

# Evidence indicates that we should be hopeful—not hopeless—about human rights

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We compare our current human rights situation not to the past but to an imagined ideal world, and thus we always fall short.

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Yes, these are [hard times for human rights](#), whether we look at the plight of the Rohingya, the violence in the Philippines, or the political crises in Venezuela and the United States. There is, nevertheless, a disturbing tendency to see our own period as uniquely bad, an opinion often supported with little firm empirical evidence or careful historical comparisons. Indeed, the pessimism surrounding human rights can almost be considered an epidemic. To name but a few examples, [Ban Ki-moon has suggested](#) that there has never been so much suffering since WWII, [Eric Posner](#) has claimed that there have been no marked decreases in human rights violations, and [Stephen Hopgood](#) has argued on this same platform that “the vast array of global human rights laws, courts and norms, and high-profile cases is the past.”

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I argue in [my recent book](#) that these claims need to be submitted to rigorous examination, both historical and statistical, in order to determine the legitimacy and effectiveness of human rights laws, movements, and institutions. Historically, human rights progress has occurred as a result of struggle, and has often been spearheaded by oppressed groups. Understanding the history of human rights as a constant struggle led by those who lack certain rights puts agency at the center of the story. The global human rights movement in the second half of the twentieth century arose from three main sources: the anti-apartheid movement led by African activists and newly decolonized states; Latin American activists resisting brutal anti-communist authoritarian

regimes; and the Helsinki movements in the former USSR and Eastern Europe—all, of course, working together with their allies in the developed world. This whole period was a hard time for human rights. The success of human rights in these areas is thus all the more noteworthy, and is also instructive for our perceptions of human rights progress today.

## By their very definition, human rights are needed when things are bad.

By their very definition, human rights are needed when things are bad. I worked at a small human rights organization, the Washington Office for Latin America (WOLA) in the early 1980s, at what is now seen by some as the golden age of human rights activism. At the time, we never felt like human rights goals were easily within our reach. How could we, when the Argentine government was disappearing [thousands of its citizens](#); the Salvador government, with the heavy support of US government training and money, was killing US nuns and massacring its own citizens in places like [El Mozote](#); and the [Khmer Rouge was carrying out a genocide](#) ignored by much of the world? The period between the end of the Cold War and the start of the so-called war on terror has likewise been identified as a high point for consensus on human rights norms, yet it was during this period when mass atrocities were perpetrated in both the Balkans and in Rwanda.

The fact that the fight for human rights has always faced significant opposition should not discourage us. The longer history of human rights offers a positive message that can help sustain us in the context of our current struggles. In *Evidence for Hope*, I explore what changes have taken place over time, using the best data I can find on what many of us would agree to be good measures of diverse human rights. Looking carefully, issue by issue, at data on human rights trends over time, we see that some situations are worsening—such as the absolute number of refugees displaced by war, or economic inequality within many countries. Human rights activists are also rarely popular in the countries where they work. Repressive governments especially have a long history of attacking and vilifying human rights groups. Human rights organizations often defend the rights of unpopular minorities such as political leftists in Latin

America, [refuseniks](#) in the former USSR, the Roma in Europe, and transgender people in the US. Another way to think of this is that human rights demands tend to be counter-majoritarian. Majorities in places like Hungary, for example, are trampling on the rights of their Roma minorities, and groups like the [Hungarian Civil Liberties Union](#) don't win popularity by defending their rights. One shouldn't go into human rights work expecting to win majority acclaim, or avoid hard times.

But there are many more upward trends, including a decline in genocide, a shrinking number of people killed in war, decreasing use of the death penalty, and improvements in poverty, infant morality, and life expectancy, as well as advances in gender equality, the rights of sexual minorities, and the rights of people with disabilities. I use this history and data to tell not a triumphalist history, but what [Albert Hirschman](#) would call a “possibilist” one, focusing not on what was probable, but on what, with commitment and struggle, was eventually possible.

So why is it that so many people believe human rights violations in the world are getting worse rather than better? The short answer is that we think the world is worse off because we care more and know more about human rights than ever before. The media and human rights organizations have drawn our attention to an increasingly wide range of rights violations around the world. Their success in doing so sometimes inadvertently causes people to think that no human rights progress is occurring. Pessimism is also derived from a method employed by human rights activists and scholars that I call “comparison to the ideal”—we compare our current situation not to the past but to an imagined ideal world, and thus we always fall short.

The stakes in this human rights debate are high. Where it has occurred, human rights progress is not at all inevitable, but rather contingent on continued commitment and effort. Some fear that if they admit there has been progress, people will grow complacent and disengaged. But excessive pessimism can be even more devastating. As community organizer [Saul Alinsky](#) reminded activists decades ago, pessimism and anger are not sufficient to maintain motivation over time; you also need to have hope and to believe that you can make a difference.

Knowing more specifically how to make a difference gives people the energy to keep working. The empirical research is not unified or simple, but using the best data at our disposal, my research has led me to have a bias for hope based not on optimism, but on reasoned evaluation of

evidence. The challenge we face now is how to sustain hope and action without complacency or indifference.

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