

Career Opportunities in Human Rights

The international human rights field is comprised of a broad spectrum of governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations which focus on the alleviation of human suffering and the protection and promotion of human rights as formulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, addressing 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 in all regions of 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 and Entry Salaries

The field of human rights is broad and multidisciplinary and, therefore, there is no direct or specific career path to follow. Over the past 20 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 to 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 bachelors degree interested in this area of social justice, including assistant project coordinators, researchers, communications assistants, development associates, and community organizers. Starting salaries for these jobs range from mid-\$20,000 to low-\$30,000.

Positions for candidates with a relevant master's degree are most frequently in the capacity of monitoring, reporting, administrative, and organizational efforts. Salaries for these positions range from the low-\$30,000 to mid-\$40,000 range, and can include titles such as program manager, analyst, research associate, writer/reporter, regional monitor, and legal advocate.

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

Demand

Paid positions in the human rights field are increasing, but are still very restricted for young professionals. The jobs that do exist can be found primarily with non-governmental organizations or, in some cases, with the federal government. There are opportunities in fields which might overlap with human rights such as governmental affairs, law, and lobbying. There are also short-term positions for those on leave from other jobs who might want to lend their expertise to the human rights arena, i.e. lawyers, teachers, social workers, doctors. Domestic careers in human rights include work with refugees who have emigrated to the US, civil rights, and women's issues.

Qualifications Necessary 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.

Regardless of the individual requirements of human rights organizations, all candidates should possess excellent oral and written communication skills, the ability to speak more than one language, 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 is one way to gain valuable experience and they also provide 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 of Discrimination Against Women, Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

In addition to skills, knowledge, and experience, dedication and commitment to social justice is mandatory. Because of the intensity of human rights work, having a desire to make a difference and the ability to work collaboratively with other agencies, groups, and cultures all working toward the same goal is crucial.

Sample Employers

- The Carter Center, www.cartercenter.org
- Center for Economic and Social Rights, www.cesr.org/
- Center for Justice and International Law, www.cejil.org/en
- Freedom House, www.freedomhouse.org/
- Global Exchange, www.globalexchange.org/
- Human Rights Watch, www.hrw.org
- Institute for Global Communication, www.igc.org/
- International Center for Transitional Justice, www.ictj.org/
- International Rescue Committee, www.theirc.org/
- National Network for Immigrant & Refugee Rights, www.nnirr.org/
- Oxfam International , www.oxfam.org/en
- Physicians for Human Rights, <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/>
- UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR), www.ohchr.org
- United Nations Organizations, www.un.org/en/

- US Agency for International Development (USAID), www.usaid.gov
- Witness for Peace, www.witnessforpeace.org/
- Women's Human Rights, <http://www.peacewomen.org/>

Demand and Future Challenges of the Profession

The magnitude of human rights challenges today far exceeds the capacity of global organizations and institutions to address them. Both the difficulty of enforcing human rights standards and the inadequate resources given to the United Nations to address peacekeeping in war-torn nations contribute to the problems of the human rights movement.

The challenges ahead are dealing with the intractable problems of poverty and lack of health care in both the developed and underdeveloped world. Increasingly, there is a link between international development initiatives and human rights, as aid is being tied to issues of democracy and governance. Problems of ethnic conflicts, causes and problems of refugee flows, human rights in nations' foreign policies, women's rights, and related issues will increasingly be areas of major concern in the human rights field.

There are challenges inherent to the nature of international human rights work that affect those working in the field. 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 conditions far inferior to what they are used to in the United States. For positions requiring extensive travel, it can be hard to maintain family relationships or enjoy regular personal activities.

Resources for More Information

Associations/Websites

- Action Without Borders (Idealist), www.idealists.org
- AlertNet, www.alertnet.org/thepeople/jobs/
- Alliance for Conflict Transformation, <http://www.conflicttransformation.org/>
- Relief Web, <http://www.reliefweb.int/>

Directories

- AAAS Directory of Human Rights Resources, <http://shr.aaas.org/dhr.htm>
- Derechos Human Rights, www.derechos.org/
- Human Rights Internet, <http://www.hri.ca/>
- Human Rights Organizations and Resources, www.hrweb.org/
- Human Rights Resource Center, www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/default.shtm
- Human Rights Education Associates, www.hrea.org/erc/Library/index.php
- University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, www1.umn.edu/humanrts/

Publications

- *Human Rights Organizations and Periodicals Directory*, Meiklejohn Civil Liberties Institute, published annually.
- *The Human Rights Quarterly*, Johns Hopkins University Press.

- *The Harvard Human Rights Journal*, Harvard Law School.
- *The Human Rights Monitor*, International Service for Human Rights.
- *The United Nations Chronicle and the Human Rights Internet*, UN Department of Public Information

In Career Library

Careers in International Affairs, Editors: Maria Pinto Carland and Lisa A. Gihring, Georgetown University Press (2003)

Career Opportunities in Politics Government and Activism, Joan Axelrod-Contrada, Facts on File (2003)