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Review Article

Beyond Borders: Reimagining Migrant Rights and Human Dignity in the Twenty-First Century

Jeuti Bori[1*], Barasha Barman[2], Purnima Khanikar[3]
[1]Assistant Professor, Discipline of Political Science, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati, Assam
[2]Doctoral Student, Dept. of Political Science, Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam
[3]Doctoral Student, Discipline of Sociology, Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University, Guwahati, Assam
***Corresponding author:** Jeuti Bori | **Received:** 25.09.2026 | **Accepted:** 18.11.2026 | **Published:** 19.11.2026 |

Abstract: This article examines the intricate intersection of global migration and human rights in the twenty-first century, exploring the persistent structural tensions between sovereign state security and universal protection obligations. As economic disparities, political instability, and accelerating climate change drive unprecedented levels of cross-border mobility, the fundamental rights of migrants including refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented individuals frequently encounter severe implementation gaps. Grounded in foundational international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Bill of Human Rights, this study analyzes core principles including universality, inalienability, indivisibility, and non-discrimination. It investigates systemic violations such as arbitrary detention, labor exploitation, and the erosion of non-refoulement, while addressing emerging challenges like climate-induced displacement and fragmented global governance. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a holistic, cooperative reform framework centered on strengthened accountability, enhanced international burden-sharing, targeted development, and the unwavering preservation of human dignity.

Keywords: Migration, Human Rights, International Law, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Climate Displacement, State Obligations, Non-Refoulement.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is as old as humanity itself. From the earliest human movements out of Africa to the complex global mobility patterns of today, people have always moved in search of safety, opportunity, dignity, and survival. In the 21st century, migration has become one of the defining global issues. Economic inequalities, political instability, climate change, conflict, education, and globalization all contribute to cross-border and internal movements of people.

At the same time, migration raises important questions regarding human rights. Do migrants enjoy the same rights as citizens? What obligations do states have toward refugees, asylum seekers, migrant workers, and undocumented migrants? How are human rights protected in practice, and where are they violated?

This discussion explores migration through the lens of human rights.

Human Rights: Principles and Practice

Understanding Human Rights

Human rights are fundamental rights and freedoms that belong to every person simply because they are human. They are universal, inalienable, indivisible, and interdependent.

The modern human rights framework was shaped significantly after the atrocities of World War II. In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which sets out a common standard of rights for all peoples and nations.

Key Principles of Human Rights

Universality: Universality is the cornerstone of human rights. It means that all human beings are entitled to human rights without exception. These rights apply equally to every person regardless of nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, migration status, or any other characteristic. The UDHR clearly affirms that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (United Nations, 1948, Article 1). Universality ensures that a migrant worker in a foreign country, a refugee fleeing conflict, or a stateless person retains the same fundamental rights as citizens. Governments

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cannot deny basic rights based on borders or identity. This principle reinforces the idea that human dignity transcends political boundaries and establishes a global moral and legal standard binding states to uphold minimum protections for everyone within their jurisdiction.

Inalienability: Human rights are inalienable, meaning they cannot be surrendered, transferred, or arbitrarily taken away. Individuals cannot lose their human rights simply because of their status, behavior, or circumstances. However, certain rights may be lawfully restricted under specific conditions such as restricting freedom of movement during a public health emergency but such limitations must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate. Even when a person is imprisoned after due legal process, they do not lose their fundamental rights, retaining the right to humane treatment and protection from torture. Inalienability underscores that human rights are inherent to human existence rather than granted by governments, which are instead obligated to respect and protect them.

Indivisibility and Interdependence:

Human rights are indivisible and interdependent. This means that civil and political rights cannot be fully realized without economic, social, and cultural rights, and vice versa. For example, the right to freedom of expression (a civil right) is closely linked to the right to education (a social right), since literacy and knowledge empower individuals to express themselves meaningfully. The adoption of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) reflects this principle. Together with the UDHR, these treaties form the International Bill of Human Rights. In reality, rights such as health, work, participation, and expression are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

Equality and non-discrimination:

Equality and non-discrimination are essential components of human rights protection. Every individual must be treated equally before the law and must not face discrimination based on race, color, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, disability, or migration status. Discrimination undermines dignity and prevents individuals from fully enjoying their rights. International law obligates states to eliminate both direct and indirect discrimination. Ensuring equality sometimes requires affirmative measures to address historical or structural inequalities, demanding fair and just treatment that ensures equal opportunity and protection.

Participation and Inclusion: Human rights emphasize that individuals have the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Participation is closely linked to democracy, transparency, and good governance, including the right to vote, to be elected, to access information, and to engage in public debate. Meaningful participation extends beyond elections; communities must be consulted in matters such as development projects, environmental decisions, and social policies. Inclusion ensures that marginalized groups such as women, minorities, persons with disabilities, and migrants have a voice in policymaking processes, strengthening accountability and fostering social cohesion.

Accountability and Rule of Law:

Accountability and the rule of law require that states, institutions, and individuals be held responsible for human rights violations. Governments must establish legal and institutional frameworks that allow victims to seek remedies, with courts and international bodies playing critical roles in ensuring justice. The rule of law ensures that laws are applied equally and fairly, and that state power is exercised within legal limits. Without accountability mechanisms, human rights protections remain theoretical rather than practical.

Categories of Human Rights

A. Civil and Political Rights

Civil and political rights protect individual freedoms and participation in public life, primarily shielding individuals from abuses of state power.

Right to Life: The right to life is the most fundamental human right. It obligates states not only to refrain from arbitrary killing but also to take positive measures to protect life, such as ensuring public safety and access to essential services. Without the right to life, all other rights lose their meaning.

Freedom from Torture: Freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment is absolute. No circumstances including war, terrorism, or public emergency can justify torture, recognizing this prohibition as a peremptory norm of international law.

Freedom of Movement: Freedom of movement allows individuals to travel within their country, choose their residence, and leave and return to their own country. While restrictions may be imposed for legitimate reasons such as public safety, they must comply with legal standards and respect proportionality.

Freedom of Expression: Freedom of expression enables individuals to share ideas, opinions, and information without undue interference. It is essential for democracy, accountability, and social progress. Although not absolute, any limitations must be strictly necessary and defined by law.

Right to a Fair Trial: The right to a fair trial ensures justice and protection against arbitrary detention or punishment. It includes the right to an independent and impartial tribunal, the presumption of innocence, legal representation, and prompt notification of charges. Fair

trial guarantees uphold the rule of law and prevent miscarriages of justice.

These rights are protected under instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

B. Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
These include:

Right to Work: The right to work ensures that every person has the opportunity to gain a living by freely chosen or accepted employment (ICESCR, Art. 6). This right includes access to fair wages, safe working conditions, equal opportunity, and protection against unemployment.

Right to Education: Education is both a human right in itself and a means of realizing other rights. Under Article 13 of the ICESCR, states must ensure that primary education is compulsory and free for all, while secondary and higher education should be made progressively accessible and affordable.

Right to Health: The right to health guarantees the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (ICESCR, Art. 12). This includes access to timely and appropriate healthcare services, essential medicines, clean water, sanitation, and healthy working conditions.

Right to Adequate Housing: Recognized under Article 11 of the ICESCR, adequate housing goes beyond having a roof over one's head. It must provide security of tenure, protection from forced eviction, access to basic services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, suitable location, and cultural adequacy.

For migrants, these rights are often difficult to access due to legal status, discrimination, and policy restrictions.

Migration: Concepts and Types

Migration refers to the movement of people from one place to another, either within a country (internal migration) or across international borders (international migration).

Types of Migration:

Voluntary Migration: Individuals move by choice, often for employment or education.
Forced Migration: Movement due to conflict, persecution, or disasters.
Labour Migration: Movement specifically for employment opportunities.
Irregular Migration: Movement outside official legal channels.
Refugee and Asylum Migration: Seeking protection from persecution.

The legal definition of a refugee is found in the 1951 Refugee Convention, adopted under the framework of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). A refugee is someone who has a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Human Rights of Migrants

Migrants are entitled to human rights regardless of their legal status. However, in practice, these rights are frequently restricted.

A. Right to Life and Security: States must protect migrants from violence, exploitation, and trafficking, ensuring that border control measures do not endanger lives.

B. Freedom from Torture and Inhuman Treatment: Detention conditions must meet international standards, as arbitrary detention of migrants violates international law.

C. Right to Non-Refoulement:** Non-refoulement prohibits returning a person to a country where they face serious threats to life or freedom, serving as a core principle of refugee protection.

D. Right to Work: Migrant workers are protected under International Labour Organization (ILO) standards applicable to all workers.

E. Right to Family Life: Family reunification is recognized in international law as essential to human dignity.

State Obligations

States hold three levels of obligation:

1. Respect: Do not interfere with rights.
2. Protect: Prevent third parties from violating rights.
3. Fulfill: Take positive measures to ensure rights are realized.

Practical examples include ensuring migrants have access to courts (respect), preventing employers from exploiting migrant workers (protect), and providing emergency healthcare services (fulfill).

Human Rights in Practice: Challenges

Despite strong legal frameworks, implementation gaps remain.

A. Border Control vs. Human Rights: States often prioritize security over human rights, resulting in restrictive border policies that drive individuals toward dangerous migration routes.

B. Detention Practices: Migrants are frequently detained for administrative reasons, and prolonged detention without judicial review violates core rights.

C. Statelessness: Some migrants become stateless and lack recognized nationality, drastically limiting their access to legal protections.

Migration and Vulnerable Groups

Certain migrant populations face heightened risks, including women migrants, children (especially unaccompanied minors), victims of trafficking, and persons with disabilities. International law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, mandates special protection for children.

Violation of Human Rights

Migration and human rights are deeply intertwined issues affecting millions worldwide. Migrants including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants, and undocumented individuals are entitled to fundamental human rights regardless of their legal status.

Key Human Rights Violations:

Arbitrary Detention: Migrants are often detained without due process or legal justification, sometimes for prolonged periods.

Exploitation: Migrant workers face forced labor, sub-minimum wages, and poor working conditions, particularly in agriculture, construction, and domestic work.

Violence and Abuse: Women and children are especially vulnerable to physical and psychological abuse, trafficking, and sexual exploitation.

Denial of Basic Services: Legal barriers and lack of documentation routinely block access to healthcare, education, and social security.

Non-Refoulement Violations: Forcing migrants back to countries where they face persecution or danger directly breaches international law.

International Frameworks and Protections:

1951 Refugee Convention: Guarantees fundamental rights and protection from persecution for refugees.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): Affirms the right to seek asylum and guarantees freedom of movement.

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR): Protects civil and political liberties, including freedom from torture and arbitrary detention.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR):** Secures rights to work, education, health, and housing.

International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions: Establish crucial labor standards and protections for migrant workers.

Challenges and Emerging Issues

Climate change, irregular migration, public perceptions, and global governance gaps pose severe challenges to migrant protection. Climate migration driven by sea-level rise and extreme weather displaces millions, yet the 1951 Refugee Convention does not explicitly cover climate-induced displacement, leaving affected populations unprotected.

Irregular migration heightens vulnerabilities, as undocumented individuals fear deportation and avoid reporting abuse. Negative public attitudes, xenophobia, and fragmented global governance further hinder rights-based responses. Addressing these issues requires expanding refugee definitions, enhancing legal pathways, building climate resilience, and strengthening global accountability.

Recommendations for Improvement

Protecting migrant rights requires a comprehensive, cooperative approach built upon key strategic pillars:

- ❖ Strengthen Accountability Mechanisms Enhance independent monitoring, transparent reporting, and individual complaint channels to hold states accountable.
- ❖ Education and Awareness: ** Implement specialized training programs for law enforcement, healthcare providers, and border officials while running public campaigns to counter xenophobia.
- ❖ International Cooperation: ** Utilize regional and global frameworks such as the Global Compact on Migration to encourage equitable burden-sharing and coordinated crisis response.
- ❖ Protect Vulnerable Groups: ** Prioritize targeted support, legal aid, and specialized shelters for women, children, and trafficking victims.
- ❖ Address Root Causes: ** Invest in sustainable development, poverty reduction, peacebuilding, and climate resilience initiatives in origin countries to alleviate forced displacement.

CONCLUSION

Migration is a multifaceted global phenomenon fundamentally tied to human rights. Universality ensures equal rights, inalienability protects against arbitrary revocation, indivisibility connects civil rights with socio-economic well-being, and interdependence highlights mutual reinforcement. While systemic challenges such as arbitrary detention, labor exploitation, climate displacement, and governance gaps persist, a steadfast commitment to international legal frameworks, enhanced accountability, public education, and international cooperation can successfully bridge the gap between policy and human reality.

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