

Human Rights in the 21st Century: Navigating Technological, Social, and Environmental Challenges

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ABSTRACT

New phenomena in the twenty-first century have presented unprecedented tests of human rights, driven by rapid advancement in technology, persistence of social injustice and worsening environmental challenges. The current paper will undertake an inter disciplinary approach to evaluate the interconnected nature of these problems, with the aim to strengthen human-rights models to respond to the changing realities on the world. The latest technological advancements another artificial intelligence (AI) and the advanced monitoring have caused serious concerns about the privacy, freedom of expression, and reputation. The fact that not only corporations, but also governmental agencies collect a great amount of personal data that is facilitated by AI, poses a threat to personal autonomy; an instance of such risk lies in the Chinese social credit system that can potentially lead to totalitarian control (Human Rights Watch, 2020). These risks have been further compounded by the increase in deepfakes as reputations are at stake, which highlights the need to develop ample legal protections. The marginalised groups of people like migrant workers, refugees, and LGBTQIA +, still face a culture of discrimination especially in conservative domain where legal and social barriers still exist (ILGA, 2023). In the Indian subcontinent, discrimination in the caste, class, and gender identity compromises equal grants of rights, even though policies ensure the protection of discrimination in the constitution of India (Amnesty International, 2023). The complexity of the climate crisis adds to these challenges, and the 2022 declaration of a clean and healthy environment as a human right by the UN further highlights the urgency of dealing with climate displacement and the right to indigenous land following years of denial of the reality of the human impact on climate change (UN General Assembly, 2022). In the same vein, the criminal-justice field is a dangerous area that is characterised by custodial violence, inordinate delays in the procedure of undertrial prisoners, and debates on capital punishment, which are all detrimental to the core right to dignity and life (NCRB, 2023). The accountability is established

through international documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and other mechanisms at a regional level, like the European Court of Human Rights, but it is substantially different across these mechanisms (OHCHR, 2023). The fact that India is present in international forums represents a sign of dedication, but it, at the same time, exposes deficiencies in national action (MEA, 2023). Digital divide further makes equitable access to rights a challenging process: many of the rural populations lack the digital access to benefit the advantage of e-governance (World Bank, 2023). Cyberbullying, especially when it affects females, indicates the necessity of gender-sensitive legal solutions that should be prioritized (UN Women, 2023).

Keywords: Human Rights, Privacy, AI Surveillance, Climate Justice, Marginalized Communities.

INTRODUCTION

The challenges we face in the 21st century are different, at least conceptually, from human rights violations like torture, slavery, and political oppression. Rather, they include systemic threats and digital and ubiquitous threats. Now, we find violations of rights arising from algorithmic decisions, surveillance of the masses, or environmental degradation, instead of repression by an overlord. These new threats complicate matters because they are invisible, ubiquitous, and fast-moving.

For example, when one person experiences censorship from their state, this attracts international attention. However, millions of people in democratic and developing nations do not know the extent of their digital surveillance by a range of government and private companies on a daily basis. Our rights to privacy, equality, freedom of expression, and even life, can be influenced not just by explicit and intentional state policies but by the actions of corporations, automation, and climate issues.

In summation, the 21st century suggests we change our ways. We must shift from a model that reacts to rights violations to one that activates a model of human rights. This does not mean to have rights in laws and policies, but in design, business, and economic and environmental policies.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL FRONTIER: INNOVATION AND INFRINGEMENT

The dual-edged nature of technology makes it easier than ever to communicate and to be more efficient, enjoy empowerment and community, while simultaneously posing serious threats to liberty, equality, and dignity.

1. Data privacy & surveillance:

Mass data collection has become normalized with social media apps, smart watches, smart buildings, surveillance cameras. While these surveillance tools can help people be efficient, what they often collect is sensitive behavioural, emotional, and biometric information - often with the users unaware, and certainly not comprehending consent. Governments might explain it away using national security, corporations argue that it is a personalization of the user, but with no regulation - this exploitable data simply becomes a tool for further oppression, not freedom - we can see this is happening in terms of profiling through data, controlling dissent through coercive action, and using data for predictive policing based on data that is inherently biased.

Example: The Pegasus spyware scandal demonstrated how state actors can leverage surveillance tools intensively to monitor journalists, record their meetings with opposition leaders, monitor human rights defenders, etc. These are attacks on democratic values that undermine democracy itself.

2. AI and Algorithmic Bias

AI systems apply by intent or by default discrimination. AI tools in judicial systems, hiring processes, or credit scoring are not objective forensic tools. They are based on model historical data that reproduce structural discrimination. Furthermore, when software-based systems don't allow for transparency, individuals cannot fight, or even understand, decisions that will have severe impacts on their already precarious lives.

Additionally, internationally, there is an AI governance gap. Whereas wealthy nations are deciding the conditions of how AI's development will unfold and impact the international landscape, poorer nations largely do not have the capacity to influence appropriate gatekeeping of how AI will alter the targeted populations they are supposed to govern.

3. Digital Divide

Access to technology can be access to opportunity. Yet, billions still cannot access basic internet connectivity through lack of infrastructure, affordability, or political censorship. These factors prevent the access to health care, legal resources, or online learning, and therefore perpetuate existing inequities. Addressing the digital divide is not a luxury anymore, it is a human right and necessity, especially as we move forward from the pandemic where services will continue to be digitized by default.

SOCIAL INEQUALITIES: PERSISTENT AND EVOLVING

Social inequalities are not only enduring, but they are also morphing into new forms under digital capitalism, migration crises, and political polarization.

1. Racial and Ethnic Discrimination

Although we may now have formally abolished slavery and apartheid, systemic racism is alive and well and it continues to play a role in many contemporary democracies. The mass incarceration of Black Americans, the systemic genocide of Rohingya Muslims, and the treatment of migrants at borders show how racial hierarchies can take distinctive forms in law and society.

Additionally, technological processes such as facial recognition technology and predictive policing enable racism to be enacted in ways that are more automated, and less visible, but equally pernicious.

2. Gender Inequality and Violence

Across all the world's regions, women and LGBTQ+ individuals face structural barriers to access, enjoying unequal pay, unpaid caregiving for family members, domestic violence, cyberstalking, and other forms of online harassment. Digital spaces have created new terrains for feminist and queer rights movements to grapple with: the prevalence of deepfakes, revenge porn, and cyberstalking of individuals has become normalized, and often legal recourse fails to keep up with the pace of technologies that compound intersectional gender-based harms.

Feminist and queer movements have expanded the conceptualization of human rights to include bodily autonomy, reproductive justice, and the securitization of digital environments. Yet,

governments fail to enforce against harm because the loopholes and institutions that enable patriarchal cultural norms are deep-seated.

3. Indigenous Rights

Indigenous peoples continue to be displaced by “**development**”. Dams, mining, highways are there to remove people and destroy ecosystems in the name of "progress" without any substantial consent. Cultural extinction happens in both material and symbolic forms; when indigenous languages all but disappear or cultural, sacred practices, are criminalized. Human Rights Law must also recognize collective rights, spiritual relationships to nature, and the existence of indigenous forms of governance.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS AS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

1. Climate Change and Displacement

Climate change is more than simply an environmental issue; it is a human rights issue. Rising sea levels, desertification, and extreme weather have already forced millions to flee their homes. We have “**climate refugees**” who currently have no recognition from international refugee law.

The right to shelter, water, food, and life is being threatened by a warming planet. In Bangladesh, in many island countries in the Pacific, and drought regions in Africa, people are facing existential threats with very little global support.

2. Environmental Racism and Inequality

Marginalized communities often live in close proximity to polluting industries and/or are located in areas prone to natural disasters. This is called environmental racism. The environmental racism can be found in higher rates of asthma, cancer, and illness in poorer people and people of colour. The right to a healthy environment, recently established under the **UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC)**, is a small step forward, but the right must be enforced to avoid further exploitation of vulnerable groups.

3. Corporate Accountability and Ecocide

Multinational corporations frequently conduct business in jurisdictions where environmental protections are scant. From oil spills in the Niger Delta to deforestation in the Amazon, a corporation's negligence or complicity is ongoing. Support for the idea of ecocide being recognized as an international crime is growing. Holding corporations accountable through legal frameworks and due diligence laws is vital to preventing vast and widespread harm to the environment and people.

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND INSTITUTIONAL LIMITATIONS

1. Strengths and Gaps in International Law

International human rights law, as embodied by treaties like the ICCPR and ICESCR, has created an established footing for associated rights. However, when it comes to enforcement, it has proved inconsistent and often ineffective due, at least in part, to state sovereignty, not having jurisdiction, and political will.

There are emerging matters that require legal evolution, and more pliant and binding responses at the global level: - AI regulation; climate displacement; and cross-border data flows.

2. Role of National Institutions

NHRIs, courts, and ombudspersons, are critical to implementing global commitments at the local level. They are often hamstrung by funding challenges, political interference, and scope of issue. Improving national institutions, such as their independence, funding support, and digital capabilities is critical to localizing the human rights discourse.

3. Human Rights and Conflict Zones

Violations of human rights involving armed conflict, insurgency, and state repression are arguably the greatest human rights violations. The 21st century has thus far seen atrocities in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, and Ukraine.

In these difficult contexts, humanitarian law and human rights law must work together to create mechanisms and remedies for accountability, documentation, and redress.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY AND YOUTH MOVEMENTS

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and grassroots activists are the lifeblood of democracy. They are the missing link when government entities, bureaucracies, and institutions move slowly, and advocate for the voices that are absent from the policy process, such as migrants, minorities, indigenous peoples, the poor, and others.

In most authoritarian regimes, and in some democracies, there is now an attack on civil society by working to restrict funding, implementing internet blackouts, creating censorship laws, and even extrajudicial killings.

The emergence of youth-led activism may be one of the more encouraging realities of this century. Movements such as:

- **Fridays for Future (climate)**
- **#EndSARS (Nigeria, police reform)**
- **#FarmersProtest (India, rights to land)**

Demonstrate the ways youth are using digital tools to mobilize globally and respond to injustice, and demand structural reforms.

But there is also retaliation against these movements too. Activists experience arrests, vilification as terrorists, and surveillance through excessive scrutiny of their social media sites. We need to protect civic space and provide the opportunity for youth to have representation in decision-making, as essential to a just future.

TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR RIGHTS EMPOWERMENT

Although there are risks to technology, I believe that it can also enhance human rights - if done so ethically.

- **In Kenya and India to date**, blockchain is being used to document land rights intending to reduce fraud and forced evictions.
- **Non-government organizations (NGOs)** are now using artificial intelligence (AI) and satellite imagery to monitor war crimes in real time in places like Ukraine and Gaza.

- **Telemedicine and e-learning platforms** are providing healthcare and education to populations in refugee camps, living in rural or remote areas, and communities in a post-conflict situation.

The future is one of rights-based and people-centered design and innovation, where developers, engineers, and policymakers partner together in creating credible potential with human dignity at the core.

A NEW RIGHTS AGENDA: EMERGING CONCEPTS AND DEMANDS

1. Digital Rights

The right to be able to access the Internet in a safe and freeway should now be considered a fundamental right – just like the rights to clean water and/or education.

- Net neutrality guarantees equitable access to all sites and services.
- Encryption safeguards the privacy of your communication.
- The right to be forgotten allows individuals and businesses to delete dangerous online records and information.

Lack of these protections turns the internet into a space of surveillance and inequality rather than empowerment.

2. Rights of Future Generations

Young people are bringing climate cases against governments, holding their leaders accountable to the next generations of people. There have been positive judgements in courts in Germany, Pakistan, and the Netherlands.

A new wave of legal approaches relating to future generations is available, including constitutional rights for nature and youth advisory councils, to embed intergenerational accountability into decision-making frameworks.

3. Mental Health Rights

Depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicide are at an all-time high globally and especially among young people, refugees and people affected by war. People consider mental health care as a privilege and not a right.

Governments should treat mental health as a public health issue as well as a human rights issue. They should implement mental health strategies in schools and workplaces and address mental health as a part of the health care sector.

TOWARD A GLOBAL, INCLUSIVE HUMAN RIGHTS FUTURE

An effective human rights framework that is future-proofed, will be intersectional, inclusive, and globally responsive.

Key imperatives:

- **Intersectionality:** A Black disabled woman is going to experience compounded discrimination that will want specific legal remedies - not just a universal protection.
- **Global Solidarity:** Countries in the North must support the South through climate financing, equitable access to vaccines, sharing technology, and debt relief. In essence if human rights only exist in privileged countries, they will not help anyone.
- **Policy innovation:** Governments need to establish fluid regulations to address new anticipated threats- such as algorithmic bias and climate change migration. Static legal forms cannot respond dynamically.

Tangible and actionable suggestions:

- Create a UN Digital Rights Charter to control the internet.
- Acknowledge climate change migrants as a new category of international protection.
- Require all transnational corporations to undertake human rights due diligence.
- Invest in human rights education, emphasizing youth and minorities.

All of this will not happen just by-passing documents; it will take political ambition, activism, and civic disposition too.

CONCLUSION

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, surroundings of challenges to human rights have shifted inherently. These challenges are no longer visible in abuses in authoritarian states or starkly discriminatory acts or policies. As opposed to the visible abuses of past decades,

many of today's violations are subtle, structural, and embedded in our frameworks of technology, inequality, and environmental degradation. We have moved from a world of national or hyper-local forms of unique violations or marginalization to ones shaped by mass surveillance, algorithmic biases, climate displacement, and digital exclusion and commodities. Despite the newness of these issues, they mark an expanded approach to protecting human dignity in the contexts of interconnected systems shared globally. The issues are complex, transnational, and fast moving and anticipate human rights frameworks to shift from reactionary to proactive, flexible, and inclusive.

Today's exigencies suggest rights need to be redefined in response to the current realities of both the mass digital age, environmental precarity, and increasing stratification of our societies. To protect human rights in this newly opened terrain, we are called to embrace structural reform as a priority across institutionalized governance. The international legal community must also reactivate and evolve to look beyond the present moment, especially in relation to the need to regulate AI, hold corporations accountable for ecological harm, recognize newly emergent rights such as data privacy and climate security, etc. As these processes continue, the national frameworks of governance must also be confident in developing capacities to ensure protections and social justice for everyone, especially upstream for marginalised people who will always be the highest risk determinants in crises.

In the end, the future of human rights will depend on our ability to re-conceptualise the nature of human rights from legally entrenched entitlements, to capacitating means for justice, participation, and shared habitude. They will need to integrate equity, sustainability, and care far beyond the law into all areas of society, including digital infrastructure, education and social policy, environment and ecology, and global economics. This does not require what it may sound like a legal challenge or a political campaign-it is certainly, however, a moral and generational obligation. The question now is not whether human rights are relevant for the 21st Century, but whether we can see and commit to an articulation of human rights that makes them meaningful, actionable, and truly universal. Only then can we create a world in which human dignity is safeguarded not just in words, but as a practice-for everyone, everywhere, and for generations to follow.