ChatGPT

Robot and AI Rights: Global Frameworks and Debates

The idea of granting *legal rights* to robots or AI systems is still highly speculative. To date **no international law** recognizes AI as legal persons or rights-holders; instead, global guidelines emphasize human welfare and safety. For example, UNESCO's 2021 *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* explicitly makes "the protection of human rights and dignity" the cornerstone of AI ethics [1]. Likewise, the OECD's AI Principles (adopted by 48 governments) call for AI that is "innovative and trustworthy" and **respects human rights and democratic values** [2]. Leading tech companies have followed suit: Google's AI Principles (2018) include pledges such as **"avoid creating or reinforcing unfair bias"** in AI systems [3], highlighting that AI must serve people. In short, nearly all major frameworks focus on human-centered values (fairness, transparency, accountability) rather than on granting any entitlement *to the AI itself*.

- **Human-Centered Principles:** Across international standards, the emphasis is on protecting people. UNESCO emphasizes human rights, transparency and fairness as core values [1], and the OECD likewise insists AI uphold democratic values [2]. This is mirrored in industry rules: companies like Google and Anthropic explicitly design AI around human ethical values. For instance, Anthropic's *Constitutional AI* method encodes a "constitution" of rules (drawn partly from the UN Declaration of Human Rights) to guide its models [4]. All these efforts make AI *responsive to human norms* rather than autonomous law subjects.
- **Accountability and Safety:** Most policies stress accountability and safety, not robot autonomy. The US "Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights" (2022) lays out principles to protect Americans from unsafe or unfair AI (such as biased algorithms or privacy invasions) [5]. Likewise, China's recent Shanghai guidelines for humanoid robots require that robots adhere to human values and *"not threaten human safety and dignity"* [6]. In practice, regulations (e.g. mandatory liability insurance or safety audits) aim to bind developers and users, rather than confer any privilege on the machines.
- **Legal Status Debates:** Formal talk of robot personhood has occurred, but only as proposals. For example, a 2017 European Parliament report urged considering "electronic personhood" for highly autonomous robots, similar to corporate personhood, to assign liability for damages [7] [8]. This media-led discussion (reported as potentially giving "human rights" to robots [7]) remains just a recommendation – it was **not** enacted into law. In fact, legal analysts note that **no country currently grants AI systems legal personhood or rights**. The Sophia the Robot incident (Saudi Arabia briefly granting a robot citizenship in 2017) was a publicity event, widely criticized for giving "more rights than millions of women" [9] [10], but it had no lasting legal effect. In summary, even where experts muse about future AI personhood, existing policies universally stop short of treating machines as rights-bearing entities.
- **Public and Academic Views:** Surveys and studies show divergent opinions on robot rights. A recent Boston University study, for example, developed a "Robot Rights and Responsibilities" scale precisely because debates are so varied [11]. The study notes "vast differences in the possible philosophical, ethical, and legal approaches" to robot rights [11], reflecting no consensus. Some ethicists argue against granting robots rights until they have sentience; others suggest moral obligations toward machines. However, even in academia the dominant framing is precautionary: focus on guiding human behavior (designers, regulators) rather than expanding rights to AI.

Regional and National Perspectives

Globally, approaches are broadly aligned: governments are building AI regulations and ethics codes to **govern human use of AI**. In the European Union, the 2017 parliamentary report on "civil law rules on robotics" recommended examining robot personhood [7] [8], but EU law has focused on human protections. The EU AI Act (2023) regulates AI risk levels and transparency, without granting any rights to machines. Similarly, the Council of Europe (which includes EU and non-EU countries) is negotiating a binding *Framework Convention* on AI, explicitly to ensure that **AI upholds human rights, democracy and the rule of law** [12]. These instruments underscore human oversight: they aim to minimize AI's risks to people, not to elevate AI to new legal status.

In North America, the US and Canada have adopted ethical guidelines but no AI personhood. The US White House's "AI Bill of Rights" sets out five principles (safe and effective systems, privacy, fairness, etc.) to protect individuals [5]. It treats AI as a tool that must respect civil rights, not as an entity with rights. Canada and Mexico follow the OECD Principles similarly. Elsewhere, Japan's AI policy (updated in 2021) uses existing laws per industry rather than a single AI law, and emphasizes "Society 5.0" innovation with ethics, not AI citizenship.

In Asia-Pacific, China and other leaders emphasize governance guidelines. For example, Shanghai's 2024 *Humanoid Robot Governance Guidelines* lay out detailed rules for robots: they must "comply with human values and ethical principles" and designers must "assume corresponding obligations," explicitly prioritizing human dignity [6] [13]. The guidelines promote safety and industry standards (insurance, risk control) rather than novel rights. (By contrast, the Sophia example in Saudi Arabia – making a robot a citizen [9] – was a one-off media event. Critics pointed out Sophia "had more rights than millions of human women" [9] [10], but no legal framework changed as a result.)

Across regions, **no government has extended fundamental rights to AI or robots**. Some draft proposals (like possible EU guidelines on liability) equate advanced AI behavior to human-level impact, but globally the trend is regulation of AI *by humans*, not recognition of AI as legal beings.

Industry and Research Perspectives

Tech companies and researchers have largely converged on human-centric ethics. Beyond Google's principles, organizations like Microsoft, IBM, and OpenAI have published their own AI commitments (emphasizing fairness, safety, explainability, etc.). Anthropic's work is illustrative: their *Constitutional AI* technique trains models using a built-in "constitution" of values. In Anthropic's words, the model's principles are drawn "from a range of sources including the UN Declaration of Human Rights" [4], ensuring the AI acts in ways aligned with human ethics. This reflects the industry norm: encode human rights into AI **behavior**, rather than empower AI with its own rights.

Academic research likewise underscores that robot rights are an open question. The BU team's new RRR scale frames the debate as still "in the ongoing discourse about the legal and moral standing of non-human and artificial entities" [11]. Scholars like David Gunkel argue robot rights could be considered philosophically, but note the legal and ethical challenges. In practice, however, most proposals center on *responsibilities* — for example, ensuring corporations remain liable for AI, or that AI outputs are traceable to human creators. Notably, even in intellectual property law, courts have so far refused to recognize AI as an inventor or author. Instead, any copyright or patent is attributed to the human operator [14].

In short, our survey of current literature and policies finds **no codified robot/personhood rights anywhere today**. Every major framework from UNESCO to the OECD to corporate ethics codes converges on one theme: AI systems should **benefit and be controlled by humans** [1] [2]. Where "robot rights" arise, it is usually as a thought experiment about liability or future risks, not a present entitlement. As of 2025, robot/AI rights remain a theoretical frontier, with the real-world focus squarely on protecting humans and ensuring ethical AI design.

Sources: A range of international standards, policy proposals, academic analyses, and industry guidelines have been reviewed. Key references include UNESCO's global AI ethics recommendation [1], the OECD AI principles [2], EU Parliament resolutions [8] [7], the US AI Bill of Rights [5], China's humanoid robot guidelines [6] [13], industry statements (e.g. Anthropic's AI "constitution" [4] and Google's principles [3]), and recent academic studies on robot rights [11]. Each emphasizes human-centric oversight of AI, with **no existing legal framework granting AI entities rights**.

---

[1] Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence | UNESCO
https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/recommendation-ethics-artificial-intelligence

[2] AI Principles Overview - OECD.AI
https://oecd.ai/en/ai-principles

[3] ai.google
https://ai.google/static/documents/ai-principles-2023-progress-update.pdf

[4] Claude's Constitution \ Anthropic
https://www.anthropic.com/news/claudes-constitution

[5] Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights | OSTP | The White House
https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/ostp/ai-bill-of-rights/

[6] [13] Shanghai Issues Guidelines for Humanoid Robot Governance
http://mmlcgroup.com/china-humanoid-guidelines/

[7] Give robots 'personhood' status, EU committee argues | Technology | The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/jan/12/give-robots-personhood-status-eu-committee-argues

[8] European Parliament resolution of 16 February 2017 with recommendations to the Commission on Civil Law Rules on Robotics (2015/2103(INL))
https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52017IP0051

[9] [10] Saudi Arabia criticized for giving female robot citizenship, while it restricts women's rights - ABC News
https://abcnews.go.com/International/saudi-arabia-criticized-giving-female-robot-citizenship-restricts/story?id=50741109

[11] The Robot Rights and Responsibilities Scale: Development and Validation of a Metric for Understanding Perceptions of Robots' Rights and Responsibilities | College of Communication
https://www.bu.edu/com/research/the-robot-rights-and-responsibilities-scale-development-and-validation-of-a-metric-for-understanding-perceptions-of-robots-rights-and-responsibilities/

[12] Council of Europe and Artificial Intelligence - Artificial Intelligence
https://www.coe.int/en/web/artificial-intelligence

[14] Opinion: Time To Explore AI's Legal Rights?
https://www.ndtv.com/opinion/time-to-determine-legal-rights-for-robots-4057252