

Human Rights and the Western Influence

When the United Nations (1948) developed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), it was seen as development towards a more just and equitable society for all people. Human rights provides a social and semi-legal framework to advocate for protections that allow all people around the world to survive and resources that allow communities to thrive. Although human rights are claimed to be universal, human rights are a product bound by Western countries' that utilize their power and economic sovereignty over weaker countries to preserve Western power and maintain their international reputation as leaders in advancing human rights. Powerful Western countries uphold this reality based on the historical events and influences that created the understanding of human rights, cultural influences from Western-based non-governmental organizations over weaker countries, and United States international agreements within the United Nations (or lack thereof) that challenge the accountability that weaker states have over more powerful Western nations. It is evident to see the imposition of Western values throughout the process of defining, implementing, and protecting human rights.

The push for basic human rights has been a continuous movement dating back to pre-modern societies. Elements of Hammurabi's code, Confucianism, early Islamic and Christian traditions supported human rights concepts related to justice, education, solidarity and more. However, the rise of colonialism led to arguably the worst forms of human rights violations like genocide and enslavement. The expansion of Western imperialism through settler colonialism came to an end after the various revolutions led by colonized peoples who rebelled against Western countries to attain social and economic rights. It is the long history of colonization and domination over weaker countries by powerful Western nations that forced Western values over those restrained communities. The genocide against non-Western communities, theft of resources, and erasure of cultural identity were simultaneously pushing values of power hoarding and individualism. These characteristics were listed out by Okun (1999) to identify the ways that colonial ideologies (which are ultimately the basis for Western values because they were enforced by the same countries) appear in various institutions and organizations. At the same time, to achieve human rights and freedom it is thought of a life that is constantly striving for success (often defined by economic strength) and self-reliance. These values are the exact same as colonialist ideals, just framed differently. Historical events of Western colonialism and domination have implemented specific norms and values within institutions and have shaped what it means to have power and to be free. Although weaker countries are no longer facing settler colonialism, current institutions are still designed to prioritize Western values.

Waltz (2002) offers an opposing argument to the idea that human rights are largely made by Western ideologies and values. Waltz (2002) stresses the notion that "the construction of the UDHR involved the energy and efforts of many people" by naming a few influential delegates from non-Western countries that contributed to the creation and definition of human rights.

These representatives include Peng Chun Chang of China, Charles Malik of Lebanon, and Hansa Mehta of India. Similarly, Wilkins (2020) attributed Chun Chang, Malik, and Mehta to their discussions on social and economic rights, role of state intervention, and inclusive language that shaped the production of the UDHR. These acknowledgements aim to disrupt the narrative that Western values were not a dominant force in defining human rights because representatives from different nations and communities engaged in the conversation and were given an equal platform to provide their “non-Western” values. However, as it’s been argued, Western values have been so prevalent and normalized within different nations and institutions as a result of colonialism that thoughts of human rights are still bounded by Western practices and ideologies.

While the work of Chun Chang, Malik, and Mehta still holds significance, the influence of Western values goes beyond the written words of the United Nations and shows up in the spaces of civil societies and non-governmental organizations. Western countries utilize their cultural and economic power to apply Western ideals and practices onto the local communities of weaker countries. International organizations based in Western countries promote Western versions of human rights by providing resources and aid that are convenient for those organizations to offer and boost the international reputation of those nations. For example, the UN’s “Global Alliance for Clean Stoves (GACS)” and the Red Cross’ “A Better Life in My Neighborhood (LAMIKA)” are two projects that have operated in ways that hold onto a Western perspective over a weaker country. Zakaria (2021) explains that the GACS project came to focus on the eradication of woodburning stoves and would supply women in rural India with “clean stoves” that not only help the environment (cleaner air and restoration of forests) but also empower the women. Instead, the Indian women felt stripped from their agency and social roles within their families because “tending of their own hearths—the cooking and caring for the household was the central point that they saw as an exercise of power,” (Zakaria, 2021). Empowerment and the practice of human rights is interpreted differently amongst communities, but Western organizations that have the resources and “call” to help their weaker counterparts still promote Western values by not actively seeking what human rights looks like in non-Western countries. Regardless, these organizations are still praised and respected by the international community for their promoting “universal” human rights in supporting weaker countries even if those efforts are culturally irrelevant. Additionally, the LAMIKA project by the Red Cross is another example of how Western organizations use economic and cultural power in weaker countries to bolster international reputation. Elliott (2015) disclosed that the Red Cross received half a billion dollars to rebuild the neighborhood of Campeche, Haiti but the organization was only able to build six decent homes. While it was clear that the issues that limited this project was the lack of expertise that was needed to construct stable infrastructure, the other underlying problem was the motive behind these human rights advocates. “The officials [of the Red Cross] wanted to know which projects would generate good publicity, not which projects would provide the most homes,” (Elliot, 2015) and left behind empty promises to the weaker countries who need the most assistance in achieving human rights. Western organizations have the power to use their economic resources to push specific cultural values while

simultaneously receiving recognition for securing human rights in weaker countries. Though weaker countries may be given a platform to participate in defining human rights, Western countries have greater capacity to carry out the use of human rights and may implement them in a way that is most beneficial for those Western agencies.

Western countries have an interest in defining and promoting human rights through a Western lens because it allows for the continuation of economic and cultural power at the international level. The challenging aspect of globalizing human rights treaties is the tension between state-society and international agreements because it asks Western countries to “give up” power. Specifically, the United States as a powerful Western nation uses various tactics to maintain its international reputation while also limiting the ability to be held accountable by weaker countries. The US, as progressive as it’s recognized to be, has yet to ratify major human rights treaties like the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and a few others. The ICC serves as last resort court that is an “independent judicial empowered to investigate and prosecute war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and the crime of aggression,” (Human Rights Watch, 2018). This is especially important for weaker countries who may not have as stable or legitimized judicial systems that can hold higher officials accountable. However, by the missing ratification from the US, the ICC is unable to investigate crimes committed in Afghanistan, Poland, etc. made by US officials or citizens. This deprives weaker countries of a platform to hold Western countries accountable towards and continues to uphold a Western idea of which human rights are more valuable than others. Not only are human rights bounded by Western values, but they are also protected at the discretion of Western countries. Similarly, the US uses its economic power to garner support from weaker countries that rely on foreign aid. Although the US did not ratify the ICC, the Western country pressured other nations to sign agreements that would exempt American employees from being surrendered to the ICC, (Kelley, 2007). For a weaker country passionate about protecting human rights, it would be easy to object to the contract. However, when a weaker country is reliant on material or security aid from said Western country, it is more likely that weaker countries will have to choose stability over justice. This further shows how Western countries are able to stray away from accountability by using economic dominance to maintain a strong international influence. Further, the position and interest of protecting human rights in weaker countries are diminishing which prioritizes human rights that promote fall into the concern of Western countries.

From the formation of human rights, Western countries have limited the definition of human rights to ideas of Western values which was possible through efforts of colonization and individualism. Although there are some instances where weaker countries have the ability to contribute to the achievement of human rights, Western organizations have the resources to impose specific practices of human rights based on what is most beneficial for the powerful country, not the weaker one. Lastly, Western nations use economic standing to affect the level of accountability they have towards weaker countries. The lack of capacity of weaker states to fully engage in human rights allows Western countries to continue pushing a cycle based on Western values. It is important to analyze and understand how Western nations have limited the scope of

human rights because it strips agency and power away from communities within weaker countries. Perhaps to reach a more just and equitable society, communities from non-Western countries must be given the space to define what human rights mean, what they look like, and how to invest in something that will always protect their human rights.

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