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Human Rights Council Background Guide 2026

Written by Elias Sepulveda and Ninja Friberg



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Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the 2026 National Model United Nations Washington DC Conference (NMUN•DC)! We are pleased to introduce you to your committee, the Human Rights Council (HRC). Your committee's work is facilitated by volunteer staffers. This year's committee staff are: Director Elias "Eli" Sepulveda and Assistant Director Ninja Friberg. Eli holds a Bachelor of Arts in International Development and works as a researcher for a philanthropic fund. In his free time, he enjoys rock climbing and language learning. Ninja grew up and spent most of her life in Denmark, but recently moved to California, United States of America. In her free time, she loves spending time with friends, watching fun movies, and being active. Both Eli and Ninja are excited to have an amazing time at NMUN•DC. The preparation of these materials was supported by Under-Secretaries-General Kaytlyn Marcotte, Catherine Tomczyk, and Tobias Willms, and Secretary-General, Ashlee Rolheiser.

The topics on the agenda for this committee are:

1. The Protection of Human Rights in the Digital Age
2. Combating Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

HRC is a subsidiary committee to the General Assembly. It monitors and assesses the state of human rights of all Member States in the United Nations. HRC can commence commissions to investigate violations, manage the human rights Complaint Process, and make recommendations to Member States. HRC consists of 47 Member States from the five global regions recognized by the United Nations. It also contains a Bureau and President to manage committee affairs. HRC obtains funding through an allocated budget as well as private donors.

This Background Guide serves as an introduction to the topics for this committee. However, it is not intended to replace individual research. We encourage you to explore your Member State's policies in depth and use the bibliography to further your knowledge on these topics. In preparation for the conference, each delegation should submit a Position Paper by 11:59 p.m. ET (DC time) on 15 October 2026 in accordance with the guidelines in the [Position Paper Guide](#) and the [NMUN•DC Position Papers website](#).

Two resources, available to download from the NMUN website, serve as essential instruments in preparing for the conference and as a reference during committee sessions:

- The [NMUN Delegate Preparation Guide](#), which explains each step in the delegate process, from pre-conference research to the committee debate and resolution drafting processes. Please take note of the information on plagiarism and the prohibition on pre-written working papers and resolutions.
- The [NMUN Rules of Procedure](#), which includes the long and short form of the rules, as well as an explanatory narrative and example script of the flow of procedure.

In addition, please review the mandatory [NMUN Conduct Expectations](#) on the NMUN website. They include the conference dress code and other expectations of all attendees. We want to emphasize that any instances of sexual harassment or discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, age, or disability will not be tolerated. If you have any questions concerning your preparation for this committee, please contact Under-Secretary-General, Catherine Tomczyk, at dcusg.catherine@nmunstaff.org or the Secretary-General, Ashlee Rolheiser, at secgen.dc@nmun.org.

We wish you all the best in your preparations and look forward to seeing you at the conference!

Elias Sepulveda, Director

Ninja Friberg, Assistant Director



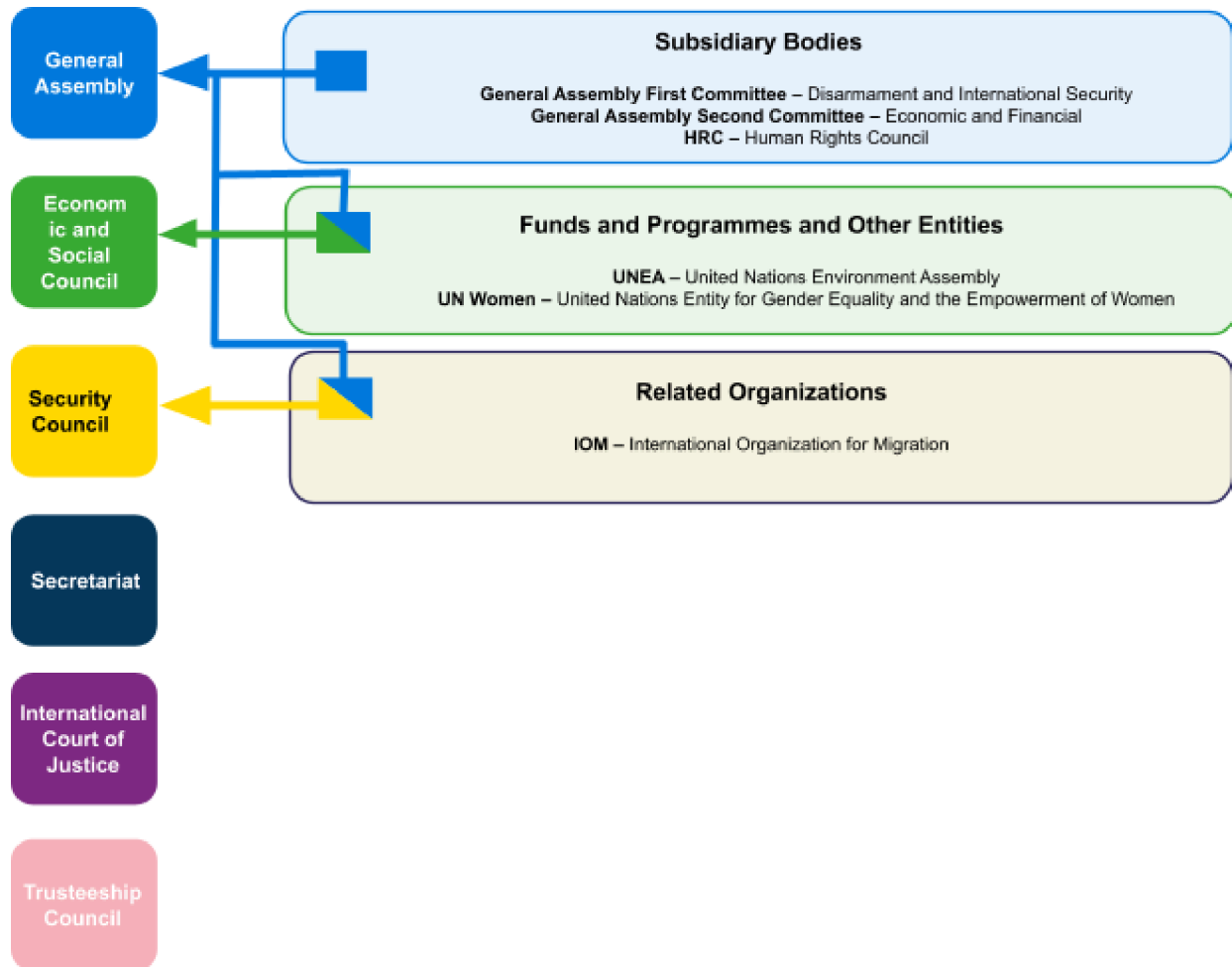
Table of Contents

United Nations System at NMUN•DC.....	1
Committee Overview.....	2
Introduction.....	2
Mandate, Function and Powers.....	2
Governance, Funding and Structure.....	4
Bibliography.....	5
1. The Protection of Human Rights in the Digital Age.....	7
Introduction.....	7
International and Regional Framework.....	8
Role of the International System.....	11
Addressing Data-Driven Discrimination and Inequality.....	12
Protecting HRDs and Digital Civic Spaces.....	14
Conclusion.....	16
Further Research.....	16
Bibliography.....	17
2. Combating Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.....	22
Introduction.....	22
International and Regional Framework.....	23
Role of the International System.....	26
Addressing Disappearances During Armed Conflict.....	28
Protecting Women and Girls from Gender-Based Impacts of Enforced Disappearances.....	29
Conclusion.....	31
Further Research.....	31
Bibliography.....	33



United Nations System at NMUN•DC

This diagram illustrates the United Nations system simulated at NMUN•DC. It shows where each committee “sits” within the system to demonstrate the reportage and relationships between entities. Examine the diagram alongside the Committee Overview to gain a clear picture of the committee’s position, purpose, and powers within the United Nations system.





Committee Overview

Introduction

HRC is the primary body responsible for addressing human rights issues in the United Nations system.¹ HRC seeks to promote universal respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, effective governance on human rights issues, and also provides recommendations after human rights violations have occurred.²

Mandate, Function and Powers

Replacing the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, HRC was established in 2006 with General Assembly resolution 60/251.³ HRC's operational structures were given further detail in 2007 by HRC resolution 5/1 on "Institution-building of the United Nations Human Rights Council," which established the HRC Complaint Procedure for cases of consistent patterns of human rights violations.⁴ It is expected to monitor, discuss, and make recommendations on human rights violations, establish international human rights standards, and promote human rights.⁵ The United Nations has two forms of human rights monitoring mechanisms: treaty-based bodies and charter-based bodies.⁶ Treaty-based bodies are made up of elected, individual experts.⁷ The experts examine and monitor human rights activities of Member States so that they meet the requirements of binding treaties.⁸ While 10 treaty-based bodies assess the implementation of specific human rights treaties, HRC is the primary charter-based body.⁹ Although its resolutions are not legally binding, it monitors human rights across all Member States rather than solely those that are party to specific treaties.¹⁰

HRC may enforce international commissions into violations of human rights law.¹¹ These non-judicial commissions allow violations to be recorded and reported, and can help to ensure accountability in potential future judicial proceedings, including those held by the International Criminal Court (ICC).¹² The commissions also review legislative and institutional mechanisms to protect human rights and propose recommendations on how they may be strengthened.¹³ HRC may hold special sessions on human rights violations if deemed necessary by one-third of Member States.¹⁴ Separate from these commissions, HRC and its subsidiaries can establish Special Procedures, which are mechanisms that enable independent

¹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Human Rights Council (A/RES/60/251)*. 2006.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid; United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Institution-building of the United Nations Human Rights Council (5/1)*. 2007.

⁵ United Nations, General Assembly. *Human Rights Council (A/RES/60/251)*. 2006; Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations. *The Human Rights Council: A practical guide*. 2015.

⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Instruments & Mechanisms*. 2024.

⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Treaty Bodies*. 2026.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *International Commissions of Inquiry, Commissions on Human Rights, Fact-Finding missions and other Investigations*. 2024.

¹² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Commissions of inquiry and fact-finding missions on international human rights and humanitarian law: Guidance and practice*. 2015.

¹³ United Nations Sustainable Development Group. *UN Special Procedures*. 2026.

¹⁴ Universal Rights Group. *A Rough Guide to the Human Rights Council*. N.d.



parties to report, monitor, and advise on country-specific or thematic issues under HRC consideration.¹⁵ Each investigation has a mandate and a mandate holder, typically a Special Rapporteur, an independent expert, or a working group.¹⁶ Special Procedures generally involve field visits, thematic studies, expert consultations, and regular reports to HRC and the General Assembly.¹⁷ Annual reports are given to the HRC and the General Assembly to review progress and follow-up actions on particular investigations.¹⁸

HRC also oversees the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a process where each Member State submits to an assessment of the fulfillment of its human rights obligations.¹⁹ The complete cycle of the UPR process takes years to complete.²⁰ Information is gathered that forms the basis of the review, including national reports, stakeholder submissions, special procedure reports, and information prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).²¹ Documents are then presented at the regular sessions of the working group on the UPR.²² Each Member State provides comments and recommendations and the Member State under review can offer reservations on specific issues.²³ Lastly, each Member State under review presents an assessment of how effectively it has acted upon the recommendations.²⁴ The order of periodic reviews is established by decision 17/119 (2011).²⁵

While the following list is not exhaustive, the mandate of HRC can be summarized as:

- **HRC will generally:** serve as a forum for dialogue on human rights; advance human rights policies and norms; mandate investigative commissions on severe violations of human rights law; initiate Special Procedures, which may encompass field visits, studies, and reports; manage the UPR processes; receive reports via the Complaint Procedure; coordinate with non-governmental and civil society actors; and make recommendations to Member States and United Nations bodies.²⁶
- **HRC will not generally:** adopt legally binding resolutions or decisions; intervene operationally in situations of human rights violations; force Member States to change national policies regarding human rights; or create new bodies or programs.²⁷

¹⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Special Procedures*. 2024.

¹⁶ United Nations, Sustainable Development Group. *UN Special Procedures*. 2026.

¹⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Special Procedures*. 2024.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Universal Periodic Review*. 2024.

²⁰ Ibid; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Working with the United Nations Human Rights Programme: A Handbook for Civil Society*. 2008. pp. 80-81.

²¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Working with the United Nations Human Rights Programme: A Handbook for Civil Society*. 2008. pp. 80-81; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Universal Periodic Review*. 2024.

²² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Basic Facts about the UPR*. 2026.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *UPR Sessions*. 2026; United Nations, General Assembly. *Follow-up to the Human Rights Council resolution 16/21 with regard to the universal periodic review (A/HRC/DEC/17/119)*. 2011.

²⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Special Procedures*. 2024; Northeastern University School of Law, Center for Global Law and Justice. *Human Rights Council*. N.d.

²⁷ Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations. *The Human Rights Council: A practical guide*. 2015. pp. 7, 18.



Governance, Funding and Structure

HRC is a subsidiary and makes regular recommendations and reports to the General Assembly.²⁸ It works closely with OHCHR and receives an annual report from the Commissioner on ongoing situations and topics.²⁹ It is served by several sub-committees, including the Advisory Committee and the Designated Experts of the United Nations High Commissioner.³⁰ These groups mainly conduct specific HRC activity and provide advice to the council.³¹

The council consists of 47 Member States who are elected via a majority vote of the General Assembly.³² Membership is based on equitable geographical distribution and a specific number of seats are designated to each geographic region.³³ The five regions that constitute the membership are Africa, the Asia Pacific, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean.³⁴ During the first regular session of each year, HRC elects a President and four Vice-Presidents to serve on its Bureau, responsible for the organization and procedural functions of the committee.³⁵ HRC receives its budget mostly from Member State contributions, as well as private donors.³⁶ As of 2026, HRC has a budget of \$224.3 million, which reflects a 10% decrease in budget and contributions from 2025.³⁷

²⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *Human Rights Council (A/RES/60/251)*. 2006. p. 3.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 7.

³⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Advisory Committee*. 2024; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *High Commissioner's Designated Experts*. 2026; United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Intergovernmental Working Groups*. 2026.

³¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Advisory Committee*. 2024; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *High Commissioner's Designated Experts*. 2026.

³² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Membership of the Human Rights Council*. 2026.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the United Nations. *The Human Rights Council: A practical guide*. 2015. p. 6; United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Human Rights Council Bureau*. 2026.

³⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *OHCHR's Funding and Budget*. N.d.

³⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *UN Human Rights Office launches USD 400 million appeal to address global human rights needs*. 2026.



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1. The Protection of Human Rights in the Digital Age

"All human rights, including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, and fundamental freedoms, must be respected, protected and promoted online and offline."³⁸

Introduction

New digital technologies have created opportunities and challenges for promoting equality, privacy, and civic participation in the digital age.³⁹ The digital age is characterized as an era of rapid technological advancement and interdependence with digital systems.⁴⁰ The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has noted that growing reliance on data-driven technologies has introduced new challenges to the rights to privacy, non-discrimination, and equality.⁴¹ One of these technologies is artificial intelligence (AI), which includes a range of technologies that use data to make predictions that can be used in facial and image recognition, language processing, and robotics, among other functions.⁴² HRC highlights that AI systems trained on biased datasets risk reinforcing systemic discrimination and producing unequal outcomes in areas such as policing, welfare, and employment, and can facilitate digital surveillance and data harvesting practices.⁴³ These new risks have prompted HRC and the international community to consider how emerging digital environments can be governed to protect human rights.⁴⁴ Human rights are fundamental rights and freedoms all people are entitled to as affirmed by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) (1948).⁴⁵ With the growing role of digital spaces for providing access to information, human rights increasingly depend on access to and safety within digital spaces, with recent multilateral efforts being made to address this by encouraging voluntary governance as well as initiatives to address cyberspace extremism.⁴⁶

Data-driven technologies can undermine human rights when used to discredit human rights defenders (HRDs) or by perpetuating existing social inequalities through data biases.⁴⁷ HRDs are individuals or organizations who promote or protect human rights or document human rights violations, and face heightened risks both online and offline through identification and political targeting due to the nature of

³⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *The Pact for the Future* (A/RES/79/1). 2024. p. 38.

³⁹ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights* (A/HRC/60/45). 2025. p. 2.

⁴⁰ United Nations, Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation. *The Age of Digital Interdependence*. 2019.

⁴¹ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights* (A/HRC/60/45). 2025. pp. 2, 14-15; United Nations Development Programme. *The Next Great Divergence*. 2025.

⁴² United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Artificial Intelligence (AI)*. N.d.

⁴³ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age* (A/HRC/RES/54/21). 2023. p. 7.

⁴⁴ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights* (A/HRC/60/45). 2025. p. 2.

⁴⁵ United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (A/RES/217 A (III)). 1948. p. 71.

⁴⁶ United Nations, General Assembly. *Road map for digital cooperation: implementation of the recommendations of the High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation - Report of the Secretary General* (A/74/821). 2020. pp. 13-15.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 4; United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Human rights defenders and new and emerging technologies: protecting human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in the digital age* (A/HRC/RES/58/23). 2025. p. 3.



their work.⁴⁸ The use of generative AI to produce non-consensual sexually explicit imagery represents a new way technology can enable gender-based violence.⁴⁹ Generative AI is a specialized type of AI that can generate content with limited human input, such as text, images, and deepfakes, which are realistic audio or visual media that imitate a real person's likeness.⁵⁰ According to Reporters without Borders, from 2023 to 2025, out of 100 cases of journalists being targeted using deepfakes, 74% of cases were against female journalists.⁵¹ This undermines Article 12 of the UDHR, which protects the right to privacy and freedom from attacks upon one's reputation.⁵² Additionally, a 2025 OHCHR report found that AI surveillance and profiling systems are more likely to misidentify women and minority communities, increasing the risk of wrongful targeting and discrimination in contexts such as policing and welfare.⁵³ This is due to selection bias in compiling training data for AI systems that are not representative of all communities.⁵⁴ Digital technologies have also become tools for suppressing human rights by challenging participation in civic and political life online.⁵⁵ In 2024 and 2025, approximately 300 internet shutdown incidents were recorded across more than 54 Member States, with 2024 marking the worst year on record for digital blackouts.⁵⁶ Internet shutdowns limit the human rights of freedom of expression and assembly in addition to disrupting the ability to seek and receive information.⁵⁷

International and Regional Framework

Human rights work in digital environments builds on the principle of equality in the *International Bill of Human Rights* that HRC is mandated to protect.⁵⁸ In 1948, the General Assembly adopted resolution 217 A (III) on the UDHR, which outlines the rights to equality, non-discrimination, and privacy for all people in Articles 1, 7, and 12.⁵⁹ In addition to the UDHR, the General Assembly adopted resolution 2200 (XXI) in 1966, which established the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR).⁶⁰ The ICCPR and ICESCR codify certain principles of the UDHR as binding international law, including freedom from discrimination

⁴⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *About human rights defenders*. N.d.; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Digital space and human rights*. N.d.

⁴⁹ Naffi. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Deepfakes and the crisis of knowing*. 2025.

⁵⁰ Ibid.; United Nations Innovation Network. *Generative AI*. N.d.

⁵¹ Reporters Without Borders. *RSF analysis of 100 deepfakes shows mounting threat to journalists — especially women*. 2026.

⁵² United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948. pp. 73-74.

⁵³ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/60/45)*. 2025. p. 9.

⁵⁴ Ibid. pp. 5-6.

⁵⁵ United Nations Office at Geneva. *UN warns of rising internet shutdowns as digital blackouts spread worldwide*. 2026.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet (A/HRC/RES/47/16)*. 2021. p. 4.

⁵⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *International Bill of Human Rights*. N.d.

⁵⁹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948. pp. 72-73.

⁶⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *International Bill of Human Rights*. N.d.



and the right to equality between men and women.⁶¹ These three documents form the *International Bill of Human Rights*, which provides the international legal basis for universal human rights.⁶² In 1998, the General Assembly adopted resolution 53/144 on the “Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms”, which affirmed the right of individuals, groups, and civil society organizations to seek, receive, and distribute information about human rights.⁶³ Recognizing the role of private organizations in protecting human rights, HRC endorsed the *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* (UNGPs) through its resolution 17/4 on “Human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises” in 2011.⁶⁴ The UNGPs address human rights harms from businesses through their Protect, Respect and Remedy framework, which outlines Member States’ duties to protect against human rights abuses, corporate responsibilities to respect human rights, and the need for access to remedies.⁶⁵ While not binding, aspects of this framework have been codified by some Member States and applied to various technology companies through national action plans.⁶⁶

The international community has adapted to emerging technologies by building on existing sustainable development frameworks.⁶⁷ In 2015, the General Assembly adopted resolution 70/1 on “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” which established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁶⁸ Notably, SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) includes targets to promote social inclusion and reduce discriminatory outcomes and SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) includes targets to strengthen institutions and promote non-discriminatory laws and policies.⁶⁹ Building on these commitments, the General Assembly adopted resolution 78/213 on the “Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of digital technologies” in 2023, which called for impact assessments throughout the lifecycle of digital technologies and emphasized that certain emerging technologies are incompatible with international human rights law.⁷⁰ This was discussed at the 2024 Summit of the Future, where Member States adopted the *Pact for the Future* and its annexed *Global Digital Compact*, which created a framework for digital cooperation and AI governance rooted in human rights and international law, as well as five objectives and principles to prevent adverse human rights impacts of digital and emerging technologies.⁷¹ Notably, objectives 3, 4, and 5 focus on creating safe digital spaces that protect

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ United Nations, General Assembly. *Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (A/RES/53/144)*. 1999. p. 4.

⁶⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework*. 2011; United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises (A/HRC/RES/17/4)*. 2011.

⁶⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework*. 2011.

⁶⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Guidance on National Action Plans*. 2016.

⁶⁷ United Nations, General Assembly. *Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of digital technologies (A/RES/78/213)*. 2023. pp. 2-4.

⁶⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. p. 14.

⁶⁹ Ibid. pp. 21, 25-26.

⁷⁰ United Nations, General Assembly. *Promotion and protection of human rights in the context of digital technologies (A/RES/78/213)*. 2023. pp. 2-5.

⁷¹ United Nations, General Assembly. *The Pact for the Future (A/RES/79/1)*. 2024. pp. 1, 37.



and promote human rights, developing responsible data governance, and improving international governance of AI.⁷²

HRC has addressed human rights in digital spaces through resolutions addressing privacy that have expanded alongside advances in technology.⁷³ In 2017, HRC adopted resolution 37/2 on “The right to privacy in the digital age,” establishing a recurring framework for examining how digital developments affect privacy rights and requesting OHCHR to continue reporting on related trends and challenges.⁷⁴ The 2021 update, resolution 48/4, reaffirmed that the same rights people hold offline must also be protected online, and requested OHCHR to identify trends and challenges relating to surveillance, the use of biometrics, and the impacts of privacy violations on individuals and groups at heightened risk, noting that these tools are used to target HRDs.⁷⁵ The resulting 2021 OHCHR report called for a moratorium on the sale and use of AI systems that pose a serious risk to human rights until adequate safeguards are in place, and called for human rights due diligence throughout the entire cycle of AI systems.⁷⁶ The 2023 update, resolution 54/21, highlighted the risks that AI systems pose to marginalized groups and called on governments to review their use of remote biometric identification in publicly accessible spaces and mass surveillance, and emphasized how technologies can produce chilling effects on the freedoms of expression, religion, and peaceful assembly.⁷⁷ The following 2025 OHCHR report found that AI systems trained on biased datasets risk reinforcing systemic discrimination and producing unequal outcomes in areas such as policing, welfare, and employment, and warned that digital surveillance and data harvesting practices targeting activists and HRDs may suppress civic participation and advocacy.⁷⁸

Regional actors have developed collaborative frameworks outlining human rights commitments in digital spaces.⁷⁹ Combining support across regions, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued the *Joint Statement on AI and Freedom of Expression* in 2025, addressing the risks of AI-driven surveillance and content moderation for civic space and HRDs.⁸⁰ This joint statement was adopted with regional support from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Organization of American States, and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, in addition to United Nations Special Rapporteurs.⁸¹ In addition to this, more localized frameworks have been adopted, such as the African Union’s *Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection*, which established standards for data privacy and cybersecurity across African Member States.⁸² In Europe, the Council of Europe’s *Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights* specifically addresses AI, requiring States parties to ensure that AI systems respect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law

⁷² Ibid. pp. 37-49.

⁷³ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age (A/HRC/RES/34/7)*. 2017. p. 2.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 1.

⁷⁵ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age (A/HRC/RES/48/4)*. 2021. pp. 2, 6.

⁷⁶ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/48/31)*. 2021. p. 15.

⁷⁷ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age (A/HRC/RES/54/21)*. 2023. pp. 5-9.

⁷⁸ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/60/45)*. 2025. p. 11.

⁷⁹ Organization of American States, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. *Joint Declaration on AI, Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom*. 2025.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² African Union. *African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection*. 2014.



and safeguard against discrimination.⁸³ Similarly, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations provides Member States with guidance on responsible AI development through their *Guide on AI Governance and Ethics*.⁸⁴

Role of the International System

The United Nations system cooperates to promote and protect human rights in the digital age.⁸⁵ HRC coordinates its work with OHCHR, which functions as the substantive and technical secretariat for HRC and as a key implementer of human rights programs.⁸⁶ OHCHR supports HRC's work on digital rights by preparing thematic reports outlining how data processing practices can impact the right to privacy and freedom from discrimination for different groups.⁸⁷ In support of HRC's digital rights work, OHCHR also operates the United Nations Hub for Human Rights and Digital Technology, which compiles human rights standards, reports, and guidance on AI, surveillance, and digital rights to support policymakers, companies, and civil society to apply a rights-based approach to digital technologies.⁸⁸ OHCHR further leads the Business and Technology Project (B-Tech Project), launched in 2019, which provides guidance on applying the UNGPs to digital technologies and works directly with technology companies and civil society to incorporate human rights considerations across the technology sector, particularly on privacy issues.⁸⁹ Additionally, HRC facilitates Special Procedures, which extend its monitoring capacity to specific thematic areas, including the protection of HRDs and the right to privacy in digital environments.⁹⁰ The Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy focuses on mass surveillance and data governance issues and publishes thematic reports that inform HRC's resolutions addressing the right to privacy in the digital age.⁹¹ Additionally, the Special Rapporteur on HRDs studies trends and challenges in the protection of HRDs, and sends communications to governments regarding alleged violations.⁹² The Special Rapporteur's mandate incorporates a particular attention to women HRDs and they report annually to both HRC and the General Assembly.⁹³

The international system also works to address digital governance issues, including through coordination on AI and data rights governance.⁹⁴ The United Nations Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies (ODET) was established by the General Assembly in 2025 as a follow-up to the *Global Digital Compact*, and works to coordinate digital cooperation and implement the *Global Digital Compact's* commitments to

⁸³ Council of Europe. *The Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence*. 2024.

⁸⁴ Association of Southeast Asian Nations Secretariat. *ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics*. 2024.

⁸⁵ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age (A/HRC/RES/54/21)*. 2023. p. 4.

⁸⁶ United Nations, General Assembly. *High Commissioner for the promotion and protection of all human rights (A/RES/48/141)*. 1994.

⁸⁷ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age (A/HRC/RES/54/21)*. 2023. p. 8.

⁸⁸ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Human Rights and Digital Technology Hub*. 2023.

⁸⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *B-Tech Project*. N.d.

⁹⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders*. N.d.

⁹¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy*. N.d.

⁹² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders*. N.d.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ United Nations, General Assembly. *The Pact for the Future (A/RES/79/1)*. 2024. p. 50.



human rights safeguards for AI governance.⁹⁵ ODET does this by hosting the AI Governance for Humanity Lab that convenes stakeholders across sectors and regions to develop cooperative practices and recommendations.⁹⁶ Additionally, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) developed the Digital Rights Dashboard, which provides Member State-level data and analysis on digital rights conditions globally, enabling Member States and other stakeholders to track patterns of digital rights restrictions and identify where governance frameworks could be improved.⁹⁷ Both ODET and UNDP support HRC's work by providing coordination infrastructure and data monitoring that helps track and respond to digital rights conditions in Member States.⁹⁸ Additionally, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) also works to build AI governance standards based on rights-based approaches.⁹⁹ ITU is a specialized United Nations agency for information and communication technologies that hosts the AI for Good program, which convenes an annual Global Summit bringing private sector and civil-society stakeholders together to conduct standards work that builds on HRC's work addressing the risks of AI-generated content, biometric surveillance, and the protection of HRDs in digital spaces.¹⁰⁰

Beyond United Nations bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and regional actors also work to support human rights in digital spaces.¹⁰¹ One example of this is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which undertakes research and provides policy guidance on human rights in the digital age, including on AI governance, data protection, and technology company responsibilities, providing analysis that supports countries in implementing international frameworks such as the UNGPs in national contexts.¹⁰² This work is further developed by NGOs such as NetHope, which focus on improving NGO AI use for humanitarian causes, and the Global Indigenous Data Alliance, which develops principles for protecting indigenous data rights.¹⁰³

Addressing Data-Driven Discrimination and Inequality

Data-driven technologies have introduced new challenges to the right to equality and the prohibition against discrimination.¹⁰⁴ OHCHR characterizes data-driven discrimination as differential treatment, facilitated by data-driven technologies, that impairs the equal recognition, enjoyment, or exercise of rights.¹⁰⁵ Frameworks included in the *International Bill of Human Rights* prohibit discrimination on the grounds of race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, and other comparable grounds associated with vulnerable or marginalized groups.¹⁰⁶ In 2024, the Special

⁹⁵ United Nations, Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies. *About the United Nations Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies*. N.d.

⁹⁶ United Nations, Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies. *AI Governance for Humanity Lab*. N.d.

⁹⁷ United Nations Development Programme. *UNDP's Digital Rights Dashboard: A conversation starter on human rights in the digital age*. 2025.

⁹⁸ United Nations Development Programme. *UNDP's Engagement at the Human Rights Council*. N.d.

⁹⁹ International Telecommunications Union. *AI and Multimedia authenticity standards collaboration*. 2026.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *AI principles*. N.d.; NetHope. *Acting Together*. N.d.; Global Indigenous Data Alliance. *Care Principles for Indigenous Data Governance*. N.d.

¹⁰² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *AI principles*. N.d.

¹⁰³ NetHope. *Acting Together*. N.d.; Global Indigenous Data Alliance. *Care Principles for Indigenous Data Governance*. N.d.

¹⁰⁴ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/60/45)*. 2025. pp. 9-13.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. pp. 3, 5.

¹⁰⁶ United Nations, General Assembly. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (A/RES/2200 (XXI))*. 1966. pp. 49-50, 52.



Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, highlighted that the data used for decision-making algorithms can reflect existing patterns of discrimination that then inform automated decisions and can negatively affect people in marginalized and vulnerable situations.¹⁰⁷ The 2018 OHCHR report *The right to privacy in the digital age* identified profiling using data, predictive AI analytics, and metadata aggregation as emerging digital threats to privacy and recommended best practices, including human rights impact assessments for digital technologies, data minimization, and stronger oversight of private technology companies.¹⁰⁸

Data-driven discrimination is facilitated by the use of AI in decision-making tools for employment, welfare, and criminal justice.¹⁰⁹ The 2019 High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation report *The Age of Digital Interdependence* highlights that digital technologies can deepen inequality in wealth, opportunity, education, and health if governance gaps remain, and was among the first major United Nations documents to identify algorithmic bias as a global governance issue.¹¹⁰ The 2025 OHCHR report on *The right to privacy in the digital age* examined these risks in detail across sectors and found that AI systems trained on biased datasets risk producing unequal outcomes, including job advertisements for management positions not reaching women, individuals labeled security threats through algorithmic profiling, and parents with disabilities being wrongly investigated for child abuse.¹¹¹ In an analysis of 133 AI systems from various sectors, 44% of the systems tested were found to show gender bias, and 25% showed gender and racial biases.¹¹² Additionally, a 2019 report by the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights noted that data-driven tools in welfare states facilitate surveillance that limits the privacy and social freedoms of recipients and make it easier to penalize individuals for infractions attributed to a lack of familiarity with digital tools.¹¹³ Core challenges highlighted include a lack of consensus on how to govern emerging technologies, conflicting commercial and social interests, and slow government response.¹¹⁴

The international community has taken steps to develop governance frameworks and monitoring mechanisms for addressing data-driven discrimination, though implementation gaps remain.¹¹⁵ In addition to international governance frameworks, such as the 2024 *Pact for the Future* and its annexed *Global Digital Compact*, programs and partnerships across the international community are working to reduce data-driven discrimination.¹¹⁶ In support of this work, the Global Partnership on AI (GPAI), launched in 2020 and hosted by OECD, brings together governments, industry, civil society, and academia to advance

¹⁰⁷ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance - Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance*, Ashwini K.P. (A/HRC/56/68). 2024. p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights* (A/HRC/39/29). 2018. pp. 5, 9.

¹⁰⁹ United Nations, Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation. *The Age of Digital Interdependence*. 2019.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 6.

¹¹¹ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights* (A/HRC/60/45). 2025. p. 2.

¹¹² United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Artificial Intelligence and gender equality*. 2024.

¹¹³ United Nations, General Assembly. *Extreme poverty and human rights - Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights* (A/74/493). 2019. pp. 15-19.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p. 13.

¹¹⁵ United Nations, General Assembly. *The Pact for the Future* (A/RES/79/1). 2024. p. 39.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 1, 37.



the responsible development and use of AI in a rights-based framework.¹¹⁷ In 2024, GPAI's Responsible AI Working Group published a report on equality in AI that examined policy frameworks for gender equality and diversity and recommended Member States to incorporate diverse perspectives into AI governance at national and international levels by engaging with marginalized groups as stakeholders, investing in capacity development, and developing data protection frameworks for marginalised people.¹¹⁸ Civil society projects have also worked to raise awareness and mitigate the impacts of data-driven discrimination, such as Amnesty International's Ban the Scan campaign, which advocated for a global ban on the use of facial recognition technology for surveillance purposes by states and the private sector in 2021.¹¹⁹ The campaign has expanded to documenting the use of facial recognition systems in India and in the State of Palestine.¹²⁰

Protecting HRDs and Digital Civic Spaces

United Nations' resolutions and partnerships affirm that protecting HRDs requires safeguarding civic spaces, digital freedoms, and secure access to information.¹²¹ Online surveillance, hacking, and digital harassment have been identified as tools used by both state and non-state actors to target HRDs.¹²² These trends include individuals being detained, targeted by restrictive legislation, and surveilled both virtually and in-person in connection with their human rights work.¹²³ Additionally, government-enforced internet shutdowns are another way that freedom of expression and access to information can be limited by preventing HRDs and individuals from receiving or disseminating information.¹²⁴ To address this, the General Assembly adopted resolution 68/181 (2013) on the "Promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms," which identified cyber stalking and email hacking as barriers to HRDs' work and called upon Member States to recognize the role of HRDs and to prevent harassment against them.¹²⁵ Follow-up resolutions, such as 2013 HRC resolution 22/6 on "Protecting human rights defenders," have built on this foundation by including protections in digital civic spaces and calling on Member States to ensure HRDs can work safely in physical and virtual environments.¹²⁶ OHCHR defines civic spaces as environments that allow civil society to engage in political, economic, and social aspects of society via access to information and dialogue.¹²⁷ These civic

¹¹⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. *Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence*. N.d.

¹¹⁸ Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence. *Towards Substantive Equality in Artificial Intelligence*. 2024. pp. 9-10.

¹¹⁹ Amnesty International. *Ban the Scan*. N.d.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/60/45)*. 2025. pp. 2, 11.

¹²² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *OHCHR and intimidation and reprisals for cooperation with the United Nations in the field of human rights*. N.d.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Civic Space and Tech Brief: Internet shutdowns and human rights*. 2023.

¹²⁵ United Nations, General Assembly. *Promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: protecting women human rights defenders (A/RES/68/181)*. 2014. p. 3.

¹²⁶ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Protecting human rights defenders (A/HRC/RES/22/6)*. 2013. p. 2.

¹²⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *OHCHR and protecting and expanding civic space*. N.d.



spaces extend to digital environments where frequent internet outages or online threats undermine the right of individuals and groups to seek, receive, and disseminate information about human rights.¹²⁸

HRDs face disproportionate digital targeting that United Nations bodies and international and regional programs aim to address.¹²⁹ OHCHR notes that women HRDs are particularly targeted for challenging traditional gender roles, pursuing human rights work, or working in feminist movements.¹³⁰ Forms of digital targeting that disproportionately affect women HRDs include AI-generated deepfakes and sexually explicit imagery used to discredit them, coordinated harassment campaigns, and the manipulation of images to drive women out of public advocacy roles.¹³¹ These forms of violence intersect with digital repression methods and have the effect of silencing women's voices in civic and political life.¹³² To address this, HRC adopted resolution 58/23 on "Human rights defenders and new emerging technologies" in 2025, which called for more secure communications and digital privacy for HRDs, and mandated OHCHR to convene regional workshops and prepare a report assessing the risks created by digital technologies and best practices for responding to them.¹³³ In addition to this work, OHCHR's B-Tech Project supports companies in implementing the UNGPs and provides ethics guidance that helps protect the privacy of HRDs.¹³⁴ This work is bolstered by multistakeholder groups, such as the Global Network Initiative (GNI), which brings together technology companies, civil society organizations, and human rights and press freedom groups to commit to promoting freedom of expression and resisting government requests for censorship or user data when it conflicts with international human rights.¹³⁵ These efforts extend to local contexts, such as through the Women of Uganda Network, which works with the GNI to strengthen digital protections for women HRDs and promote digital inclusion, freedom of expression, and online safety for women activists and civil society groups through research.¹³⁶ Project-based initiatives, such as those run by the Human Rights Data Analysis Group, also support HRDs and human rights reporting by partnering with regional NGOs to improve data collection to support human rights violation claims.¹³⁷

¹²⁸ Ibid; United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Human rights defenders and new and emerging technologies: protecting human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in the digital age (A/HRC/RES/58/23)*. 2025. pp. 2-3.

¹²⁹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: protecting women human rights defenders (A/RES/68/181)*. 2014. pp. 2-3.

¹³⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Women Human Rights Defenders*. N.d.

¹³¹ United Nations Development Programme. *Unite to end digital violence against all women and girls*. 2025.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Human rights defenders and new and emerging technologies: protecting human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in the digital age (A/HRC/RES/58/23)*. 2025. pp. 1, 6-7.

¹³⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *B-Tech Project*. N.d.

¹³⁵ Global Network Initiative. *A multistakeholder collaboration to protect freedom of expression and privacy in tech*. N.d.

¹³⁶ Women of Uganda Network. *Our Projects*. N.d.; Women of Uganda Network. *Women's Online Rights Siege by Internet Shutdowns-Why it Matters for Women's Freedom of Expression and Participation in Uganda*. 2021.

¹³⁷ Human Rights Data Analysis Group. *Core Concepts*. 2026.



Conclusion

Digital spaces and new technologies present new opportunities and challenges to human rights, HRDs, and digital civic spaces.¹³⁸ They present challenges to equality, privacy, and civic participation through data-driven discrimination, surveillance, and digital repression of information flows.¹³⁹ The emergence of new technologies has prompted international dialogue on how to govern new digital spaces to protect human rights online and offline.¹⁴⁰ To this end, the international community has adopted frameworks, monitoring mechanisms, and multistakeholder partnerships to address these challenges.¹⁴¹ However, several obstacles remain, including gaps in governance and private-public sector alignment and gaps in support for privacy and data protections that would help identify and reduce data-driven discrimination and protect HRDs from being targeted.¹⁴²

Further Research

As delegates conduct further research and consider how to address this topic, they should consider: What role can public-private partnerships play in addressing data-driven discrimination or human rights violations? How can the international community develop AI governance frameworks that are inclusive of communities that are most vulnerable to algorithmic harms? What standards should apply to the use of automated decision-making in areas such as employment, healthcare, and criminal justice? What role can civil society organizations play in documenting and responding to digital threats to civic space?

¹³⁸ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *The right to privacy in the digital age - Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/60/45)*. 2025. p. 2.

¹³⁹ United Nations, Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation. *The Age of Digital Interdependence*. 2019.

¹⁴⁰ United Nations, General Assembly. *The Pact for the Future (A/RES/79/1)*. 2024. p. 39.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. pp. 1, 37.

¹⁴² United Nations, General Assembly. *Extreme poverty and human rights - Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights (A/74/493)*. 2019. p. 11.



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2. Combating Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances

Introduction

Enforced disappearances represent a grave violation of internationally recognized human rights and continue to affect hundreds of thousands of individuals worldwide, particularly during periods of armed conflict and political repression.¹⁴³ According to Article 2 of the *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances* (ICPPED), an enforced disappearance is defined as the arrest, detention, abduction, or any other form of deprivation of liberty.¹⁴⁴ The act is followed by a refusal to acknowledge the denial of freedom or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person.¹⁴⁵ The UDHR acknowledges that any person has the right to life, liberty, and security of person under Article 3, and the right to freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment, under Article 5.¹⁴⁶ Enforced disappearances violate these rights and many others by removing a person's freedom of movement, stripping them of legal protection, and often subjecting them to inhumane conditions, torture, or extrajudicial killing while denying their existence and access to justice.¹⁴⁷ According to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID), the number of cases under active consideration that have not yet been clarified, closed, or discontinued stands at 48,619 in a total of 100 Member States.¹⁴⁸ Of these cases, the United Nations suspects there are hundreds, if not thousands, more that go unaccounted for due to the majority of enforced or involuntary disappearances occurring during times of war.¹⁴⁹ As noted in the 2025 report of the Secretary-General on the status of the ICPPED (A/80/298), hundreds of thousands of people have disappeared during conflicts or periods of repression in at least 85 countries around the world.¹⁵⁰

Enforced disappearances have severe ramifications for secondary victims, particularly women and girls.¹⁵¹ These secondary ramifications can result in gender-based violence (GBV).¹⁵² According to the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women* (1994), GBV is any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.¹⁵³

¹⁴³ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August*. N.d.

¹⁴⁴ United Nations, General Assembly. *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (A/RES/61/177)*. 2006. p. 1.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948. p. 2.

¹⁴⁷ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August*. N.d.

¹⁴⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances*. 2024.

¹⁴⁹ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August*. N.d.

¹⁵⁰ United Nations, General Assembly. *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance: Report of the Secretary-General (A/80/298)*. 2025. p. 1.

¹⁵¹ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August*. N.d.

¹⁵² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Gender-based violence*. N.d.

¹⁵³ United Nations, General Assembly. *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (A/RES/48/104)*. 1994. p. 1.



This can take many forms, such as sexual violence, economic violence, or human trafficking.¹⁵⁴ According to the United Nations Department of Global Communications, enforced disappearances have frequently been used as a strategy to spread terror within society.¹⁵⁵ The economic, psychological, and social insecurity generated by this practice affects close relatives of the disappeared, their communities, and society as a whole.¹⁵⁶ As men are the majority of victims of enforced disappearances or displacement, women and girls will often be left behind to face the secondary consequences.¹⁵⁷ These may include ongoing victimization resulting from poverty, family conflict, and psychological trauma.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, the loss of the family breadwinner may force women in developing countries into low-paying, insecure jobs, often far away from their families, increasing their risk of exploitation and jeopardizing their children's well-being and education.¹⁵⁹ This leaves them in severe economic hardship and vulnerable to intimidation, persecution, and reprisals, as well as GBV.¹⁶⁰

International and Regional Framework

International legal instruments establish the rights of persons to be free from enforced or involuntary disappearances, and the related impacts on societies and families.¹⁶¹ The UDHR outlines rights to which all persons are entitled, including the right to life, liberty, and security of person (Article 3), protection from torture or cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 5), and freedom from arbitrary arrest, detention, or exile (Article 9).¹⁶² Enforced disappearances violate many of these internationally recognized individual rights, making it a key issue to combat.¹⁶³ While the UDHR is not a legally binding document, it carries significant moral weight in the international community, shaping the language of more than 70 human rights treaties globally.¹⁶⁴ Other core documents shaping the international community's perspective on individual rights are the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR), both adopted through General Assembly resolution 2200 (XXI) in 1966.¹⁶⁵ The ICCPR commits States parties to respect the civil and political rights of individuals, while the ICESCR commits ratifying states to protect fundamental human, economic, and social standards.¹⁶⁶ Together, the ICCPR, the ICESCR, and the UDHR form the *International Bill of Human Rights*.¹⁶⁷

¹⁵⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. *Gender-based violence*. N.d.

¹⁵⁵ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August*. N.d.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ International Center for Transitional Justice. *The Disappeared and Invisible: Revealing the Enduring Impact of Enforced Disappearance on Women*. 2015.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *International standards on enforced or involuntary disappearances*. 2024.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948. pp. 1-2.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ United Nations, General Assembly. *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (A/RES/2200 (XXI))*. 1966. p. 1; United Nations, General Assembly. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (A/RES/2200 (XXI))*. 1966. p. 1.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *International Bill of Human Rights*. N.d.



The international community has established legal frameworks to prevent enforced disappearances, protect detainees, and promote justice.¹⁶⁸ In 1977, the General Assembly adopted the *Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners*, also known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, and later, in 1988, the *Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment*.¹⁶⁹ Both became guiding documents for prisoner treatment and protection from unlawful detention.¹⁷⁰ In 1992, the General Assembly adopted resolution 47/133 on the “Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance” (DPPED), which established in Article 1 that any act of enforced disappearance is an offense to human dignity.¹⁷¹ It is condemned as a denial of the purposes of the *Charter of the United Nations* and as a violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the UDHR and reaffirmed and developed in international instruments in this field.¹⁷² Article 2 of the Declaration also elaborates that no Member State shall practice, permit, or tolerate enforced disappearances.¹⁷³ To strengthen cooperation in addressing enforced disappearances, the ICPPED was adopted through General Assembly resolution 61/177 in 2006.¹⁷⁴ Article 4 of the ICPPED outlaws enforced disappearances by requiring States parties to establish that enforced disappearance constitutes an offense under their national criminal law.¹⁷⁵

Furthermore, in 2015, the General Assembly adopted resolution 70/1 on “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”¹⁷⁶ Notably, Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies and access to justice for all.¹⁷⁷ Within the SDG, specific targets were identified to monitor and promote progress, including SDG target 16.1, which seeks to significantly reduce all forms of violence everywhere.¹⁷⁸ These also include target 16.2 to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children; and target 16.3 to promote the rule of law at the national and international levels, which are both relevant to the discussion of enforced or involuntary disappearances because children may be particularly vulnerable while strong rule-of-law institutions are critical for preventing disappearances, investigating cases, and holding perpetrators accountable.¹⁷⁹

¹⁶⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules)* (A/RES/70/175). 2016. pp. 2-4; United Nations, General Assembly. *Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment* (A/RES/43/173). 1988. pp. 1-7.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance* (A/RES/47/133). 1992. p. 1.

¹⁷² United Nations, Human Rights Council, Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. *Compilation of General Comments on the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*. N.d.

¹⁷³ United Nations, General Assembly. *Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance* (A/RES/47/133). 1992. p. 1.

¹⁷⁴ United Nations, General Assembly. *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances* (A/RES/61/177). 2006. p. 1.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 2.

¹⁷⁶ United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (A/RES/70/1). 2015. p. 1.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 25.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 26.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 27.



HRC has reinforced women's role in coordinating efforts to protect individual rights.¹⁸⁰ Through its resolution 49/18 on “Recognizing the contribution of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in conflict and post-conflict situations, to the enjoyment and realization of human rights” (2022), HRC has recognized their contributions in conflict and post-conflict contexts despite facing heightened risks.¹⁸¹ Women’s contributions in conflict or post-conflict settings include documenting abuses, providing humanitarian aid, assisting victims, and driving peacebuilding.¹⁸² Additional frameworks work to strengthen monitoring and response mechanisms to GBV linked to disappearances.¹⁸³ These include HRC resolution 50/7 entitled “Mandate of Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences” (2022) and HRC resolution 53/27 on “Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to all forms of violence against women and girls in criminal justice detention” (2023).¹⁸⁴

In addition to this, regional frameworks have also established standards of human rights against enforced disappearances.¹⁸⁵ In 1950, the Council of Europe adopted the *European Convention on Human Rights* (ECHR).¹⁸⁶ The ECHR protects the rights to life, liberty, security, and freedom from torture.¹⁸⁷ Similar to the ECHR, the Organization of African Unity established the *African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights* (ACHPR) in 1981, Article 6 of which affirms that every individual shall have the right to liberty and to the security of his person and that no one may be arbitrarily arrested or detained.¹⁸⁸ Following the ideas established in the ECHR and the ACHPR, in 2012, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted the *ASEAN Human Rights Declaration*, which established a similar right to freedom and dignity under the law, as well as the freedom from arbitrary arrest, search, detention, abduction, or any other form of deprivation of liberty.¹⁸⁹ The most recent regional body to create a human rights declaration was the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), which created the *GCC Human Rights Declaration* in 2014, Article 34 of which states that no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention, confinement, or restriction of his freedom and that all persons have the right to humane treatment while in custody.¹⁹⁰ In 2022, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights became the first regional body to adopt a framework specifically for the protection of individuals against enforced disappearances,

¹⁸⁰ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Recognizing the contribution of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in conflict and post-conflict situations, to the enjoyment and realization of human rights (A/HRC/RES/49/18)*. 2022. p. 2.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Mandate of Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences (A/HRC/RES/50/7)*. 2022. p. 5.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.; United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Accelerating efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to all forms of violence against women and girls in criminal justice detention (A/HRC/RES/53/27)*. 2025. p. 4.

¹⁸⁵ United Nations, General Assembly. *United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) (A/RES/70/175)*. 2016. pp. 2-4; United Nations, General Assembly. *Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment (A/RES/43/173)*. 1988. pp. 1-7.

¹⁸⁶ Council of Europe. *European Convention on Human Rights*. 1950. pp. 3-6.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Organization of African Unity. *African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (CAB/LEG/67/3)*. 1981. p. 3.

¹⁸⁹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations. *ASEAN Human Rights Declaration*. 2012.

¹⁹⁰ Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf. *Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf Human Rights Declaration (35th Session, Doha)*. 2014. p. 8.



namely the *Guidelines on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances in Africa*.¹⁹¹ These guidelines promote the disclosure of victims' whereabouts and the prevention of disappearances.¹⁹²

Role of the International System

The international system plays a central role in combating enforced or involuntary disappearances through accountability, norm-setting, monitoring, and capacity-building mechanisms.¹⁹³ In 1980, the Commission on Human Rights, now the Human Rights Council (HRC), established the WGEID.¹⁹⁴ Originally, WGEID was tasked with examining questions relevant to enforced or involuntary disappearances of persons.¹⁹⁵ However, following the adoption of the DPPED in 1992, the mandate was expanded to specifically help Member States overcome obstacles to ensure the realization of the declaration.¹⁹⁶ Since its inception, WGEID has transmitted a total of 61,626 cases of enforced disappearances to 115 Member States concerned.¹⁹⁷ Within the United Nations, HRC serves as a primary forum for addressing disappearances through resolutions.¹⁹⁸ WGEID and the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) monitor Member States' compliance with the Convention, provide recommendations to Member States, and utilize reporting mechanisms to enhance transparency and accountability within the international system.¹⁹⁹ For example, WGEID can support judicial bodies, including regional courts such as the European Court of Human Rights, by submitting third-party interventions or expert opinions.²⁰⁰ HRC contributes to the international legal process by collecting and verifying evidence through its fact-finding missions and investigative mechanisms.²⁰¹ These efforts are supported by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which provides technical assistance, supports reporting mechanisms, conducts research to support HRC's mandate, and facilitates cooperation across United Nations bodies.²⁰² OHCHR also supports HRC Special Procedures, including the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants.²⁰³ In 2025, Special

¹⁹¹ African Union, African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. *Guidelines on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances in Africa*. 2022. p. 1.

¹⁹² Ibid. pp. 12-14.

¹⁹³ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Enforced or involuntary disappearances (A/HRC/RES/54/14)*. 2023. p. 1.

¹⁹⁴ United Nations, Commission on Human Rights. *Question of missing and disappeared persons (E/CN.4/RES/20(XXXVI))*. 1980.

¹⁹⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances*. 2024.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Victims must be at the core of action to combat enforced disappearance, says Working Group*. 2024.

¹⁹⁸ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Enforced or involuntary disappearances (A/HRC/RES/54/14)*. 2023. p. 3.

¹⁹⁹ United Nations, Committee on Enforced Disappearances. *Leaflet: the CED and the WGEID in a nutshell*. 2023. pp. 6-11.

²⁰⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Submissions to courts*. 2026.

²⁰¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Manual on Human Rights Monitoring (Revised edition) - Chapter 3: Human rights monitoring, fact-finding and investigation by the United Nations*. 2011.

²⁰² Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *What we do: an overview*. 2026.

²⁰³ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants*. N.d.



Rapporteur Gehad Madi reported increasing migrant disappearances and recommended a truth and monitoring mechanism to ensure accountability and justice.²⁰⁴

The International Court of Justice contributes by adjudicating disputes between states concerning violations of international law, including international frameworks preventing enforced or involuntary disappearances.²⁰⁵ Additionally, the International Criminal Court (ICC) prosecutes enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity under the *Rome Statute*.²⁰⁶ The *Rome Statute* grants ICC jurisdiction to prosecute individuals for four core international crimes: genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression.²⁰⁷ ICC works to maintain accountability at the international level, although not all Member States have ratified the Statute and therefore fall outside ICC's jurisdiction.²⁰⁸ The General Assembly reinforces these efforts through normative frameworks and ongoing updates on the ICPPED, encouraging broader ratification and implementation across Member States.²⁰⁹

At the regional level, human rights bodies complement United Nations efforts by providing context-specific frameworks, monitoring, and regulations.²¹⁰ The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights works alongside the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights to investigate violations and deliver legal remedies.²¹¹ In Southeast Asia, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights promotes dialogue and cooperation.²¹² Similarly, the Permanent Arab Committee for Human Rights facilitates coordination among Arab League Member States to advance regional standards.²¹³ For example, it promotes the implementation of the *Arab Charter on Human Rights*, adopted by the League of Arab States in 2004 to modernize the region's human rights framework, which establishes protections for fundamental rights, including due process, prohibition of arbitrary detention, and safeguards against enforced disappearance.²¹⁴ In the Americas, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights address disappearance by issuing binding judgments and reparations in cases regarding enforced or involuntary disappearances.²¹⁵ In Europe, the European Court of Human Rights and the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture provide legal and monitoring mechanisms to hold states legally accountable for their actions.²¹⁶ Collectively, these regional

²⁰⁴ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Phenomenon of migrants going missing or subjected to enforced disappearance – human rights analysis: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, Gehad Madi (A/HRC/59/49)*. 2025. pp. 2-4.

²⁰⁵ International Court of Justice. *How the Court Works*. 2026.

²⁰⁶ United Nations Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Establishment of an International Criminal Court. *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*. 1998.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ International Criminal Court. *About the Court*. N.d.

²⁰⁹ United Nations, General Assembly. *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (A/RES/80/201)*. 2025. pp. 3-5.

²¹⁰ United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948. p. 1.

²¹¹ African Union, African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. *African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights*. 1987; African Union, African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights. *African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights*. 2006.

²¹² Association of Southeast Asian Nations. *Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights*. 2009.

²¹³ League of Arab States. *About Permanent Arab Committee for Human Rights*. N.d.

²¹⁴ League of Arab States. *Arab Charter on Human Rights*. 2004. p. 3.

²¹⁵ Organization of American States. *Inter-American Commission on Human Rights*. 1959; Inter-American Court of Human Rights. *What is the I/A Court H.R.?*. 2026.

²¹⁶ European Court of Human Rights. *European Court of Human Rights*. 1959; Council of Europe. *Committee for the Prevention of Torture*. 1987.



systems enhance access to justice, strengthen enforcement where applicable, and reinforce global efforts to prevent enforced and involuntary disappearances.²¹⁷

Addressing Disappearances During Armed Conflict

The international system plays a critical role through prevention, documentation, and accountability initiatives.²¹⁸ In conflict settings, state and non-state actors detain individuals without due process and conceal information regarding their fate and future treatment, thereby removing legal protections and preventing accountability measures.²¹⁹ Victims of enforced or involuntary disappearances are frequently subjected to torture and inhumane conditions, while their families are denied information, leaving individuals deprived of all their rights and at the mercy of their captors.²²⁰ The absence or inconsistent implementation of detainee registration systems, along with limited coordination among reporting mechanisms, reduces the capacity to track missing persons and support accountability, as reflected in findings of CED that emphasize the importance of maintaining accessible and comprehensive detention records.²²¹ Disappearances are exacerbated by weak institutional capacity, lack of transparency, and insufficient legal safeguards in conflict environments.²²² The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) further recommends that all parties to armed conflict account for missing persons and take feasible measures to clarify their fate under ICRC Rule 117 on accounting for missing persons, reinforcing the legal responsibility of states and armed groups.²²³ In practice, this is operationalized by non-governmental organizations, intergovernmental organizations, and state governments through centralized detainee registries, forensic identification programs, and family tracing services.²²⁴ Examples include ICRC's Central Tracing Agency, which collects and manages information on prisoners of war, detainees, and separated families during armed conflicts.²²⁵ With regard to the documentation and tracking of missing persons and in accordance with SDG target 16.a, progress is assessed through indicators related to institutional capacity, including the ability of national authorities to document detentions, investigate disappearances, and maintain accessible records.²²⁶ One notable initiative is the International Commission on Missing Persons, an organization that works with international organizations to assist states in protecting the rights of missing persons and their families.²²⁷ Another example is the

²¹⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *About enforced disappearance*. N.d.

²¹⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. p. 3.

²¹⁹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948. p. 10.

²²⁰ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances, 30 August*. N.d.

²²¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Experts of the Committee on Enforced Disappearances Note Steps Taken by Iraq to Address Enforced Disappearance, Raise Questions on Preserving Evidence Collected by the United Nations Investigative Team and Excavations of Mass Graves*. 2026.

²²² International Committee of the Red Cross. *Rule 117. Accounting for Missing Persons*. N.d.

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross. *The Missing: Action to resolve the problem of people unaccounted for as a result of armed conflict or internal violence and to assist their families*. 2002.

²²⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross. *ICRC's Central Tracing Agency Bureau for the international armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine: Providing answers to families*. 2022.

²²⁶ United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. p. 7.

²²⁷ International Commission on Missing Persons. *About ICMP*. N.d.



Joint Commission on Missing Persons between Kosovo and Serbia, which was facilitated by the EU to assist ICRC in accounting for missing persons following the recent conflict in the region.²²⁸

ICRC leads efforts to trace missing persons, register cases, and reconnect families, including documenting tens of thousands of missing persons cases in conflict settings such as Syria.²²⁹ The General Assembly established the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (IIMP) through its resolution 77/301 (2023) and mandated IIMP to clarify the fate and whereabouts of all missing persons and support families, representing a dedicated international mechanism for large-scale disappearance cases.²³⁰ Contemporary conflicts highlight the persistence of enforced disappearances, as seen in Syria, where approximately 968,651 individuals have been detained since the beginning of the conflict, many of whom remain missing, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.²³¹ Similarly, the Sri Lankan Civil War resulted in an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 deaths and thousands of enforced disappearances, many of which remain unresolved.²³²

Protecting Women and Girls from Gender-Based Impacts of Enforced Disappearances

Enforced disappearances disproportionately impact women and girls, as both are direct and secondary victims.²³³ The international community has recognized that enforced disappearances of women and girls have increased in recent years, with approximately 676 million women and girls living in or near conflict-affected regions.²³⁴ According to the International Center for Transitional Justice, women and girls who experience enforced or involuntary disappearance face heightened risks of GBV, including sexual violence, trafficking, and exploitation.²³⁵ Armed groups, organized crime networks, and paramilitaries deliberately target them due to gendered vulnerabilities, using abduction, sexual violence, and coercion to control communities, intimidate populations, and pressure families.²³⁶ The gender-based impacts of these actions extend beyond the immediate victims to families and communities, where women often bear the social and economic consequences of disappearances, including loss of household income, barriers to land and property ownership, restricted access to formal employment, and limited ability to secure legal

²²⁸ Centre for Contemporary Politics - European Western Balkans. *First trilateral meeting of the Joint Commission on Missing Persons convened*. 2026.

²²⁹ International Committee of the Red Cross. *Syria: What is the ICRC's contribution in the search for missing people?*. 2024.

²³⁰ United Nations, General Assembly. *Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic (A/RES/77/301)*. 2023; United Nations, General Assembly. *Implementation of the resolution on the establishment of the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic: Report of the Secretary-General (A/78/627)*. 2023. p. 10.

²³¹ Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. *Detainees and forcibly-disappeared people in a decade of the war | Over 105,000 civilians killed and died in regime prisons...fate of hundreds of thousands others remains unknown...while relevant organizations continue inaction*. 2021.

²³² United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *UN Says Sri Lanka has 'historic opportunity' to end impunity, deliver justice*. 2025.

²³³ International Center for Transitional Justice. *The Disappeared and Invisible: Revealing the Enduring Impact of Enforced Disappearance on Women*. 2015. p. 2.

²³⁴ Amnesty International. *Women, Girls and Enforced Disappearances*. N.d.; United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. *Facts and figures: Women, peace, and security*. 2025.

²³⁵ International Center for Transitional Justice. *The Disappeared and Invisible: Revealing the Enduring Impact of Enforced Disappearance on Women*. 2015. p. 5.

²³⁶ Amnesty International. *Women, Girls and Enforced Disappearances*. N.d.



representation.²³⁷ WGEID has emphasized that the serious economic hardship that usually accompanies a disappearance is most often borne by women, who are also frequently responsible for seeking justice and information about missing relatives, despite facing legal, financial, and institutional obstacles in doing so.²³⁸ Women searching for disappeared relatives may face intimidation, displacement, or violence.²³⁹ This undermines the UDHR principle of non-discrimination.²⁴⁰

Therefore, international frameworks emphasize the need to address these gender-specific impacts through both prevention and participation.²⁴¹ SDG 5 (gender equality), which calls for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and its targets, including SDG target 5.1 on ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls and SDG target 5.2 regarding the elimination of all forms of violence, including trafficking and sexual exploitation, are all linked to enforced disappearances and the resulting treatment of women and girls.²⁴² These are operationalized in practice through local and regional initiatives such as gender-sensitive legal aid services for families of the disappeared, community-based reporting and documentation mechanisms, survivor support programs, and capacity-building efforts to strengthen law enforcement and judicial responses to GBV and disappearances.²⁴³ CED has further advanced this framework through the development of its General Comment No. 2 on women, girls, and enforced disappearances.²⁴⁴ In 2025, the Committee launched a global consultation process with Member States, civil society, victims' groups, and United Nations entities to examine the gendered causes and consequences of enforced disappearances.²⁴⁵ The initiative aims to clarify states' obligations under the ICPED and strengthen protections for women and girls affected by disappearances.²⁴⁶

This reflects a shift towards gender-sensitive accountability and recovery processes.²⁴⁷ In practice, this includes measures such as survivor-centered inquiries, as seen in Canada's National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and the inclusion of women in transitional justice institutions,

²³⁷ United Nations, Human Rights Council, Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. *General comment on women affected by enforced disappearances adopted by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances at its ninety-eighth session (31 October – 9 November 2012) (A/HRC/WGEID/98/2)*. 2013. p. 2.

²³⁸ Ibid. p. 4.

²³⁹ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Recognizing the contribution of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in conflict and post-conflict situations, to the enjoyment and realization of human rights (A/HRC/RES/49/18)*. 2022. p. 20.

²⁴⁰ United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948. p. 10.

²⁴¹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. p. 15.

²⁴² Ibid. p. 14.

²⁴³ Ibid. p. 17.

²⁴⁴ United Nations, Human Rights Council, Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. *General comment on women affected by enforced disappearances adopted by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances at its ninety-eighth session (31 October – 9 November 2012) (A/HRC/WGEID/98/2)*. 2013.

²⁴⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Call for inputs on women, girls and enforced disappearances (concept note for CED General Comment n°2)*. 2025.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ United Nations, Secretary-General. *Guidance Note of the Secretary General - Transitional Justice: A Strategic Tool for People, Prevention and Peace*. 2024.



as demonstrated by Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace.²⁴⁸ It also includes the deployment of gender experts in United Nations investigations to document GBV and support survivor-centered justice processes.²⁴⁹ According to WGEID, enforced disappearances can exacerbate existing inequalities and perpetuate cycles of GBV in both conflict and non-conflict settings without strengthened gender-responsive policies, inclusive legal frameworks, and protections for women and girls.²⁵⁰

Conclusion

Addressing enforced disappearances is critical to protecting fundamental human rights, particularly the rights to life, liberty, and security of person as acknowledged in the UDHR and reinforced through the ICCPED.²⁵¹ These frameworks emphasize the responsibility of Member States to prevent disappearances, ensure accountability, and address their broader societal impacts.²⁵² International and regional disparities in institutional capacity, legal enforcement, and access to information continue to influence the ability of Member States to effectively respond to enforced disappearances and support their populations.²⁵³ Ongoing conflicts and gender inequalities make coordinated international action increasingly urgent.²⁵⁴ Weak governance structures, lack of transparency, and limited access to data systems contribute to the persistence of disappearances.²⁵⁵ Women and girls are particularly affected by these conditions, facing elevated risks of GBV, economic marginalization, and barriers to accessing support and justice.²⁵⁶ For this reason, United Nations entities and specialized mechanisms, including IIMP, work in partnership with international organizations such as ICRC to enhance monitoring, improve data collection, and support accountability efforts across Member States.²⁵⁷

Further Research

As delegates conduct further research and deliberate how to address this topic, they should consider: How can Member States improve data collection, information-sharing, and detainee registration systems

²⁴⁸ Government of Canada, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. 2019; Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz. *What is the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (SJP)?*. 2019.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ United Nations, Human Rights Council, Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. *General comment on women affected by enforced disappearances adopted by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances at its ninety-eighth session (31 October – 9 November 2012) (A/HRC/WGEID/98/2)*. 2013. p. 3.

²⁵¹ United Nations, General Assembly. *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (A/RES/61/177)*. 2006. p. 9; United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (A/RES/217 A (III))*. 1948. p. 1.

²⁵² United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015. p. 4.

²⁵³ United Nations, General Assembly. *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (A/RES/61/177)*. 2006. p. 5.

²⁵⁴ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Recognizing the contribution of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in conflict and post-conflict situations, to the enjoyment and realization of human rights (A/HRC/RES/49/18)*. 2022. p. 5.

²⁵⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross. *Rule 117. Accounting for Missing Persons*. N.d.

²⁵⁶ United Nations, Human Rights Council. *Recognizing the contribution of human rights defenders, including women human rights defenders, in conflict and post-conflict situations, to the enjoyment and realization of human rights (A/HRC/RES/49/18)*. 2022. p. 8.

²⁵⁷ International Committee of the Red Cross. *Syria: What is the ICRC's contribution in the search for missing people?*. 2024.



to effectively prevent and track enforced disappearances during armed conflict? What mechanisms can ensure greater accountability for state and non-state actors responsible for enforced disappearances, particularly in conflict and post-conflict settings? How can international frameworks be strengthened to address the gender-specific impacts of enforced disappearances, including protection from GBV and support for affected families? What role can regional organizations and international partnerships play in enhancing capacity-building, technical assistance, and coordination to prevent and respond to enforced disappearances?



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