Career Opportunities in HUMAN RIGHTS

Description of the field

The international human rights field is comprised of a broad spectrum of governmental, intergovernmental, and nongovernmental organizations focused on the alleviation of human suffering and the protection and promotion of human rights. Careers address the full spectrum of human rights: economic, social, cultural, political, and civil. The field of human rights overlaps with key issue areas of peace and security, development, law, humanitarian assistance, and economic and social affairs.

Work in human rights can be challenging and intense. Organizations use a variety of disciplines in their approach to social justice, including direct service, advocacy, policy development, and research. Activities include research focusing on preventing and ending human rights abuses throughout the world, monitoring human rights development, conducting on-site investigations, writing reports on human rights conditions, engaging in advocacy to publicize and curtail human rights violations, litigation, lobbying, and promoting human rights practices in social and political structures. In addition, human rights professionals provide advisory and educational services, refugee assistance, policy analysis for national and international institutions, assistance in institution building, and economic development monitoring.

Career Paths

The field of human rights is broad and multidisciplinary; therefore, there is no direct or specific career path to follow. Over the past 25 years, the variety of career opportunities in human rights has broadened to include grassroots/community organizers, media specialists, grant writers, educators, financial analysts, journalists, researchers, health care professionals, and human rights monitors. The energy behind human rights work is often found in local/indigenous grassroots groups. Support for these groups can be provided in the form of technical assistance, research, or training.

Although the field is relatively competitive to enter, there are many entry-level opportunities for job seekers with a bachelor’s degree interested in this area of social justice. Possible positions include assistant project coordinator, researcher, communications assistant, development associate, and community organizer.

Positions for candidates with a relevant master’s degree are most frequently in the capacity of monitoring, reporting, administrative, and

QUALIFICATIONS TO ENTER THE FIELD

+ The skills required to work in the human rights field vary depending on the organization and type of work.

+ Human rights advocates must be skilled in research, writing, analytical thinking, public speaking, and/or grassroots organizing. Those working in policy development, legal cases, or complex international treaties typically require an advanced degree in law, medicine, anthropology, or something similar.

+ All candidates should possess excellent oral and written communication skills, foreign language proficiency, cross-cultural skills, flexibility, and a willingness to carry out a wide range of responsibilities with limited resources.

+ Experience living and working abroad, especially in a developing country, is highly recommended.

+ Internships with human rights organizations are one way to gain valuable experience while also providing professional contacts in the human rights community. In many cases, internships lead directly or indirectly to full-time jobs.

+ It is also helpful, if not critical, to be familiar with primary human rights documents and declarations such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Convention on the Elimination
organizational efforts and can include titles such as program manager, analyst, research associate, writer/reporter, regional monitor, and legal advocate.

Advanced positions can include positions such as executive director, project administrator, senior program director, and legal counsel. Depending on the size and type of organization, senior-level employees can have a salary anywhere from the low-$30,000s to over $100,000. A law degree or a background in an overlapping field is often required for senior-level employment.

Sample Employers

- Amnesty International – amnesty.org/en/
- Association for Women’s Rights in Development – awid.org
- The Carter Center – cartercenter.org
- Center for Economic and Social Rights – cesr.org
- Center for Justice and International Law – cejil.org/en
- Derechos Human Rights – derechos.org/esp.html
- Freedom House – freedomhouse.org
- Global Exchange – globalexchange.org
- Human Rights First – humanrightsfirst.org
- Human Rights Watch – hrw.org
- Institute for Global Communication – igc.apc.org
- Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre – internal-displacement.org
- International Center for Transitional Justice – ictj.org
- International Refugee Rights Initiative – refugee-rights.org
- International Rescue Committee – rescue.org
- National Network for Immigrant & Refugee Rights – nnirr.org/drupal/
- Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) – nrc.no
- Oxfam International – oxfam.org
- Physicians for Human Rights – physiciansforhumanrights.org
- UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) – ohchr.org
- United Nations Organizations – un.org
- US Agency for International Development (USAID) – usaid.gov
- Witness for Peace – witnessforpeace.org

Resources for Additional Information

Internet Resources

- AAAS Science and Human Rights Program – aaas.org/program/science-human-rights-coalition
- Action Without Borders (Idealist) – idealist.org
- Alliance for Conflict Transformation – conflicttransformation.org
- Human Rights Education Associates – hrea.org
- Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems – huridocs.org
- Human Rights Internet – www.hri.ca
- OneWorld – oneworld.org

QUALIFICATIONS TO ENTER THE FIELD

(Cont’d.)


+ In addition to skills, knowledge, and experience, a career in human rights requires a commitment to social justice.

+ Due to the intensity of human rights work, it is crucial to have a desire to make a difference, in addition to having the ability to work collaboratively with other agencies, groups, and cultures.

DEMAND

+ Paid positions in the field are increasing, but still limited for young professionals. The jobs that do exist can be found primarily with nongovernmental organizations or, in some cases, with the federal government.

+ There are opportunities in other fields which overlap with human rights such as governmental affairs, law, and lobbying.

+ There are also short-term positions for those on leave from other jobs, i.e. lawyers, teachers, social workers, and doctors. Domestic careers in human rights include work with refugees, civil rights, and women’s issues.
FUTURE CHALLENGES OF THE PROFESSION

+ The magnitude of human rights challenges today far exceeds the capacity of global institutions to address them, particularly in the peacekeeping arena.

+ The intractable problems of poverty and the lack of healthcare in both the developed and lesser developed world remain significant challenges.

+ International development initiatives and human rights are increasingly linked, as aid is being tied to issues of democracy and governance.

+ Problems of ethnic conflict, refugee flows, reinforcing political support for human rights, women’s rights, and related issues will remain significant priorities in the human rights field.

+ There are challenges inherent to international human rights work. Living and/or traveling abroad can be both exciting and challenging. Employees may be separated from familiar surroundings and relationships for long periods of time and may be living in austere conditions. For positions requiring extensive travel, it can be hard to maintain family relationships or enjoy regular personal activities.