, confiscated his computers, and arrested him. He was held in an undisclosed location for nearly three months, at first was not told whether he would be charged with a crime, and was only allowed to see his wife once for 15 minutes while he was detained.

Scenario 6

In a large Western nation, a certain drug is illegal. This drug can be purchased in two forms: a powder and a "rock," which consists of small solid chunks. The powder is expensive and is often bought by middle- and upper-class people within the society, many of whom are white. The rock form of the drug is inexpensive and is often bought by poorer people, many of whom are black. (The majority of the country's population is white.) The nation's governing body passed a drug law mandating a five-year minimum prison sentence for possessing 5 grams of the rock form. However, a person would have to possess 500 grams—100 times as much—of the powder form of the drug to get the same five-year minimum sentence.

Scenario 7

In a country in the Middle East, immigrant workers come for jobs, many of which are menial and low-paying. The workers travel from countries in Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and other parts of the world. Some of them are in the country legally, and some are in the country illegally. It is very difficult for most of these workers to become citizens of the country because they do not have the cultural or ethnic background of the majority of the country's citizens. (It is possible to become a citizen by being "naturalized," but in practice this is rare.) Some of these migrant workers have children while they are in the country, and the children are not granted legal citizenship when they are born. The government has recently developed a plan to deport these children, along with their families, unless the children meet specific criteria (such as being a certain age and speaking the language of the country).

Scenario 11

A Western nation is engaged in a war with a country in another part of the world. As part of its strategy, the Western nation uses *unmanned drones*—aircraft that are flown by remote control. These drones have weapons, which are used against targets (such as compounds said to contain terrorists) that have been identified by the country's intelligence agency. However, these drones sometimes kill civilians—many of whom are children and women. International agencies say that killing must be a military necessity, and that without people on the ground, there's no one who can see whether there might be civilians in danger during an attack. The nation's government argues that the drones are an important part of military strategy in areas where it's not practical to deploy soldiers, and says that everything possible is done to minimize civilian deaths.

Scenario 12

In a number of countries, health insurance is something that each person is responsible for providing for him- or herself, rather than something provided by the government. In one such country, health insurance is usually covered by employers, but those who are self-employed have to pay for their own insurance, which is often very expensive. If they have pre-existing conditions (for example, if they have had cancer), they may not be able to get insurance at all, or the insurance they get may be very expensive. For the very poor, the government has a medical insurance system. However, not all poor people qualify for the program. Millions of people in this country don't have any medical insurance at all, and if they become ill, they can face thousands of dollars in medical bills they may not be able to pay. One university study found that 45,000 deaths per year in this country were associated with a lack of health insurance.

Handout 2: Unit 6 Overview

Are you entitled to rights simply because you are human? Is there such a thing as a universal right? Do all members of the global community have a responsibility to protect all people, regardless of nationality, gender, or race? What happens when the protection of rights is transformed into a legal obligation?

In this unit, you will grapple with the tensions that exist around the definition and the universal character of human rights. Throughout this course, you've learned about the dilemmas, successes, and conflicts that emerge for people who create, enforce, and interpret the laws. Now you will consider whether and how the rule of law should apply across borders, and what it means to balance national values and social, political, and economic priorities with the responsibility to protect all human beings. You will choose one human rights issue that is important to you, conduct research on it, write a policy brief—a short written document about the issue that could be used as part of an advocacy campaign—and create a storyboard for a public service announcement—a type of advertisement that can raise awareness, inform, persuade, or encourage action—about the issue. Your work in this unit will focus on the following questions:

- What are human rights? What are the debates around the concept of universal human rights?
- How are human rights codified, enforced, and interpreted?
- What challenges exist in the protection of human rights?
- What roles do people in the fields of law, law enforcement, and advocacy play in the protection of human rights?

Understandings

- Human rights are defined as rights we all have simply because we are human, but there is an international debate about the nature and extent of universal human rights.
- Human rights are codified, enforced, and interpreted through both domestic and international bodies.
- Enforcement of human rights by domestic courts, inter-governmental organizations, and international tribunals is challenging because of several factors, including national sovereignty and difficulties in monitoring abuses.
- People who work in governmental, inter-governmental, non-governmental, and grassroots organizations promote human rights in the world through data collection, education campaigns, court cases, and direct action.

Vocabulary Used in This Unit

Child labor: The practice of using children (those below a minimum age that is specified in a law, convention, or treaty) for work that harms or exploits them.

Convention: A formally concluded and ratified agreement between Nation-states. Once ratified, conventions are legally binding. (The generic term *convention* is synonymous with the generic terms *treaty* and *covenant*.)

Customary international law: Worldwide legal agreements that develop through the practices of States and are followed because of a sense of legal obligation rather than a formalized convention.

Enforcement: The process of ensuring that laws or policies are followed.

Human rights: Universal legal guarantees protecting individuals and groups against government actions that interfere with one's fundamental freedoms and human dignity. Human rights law obliges governments to take some actions and prevents them from taking others.

Inter-governmental organization (IGO): A group whose membership consists in large part of representatives from two or more national governments. IGOs are formed by the creation of a treaty between participating countries.

Intervention: The process of taking action to change a situation (for example, an action taken with the goal of preventing further human rights violations in a country).

Investigation: Conducting research and fact-finding to determine whether a law (such as a human rights law) has been violated.

Monitoring: Closely observing the implementation of human rights agreements in a specified area over a period of time.

Nation-state: A territory that self-identifies as being sovereign, in charge of ruling itself economically, politically, and socially. May be abbreviated as *State*.

Non-governmental organization (NGO): A group whose membership excludes representatives from governments, although they may be funded by one or more governments. NGOs are usually designed to promote a social aim. They may try to achieve change through projects, or through advocacy and public awareness campaigns.

Policy brief: A written document containing information about one or more issues that can be used as part of an advocacy campaign. Can be used to inform, persuade, or push a person or group to take action.

Public service announcement (PSA): A type of advertisement (audio, video, print, or Web-based) that can be used to raise awareness, inform, persuade, or encourage action on a particular issue.

Ratification: The process of formal, legally binding approval, such as of a treaty.

Storyboard: A series of drawings/sketches and written descriptions that are used during the design process for a piece of media, such as an ad, TV show, or movie.

Treaties: Formally concluded and ratified agreements between Nation-States. Once ratified, treaties are legally binding. (The generic term *treaty* is synonymous with the generic terms *convention* and *covenant*.)

Treaty law: International law that is laid out in international, legally binding agreements (such as treaties) that have been developed, signed, and ratified by states.

Unit Project

You will take on the role of a researcher in an international organization that creates human rights *advocacy campaigns*—campaigns that raise awareness and seek to change policies and laws about human rights issues. You will select one human rights issue that you feel strongly about, and create two products for an advocacy campaign about the issue: a policy brief and a storyboard for a public service announcement (PSA). (A *storyboard* is a tool used to visualize movies, TV shows, and ads before they are made.)

Your policy brief will describe the issue you've chosen, the laws and policies related to the issue, and any efforts to enforce these laws. You will also recommend additional action that you think could be taken around the issue. Your PSA will explain to viewers why the issue you've chosen is a serious one, and will advocate for change or for greater enforcement of the law.

In This Unit You Will . . .

Think about how human rights are defined. Look at human rights issues around the world, analyze the human rights outlined by the United Nations, and consider arguments for and against the universality of human rights.

Learn about and research international laws and policies governing human rights. Learn about international laws and policies, and look in depth at child labor laws. Understand the relationship between international and domestic laws. Research laws and treaties related to the issue you've chosen for your unit project.

Consider the role that advocacy plays in addressing and promoting human rights. Explore strategies used by advocacy organizations to promote human rights. Understand how policy briefs and ad campaigns are used to inform the public and policymakers and to promote change.

Learn about the challenges in identifying, investigating, and enforcing human rights. Using the example of child labor, examine the role that government and non-government groups play in investigation, monitoring, and enforcement. Identify strategies for and challenges to enforcing human rights on the issue you have chosen.

Contribute to advancing human rights by taking part in an advocacy campaign. As part of an advocacy campaign, write a policy brief to a particular audience such as policymakers; create a storyboard for a public service announcement; and share your work with other students.

Career Portfolio

You will create or complete the following items to keep in your Career Portfolio:

- Policy brief
- PSA storyboard
- People and Career Profiles
- Unit exam
- Journals (4)

Unit 6 Journal Assignments

Respond to the journal questions as assigned.

Journal 1

Do you think any human rights are universal? Why or why not?
If you do think there are universal rights, what do you think those rights should be?

Journal 2

Do you think the United States has an obligation to ratify documents such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child? Why or why not?

Journal 3

Do you think human rights are most effectively protected through formal legal structures (laws, law enforcement, the courts), or through other means? Explain why you feel this way.

Journal 4

Thinking back on your research for the unit project, which individuals and/or groups are committing human rights violations? What incentives do they have to continue such practices? What incentives might persuade these individuals or groups to change such practices?

Handout 3: What Are Human Rights?

Now that you've looked at some human rights scenarios, and talked about what you think human rights are, you can consider how others have defined the term. The text in this handout is from the United Nations*:

Human rights are universal legal guarantees protecting individuals and groups against actions by governments that interfere with fundamental freedoms and human dignity. Human rights law obliges governments to do some things and prevents them from doing others. The following are some of the most frequently cited characteristics of human rights:

- Internationally guaranteed
- Legally protected
- Focus on the dignity of the human being
- Protect individuals and groups
- Oblige States and State actors
- Cannot be waived or taken away
- Equal and interdependent
- Universal

Examples of Human Rights

Human rights are described in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which you will learn about in the next activity) and in the various treaties (also called *covenants* and *conventions*), declarations, guidelines, and bodies of principles elaborated by the United Nations and by regional organizations. They include a broad range of guarantees, addressing virtually every aspect of human life and human interaction. The rights guaranteed to all human beings include the following:

- Freedom of association, expression, assembly, and movement
- Right to life
- Freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment
- Freedom from arbitrary arrest or detention
- Right to a fair trial
- Freedom from discrimination
- Right to equal protection of the law
- Freedom from arbitrary interference with privacy, family, home, or correspondence
- Right to asylum
- Right to nationality
- Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion
- Right to vote and to take part in government
- Right to just and favourable working conditions
- Right to adequate food, shelter, clothing, and social security
- Right to health
- Right to education
- Right to participate in cultural life

Where Do Human Rights Come From?

Human rights norms and standards are derived from two principal types of international laws: customary international law and treaty law.

Customary international law (or simply *custom*) refers to international laws that develop through the general and consistent practice of States (i.e., countries) and are followed because of a sense of legal obligation. In other words, if States perform in a certain way over a period of time because they all believe they are required to do so, that behavior becomes recognized as a principle of international law that is binding on them, even if it is not spelled out in a particular agreement. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is not in itself a binding treaty, provisions of it have been identified as having the character of customary international law, and States are therefore bound to respect them.

Treaty law includes the law of human rights as set out in the many international agreements (treaties, covenants, conventions) that have been collectively developed, signed and *ratified* (formally approved) by States. Some of these treaties cover whole sets of rights (such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights), while others focus on particular types of violations (such as the Convention Against Torture) or on particular groups to be protected (such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child). Another type focuses on particular situations, such as armed conflict (including the four Geneva Conventions of 1949). All of these instruments are fully legally binding on the States that have ratified them.

* From *Human Rights and Law Enforcement: A Trainer's Guide on Human Rights for the Police*. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, New York and Geneva, 2002, p. 13.