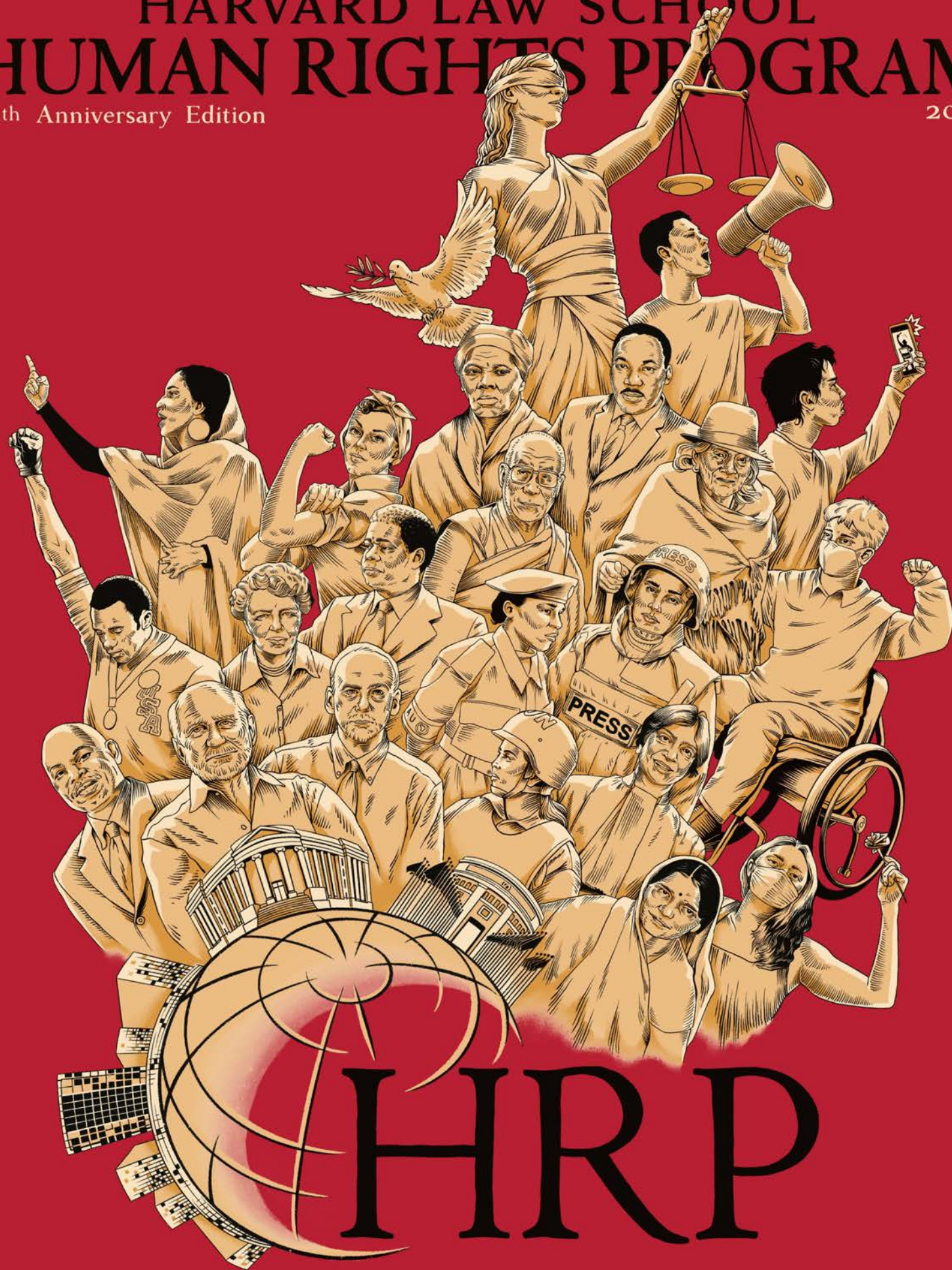


HARVARD LAW SCHOOL HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM

40th Anniversary Edition 2025



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DIRECTOR

Professor Gerald L. Neuman

J. Sinclair Armstrong Professor of International, Comparative, Foreign Law

617-495 9083
neuman@law.harvard.edu

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

Dr. Abadir M. Ibrahim

WCC 3120
abibrahim@law.harvard.edu

PROGRAM ASSISTANT

Valenia Bergier

WCC 3118
vbergier@law.harvard.edu

PROGRAM OFFICES

6 Everett Street, 3rd Floor
Cambridge, MA 02138
Tel. 617-495-9362
Fax. 617-495-9393
hrp@law.harvard.edu
http://hrp.law.harvard.edu

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Director's Foreword

The celebration of the Fortieth Anniversary of the Human Rights Program (HRP) was deliberately scheduled for October 2024, a time when we could take a moment to look back at older challenges and achievements of the human rights system, and look forward to the middle-term future for the challenges it would bring, regardless of the outcome of the 2024 election in the United States. By “human rights system” I mean the broad network of institutions, groups, and individuals who work to further the goals of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That includes the public institutions of human rights law and the private initiatives of human rights advocacy.

As always, HRP focused critical attention both on violations of human rights and on possible failings of the human rights institutions themselves. Some of the challenges involve age-old concerns of the struggle for human rights—inequality, violence, poverty, persecution, dictatorship. Others involve newer sources of threat to human rights such as anthropogenic climate change, and the rapid advances in the development and use of “artificial intelligence.” Frankly, it is unclear to me how human rights actors can best contribute to the confronting of these urgent new challenges with highly technical dimensions.

Then came 2025, and a new U.S. administration bent on repudiation of existing policies. It was predictable that the government would seek to discredit climate science, but I did not foresee that the government would attack science itself and the institutions of scientific research and higher education. It was predictable that an administration whose earlier version had produced the infamous Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights would have little respect for the international human rights apparatus. I did not expect that the administration would abandon the defense of democracy in the world, or that it would lose interest in global public health after experiencing a historic pandemic.

HRP will continue its existing interests, and mine, while being alert to new developments. The climate emergency is too severe to sit and wait for a more receptive political audience. Even if it is not clear how the global temperature rise can be reduced (“mitigation”), or how states and communities can prepare themselves better to address its consequences (“adaptation”), and even if the role of human rights institutions in assisting these processes is debated, these are conversations that we need to participate in.

One focus of HRP’s work on climate has explored perspectives on climate problems and solutions in Africa, a region that is

suffering so much of the harm of climate change while having added so little to its causes. This project, like all our collaborations with human rights colleagues in Africa, has been greatly strengthened by the expertise of HRP’s Associate Director Abadir Ibrahim (to whom I am continually grateful). We will maintain our particular interest in the region, despite the differing priorities of the U.S. government.

We will continue to talk about the rights of environmental advocates, and other human rights defenders such as election observers and proponents of transitional justice, who face intimidation and violence in other countries. And sometimes in the United States.

We will keep our attention on regression in women’s rights, and on issues of equality in general. HRP has held numerous public events and private workshops examining antidiscrimination law and racial justice, including projects on discrimination based on religion, discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and discrimination based on various ages. Participants have discussed and critiqued government policies, social phenomena, and the standards for evaluating discrimination in human rights law, and we will continue these inquiries.

Personally, a lot of my own recent work has been on rights of migrants. HRP hosted a workshop on comparative deportation practice in April 2025 that had been arranged long in advance, in collaboration with a visiting fellow, before we discovered how timely it would be. The discussion of the U.S. context has an international law dimension, but much of the analysis necessarily concerns domestic law, U.S. federal law. That illustrates a broader point about human rights work that is salient in the current political environment.

There are times and places in which the discourse of international human rights law is not the most effective tool for achieving its actual goals. For many societies, local norms and local traditions carry more persuasive weight than international norms that may

be perceived as technical or invasive even when they serve the same underlying values. Human rights strategy often involves partnership between global legal experts and local advocates employing vernacular conceptions of justice and injustice. In the United States, a strong sense of normative self-sufficiency has long prevailed, and in the current fever of populism, international law is too easily dismissed as elitist or anti-American. With regard to civil and political rights – including equality – the United States has normative resources that support human rights, as well as elements that undercut them. With regard to economic and social rights, the resources are unfortunately fewer. For foreign nationals, the coverage might best be described as a patchwork: some issues do receive normal constitutional law treatment, while other issues are primarily dependent on statutory law, and in some areas the statutory law is reinforced by international law. As a result, in legal argumentation the normative resources are mixed, and for vernacular public advocacy the complexity leaves important issues about migrants open to widely contrasting perspectives. Populism can go to the extreme of totally denying their rights and encouraging brutality.

And of course, we will continue to be interested in human rights institutions, including the global and regional bodies, their outputs and their strengths and their weaknesses. As a former treaty body member, I will say that there are situations in which the task for the moment is to bear witness and build for the future.

Another of the ways that HRP builds for the future is by preparing our extraordinary students, advising their research, acquainting them with human rights organizations, and helping to launch their careers. I look forward to hearing them describe their achievements, at our next anniversary or at events in between.



Gerald L. Neuman



Gerald Neuman '80 is the Director of HRP and the J. Sinclair Armstrong Professor of International, Foreign, and Comparative Law at Harvard Law School. Credit: Kathleen Dooher

The Celebrations

The overall theme of the 40th Anniversary Symposium focused on “Envisioning the Future of Human Rights,” exploring expectations for the prospective development of the human rights movement and specific issues that it addresses or should address. Examining the trajectory of human rights naturally involved reflections on the past —which, given the nature of the occasion, included opportunities to reminisce about the early years and milestones of HRP. In addition to some structured opportunities for sharing memories, panelists engaged in informal discussions and reminisced about their personal experiences from years past.



1) Panel 1 on Human Rights and Equality. 2) Kristen Stilt, Ryan Goodman, and Gerald Neuman conversing. 3) Henry Steiner speaking to Alicia Ely Yamin with Makau Mutua in the background. 4) Panel 2 on Investing in a Just Future: (Re)Imagining the Field. 5) Dean Goldberg speaking to a student. 6) Makau Mutua greeting a colleague. 7) Flávia Piovesan VF '95 and '00 participating in Panel 1 discussions. 8) Rakesh Rajani VF 99' participating in Panel 1 discussions with Salma Waheedi (PLSMW), Aminta Ossom '09 (IHRC) & Esther Gabriel '25 in the background. 9) Marcin Kilanowski (VF '25, FAS) responding to a question during an audience exercise led by Katherine Sikkink. 10) Former Dean Martha Minow. 11) Amy Van Zyl-Chavarro LL.M. '25 in focus behind Jessica Neuwirth. 12) Victor Madrigal-Borloz VF '19-'25 greeting a student.





13) Aminta Ossom speaking with Victor Madrigal-Borloz and Salma Waheedi. 14) HRP Alumni greeting each other after the Panel 1 Discussion. 15) Gerald Neuman speaking with Flavia Piovesan. 16) Rayhan Asat LL.M. '16, S.J.D. Candidate. 17) Thomas White LL.M. '25 speaking during discussion on Panel 1, flanked (clockwise) by Wiliame Gucake LL.M. '25, Iliina Shah (OCP), Hannah Yáng LL.M. '25, and Hildur Hjörvar LL.M. '25. 18) Arnaaz Ameer LL.M. '23, S.J.D. candidate. 19) Emily Ray '21. 20) Beatrice Lindstrom and Benyam Dawit Mezmur. 21) Jessica Neuwirth and Tyler Giannini. 22) William P. Alford '77 speaking with Ryan Goodman, Makau Mutua, and Jessica Neuwirth. 23) Abadir M. Ibrahim and Kathryn Sikkink. 24) Judy Murciano (OPIA) and Daniel Levine-Spound '19 (IHRC). 25) Taqbir Huda LL.M. '25 participating in Panel 2 discussions. 26) Henry Steiner speaking with Alicia Ely Yamin and Rakesh Rajani.

All photo credits: Tony Rinaldo.



HRP's 40th Anniversary Symposium

Envisioning the Future of Human Rights

The Anniversary Program

Welcome Remarks

Gerald L. Neuman '80, J. Sinclair Armstrong Professor of International, Foreign, and Comparative Law, Director of the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School

John C.P. Goldberg, Interim Dean, Carter Professor of General Jurisprudence, Harvard Law School

James Ross '85, Legal and Policy Director, Human Rights Watch

Keynote Address

Kathryn Sikkink, Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy at Harvard Kennedy School

Panel Discussions

Human Rights and Equality

Panelists detailed and placed their work in human rights within the broader context of equality.

Moderator:

Tyler Giannini, Clinical Professor of Law, Director of Human Rights Entrepreneurs Clinic at Harvard Law School

Panelists:

Victor Madrigal-Borloz, Eleanor Roosevelt Senior Visiting Researcher and Lecturer on Law at Harvard Law School

Jessica Neuwirth '85, Distinguished Lecturer and Rita E. Hauser Director, Human Rights Program, Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute at Hunter College

Martha Minow, 300th Anniversary University Professor at Harvard University

Karima Benounne, Lewis M. Simes Professor of Law at the University of Michigan

Gerald L. Neuman, J. Sinclair Armstrong Professor of International, Foreign, and Comparative Law at Harvard Law School and Director of the School's Human Rights Program

Investing in a Just Future: (Re)Imagining the Field

Moderator:

Alicia Ely Yamin '91, Lecturer on Law; Senior Fellow on Global Health and Rights at the Petrie-Flom Center for Health Law Policy, Biotechnology and Bioethics at Harvard Law School

Panelists:

Ryan Goodman, Anne and Joel Ehrenkranz Professor of Law at New York University School of Law

Benyam Dawit Mezmur, Professor of Law and Deputy Dean for Research and Post-Graduate Studies at the Law Faculty at the University of the Western Cape, Member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

Kristen Stilt, Professor of Law, Faculty Director of the Animal Law and Policy Program, and Director of the Program on Law and Society in the Muslim World at Harvard Law School

Makau Mutua LL.M. '85 S.J.D. '87, SUNY Distinguished Professor, Margaret W. Wong Professor, University at Buffalo School of Law

Additional Individuals Referred to in this Publication

In addition to the symposium panelists listed above, this section provides the professional titles for other key individuals referenced throughout the publication.

Abadir M. Ibrahim, Associate Director of the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School

Kenneth Roth, Senior Fellow at the Carr Center and the Charles and Marie Robertson Visiting Professor at the Princeton School for Public and International Affairs, Former Executive Director of Human Rights Watch (1993-2022)

Yuval Shany, Hersch Lauterpacht Chair in International Law and former Dean of the Law Faculty of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Senior Research Fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute, Member (2013-2020) and Chair (2018-2019) of the UN Human Rights Committee.

E. Tendayi Achiume, Alicia Miñana Professor of Law at UCLA Law, Leah Kaplan Visiting Professor in Human Rights at Stanford Law School, and Former UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (2017-2022)

Looking Back to Envision the Future

Hope in Difficult Times

Throughout the previous academic year HRP organized a number of workshops and events focusing on issues at the intersection of human rights and pressing global challenges. These conversations were also captured at HRP’s 40th Anniversary Symposium. Featuring two roundtable panels organized around the theme of “Envisioning the Future of Human Rights,” the symposium brought together presenters and participants to critically examine the history of the human rights movement and explored its prospective developments as well as specific issues that it addresses or should address.

These conversations highlighted the considerable progress made by the human rights movement. Besides the development of robust regional and global normative frameworks and their wide adoption by constitutions and domestic legal systems,

the invocation of the language of rights by protest movements around the world shows that human rights have indeed become, in Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s apt description, a “common language of humanity”.

It is, however, pertinent to note that many of the major advances in human rights emanated from or were accompanied by major clampdowns on human rights, exacerbated by state-sponsored or organized violence, exploitation, revolution and war. This is most evident in the fact that the establishment of the United Nations and of the international human rights system were made possible in great part by the horrors of the two World Wars.

Furthermore, the human rights project fundamentally remains a work in progress that continues to evolve—partly in reaction to events the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(UDHR) rightly described as having “outraged the conscience of mankind”. The UDHR, which echoed the American and French Declarations in proclaiming the “equal and inalienable rights” of all humanity, did not immediately transform human rights practices worldwide. While the Soviet Union, operating its extensive Gulag, abstained from voting for the UDHR, even the countries that endorsed it maintained systems involving serious human rights violations. Most European powers upheld violent colonial empires, and the U.S. maintained a system of racial segregation. Although much progress has been made since then, these gains are neither complete nor guaranteed against reversals. Even our greatest advances serve as powerful reminders of the work needed to inch closer to the full promise of universal human rights.

Most participants at the 40th Anniversary Symposium highlighted that the progress made by the human rights movement has been non-linear by pointing out implementation failures in the human rights field. Jessica Neuwirth, for instance, while noting that the human rights movement has succeeded in securing the recognition women’s rights as an integral part of the fabric of human rights law, emphasized that the enforcement gap was both deep and lingering. This is accentuated by normative regressions, a “rollback of women’s rights” at the domestic level, such as lowering of the marriage age or the erosion of reproductive rights in recent years. Agreeing with this conclusion, Karima Bennouna argued that the significance and consistency of the enforcement gap is such that it risks undermining the entire human rights project. The historical roots of the systemic neglect of women’s rights in South America were also discussed at an HRP event last fall by Julissa Mantilla Falcón whose work highlights decades-long delays in recognizing femicide, domestic violence, and marital

rape as serious human rights concerns until the 1990s.

conclusion that human rights institutions continue to be of “a

...gains are neither complete nor guaranteed against reversals ... even our greatest advances serve as powerful reminders of the work [that remains].

While also acknowledging normative developments, including in the Global South, Makau Mutua emphasized continued failures of the norms to make a difference, pointing to large-scale human rights violations such as those in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and the DRC as evidence. Reflecting on his own professional journey, one that began with a “labor of love” only to be overrun by “a kind of professional depression”, he took the critique further concluding that the promise of human rights has been oversold. “I think that we ought to be more honest with ourselves” he declared, arguing that such honesty requires an exercise of “reflection and self-criticism” which should include “admitting that we’ve failed to transform society by using [human rights] language.”

In her keynote address, Kathryn Sikkink, echoing James Ross’s

pressing and acute necessity”, and anticipating many of the comments made throughout the day, outlined many of the challenges posed by ongoing conflicts and widespread humanitarian crisis. She added that the current moment in history is particularly ominous, as it is happening against the backdrop of a global democratic recession following the end of the “third wave” of democratization,

Human Rights in History: A Timeline

History is replete with examples of attempts, both failed and successful, to restrain absolute power and combat injustice—enduring struggles that have taken different shapes, today taking the form of the fight for human rights and democracy. This timeline captures some of the milestones in this uneven journey, situating HRP’s evolution within this broader context.

SOME EARLY MILESTONES

539 BCE

The Edict of Cyrus establishes the pluralistic Achaemenid empire and repatriates peoples vsubjected to mass deportation under Babylonian rule.

400 BCE

Greek philosophers develop foundational concepts of natural law and moral universalism.

27 BCE

Roman jurists begin articulating the concept of *ius naturale*.

622 CE

The Constitution of Medina establishes a pluralist multi-religious political community.

1215

The Magna Carta limits the power of the Crown and establishes rights.

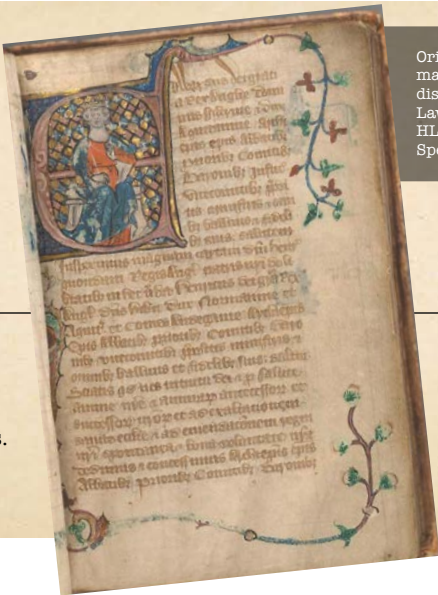
Original Magna Carta manuscript (re) discovered in HLS Law Library. Credit: HLS Historical & Special Collections

1222

The Charter of Manden, fashioned from the “Hunters’ Oath”, establishes the Mali Empire on a foundation of the sanctity of life.



Roman Imperial coin depicting Aequitas (Equity). Her scales symbolize the enduring ideal of fairness and balance that became central to the definition of natural law. Credit: Encycl. Brit.



Griots, the custodians of West African oral history, have preserved the Hunter's Oath for centuries, transmitting its principles through epic poetry and musical performance.

and is accompanied by a well-funded and organized backlash against the human rights movement—one that, ironically, has borrowed many strategies and tactics from the human rights movement itself.

Although it is no surprise that one would encounter disillusionment and despair in the human rights field, Sikkink reminded the audience that this entails neither a dystopic future, nor the failure of the human rights movement. While not minimizing the gravity of current risks and challenges, a broader perspective reveals that past progress was also achieved despite significant challenges. For example, the core human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, were adopted in the midst of the Cold War. As noted by Sikkink, when HRP was established in 1984, the Convention on Women's Rights had come into force just three years prior, and the rights of children, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and LGBTQ+ persons had not yet been recognized at the international level—an International Criminal Court would have been unimaginable. This sentiment was also articulated in Gerald Neuman's opening:

“When this Program was founded, it was a difficult time for human rights. We are living now in many ways in a difficult time for human rights. But there is reason for hope, reason for hard work, even more so in difficult times.”



Kathryn Sikkink presenting her keynote address at the 40th. Credit: Tony Rinaldo

Celebrating HRP

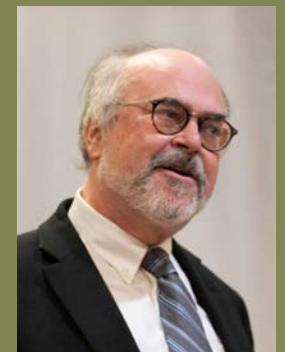
The Stories Behind the History

HRP emerges from a rich educational history at HLS which has produced renowned academics, practitioners and global leaders in the human rights field. International human rights teaching began with Professor Emeritus Louis Sohn LL.M. '40, S.J.D. '58. Sohn started his career as an assistant for Judge Manley Hudson, LL.B. 1910, S.J.D. 1917, who had solidified the place of international law at HLS and was serving as a judge on the Permanent Court of International Justice. Sohn made influential contributions to the drafting of the United Nations Charter and the Statute of the International Court of Justice and is considered to be a founding figure in human rights law and international environmental law. While teaching human rights at HLS, Sohn also coauthored a casebook with Professor Thomas Buergenthal LL.M. '61, S.J.D. '68, who became another giant in the human rights field.

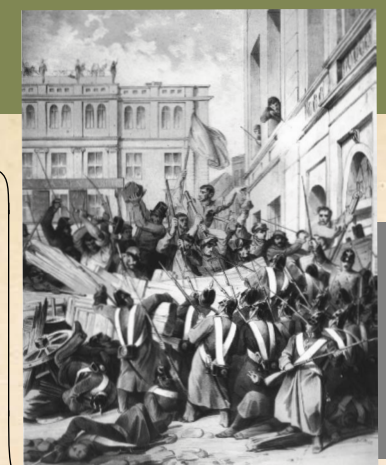
HLS continues to provide centers of excellence in teaching, research, practice, and advocacy in the human rights field. The law school's innovative leaps such as the expansion of experiential learning in the 1970s and the establishment of HRP in the 1980s set the tone of engagement and reflection for the human rights community at the Law School. In addition to its students and alumni from around the world, the human rights community of HLS today includes leading research programs and centers, clinics, law journals, and student organizations.

Students: The Driving Force

In 1983, a group of students presented a comprehensive set of proposals to Dean James Vorenberg '51 that envisioned the formation of an institution dedicated to human rights. The core group of students included Hilary Charlesworth S.J.D. '86, Helena Cook LL.M. '84, Steven Golub '85, Makau Mutua LL.M. '85, S.J.D. '87, Jessica Neuwirth '85, James Ross '85, VF. '98, and Katie Zoglin '85. During the 40th Anniversary Symposium, James Ross described how he and his peers passionately campaigned for a human rights program at a time when few of its kind existed within U.S. universities. Although their proposal covered a lot of ground, James recalls students' apprehension about how to envision a program that would support them in pursuing human rights careers. James



James Ross delivering his Keynote Address at the 40th. Credits: Tony Rinaldo



A black and white 1848 lithograph depicting a chaotic street battle in Berlin, with revolutionaries waving flags atop a makeshift barricade of overturned wagons and timber while fighting against soldiers.

1865
13th Amendment abolishes slavery in the U.S., followed by the 14th (1868) and 15th (1870) Amendments that establish citizenship, equal protection, and voting rights regardless of race.

1848
Sparked by a crackdown on associational rights in Paris, the “Year of Revolutions”, or the “Springtime of Peoples”, saw working-class and liberal uprisings spread across much of Europe.

1833
The Slavery Abolition Act (applicable to Britain and its colonies).

The Factory Act mandates minimum working hours for children and forbids the employment of children under age 9 in England.

THE FIRST WAVE OF DEMOCRACY BEGINS

Starting with a series of events in the 1820s, notably the widespread decolonization across South America and the lifting of property, tax, and literacy restrictions on the voting rights of adult white males in the U.S., the first wave continued until the rise of fascism 1920s.

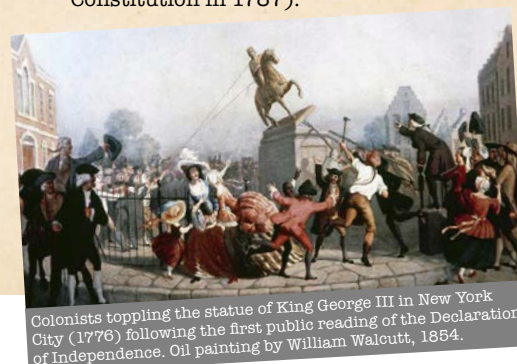


1791
U.S. Bill of Rights.

Haitian Revolution leads to decolonization and the abolition of slavery.

1789
The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in France.

1776
U.S. Declaration of Independence (followed by U.S. Constitution in 1787).



THE AGE OF REVOLUTION

Inspired by Enlightenment ideals and driven by the shifts of industrialization, a new revolutionary ferment takes hold, fueling demands for universal suffrage and liberation based on class, race, gender, and national identity

1689
The English Bill of Rights establishes Parliamentary supremacy and expands Civ. & Pol. Rts.

Louis Sohn was joined by Professor C. Clyde Ferguson, who had the distinction of being a civil rights lawyer and an established scholar of international human rights law as well as a diplomat who had leading roles in US policy in Africa and at the United Nations. He continued Professor Sohn's seminars and started a process of placing human rights at HLS on more solid ground. Although he launched an internship program that would later become HRP's Summer Fellowship Program, he passed away suddenly in December 1983. The mission of establishing a permanent home for international human rights at HLS was taken up by another luminary at the forefront of international law scholarship, Professor Emeritus Henry J. Steiner LL.B. '55. HRP was one of the first human rights programs to be based at an American law school, and the first such program at Harvard University.

Professor Steiner's many contributions to the field included the major new human rights case book *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* (1st ed. 1996), produced in collaboration with Professor Philip Alston, and later joined by Steiner's successor as HRP director, Professor Ryan Goodman. Starting in 2012, HRP was jointly directed by Professor Neuman and Clinical Professor Tyler Giannini. Neuman was a co-author of another leading human rights casebook, *Human Rights* (1st ed. 1999), written with legendary international law scholar Louis Henkin '40.

Since its founding, HRP has been asking critical questions about the human rights movement. In this process, HRP has helped push the

echoed advice that he received from Harold Berman, "If you want to go into a field where there are very few opportunities, it's very important [that you] don't keep your options open." Generations of students heeded this advice and went on to impactful careers, making lasting contributions that shape the field of human rights law and policy.

HLS students continued to serve as a driving force behind HRP and human rights initiatives at HLS more broadly by pursuing their interest in human rights causes, leading to the development of notable student organizations and initiatives. In 1988, the Harvard Human Rights Journal was established by Morris Panner '88 and William J. O'Farrell '88, who served as co-editors of its first volume. The Journal became independent from HRP in 1990 and is now recognized as a leading academic publication in the human rights field.

In the early 2000s, the Harvard Law Student Advocates for Human Rights (Advocates) was created to expand student opportunities to participate in human rights-related projects. These projects operate on a global scale and include seeking redress for victims of state-sponsored abuse, protecting protesters' freedom of expression, and pursuing accountability for serious human rights violations. Student demand and advocacy was also instrumental to the expansion of human rights clinical offerings at HLS and the eventual establishment of the International Human Rights Clinic, which became independent from the Human Rights Program in 2004.

"If Henry was the father of the Human Rights Program, then Clyde was the grandfather of the Human Rights Program, and he is the person who inspired me to come to Harvard Law School."

Jessica Neuwirth '85

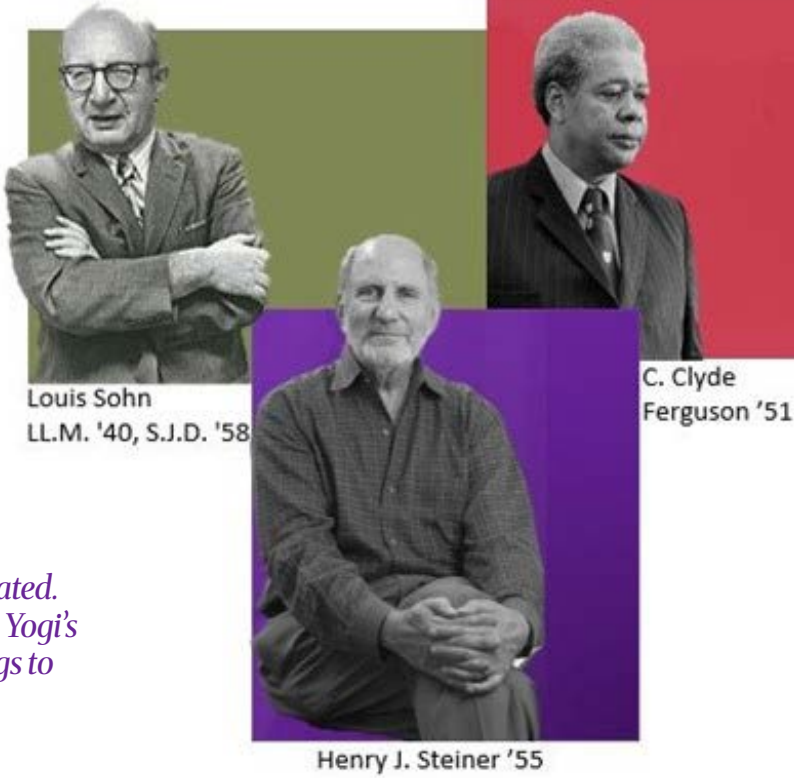
"[W]ith creativity and persistence, and just a lot of hard work, [Henry] created the Program that we have today."

James Ross '85

"Henry ... was the paterfamilias ... [who] illuminated. Henry didn't give us answers, but...with almost a Yogi's touch, tweaked the way we were looking at things to make us ask deeper, better questions."

Alicia Yamin '91

boundaries of human rights scholarship, pedagogy, and practice. In addition to the pioneering role it played in the development of curricula and innovative clinical pedagogy, the Program has been a leader in cutting edge research and the publication of human rights



Another area of HRP's focus has included public interest work that bridges theory and practice. The Program began to develop clinical pedagogy in the 1990s through an initiative led by HRP Administrative Director Jennie Green. In 2004 the International Human Rights Clinic

Since its founding, HRP has been asking critical questions about the human rights movement [and] has helped push the boundaries of human rights scholarship, pedagogy, and practice.

books, reports, law journal articles, working papers, and other publications in its field. These and the Program's other activities aim at enriching the internal life of the school and the external human rights movement.

(IHRC) was formally established as a component of HRP under the direction of James Cavallaro, who was its first Clinical Director and later the Executive Director of HRP. Starting that year, HRP comprised both the Academic Program

1882

The Chinese Exclusion Act prohibits laborers for a ten-year period on the basis of nationality.

1914

World War I begins



A party of Royal Irish Rifles resting in a communication trench early in the Battle of the Somme, possibly on 1 July. Source: Imperial War Museums.

1918

The Bolshevik Revolution leads to the overthrow of the Czar and the establishment of the first Socialist Republic.

The German Revolution, as well as nine more peaceful "revolutions" bring about democratization in Europe.

THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

The Treaty of Versailles (1919) ends WW-I and launches a dual approach to preventing conflict through the establishment of the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The League, hoping to end the era of nationalism, expansionism, and the "balance of power," establishes procedures for the peaceful settlement of disputes, eventually prohibiting the resort to war under the Kellogg-Briand Pact. The ILO, recognizing that "lasting peace can be established only if it is based on social justice," promotes economic and social justice for workers.

1920

19th Amendment extends the franchise to women in the U.S.



1915 Suffragists in the lobby of Hotel Utah with Senator Reed Smoot.

1926

Slavery Convention is adopted by the League of Nations.



Founder Henry Steiner speaks at an HRP event as Director Gerald L. Neuman looks on. Credit: Heratch Photography

and the Clinic, which made strides together in grappling with pressing human rights issues around the world.

Over the years, the Clinic has partnered with leading international and grassroots organizations, pursued projects that impacted a diverse range of human rights and humanitarian issues, and trained hundreds of HLS students to become effective social justice advocates. As of 2021, the Clinic is now a separate entity distinct from HRP, under the direction of Clinical Professor Susan Farbstien '04.

HRP continues to support human rights education and public interest work, which are channeled into activities including its various fellowship programs that provide students with practical human rights experience and events focused on student learning. More broadly, the Human Rights Program, together with its current and former students, visiting fellows, staff, and professors, forms an integral part of the human rights ecosystem at Harvard and the global human rights community.

A Message from the Dean: “You Have Succeeded and Beyond”

In his opening remarks at HRP’s 40th Anniversary Program, Dean John C.P. Goldberg evoked the serious global context that had motivated a group of students “who were committed to upholding human dignity” to advocate for the creation of a human rights program at Harvard Law School in 1984. The result was a program that “has been a cornerstone of critical engagement with and an intellectual home for human rights law and issues.” The Dean continued by reflecting on the role of Professor Emeritus Henry Steiner, the founding director of HRP, quoting Makau Mutua’s words: “[HRP] would not have been possible without the foresight, commitment, and hard work of this deeply complex man. He took a possibility and made it into a reality.”

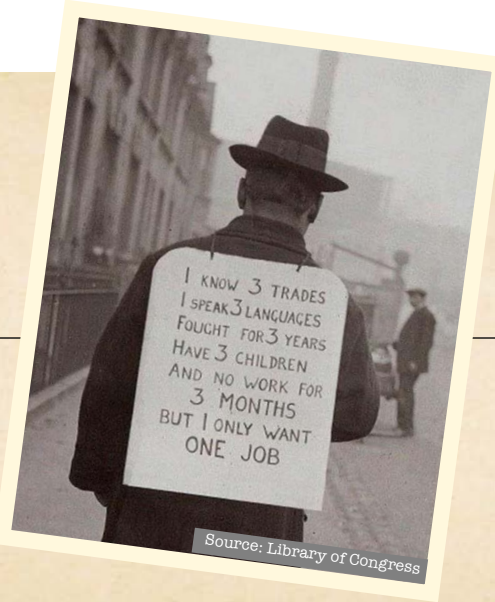
Remembering that Steiner’s aim was to make human rights a quintessential part of lawyering within the HLS community and a primary career path for students, Dean Goldberg proudly announced to him, “Good news—you have succeeded and beyond.” Dean Goldberg highlighted the important role that HRP plays in the HLS and international human rights community, praising HRP’s events, publications, and student work. HRP’s alumni exemplify the Program’s commitment to human rights through their work at the forefront of advocacy and policy. Dean Goldberg also recognized Professor Gerald Neuman, who has led HRP as its director since 2012, for his dedication to HRP’s role in international human rights. Dean Goldberg alluded to Neuman’s mathematical background by praising him as “a vector and force multiplier in this critical area.”



Harvard Law School Interim Dean John Goldberg. Credit: Tony Rinaldo

1929

The Great Depression causes widespread economic hardship and erodes public confidence in existing governments.



The New Deal reforms launched by Pres. Franklin Roosevelt, followed by similar reforms in Britain and France, lead to the establishment of modern administrative states dedicated to social welfare and the regulation of recessionary and inflationary pressures.

1933

Hitler rises to power and the Nazi regime begins systematic persecution of minorities, political opponents, and anyone deemed a “radical” or an “enemy of the people.”

Human Rights and Equality

Investing in a Just Future

The idea that human beings ought to be treated with equal respect and dignity is a foundational principle of human rights law. The UDHR enshrines this tenet from its opening words—the first sentence of its preamble and its first article proclaim that the global community seeks the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights” of human beings, who are “born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Article 2 gives this principle its most explicit articulation, declaring that “everyone” is entitled to rights “without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” This guiding principle forms a central thread woven through the remainder of the UDHR and every human rights treaty that followed it.

Beyond its moral imperative, the UDHR captures a key

political impulse that has driven post-enlightenment and contemporary political movements. The principle of equality has special resonance in democratic societies, where the fight for universal suffrage and electoral equality is a centuries-old and ongoing struggle, reflected in efforts to extend the franchise to younger citizens, non-citizen residents, or the incarcerated. Such debates on democratic participation, as noted at an HRP workshop on age discrimination, also extend to the appropriateness of age cutoffs for political office. The full scope of the precept of equality is revealed not only in its foundational promise of legal, or de jure, equality, but also in its application to confronting the persistence of de facto discrimination, developing a substantive agenda for historically disenfranchised groups, and ultimately, pursuing a broader egalitarian vision that addresses systemic link

between economic, social and political equality.

The centrality accorded to equality in human rights law may also be partly explained by the pervasiveness of discrimination and inequality—today and throughout history. As highlighted at the first panel of the 40th Anniversary Symposium, there is no doubt that we have made significant normative headway on women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial equality. The widespread adoption of treaties and constitutions that enshrine the principle of equality stands in stark contrast to previous eras when most legal systems mandated and enforced discrimination—when women had diminished legal personhood, fleeing slavery was a crime, and the poor could be imprisoned for their debts. However, despite much progress, substantial gaps persist, between the promise of equality and its practical realization.

Victor Madrigal-Borloz highlighted the advancement on LGBTQ+ rights by pointing out that when HRP was established in 1984, same-sex sexual intimacy was criminalized in most countries. As the AIDS pandemic devastated the LGBTQ+ community, the enforcement of these laws only intensified, compounding their marginalization and collective trauma. Reflecting on his own lived experience, he recalled “When I was born in Costa Rica, I was born a criminal, and I was born a sinner,” capturing the criminalization, pathologization, and stigmatization of homosexuality. Change came slowly: it was not until 1994, in *Toonen v. Australia*, that the UN Human Rights Committee recognized sexual orientation as a protected status under both anti-discrimination provisions and the right to privacy. Today, it is widely recognized, including by the UN, that being sexually or gender diverse has implications extending beyond the privacy of the home, into fundamental rights to work, to healthcare, and education. While Victor Madrigal-Borloz can rejoice in this progress, noting “fifty years later, I am



Victor Madrigal-Borloz and Jessica Neuwirth at Panel 1 of the 40th. Credit: Tony Rinaldo

I was born a criminal, and I was born a sinner... fifty years later, I am only a sinner..

only a sinner,” he also points out that this achievement is tempered by the reality that significant challenges remain, with criminalization persisting in dozens of countries.

The pattern of progress undercut by regression was echoed by Jessica Neuwirth and Karima Bennoune in the context of women’s rights. Besides the rollback of reproductive rights and equity initiatives in the U.S., they cited the international community’s

inadequate response to the Taliban’s systemic subjugation of women. Invoking what women’s rights activists in Afghanistan and Iran have described as “gender apartheid”, Karima Bennoune underscored that the Taliban’s governance model is not merely discriminatory, but ideologically committed to the systemic exclusion of women. She concluded that this form of persecution is so entrenched that it demands recognition as a crime against humanity.

The Second New Deal is launched by President Franklin Roosevelt, which introduced transformative programs such as Social Security, strengthened labor rights, expanded federal employment through the Works Progress Administration, and launched rural electrification.

1935

The Nuremberg Laws institutionalize racial discrimination, as the Nazi regime a war economy fueled by forced labor, the elimination of unions, and state plunder that begins with minorities and expands to occupied nations.

Harvard and Radcliffe students organize protests in response to the Kristallnacht and launch a scholarship initiative, sparking a nationwide grassroots movement that helped hundreds of persecuted students from Central Europe.

1938

Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass) a Nazi regime-organized pogrom against Jewish residents in Germany and Austria results in widespread vandalism, arson, the destruction of synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses and the arrest of 30,000 Jewish men who are sent to concentration camps.

1939

World War II begins, causing up to 85 million deaths and marked by the Holocaust, the genocide of 6 million Jews, alongside the systematic murder of millions of other targeted groups including Roma, people with disabilities, Poles, Soviet civilians, and more.

THE POSTWAR ERA

The end of WW-II saw the founding of the United Nations (1945) which sought to prohibit the use of force except in cases of self-defense or the authorization of the UN Security Council. This era also heralded global decolonization, the civil rights movement, and the international human rights system. This period was also marked by the Cold War which fuelled proxy wars and deferred democratic aspirations.

**Treaty dates indicate date of adoption.*

1946

Nuremberg & Tokyo Trials establish precedent for international criminal justice.



Drafting Committee of the UDHR, June 1947. From left: Dr. P.C. Chang, Henri Laugier, Mrs. Eleanor D. Roosevelt (Chair), Prof. John P. Humphrey, Dr. Charles Malik, and Prof. Vladimir M. Koretsky. Credit: UN Photos.

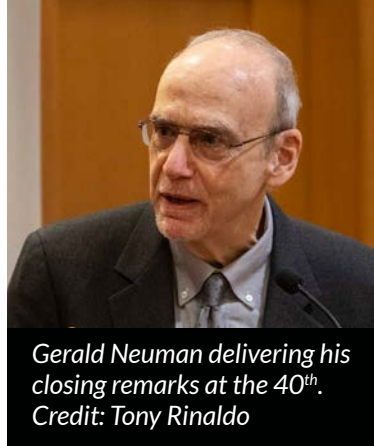
1948

The American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Genocide Convention

On racial discrimination, Gerald Neuman highlighted how despite the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination being the first of the core human rights treaties, racial discrimination remains an “eternal issue” reemerging with renewed force in the U.S. At the time of the 40th Anniversary Symposium, this regression included the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Students for Fair Admission* decision, which E. Tendayi Achiume described in a previous event as having put the U.S. “deeply at odds” with the convention, by eliminating the “special

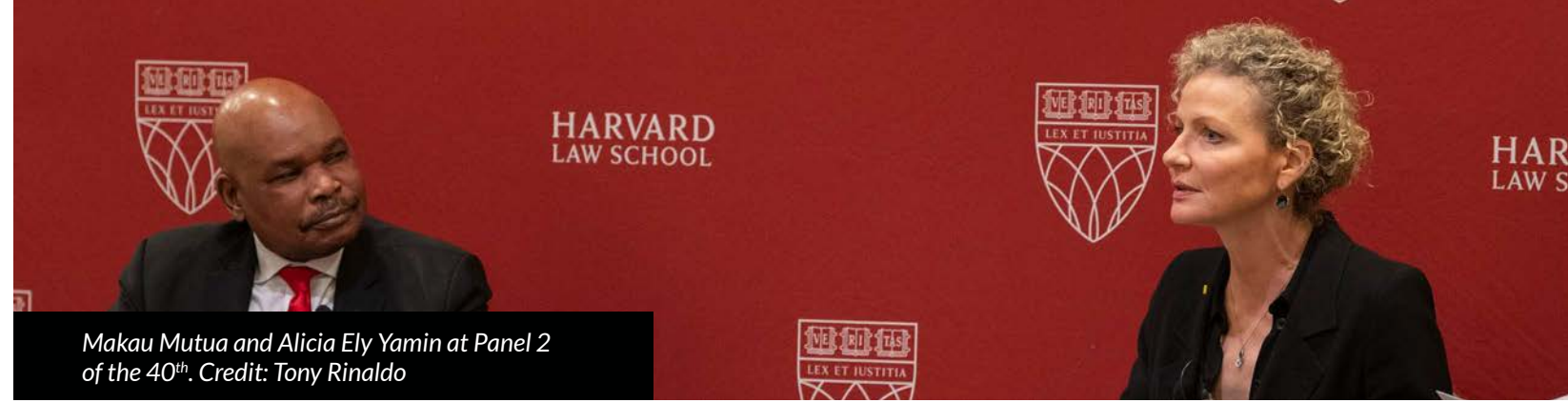


Gerald Neuman delivering his closing remarks at the 40th. Credit: Tony Rinaldo

measures” that the treaty contemplates as a tool for reversing the legacies of deeply entrenched racial injustice.

The persistence and deeply embedded nature of discrimination in many societies underscores why formal prohibitions are often insufficient, necessitating a

focus on substantive equality. The formal establishment of equality, or the prohibition of discrimination by law, are rarely sufficient to remedy the lasting legacies of centuries of slavery and both legal and de facto discrimination. For example, while “it is easy to understand how intentional discrimination imposes disadvantages on certain groups,” as Gerald Neuman notes, indirect discrimination, which focuses on the unequal impact of laws, “can involve unintended barriers that disproportionately hold back members of a group that may already be disadvantaged.”



Makau Mutua and Alicia Ely Yamin at Panel 2 of the 40th. Credit: Tony Rinaldo

Achieving substantive equality, therefore, may require societies to adopt proactive measures, such as making reasonable accommodations, or implementing affirmative action policies, to ensure meaningful progress towards its realization.

In addition, de facto discrimination and inequality can often be systemic, embedded in and sustained through social, economic, and cultural practices. This was highlighted last Spring at an HRP-hosted expert consultation of the UN Permanent Forum for People of African Descent, where participants discussed systemic and structural racism, the lasting impacts of slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and institutional racism. Many experts at the consultation emphasized that recognizing historical harms

and understanding the scale and multidimensionality of their contemporary legacies are indispensable steps towards true equality and intergenerational justice.

Symposium, Alicia Yamin and Makau Mutua explored this link, noting that economic and political inequality erodes equal opportunity to access essential goods and

The principle of equality may also require...the pursuit of a broader egalitarian understanding of... equal citizenship.”

Finally, revealing the full scope of the principle of equality may also require moving beyond a substantive agenda for specific protected groups in pursuit of a broader egalitarian understanding of equality, or the realization of equal citizenship. Such an approach focuses on removing the social, and especially economic, barriers that prevent full and equitable participation in democratic politics. In the second panel of the 40th Anniversary

services covered by economic and social rights. Alicia Yamin pointed out that the establishment of the HRP in 1984 coincided with the rise of the “Washington Consensus”, which ushered in policies of deregulation, privatization, and trade liberalization at the expense of socioeconomic and solidarity rights. She noted how “the savage inequalities” that resulted now threaten to render hollow the promise of equal opportunity for healthcare, education, shelter, or food.

Highlights from HRP’s workshops, research, and publications addressing different aspects of discrimination—including the 2020-2022 research and workshop series on indirect discrimination, which produced 26 working papers and two special issues of the Harvard Human Rights Journal.



Ghanaian officials hoist Kwame Nkrumah in triumph after independence from Great Britain. Credit: Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

1950

European Convention on Human Rights

1954

Brown v. Board of Education desegregates U.S. schools.

Year of Africa, 17 African nations gain independence nearly tripling the size of the Africa Group at the UN

1965

U.S. Voting Rights Act

International Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination



The March to Montgomery, 1965. Credit: John Kouns

1960

Sharpeville Massacre in South Africa

1969

American Convention on Human Rights

1967

U.S. Sup. Ct. strikes down interracial marriage bans in *Loving v. Virginia*

Stonewall Uprising



Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, prominent organizers of the Stonewall protests, wearing commemorative sashes at a pride event in New York City. Credit: Digital Transgender Archive.

The two International Covenants ICCPR & ICESCR are adopted.

1966

Cultural Revolution begins in China (1966-76).



Polish Jewish children, en route to safety in American Zones of Austria and Germany. Credit: The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

1951

The Refugee Convention

AUDIENCE EXERCISE

The overall theme of the 40th Anniversary event centered on the future of human rights and explored expectations for the prospective development of the human rights movement. During her Keynote Address, Kathryn Sikkink posed this question to the audience, inviting them to write down their hopes for the future of human rights.

Ending Uyghur genocide not in 40 years but with the urgency it's warranted

Keep on being extraordinary

Convince more of our colleagues to see the pertinence of human rights to their subject matter area - whether constitutional law, corporate law or whatever

An action plan to get the US to ratify all major Human Rights Treaties + ICC

Civilian child deaths (war, hunger)

Pienso que depende de cada uno de nosotros fortalecer los derechos humanos con perspectiva de genero

The ICC mete out international justice in the global north

Realization of equal rights

A world in which International Human Rights institutions are rarely needed because domestic rule-of-law institutions work well

Climate as the social movement of our time. Tap always into the students and their dreams!

ENVISION...

Teaching law students to defend human rights in US courts; a campaign to make Int'l HR law justiciable.

Addressing climate change

Gender parity

Climate change/planetary health, not only in the sense of adaptation (i.e. how to deal w/ climate refugees) but also mitigation

Equal justice

Free Borders

ENVISION

1. Responsibility of corporations for human rights violations!

2. Establishment of:
Right to clean environment
Right to development

Empowering women, indigenous, and global south to take the lead

Right to education achieved with enforcement

Accountability mechanisms designed by and for affected communities.

Multisector collaboration

Expand U.S. constitutional law to better align w/ human rights

Value of a rights-based approach to be reinforced

Accountability for Dictators/Corrupt governments up in small developing countries

Freedom of speech

I'd like to see LGBTQI+ people just as human beings, without the necessity to have this label

Global Migration and Citizenship Redefined

More power for the UN to enforce its decisions

More focus on -> ESC rights

End to impunity + Application of IHL equally to all situations

Apartheid Convention

1975

Khmer Rouge's attempts to replicate Mao's cultural revolution ends with the killing of 1.5 to 2 million Cambodians by 1978.

1979

Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

1980S - THE "THIRD-WAVE" OF DEMOCRACY & THE NEOLIBERAL TURN

While the "Third Wave," which started with the Carnation Revolution in Portugal (1974), expands democracy throughout the 1980s and 90s, a global economic crisis ushers in neoliberal policies that impose austerity and structural adjustment.



Credit: The Current, University of California

1981

African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights

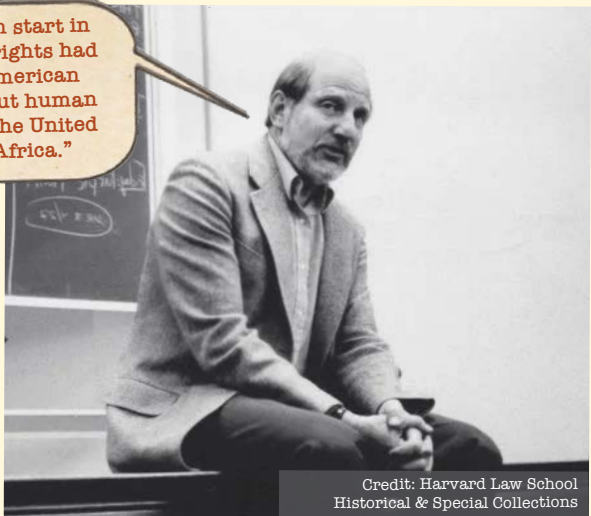
1984

Convention Against Torture

HRP is Established with Henry Steiner's leadership and Jack Tobin as the Administrative Director.

"[W]hy did the Human Rights Program start in 1984 . . . ? The time was right. Human rights had become a distinctive feature of the American and international scene . . . debate about human rights became commonplace . . . from the United States to the Soviet Union to South Africa."

HENRY STEINER



Credit: Harvard Law School Historical & Special Collections

HRP Publications

As a center for human rights scholarship, HRP supports and produces a diverse range of publications, including books, book chapters, law journal articles, reports, and working papers. While some publications emerge from the work of scholars and visiting fellows who take time from their regular professional responsibilities for a singular focus on a writing project, many come out of cross-cutting collaborations among faculty, fellows, staff, and students from numerous disciplines and regions. Some publications emerge from conversations on the sidelines of international conferences and roundtables; others are the planned outcomes of these gatherings. Though publications may be theoretical or practice-oriented, many bridge theory and practice to shape scholarly discourse, nurture thought leadership, and provide a platform for original and challenging ideas. Ultimately, one thing that unites all HRP publications is their commitment to bring knowledge to the service of human rights and equal dignity.

BOOKS

Abadir M. Ibrahim & Kokebe Wolde, eds., *Between Failure and Redemption: The Future of the Ethiopian Social Contract* (2023).

Gerald L. Neuman, ed., *Human Rights in a Time of Populism: Challenges and Responses* (2020).

Gerald L. Neuman & Silja Vöneky, eds., *Human Rights, Democracy, and Legitimacy in a World of Disorder* (2018).

Gerald L. Neuman & Tomiko Brown-Nagin, eds., *Reconsidering the Insular Cases: The Past and Future of the American Empire* (2015).

David Marshall, ed., *The International Rule of Law Movement: A Crisis of Legitimacy and the Way Forward* (2014).

James L. Cavallaro et al. *No Nos Toman En Cuenta* (2013).

Ahmad Amara et al. *Indigenous (In)Justice: Human Rights Law and Bedouin Arabs in the Naqab/Negev* (2013).

Alicia Ely Yamin & Siri Gloppen, eds., *Litigating Health Rights: Can Courts Bring More Justice to Health?* (2011).

Mindy J. Roseman & Laura Reichenbach, eds., *Reproductive Health and Human Rights: The Way Forward* (2011).

Sharanjeet Parmar, et al., *Children and Transitional Justice: Truth-Telling, Accountability and Reconciliation* (2010).

James L. Cavallaro, et al., *No Place to Hide: Gang, State and Clandestine Violence in El Salvador* (2010).

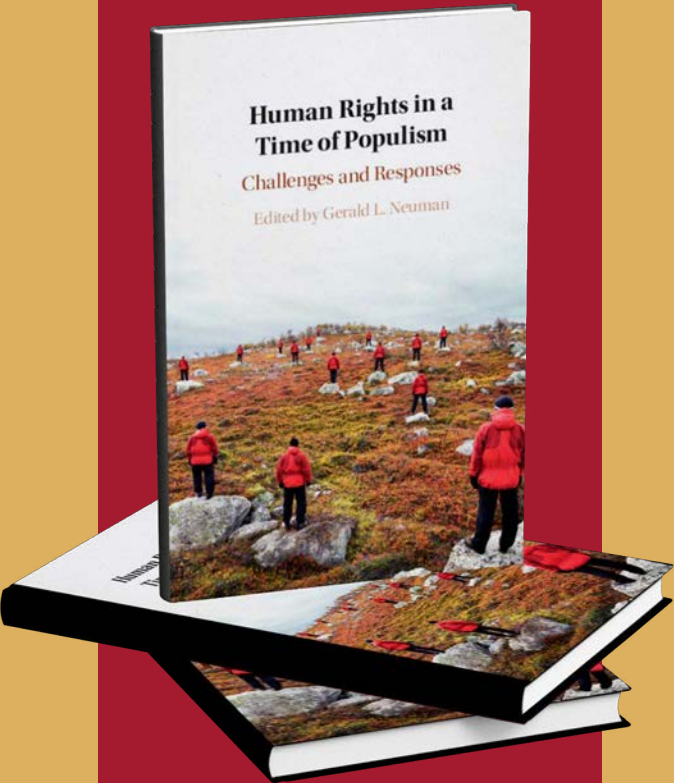
Mindy J. Roseman & Ryan Goodman, eds., *Interrogations, Forced Feedings, and the Role of Health Professionals: New Perspectives on International Human Rights, Humanitarian Law, and Ethics* (2009).

Susan Farbstein, Tyler Giannini et al., eds., *Prosecuting Apartheid-Era Crimes? A South African Dialogue on Justice* (2009).

Bringing Knowledge to the Service of Human Rights and Equal Dignity

As a university-based research program, HRP is uniquely positioned to bridge the worlds of practice and scholarship. This is particularly important in the field of human rights, where norms, practices, and challenges are universal yet manifest differently across regions and communities. Moreover, human rights actors are dispersed across academic disciplines and spheres of practice—including intergovernmental institutions, NGOs, unions, and grassroots organizers. It is critically important to convene these diverse actors, facilitate their learning from one another, and widely disseminate key lessons, especially when human rights are under attack.

A publication that exemplifies HRP’s vision of bringing knowledge to the service of human rights is the book edited by Gerald L. Neuman, *Human Rights in a Time of Populism: Challenges and Responses*. Growing out of a conference convened by HRP at Harvard Law School, the volume was one of the first academic books to address the challenges posed to human rights by the rise of populism. Published by Cambridge University Press, its eleven thought-provoking chapters offer a combination of academic insights and case studies, bringing together scholars and practitioners from around the world and from disciplinary backgrounds including comparative and international law, international relations, political science, and public policy.



1988

Harvard Human Rights Journal is established as the Harvard Human Rights Yearbook (re-named and re-constituted in its current form in 1990).

Convention on the Rights of the Child

1989

Tiananmen Square protest ends in a violent crackdown.

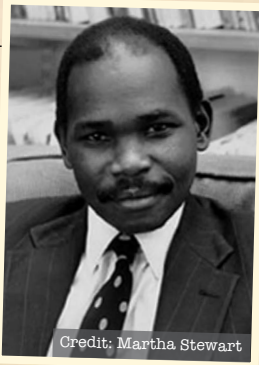


1990'S - END OF THE COLD WAR & A SURGE IN TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

With the Cold War winding down, truth commissions proliferated, building on earlier models such as Argentina’s National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons. In the 1990s, dozens of new bodies were created, including the historic South African TRC (1995). The use of TRCs has remained a significant tool for post-conflict societies well into the 2000s.

1991

Makau Mutua assumes Associate Director position (1991 – 96)



Jennie Green assumes Administrative Director position at HRP (1992)

1992

The Bosnian conflict and serious human rights violations (leads to establishment of ICTY).



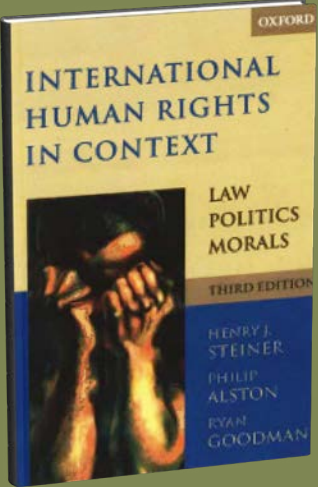
Transition to democracy in South Africa

1994

The Rwandan genocide, the systematic murder of up to 800,000 or a million people in 100 days, triggers the creation of the ICTR and inspires the future development of the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) doctrine.

“The” Coursebook & the Fruitful Relationship

From the publication of its first edition in 1996, the coursebook styled Henry Steiner and Philip Alston, *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* (Oxford University Press) became linked to HRP. The program bought some 600 books from Oxford University Press at a reduced price and distributed those books without charge to ensure this valuable assistance for human rights work was accessible to advocates, academics, and institutions in developing economies where the book’s high-income market price would be prohibitive. HRP followed the same policy with subsequent editions which notably added Ryan Goodman as a co-editor in its third edition. Abadir M. Ibrahim, HRP’s current associate director, recalls that this initiative was “an excellent decision at many levels,” since “multiple generations of human rights law scholars and practitioners across continents recognize ‘Steiner & Alston,’ not just as an essential teaching material, but as a shared professional landmark.” Philip Alston later published a successor to these volumes that he made available to everyone via a Creative Commons license.



James L. Cavallaro et al., *Security in Paraguay: Analysis and Responses in Comparative Perspective* (2008).

Gerald L. Neuman, *Strangers to the Constitution: Immigrants, Borders, and Fundamental Law* (1996).

Henry Steiner, *Moral Argument and Social Vision in the Courts: A Study of Tort Accident Law* (1997).

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Gerald Neuman, *The Afterlife of “Title 42”: Autopsy and Reformation*, 33 Tul. J. Int’l & Comp. L. 329 (2025).

Marinella Marmo & Sanzhuan Guo, *Socio-Legal Frameworks to Understand Deportation of Non-Citizens: International Laws Versus National Laws and Policies*, 34 Griffith L. Rev. 131 (2025).

George Yijun, Tim McFarland & Sanzhuan Guo, *Automated Decision Making and Deportation: Legal Concerns and Regulation*, 34 Griffith L. Rev. 273 (2025).

Jonathan Liljeblad, *Clarifying Indigenous Approaches to Ecocide*, 14 Transnat’l Env’tl. L. 659 (2025).

Jonathan Liljeblad, *Indigenizing International Law Education*, 23 Wash. U. Glob. Stud. L. Rev. 137 (2025).

Jonathan Liljeblad, *Intersections of Ecocide, Indigenous Struggle, and Pro-Democracy Conflict: Implications of Post-Coup Myanmar for Ecocide in International Criminal Law*, Int’l J. Hum. Rts. (2025).

Julissa Mantilla Falcón, *Machismo en el Congreso: Con Bando Pero Sin Vergüenza*, La República (Sept. 30, 2025).

Abadir Ibrahim & Angela Hefti, *Contributions of the African Human Rights System to International Climate Law*, Yale J. Int’l L. (forthcoming 2025).

Gerald L. Neuman, *Impeachment as Cause or Cure of Human Rights Violations*, in *Impeachment in a Global Context* 17 (Chris Monaghan, Matthew Flinders & Aziz Z. Huq eds., 2024).

Angela Hefti, *Intersectional Victims as Agents of Change in International Human Rights-Based Climate Litigation*, 13 Transnat’l Env’tl. L. 610 (2024).

Angela Hefti, Hannah van Kolschooten & Aminta Ossom, *A Health-Centric Intersectional Approach to Climate Litigation at the European Court of Human Rights*, 37 Harv. Hum. Rts. J. 351 (2024).

Yuji Iwasawa, *Various Means of Enforcement in International Law*, 65 Harv. Int’l L. J. 1 (2023).

Benyam Dawit Mezmur, *Based Solely on their Date of Birth? Rethinking Age Discrimination against Children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 36 Harv. Hum. Rts. J. 261 (2023).

Gerald L. Neuman & Abadir M. Ibrahim, *When Is Age Discrimination a Human Rights Violation?*, 36 Harv. Hum. Rts. J. 223 (2023).

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Benyam Dawit Mezmur and Charissa Fawole, *From the Margins to the Mainstream?: Bridging the Scholarship Gap on Statelessness in Africa*, 8 Afr. Hum. Mobility Rev. 4 (2022).

Benyam Dawit Mezmur, *Making Their Days Count: The 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 4 Statelessness & Citizenship Rev. 198 (2022).

Gerald L. Neuman, *The “Right to Effective Governance” and the Human Rights Baseline in Constitutionalism and a Right to Effective Government?* (V.C. Jackson & Y. Dawood eds., 2022).

Gerald Neuman, *Questions of Indirect Discrimination on the Basis of Religion*, 34 Harv. Hum. Rts. J. 177 (2021).

Gerald Neuman, *Divergent Human Rights Approaches to Capacity and Consent*, in *Mental Health, Legal Capacity, and Human Rights* (Michael Ashley Stein et al., eds., 2021).

Kristen Stilt, Salma Waheedi & Swathi Gandhavadi Griffin, *The Ambitions of Muslim Family Law Reform*, 41 Harv. J.L. & Gender 301 (2018).

Gerald L. Neuman, *Human Rights, Treaties, and International Legitimacy*, in *Human Rights, Democracy, and Legitimacy in a World of Disorder* (Gerald L. Neuman & Silja Vöneky, eds., 2018).

1995

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing & the Beijing Platform for Action.

1996

Peter Rosenblum assumes Associate Director position at HRP (1996 - 2002)



Rome Statute establishing International Criminal Court is adopted.

Augusto Pinochet is arrested under the principle of universal jurisdiction.

1998

Second Congo War begins with estimated 5.4 million deaths before it comes to an end in 2003.

2000’S - THE WAR ON TERROR

The 9/11 attacks, which caused nearly 3,000 deaths and triggered a paradigm shift in global security, sparked a global “war on terror” in which human rights were threatened from multiple sides—by sweeping counterterrorism measures, violent extremist movements, and regimes that exploited the moment to crush domestic dissent under the guise of fighting terrorism.

2002

Jim Cavallaro joins HRP as Clinical Director (2002 - 2011)



2003

The Darfur conflict begins, a brutal campaign that prompts the ICC to issue its first-ever arrest warrant for a sitting head of state on charges of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Emily Nagisa Keehan & Ariane Nevin, *Health, Human Rights, and the Transformation of Punishment: South African Litigation to Address HIV and Tuberculosis in Prisons*, 20 *Health & Hum. Rts. J.* 213 (2018).

Bonnie Docherty, A 'Light for All Humanity': *The Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and the Progress of Humanitarian Disarmament*, 30 *Global Change, Peace & Sec.* 163 (2018).

Gerald L. Neuman, *Bi-Level Remedies for Human Rights Violations*, 55 *Harv. Int'l L.J.* 323 (2014).

Susan H. Farbstien, *Reflections on the Question of When, if Ever, Violence is Justified in Struggles for Political or Social Change*, 27 *Harv. Hum. Rts. J.* 1 (2014).

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Fernando Delgado and Jim Cavallaro, The Paradox of Accountability in Brazil, in *After Oppression: Transitional Justice in Latin America and Eastern Europe* (Vesselin Popovski & Monica Serrano eds., 2013).

Susan Farbstien and Tyler Giannini, *The Alien Tort Statute and Corporate Liability*, 160 *U. Pa. L. Rev.* 99 (2011).

Alice M. Miller & Mindy J. Roseman, *Normalizing Sex and Its Discontents: Establishing Sexual Rights in International Law*, 34 *Harv. J. L. & S.* 313 (2011).

Alice M. Miller & Mindy J. Roseman, *Sexual and Reproductive Rights at the United Nations: Frustration or Fulfilment?*, 19 *Sex. & Reprod. Health Matters* 102 (2011).

Bonnie Docherty and Richard Moyes, *International Cooperation and Assistance*, in *The Convention on Cluster Munitions: A Commentary* (Gro Nystuen & Stuart Casey-Maslen eds., 2010).

Bonnie Docherty, *Facilitation and Clarification of Compliance*,

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Bonnie Docherty, *Transparency Measures*, in *The Convention on Cluster Munitions: A Commentary* (Gro Nystuen & Stuart Casey-Maslen eds., 2010).

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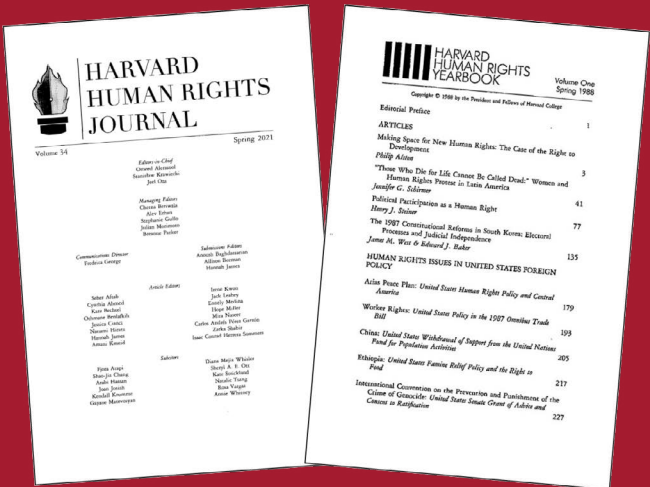
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The student-directed *Harvard Human Rights Journal* (HHRJ) has been a cornerstone of student involvement in human rights at HLS since 1988. HHRJ grew out of a student initiative and is a leading human rights journals in the field today. HHRJ publishes cutting edge content on international human rights law in both international and domestic contexts, exploring novel arguments and issues that advance the universal promise of human rights. HHRJ collaborates with HRP by consulting with its director, staff, and visiting fellows, and regularly co-sponsoring events, symposia, and special-issue workshops. For many at HLS, the HHRJ serves to anchor their law school experience, grounding them both in the university and in the human rights movement.

2004

International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC) is Established with Jim Cavallaro as Executive Director.

2005

UN General Assembly resolution affirming the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P)

Ryan Goodman assumes HRP leadership.



"One of the features of HRP that I cherish the most is its ability to operate at the intersection of practice and scholarship."

RYAN GOODMAN

2006

UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Mindy Jane Roseman joins HRP as Academic Director (2006 - 2016)



2007

Tyler Giannini becomes director of IHRC (2007 - 2022)

UN Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples

The 15th Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Credit: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas



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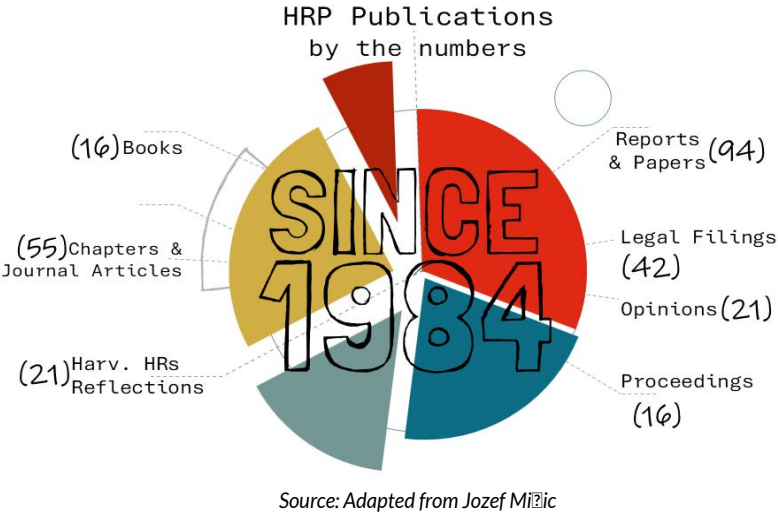
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OTHER PUBLICATIONS

HRP's publication footprint extends well beyond its contributions to the body of literature published as



books, book chapters, and academic journal articles. For example, its Working Paper series provides scholars and researchers with opportunities to circulate preliminary findings, workshop their ideas, invite collaboration and feedback, and contribute to ongoing academic or policy debates. HRP's Reports and Briefing Papers, as well as op-eds and amicus briefs written on members of the HRP community, focus on highlighting specific human rights challenges and proposing solutions.

The HRP website also hosts Harvard Human Rights Reflections (Reflections), a platform for members of Harvard's human rights community to publish and exchange legal arguments, advocacy pieces, applied research, practitioner's notes, and other forms of reflections related to human rights law, theory, and practice. In addition, HRP publishes videos of some events and written Conference Proceedings to enhance the accessibility of valuable human rights conversations or to amplify important human rights topics and issues.

The Future of Human Rights Protection, Adaptation, and Innovation

Constitutions, treaties, declarations, and other legal and judicial documents provide an important, albeit limited, lens into the history of human rights. These documents reveal a profound shift in human rights, moving from privileges "given and granted" by the royal "We" in the Magna Carta to inalienable rights asserted by "We the People". Today, this foundational principle of inalienable rights finds expression in many international treaties, including the UN Charter, and almost every constitution in the world.

This legacy of norm-building set the stage for a recent discussion about the movement's future, pointing towards protecting existing treaties. During the 40th Anniversary symposium, many participants commended the international human rights movement for successfully developing international standards, which are articulated in

various treaties, international jurisprudence, and soft law. However, several participants also highlighted a growing imperative to shift focus away from new normative growth, especially in the form of new human rights treaties, and toward the implementation of existing treaties. This perspective was captured by Jessica Neuwirth, for example, who insisted on the need to "focus less on the development of new legal norms and more on the implementation of existing law." This notion was reiterated in other events which addressed potential pushback against normative developments stemming from concerns over "rights inflation".

Although there is a distinct possibility that the future of international human rights law will reorient towards enforcement, norm-development driven by the adaptation and refinement of existing treaties remains a strong possibility. Adaptation may arise from jurisprudential

refinements and applications to new circumstances brought about by global challenges such as climate change and Artificial Intelligence (AI). The scale of the climate crisis, for instance, creates a pressing need for new thinking and the crafting of novel legal tools to address its impact on human rights—irrespective of whether these strategies emanate from human rights, the rights of nature, or any of other adjacent fields of international law. Innovative approaches will be essential in the form of strategic and institutional adaptations aimed at responding to political backlash and attempts to roll back current normative and institutional achievements.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Within the last few decades climate change has emerged as one of the defining challenges of our time. Beyond its broader ecosystem, environmental and socioeconomic impacts, climate change also poses a myriad of human rights challenges which are expected

2010'S - A TIME HOPE & UPHEAVAL

In the years following the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, widespread public anger fueled major protest movements in the U.S., Europe, and South America. While triggered differently in each region, the resulting discontent provided an opening for previously marginal political actors to make electoral gains. The Arab Spring and non-violent protests across Africa also saw citizens rise up against entrenched authoritarianism. While these protest movements initially sparked widespread hope for democratic reform, most gains ultimately resulted in democratic regression or instability.

2011

Indignados protesters in Barcelona on May 27, 2011 raise their hands in a collective gesture of peaceful resistance.

2012

The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements, while unified in their discontent, reveal fundamental cleavages on the role of the state and taxes, framing them as either a core threat to freedom or as essential for remedying inequality.

2012

Tyler Giannini (2012 - 2021) and Gerald Neuman (2012 - present) assume voo-directorship of HRP.

Credit: Martha Stewart

"This is a place of cultivating hope and futures in the wake of battles and fires that we're fighting."

TYLER GIANNINI

2014

Hong Kong pro-democracy protests begin & continue until 2020

Credit: Pasu Au Yeung

2016

Emily Nagisa Keehn joins HRP as Associate Director (2016 - 2019)



Benyam Dawit Mezmur and Kristen Stilt at Panel 2 of the 40th. Credits: Tony Rinaldo

to intensify over time. While the direct threats to life and physical safety from extreme weather events are vivid and readily apparent, its broader impacts on quality of life will be no less insidious. Hydrological extremes, such as storm surges caused by sea level rise, undermine the right to housing and property in coastal communities. Droughts and desertification impact

states face the risk of complete submergence, effectively extinguishing entire categories of rights, including the right to self-determination, and turning entire populations into climate refugees.

While climate change will ultimately affect everyone and undermine the human rights of millions globally, there is bound to be a disproportionate

which Benyam Dawit Mezmur noted “there is a common adage that ‘disasters are the greatest equalizers.’ It is not true. For example, as UNICEF rightly asserts, ‘the climate crisis is a child rights crisis.’ Climate shocks affect children in Africa more acutely and longer—often for the rest of their lives—especially as adaptation as well as loss and damage measures are very limited.”

While the significant impact of climate change on human rights is apparent, there remains much uncertainty regarding how these interactions may evolve. The compounded impacts of climate change through increased competition over resources, armed conflict, mass migration, and demographic pressures

[T]hreats to life and physical safety from extreme weather events are vivid [but the] broader impacts on quality of life will be no less insidious.

access to food and nutrition, while flooding in riverine communities and the spread of waterborne diseases threaten the right to health. Perhaps most starkly, small island

impact on poor and historically disadvantaged individuals and communities. This point was highlighted in an HRP co-organized event at the University of Western Cape in

with wide-ranging political implications can have a cascading effect. In addition, current trends in large-scale AI infrastructure development have dramatically increased energy consumption and freshwater usage, which could significantly worsen greenhouse gas emissions. Unless these trends are mitigated, perhaps ironically through AI-driven innovations, the dual pressures of climate change and rapid AI growth could accelerate climate-induced erosions of human rights.

In the face of international gridlock on climate negotiations, advocates, and some states have increasingly turned to litigation as a key strategy. While this approach has seen some success, such as the recent ICJ advisory opinion, judicial remedies are ill-suited to drive the comprehensive, economy-wide, and globally coordinated transformation the climate crisis demands. Some of the shortcomings of litigation, in this case of the rights-based approach, were illustrated in an HRP case-update event on the first ever climate-related decisions of the European Court of

Human Rights where the KlimaSeniorinnen decision was described as both “groundbreaking”, while also being “insufficient” to meet the challenges of climate justice. At a later HRP event, Síofra O’Leary, judge and former President of the European Court of Human Rights, noted that climate cases bring human rights law to “unchartered territory”—testing the limits of its doctrines on causation and attribution, or the temporal and geographic applications of its norms.

While advocates pursue creative solutions within existing legal frameworks, the scale of the climate crisis may demand a more fundamental shift. At the 40th Anniversary

we cannot expect the “anthropocentric worldview”, one that imagines the primary purpose of nature as being human domination and exploitation, to “somehow get us out or beyond” the climate catastrophe that it is responsible for in the first place.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The rapid advancement in AI technologies presents a challenging paradox—one of both novel opportunities for the promotion of, as well as novel threats to, human rights. As observed by Martha Minow at HRP’s 40th Anniversary Symposium, AI is both the “new gold rush”

AI is both the ‘new gold rush’ and an ‘emerging frontier’ for human and civil rights ...

Symposium, Kristen Stilt made a case for the “radical rethinking” of the core pillars of modern law—including by going beyond the mere “greening” of human rights law. She contended that

and an “emerging frontier” for human and civil rights. For-profit companies and states have increasingly invested in scaling AI-based applications across all domains—including healthcare, housing, education,

The murder of George Floyd sparks historic racial justice protests, bringing global prominence to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, founded in 2013.

2020

The COVID-19 pandemic leads to the abuse of emergency powers accelerating the global democratic decline.

IHRC becomes independent of HRP with Susan Farbstein as its Director.

Abadir M. Ibrahim joins HRP as Associate Director (2021 – present)

2021

Taliban returns to power in Afghanistan, severely restricting human rights and especially women’s rights.

Russia launches a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.



Credit: Tony Rinaldo

2023

ICC judges issue arrest warrants for Russian President Vladimir Putin.

ICC Judges issue arrest warrants for Hamas military commander Mohammed Deif, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and former defence minister Yoav Gallant.

2025

The Second Trump Administration.



American flag seen through barbed wire surrounding CoreCivic Otay Mesa Detention Center, a privately owned immigration detention facility in San Diego, CA, Oct. 4, 2025. Credit: Kevin Carter/Getty Images



Participants of the Expert Consultation on the Need for and Feasibility of an International AI Bill of Human Rights at HLS on June 10th, 2025, cohosted by HRP and The University of Oxford's Accelerator Fellowship Programme. Credits: Jodi Hilton

banking, and delivering humanitarian aid. These developments have the potential to translate into the progressive realization of many socioeconomic rights. Yet, AI systems also pose risks of reproducing and amplifying existing societal inequities in many of the same spheres. AI can enhance access to justice and streamline human rights case-processing, yet policing algorithms may violate privacy or fair trial rights, while autonomous weapon systems can cause destruction and jeopardize life.

Some of the direct impacts were illustrated by Ifeoma Ajunwa and other participants at two events co-sponsored by HRP with the Accelerator Fellowship Programme of the University of Oxford as “dignitarian harms” that emerge from the seemingly endless capacity for surveillance made possible by AI. Such surveillance is typically understood as something undertaken by *states*—made especially acute in authoritarian settings—but it also increasingly operates in the hands of the *private sector*. This includes employers that can monitor workers’ every move; credit scoring firms that can assess and categorize individuals based on

algorithmic assessments, and businesses that reduce human beings to generators of datapoints. As a result of these mechanisms, individuals are essentialized to their function as consumers, workers, or voters, eroding their fundamental dignity and agency.

While the emergence of novel AI capabilities may necessitate the articulation of new rights to address unprecedented challenges, the current regulatory landscape reveals a critical gap: insufficient work has been done in the systematic application of existing human rights norms to the governance of AI. As noted by Yuval Shany at the expert consultation on envisioning an AI Bill of Rights, current efforts to regulate AI through human rights frameworks constitute three fundamental weaknesses: they are abstract exercises in “constructive ambiguity,” are characterized by voluntary compliance mechanisms, or fail to offer definitive guidelines for the application of human rights standards to AI systems. The accelerating pace of the AI technology landscape, the non-transparent nature of algorithmic decision-making, and the multidimensional and globalized impacts of AI,

further complicate the ability of human rights mechanisms to effectively address the harms generated by AI systems.

AI’s downstream effects, while not directly violating specific legal norms, pose more complex challenges which can create enduring human rights impacts. For instance, while AI-driven innovations could theoretically increase productivity and worker earnings, many fear they will instead cause large-scale unemployment, widen the income gap, and fuel social strife. These economic shifts generate a deeper concern, described by Julie E. Cohen ‘91 as a potential descent into “tech oligarchy.” Nobel laureates Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson have echoed this warning, adding that the current trajectory of AI automation is already following a worker-replacing, rather than a worker-complementary, path established by the computer revolution. Besides further eroding organized labor and growing the wealth gap—trends that have been underway since 1980s—AI also poses new risks such as fueling polarization and mis/disinformation through algorithmic amplification.

Perhaps the ultimate paradox of the AI era is the erosion of democracy itself, a shift toward oligarchic and autocratic governance structures emerging ostensibly through democratic processes, as control over information infrastructures translates to unprecedented levels of concentrated wealth and political influence. Several participants at the expert consultation on envisioning an

AI Bill of Rights highlighted a key challenge in regulating AI technologies as their ability to evade state oversight by relocating to different jurisdictions. This has led to suggestions of global solutions such as harmonized taxation frameworks, and, as Ifeoma Ajunwa recommended, international unionization to ensure transnational protection of workers’ rights. Other suggestions included

Hélène Landemore’s call for a “pre-distributive approach”, that would promote interventions before oligarchic control becomes entrenched, and Julie E. Cohen’s proposal to develop a manifesto for collective action that counters technofuturist narratives that, whether utopian or dystopian, have the effect of obscuring the consolidation of power by tech oligarchs.

Empowerig Future Leaders

Student and Visiting Fellows @ HRP

Extraordinary human rights advocates, scholars, and leaders in the human rights field have passed through HRP, be it as students, visiting fellows, professors, or staff members. HRP facilitates the emergence and connection of human rights leaders across generations and creates opportunities for community building and intellectual exchange by, among other things, providing fellowships to students, alumni, and advocates who have demonstrated commitment to the field of human rights. Besides supporting leaders, scholars, and advocates, fellowships are also designed to advance human rights practice and scholarship more broadly.

Since its establishment, HRP has been dedicated to cultivating the next generation of human rights leaders by providing students with foundational career support. Winter and Summer Fellowships allow

HLS students to explore different fields of practice, hone their skills, and gain practical experience on their path of choice. Post-graduate Fellowships act as a critical launching pad for the careers of recent HLS graduates, offering them a year of hands-on experience at a human rights organization. Engaging in over 1,000 internships in 122 countries, HRP’s fellowships span across the globe, demonstrating students’ commitment to international human rights.

The HRP Visiting Fellows Program gives individuals with a demonstrated commitment to human rights an opportunity to engage with the human rights community at HLS, enrich in HLS events and conferences, and engage in research that advances human rights knowledge. HRP visiting fellows, many of whom are established scholars and leaders in their field, provide opportunities for students and faculty to

benefit from their diverse experiences and perspectives and connect with a global cohort of human rights actors. HRP first welcomed visiting fellows in 1986, and since then, more than 240 scholars and advocates from 76 countries have participated, representing a broad range of human rights work and bringing with them a stunning range of experiences and perspectives to the HRP community.

2025 STUDENT FELLOWS

Kelsey Johnson ’25 interned with the Legal Resources Centre (LRC), an independent public interest law organization in Cape Town, South Africa, to advance social justice, equality, and human rights.

Elena Lio ’25 spent her winter fellowship in Sydney, Australia, and Auckland, New

Zealand, researching the law and history of interactions between colonial settlers and indigenous groups in 19th-century Australia and New Zealand.

Madeleine Wonneberger '27 is interning at the British Institute of International and Comparative Law (BIICL) in London, supporting the Business and Human Rights division's work on corporate human rights abuses, transitional justice, and multilateral AI regulation.

2024-2026
POSTGRADUATE
FELLOWS

Satter Fellows

The Satter Human Rights Fellowship, funded by the Satter Foundation and named after Muneer Satter J.D./M.B.A. '87 allows recent graduates to spend a year working on the defense of human rights in response to mass atrocities or widespread and severe patterns of human rights abuse.

Aizhan Tilenbaeva LL.M. '22 completed her Fellowship at the Global Rights Compliance (GRC) in Ukraine, where she promoted justice and accountability by conducting strategic investigative legal work.

Henigson Fellows

The Henigson Human Rights Fellowship, made possible by a gift from Robert '55 and Phyllis Henigson, is awarded to recent

graduates with a demonstrated commitment to international human rights and an interest in working in the field. The Fellowship supports ten to twelve months of work, enabling students to make a valuable contribution to human rights.

Sabrina Ochoa '24 is working with CenterLaw Philippines, where she is utilizing both international and domestic avenues to secure reparations for victims of human rights abuses in the Philippines.

Deepika Singh '24 is working with Thai Lawyers for Human Rights to secure civil and political rights for Thai people.

Isabella Leal Aguilar '25 is working with Casa Nicolás in Mexico, where she will work towards strengthening legal protections for the migrant community in northern Mexico by addressing systemic human rights violations, identifying abuse patterns, and advocating for policy reforms that uphold migrant rights in Mexico.

Camila Castellanos Forero '25 is working with the International Center for Transitional Justice in The Gambia. In this role, she will support the implementation of the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations Commission, provide technical expertise on reparations, contribute to the establishment of a hybrid transitional court to prosecute those responsible for gross human rights violations during the Yahya Jammeh regime, and promote gender-sensitive approaches to accountability.

2024-2025 VISITING
FELLOWS

Sanzhuan (Sandra) Guo is the Rapporteur of the International Law Association's Committee on International Migration and International Law, and an Associate Professor in Law at the College of Business, Government and Law at Flinders University. Sandra's current research examines regional migration governance in the Australia-New Zealand-Pacific (ANZ-Pacific) region through a multidisciplinary approach integrating international law and international relations.

Jonathan Liljeblad is an Associate Professor at the Australian National University College of Law. His research centers on the complexities of promoting international norms within developing countries, with a focus on issues of human rights, Indigenous rights, and the environment.

Julissa Mantilla Falcón is a professor at the Academy of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law at American University (Washington, DC), as well as at the Faculty of Law, the Master's in Gender Studies, and the Master's in Human Rights at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP), where she received the Research Recognition Award for her outstanding publications and distinguished

career. She is a former president of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR).

Angela Hefti is an Assistant Professor of Law at Florida International University's College of Law, Angela served as a judicial clerk in the asylum division of the Federal Administrative Court in Switzerland and was a Yale Robina Fellow at the European Court of Human Rights. Angela's research interests include climate change litigation and human rights, feminist and critical theory, as well as femicide.

Thyagi Ruwanpathirana was HRP's Neelan Tiruchelvam Memorial Fellow, whose research focuses on the creation of an enabling

environment for a post-conflict Truth Commission that meets the needs of the victims of Sri Lanka's internal armed conflict.

Michael McEachrane is a Member and Rapporteur of the UN Permanent Forum on People of African Descent and a Senior Visiting Researcher at the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in Lund, Sweden.

Victor Madrigal-Borloz was HRP's Senior Visiting Researcher from 2019 to December 2025. From 2018 to 2023, he was the UN Independent Expert on Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity appointed by the United Nations Human Rights Council.



Credit: Austl. Bur. Stat., Bing, GeoNames, LaraFields, Microsoft, Navinfo, Open Places, OpenStreetMap, Overture Maps Foundation, TomTom, Zenrin.

The Turn toward Authoritarianism

A Detour or a Derailment?

by Gerald L. Neuman & Abadir M. Ibrahim

One of the themes that emerged during HRP’s 40th Anniversary Symposium was what participants referred to as a “decline,” “reversal,” “regression,” “erosion” or “backsliding” of democracy—a downward trajectory for democracy worldwide. Although this trend has not erased the gains of the “Third Wave” of global democratization, which ensued roughly between 1974 and the 1990s, a “reverse wave” of democratic decline has accelerated in recent years. In 2024, according to the V-Dem Dataset, 45 countries experienced episodes of democratic decline, while only 19 exhibited positive trends. Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit report deterioration in human rights standards over the last two decades driven by violations of civil and political rights in autocratizing states.

What makes the current moment especially concerning is that the wave of democratic decline has not spared established democracies. With the rise of exclusionary populism, seemingly consolidated Third-Wave democracies such as Hungary and Poland, as well as older, Second and First Wave, democracies such as India

and the United States, have all experienced notable levels of democratic regression.

Countering and exposing authoritarian abuse is familiar terrain for the human rights movement, but the rise of exclusionary populism in established democracies has both introduced new challenges and heightened others. The persistence of exclusionary populism means that the types of threats it poses to human rights are no longer a matter of speculation. What remains open to speculation, and is a matter of growing concern given the political developments of the 40th Anniversary Year, is how and when this authoritarian tide might end, or how much more ground democracy will lose before the trend is reversed.

HUMAN RIGHTS UNDER EXCLUSIONARY POPULIST REGIMES

Different political scientists have used the term “populism” to describe a broad range of political programs, strategies, and styles. The exclusionary or ideational form of populism has often been associated

with the recent erosion of human rights in democratic states. Exclusionary populists, professing to speak for a group they cast as the “real” people, run for office promising to rectify injustices and threats they attribute to self-interested elites and the marginalized groups and minorities that these protect. The targeted “enemies” are blamed for a wide range of social ills and may be vilified as “so-called scientists and intellectuals” and “unelected deep-state operatives” or as “terrorists” or “drug criminals”. Such inflammatory discourse, when coupled with a sense of urgency and the dehumanization of supposed antagonists, normalizes and legitimizes discriminatory state practices, political violence, and serious human rights violations.

“Authoritarian” is also a term applied variably, sometimes to autocratic systems of governance, sometimes to practices characteristic of those systems but occurring in systems that are not—or not yet authoritarian regimes. Others have employed the term to describe attitudes that are used to justify authoritarian regimes or practices. Exclusionary populism expresses authoritarian attitudes toward its targets, and when in power it tends to lead to authoritarian practices, or worse.

What makes the current moment especially concerning is that the wave of democratic decline has not spared established democracies.

Courts during Democratic Decline

During its 40th Anniversary Year HRP events featured judges and scholars who were personally familiar with the role of courts, and other adjacent institutions such as National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs), in defending human rights and the rule of law. Alfredo Gutiérrez Ortiz Mena LL.M. ’98, former Justice of the Mexican Supreme Court, presented his stance on Mexico’s new constitutional amendment that allows judges to be elected by popular vote. The amendment followed “reforms” which undermined judicial review and turned the judiciary into an elected office. This may not only lead to the election of judges allied with the ruling party or the interests of business elites, but it could also subject judges and judicial reasoning to “political opinions and to popular opinion,” thereby undermining equal protection under the Constitution. Justice Gutiérrez Ortiz Mena, who is known for his pro-rights decisions, including those which favored the current ruling party when it was in opposition, was left with one final act in the defense of constitutionalism—resigning together with half of Mexico’s federal judges.

Marko Bošnjak, president of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), outlined several cases that reached the Strasbourg Court from countries that are experiencing democratic backsliding. He described the phenomenon as originating from the actions of democratically elected leaders instituting successive reforms that reinforce each other, resulting in “rule of law backsliding.” Exemplified in the events leading up to Gutiérrez Ortiz Mena’s resignation, Bošnjak discussed one category of cases where populist regimes attempt to undermine judicial independence by “reforming” judicial appointment, tenure, and disciplinary procedures and by appointing loyalists to the bench. The other category, which referenced Russian dissident Alexei Navalny, involved human rights violation cases that reach the ECHR partly because the authoritarian populist regime has already compromised the domestic courts, forcing citizens to seek justice elsewhere.

As Bošnjak noted, it is difficult to undo the harm caused by authoritarian actors who simply ignore court orders, allowing the backsliding to sink deeper the longer they stay. However, decisions by independent judicial bodies such as the ECHR, even when they are ignored, do have utility. These cases expose authoritarian abuses and provide victims with a restorative platform that validates their experience and allows them to vocalize their experience. These cases become a legal blueprint, ready to be implemented to ensure accountability and rebuild the rule of law once the rule of law and democratic governance are reestablished.

Having risen to power through democratic processes, populist leaders or parties are often willing to dispense with democratic norms. Populist parties may manipulate the rules of the game to tip the scale in their favor. Such measures can include extending term limits, changing how votes are counted, or engaging in redistricting, vote suppression, and “voter tourism” (i.e., enabling supporters to cast votes in contested districts where they do not reside). They may combine such technical measures with disinformation campaigns and political

intimidation or escalate to electoral fraud and violence. In this way, the democratic process itself is turned into the path to authoritarianism.

Similarly, populist figures who were happy to benefit from human rights, as well as rule of law norms and their institutional safeguards, when they were upstart politicians do not hesitate to curtail rights once in office. Populists seek to control, or extract acquiescence from, electoral institutions, prosecutorial and security institutions, judiciaries, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs),

and constitutional courts. In their pursuit of staff loyalty and institutional capture, populist rulers typically weaken the professionalism of bureaucracies and may also go as far as purging them or dismantling them entirely.

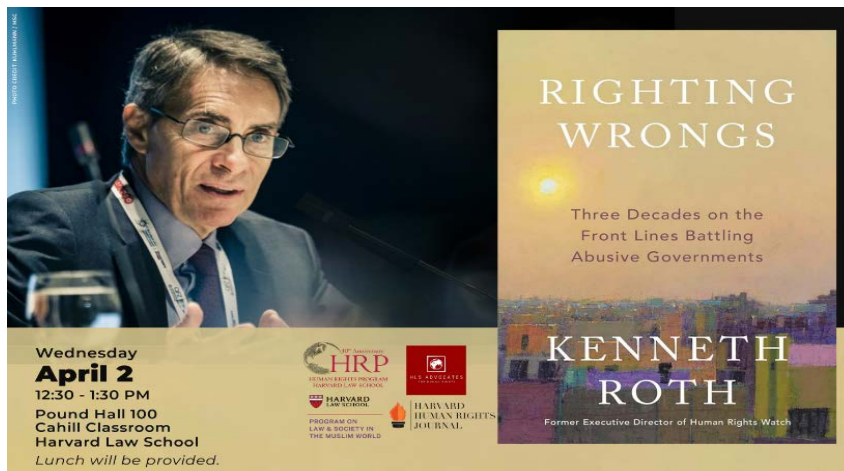
Although some human rights concerns are raised by populists’ implementation of promises to win a “war on drugs” or to repel a migrant “invasion”, their rights violations are also aimed more generally at creating a hostile environment for political opposition and dissent. Those singled out for intimidation



Alfredo Gutiérrez Ortiz Mena speaking on “The Role of the Judiciary in Mexico’s Democracy”. Credit: Lorin Granger



Marko Bošnjak speaking on “The Role of Courts in Tackling Democratic Backsliding”. Credit: Jodi Hilton



and attack may thus include individual journalists, independent media, human rights and democracy advocates, and opposition politicians. Broader civil society and business institutions may also be targeted if they are perceived as threats or as independent power centers outside the regime’s control. A climate of fear is often created or amplified by ideologically motivated non-state actors and social media armies that carry out harassment and disinformation campaigns, affording the state a degree of plausible deniability for the suppression of dissent.

Internationally, exclusionary populist regimes have been intensifying antagonism against normative and institutional structures that guarantee human rights. Their rhetoric against the international human rights community as “corrupt globalist elites” who suppress the popular will, only escalates once populist leaders are elected to office, and grows as their human rights record worsens. Whereas some have altogether withdrawn from international human rights systems, populist-led states may remain

and ally themselves with fully autocratic regimes to undermine intergovernmental human rights institutions, cut funding, or “reform” mandates to limit their independence or functions. Going further, autocratic and populist-led states may attempt to coopt and appropriate international mechanisms and norms for their own repressive ends.

THE WAY FORWARD

In recent years, HRP has convened human rights scholars and advocates, and other interdisciplinary experts to examine the current challenges to democracy and human rights and to explore effective ways to overcome them. These discussions approached the problem from multiple angles, examining both the role of individual agency—the choices made by politicians, judges, or voters—and the broader social, economic, and political context shaping those actions. The analysis also covered factors ranging from anxieties over social and demographic change to the mechanics of legal structures governing elections, political parties, impeachment procedures, and judicial appointments. Some

of the proposed solutions focused on addressing deep structural causes such as long-term wage and income stagnation and housing affordability, and on breaking the mutually reinforcing cycle between concentrated wealth and political power.

Besides examining adjustments in the human rights systems in reaction to the rise in authoritarianism and populism, discussions also included introspections within the human rights movement itself. HRP’s goals were described at the 40th Anniversary Symposium as including “critical engagement with the human rights regime and the ways in which the human rights regime needs to be criticized, sometimes for doing too little and sometimes for doing too much and sometimes for doing things badly”. This introspection, for example, involved re-evaluating the overall effectiveness, or otherwise, of human rights bodies and procedures, and questioning whether the insufficient implementation of economic and social rights left democracies vulnerable to populist backlash. It also included discussion on whether the implementation of socioeconomic rights, the “second bill of rights” or the “new deal” in American political parlance, would have been sufficient to prevent structural inequality.

Some of the required re-adjustments were highlighted by Kenneth Roth at an HRP event last Spring. He observed that human rights

organizations needed to recalibrate their advocacy strategies towards Western democracies, much as they did after 9/11, but this time to address the erosion of judicial independence and the rule of law. Even as

confrontation that stretches back at least to the struggles against absolute monarchs, and moments of crisis have always brought out the resolve and ingenuity of those who strive for dignity and equality. What

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they work through these difficult times, however, their expectations and aspirations do not necessarily have to be circumscribed. As noted by Roth, democracy still has a high degree of salience even in entrenched authoritarian regimes, including those in global and regional powers such as China, Russia and Iran, which feel threatened more by the democratic aspirations of their own people than by any geopolitical rival.

As we enter these difficult times, it is apt to remember that authoritarianism and the human rights movement are not new foes. This is a

are often called the three “generations” of rights—civil and political, socio-economic, and community and solidarity rights—can be traced to the struggles of the democratic-revolutionary, industrial, and anti-colonial eras. The global human rights system too, including major institutional milestones from Nuremberg to the ICC, came out of extremely difficult times. As observed by Kathryn Sikkink at HRP’s 40th Anniversary Symposium, there may not be a “golden era” of human rights, insofar as there has always been injustice and abuse of power. But human rights will endure as an essential

standard in the struggle for a more just world, serving as a benchmark against which the actions of dictatorships, exclusionary populist regimes, and democracies alike will be measured. Ultimately, the power to advance this struggle lies in the agency and resolve of fellow human beings—whether as individuals or as members of communities and civic groups. The role of universities, and of the students and scholars who constitute them, will always be important in supporting or opposing the human rights movement. This importance is underscored by the fact that authoritarian and populist regimes seek to secure either the support or the conformity of universities. While human rights and civic education curricula, clinical work, and research are all crucial, the success of the human rights movement has always required a broader constituency across civil society. The question of ‘how broad’ was addressed by Eleanor Roosevelt in a 1958 speech, in which she located the struggle for human rights in the daily lives of ordinary individuals.



“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person: the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”

United Nations, New York, 27 March 1958

HRP Events

Every year, HRP hosts and co-sponsors lectures, panels, workshops, conferences, and other convenings that explore timely human rights issues and doctrinal debates. Ranging from keynote lectures delivered to large, sometimes global audiences to small, informal coffee chats where students gain insights into diverse human rights career pathways, these events serve to bridge theory and practice and provide co-curricular learning and experience-sharing opportunities. Events include collaborative workshops that enable practitioners and scholars to address complex challenges or develop new ideas, as well as book launches at which published works are presented, discussed, and rigorously examined.

Whether building consensus on important issues or inviting critical debates, HRP events and activities aim to enrich the intellectual life of the law school and contribute to the external human rights movement. These events are often organized and promoted in partnership with student organizations, such as the Harvard Human Rights Journal and HLS Advocates for Human Rights; other research centers and programs; and intergovernmental organizations. The following selection from the 2024–2025 academic year highlights both HRP-sponsored events and the external engagements of its faculty, fellows, and researchers.

AFTER INDIA'S ELECTIONS: A CONVERSATION ON DEMOCRACY AND DISSENT

SUCHITRA VIJAYAN
September 12, 4:00 PM
WCC 3034
Moderated by Nitika Khaitan.
Refreshments will be served.

Book talk: The Abraham Accords

The Gulf States, Israel, and the Limits of Normalization

By Elham Fakhro

10.01.24, 12:15 pm
WCC 3007, HLS

Human Rights Program 40th Anniversary Symposium

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 17
12:15PM – 6:30 PM
MILSTEIN EAST BC
Wasserstein Hall
Harvard Law School

Kathryn Sikkink	Gerald Neuman	Jessica Neuwirth	Morha Minow	Victor Madrigal-Borloz	Tyler Giannini
Makau Mutua	Karima Bennouna	Alicia Ely Yamin	Ryan Goodman	Benyam D. Mezmur	Kristen Stille

International Actors and Rule of Law Reform in the Global South: Lessons from Ethiopia

October 10, 12:15 pm
WCC 3007, Harvard Law School

The event will be moderated by Salma Waheedi. Lunch will be served to attendees.

Book Talk

The Gates of Gaza

Critical Voices from Israel on October 7 and the War with Hamas

Featuring:
Lihi Ben Shitrit

Monday, Oct. 28
12:15 pm, WCC 3007

Accountability, Reconciliation and Transitional Justice in Sri Lanka

Role of the International Community

November 13, 12:15 pm ET | Hauser 104, Zoom
Lunch will be served.

HABLEMOS DE MÉXICO

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14
9AM - 10:30AM
WCC 3007 ROOM, HLS

ALFREDO GUTIÉRREZ ORTIZ MENA

JUSTICE OF THE SUPREME COURT OF MEXICO

THE RIGHTS OF ATHLETES AND PLAYERS

October 29
12:15 pm ET
Lewis 202 | Zoom

The Role of the European Court of Human Rights in Adjudicating Global Sports Disputes

Dr. Daniel Rietker
Moderated by Prof. Gerald Neuman

ANTI-GENDER POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA

11/14 | 12:15 - 1:30 PM
Hauser 105, HLS campus | Zoom
Lunch provided.

JULISSA MANTILLA FALCÓN

AUCIA ELY YAMIN (MODERATOR)

NOVEMBER 15, 12:15 PM | WCC 3034

Lunch will be served.

Article workshop

The Importance of Gender Mainstreaming in International Human Rights Law: The Recognition of Women's Rights

Author
Julissa Mantilla Falcón

Hidden in Plain Sight

STATELESS COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES AND PAKISTAN

A lunch talk with Hiba Thobani, Advisory Member of Imkaan Welfare Organisation's Legal Aid Center, and Karina Ambartsoumian-Clough, Executive Director of United Stateless

HOW DISABILITY INCLUSION DRIVES U.S. FOREIGN POLICY WITH SARA MINKARA

NOVEMBER 25
12:20 - 1:30 PM
WCC 1015

November 18

12:15 - 1:15pm
WCC 3008
Lunch will be provided

SALSA

Western Sahara
International Law and the Struggle for Self-Determination



February 3
12:15-1:15pm ET
WCC 2009
Harvard Law School

(Amb.) Mouloud Saidi
Lisa Dicker
Bill Fletcher Jr

HRP
HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM
HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

LUNCH TALK

THE LAW OF GENOCIDE:
LEMKIN & GAZA

WITH PAUL O'BRIEN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL USA



REGISTER NOW
FEB 26, LUNCH BLOCK
LOCATION TO BE SENT TO
REGISTRANTS

**THE ROLE OF COURTS IN
TACKLING DEMOCRATIC
BACKSLIDING**

WITH DR. MARKO BOŠNJAK,
PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF
HUMAN RIGHTS



REGISTER NOW
MARCH 10, 12:20 - 1:20
WCC 1010

**Atrocity Crimes and
the Limits of
International
Criminal Justice**

HRP
HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM
HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

**CLIMATE CHANGE &
THE COURTS**

LIMITS, ROLE, AND POTENTIAL
WITH DR. SÍOFRA O'LEARY,
FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS
MODERATED BY PROFESSOR TYLER GIANNINI



REGISTER NOW
MARCH 3, 12:20 - 1:20
WCC 1010
LUNCH PROVIDED

**INDIGENOUS
JUSTICE
IS
CLIMATE JUSTICE**



HRP
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LAWASIA
THE LAW ASSOCIATION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

Australian
National
University

ANU LAW SCHOOL

**MILITARIZATION
OF EDUCATION**
CASE STUDIES IN THE RUSSIA-
UKRAINE ARMED CONFLICT

A LUNCH TALK WITH ELIZA
SHYHAPOVA, INTERNATIONAL
LAWYER AND LEGAL CONSULTANT
AT THE INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT LAW ORGANIZATION

Monday, March 31, 12:15
WCC 3008
Lunch provided



Wednesday
April 2
12:30 - 1:30 PM
Pound Hall 100
Cahill Classroom
Harvard Law School
Lunch will be provided.

**RIGHTING
WRONGS**
Three Decades on the
Front Lines Battling
Abusive Governments

**KENNETH
ROTH**
Former Executive Director of Human Rights Watch



13th annual Roma conference

**Unraveling injustice
and power structures**

Friday, April 4, 2025, 12:30pm-6:15pm ET | Online and in-person
Smith Campus Center, 10th Floor, Cambridge, MA

Registrations: <https://roma2025.harvard.edu/agenda>

**Deportation in
International Law &
Comparative Perspective**
April 22
12:15 pm ET
Austin 111 / Zoom
Lunch will be served.



**APRIL 30, 12:00 PM ET
WCC 3116 | ZOOM**

**Law, Politics and Armed Group
Accountability
for Past Human Rights Violations**
Kieran McEvoy

Lunch will be provided.



HRP
HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM
HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

**APRIL 24, 12:15 PM ET
WCC 3019 | ZOOM**

Dinesha Samararatne

**The Duty to Prevent, Guarantor
Institutions & State Capture**
Theorizing from the Global South

Lunch will be provided.



Moderator:
Manisha Dissanayake

**PATTERN ANALYSIS AS A TOOL FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS INVESTIGATIONS**
A Practice-Oriented Reflection

05/19 | 11:00 AM - 12:30 PM
WCC 3015, HLS campus | Zoom
Lunch provided.



HRP
HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM
HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

Artificial Intelligence
Promises and Perils for Humans' Rights

June 10th at 10:30 AM to 12:30 PM EST
This is a Zoom event



HRP
HUMAN RIGHTS PROGRAM
HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

HUMAN RIGHTS LAW & PRACTICE IN THE UNITED STATES SYMPOSIUM

This year marked the second year that HRP partnered with the HLS Human Rights Entrepreneurs Clinic and the University of Ghana School of Law (UGSoL) to welcome students and professors to a summer seminar on human rights in the United States. Designed to equip graduate students of law with international and comparative experience, the seminar brought together an interdisciplinary group of scholars and practitioners from HLS, UGSoL, and other U.S. universities and human rights organizations to facilitate the interactive learning sessions. The seminar included visits to sites of innovative human rights work in the Greater Boston area as well as historical sites connected with the struggle for human rights and freedoms.



Our core teaching team, Emily Ray and Abadir Ibrahim, guided participant learning and engagement. We were also privileged to have workshops led by outstanding leaders in the Human Rights field, including Tyler Giannini, Victor Madrigal-Borloz, Sabrineh Ardalan, Justin Hansford, and Margaret Drew. Their insights and expertise enriched our discussions and deepened our connections. We were thrilled to spotlight City Life/Vida Urbana and Y2Y, organizations working on the front lines of the housing crisis.

SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS AND INTERVIEWS

Sanzhuan (Sandra) Guo

Panelist at “Climate Change and Migration in International Law: From Europe to the South Pacific” at The University of Chicago Law School, April 8, 2025.

Panelist at “Climate Change and Migration in International Law” at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law, April 7, 2025.

Speaker at “2025 Emerging Immigration Scholars Conference” at Ohio State University Moritz College of Law on May 20-21, 2025.

Abadir M. Ibrahim

Interview for article “The Civil Society Agency Announces a New Draft Law Prohibiting Advocacy Organizations from Receiving International Funding” BBC Amharic, June 25, 2025.

Panelist at “Two Years on from the Pretoria Agreement: What’s Next for Ethiopia?” Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Refugees International, ECDC, The Open Society Foundations, and Amnesty International USA, November 21, 2024.

Interview for article “Concerns over the [Ethiopian] Government’s New Legal Reforms” BBC Amharic, November 29, 2024.

Interview for article “The Constitution: A 30-Year Journey of the ‘Social Contract’ of Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples” BBC Amharic, December 8, 2024.

Panelist at “What are the Implications of the Suspension of Four Human Rights Organizations on the Civic Space in Ethiopia?” Deutsche Welle Amharic, January 12, 2025.

Interview for article “Balancing Democracy and Economic Growth: A False Dichotomy on Ethiopia’s Path Forward” The Reporter, March 1, 2025.

Panelist at “Director’s Lunch and Panel – Ethiopia’s War in Tigray: Learning from the Past, Seeking Peace” at Harvard University Center for African Studies, April 30, 2025.

Interview for article “Twenty Years On: Ethiopia’s 2005 Elections Revisited” BBC Amharic, May 15, 2025.

Panelist at “Why are Proposed Amendments to the Ethiopian Civil Society Law Causing Concern?” Deutsche Welle Amharic, July 14, 2025.

Jonathan Liljeblad

Speaker at “Indigenous Rights in South Asia: Current Struggles in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal” Australian National University Law School (ANU Law School), the American Society of International Law (ASIL), the Law Association for Asia and the Pacific (LAWASIA), and HRP, March 28, 2025.

Julissa Mantilla Falcón

Instructor in post-graduate course “Curso de Actualización en Derecho Internacional de los Derechos Humanos” (Engl.: Refresher Course in Human Rights Law), Law School of Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú in Lima, March to May 2025.

Gerald L. Neuman

Interview in article “Can birthright citizenship be changed?” in Harvard Law Today, January 24, 2025.

Adviser and discussant “Meeting of Advisers and Members of the Consultative Group on Restatement of the Law Fourth”, The Foreign Relations Law of the United States, American Law Institute, February 21, 2025.

Expert panel member at “Birthright Citizenship in U.S. Law and History” at New School, March 7, 2025.

Opening speaker at “Protest and the Academy: Assembly Rights and Freedom of Association on University Campuses” with United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and of Association, Gina Romero at Harvard Law School, March 11, 2025.

Panelist at “HLS Law and Democracy Forum: Can the President End Birthright Citizenship? A Conversation with Professor Guy-Uriel Charles and Professor Gerald Neuman” at Harvard Law School, March 13, 2025.

Acknowledgments

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Harvard International Law Journal
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Program on Law and Society in the Muslim World

Religion and Public Life at the Harvard Divinity School
Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative at the Harvard Divinity School
Roma Program for Health and Human Rights at the François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights
Romani Studies Program at Central European University
Salata Institute for Climate and Sustainability
South Asia Caucus and Casteless Caucus at the Harvard Kennedy School
South Asian Studies Colloquium at the FAS Department of South Asian Studies
Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University
Women, Gender, and Health Interdisciplinary Concentration (WGH) at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health
Women's Law Association

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