

## Rights and responsibilities in the Coronavirus pandemic

To protect our collective right to health in the current pandemic situation, we need to balance our individual rights with collective responsibilities.

By: **Kathryn Sikkink** (/kathryn-sikkink/)



Nathan Dumlao ([https://unsplash.com/@nate\\_dumlao?](https://unsplash.com/@nate_dumlao?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText)

[https://unsplash.com/s/photos/wash-hands?](https://unsplash.com/s/photos/wash-hands?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText)

[https://unsplash.com/s/photos/wash-hands?](https://unsplash.com/s/photos/wash-hands?utm_source=unsplash&utm_medium=referral&utm_content=creditCopyText)

In order to fully implement human rights, we need to place more emphasis on the responsibility of all actors, and not just states, to take action together to make sure rights are enjoyed.

This argument from my newly published book: *[The Hidden Face of Rights: Toward a Politics of Responsibility](https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300233292/hidden-face-rights)*

(<https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300233292/hidden-face-rights>), turns out to be particularly relevant to the coronavirus pandemic. Even if all governments were taking efficient action, but individuals didn't also do their share by staying home and washing their hands, the crisis would not be averted.

Building on the work of [Iris Marion Young](https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195392388.001.0001/acprof-9780195392388) in her posthumous book, *[Responsibility for Justice](https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195392388.001.0001/acprof-9780195392388)*

(<https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195392388.001.0001/acprof-9780195392388>), in *The Hidden Face of Rights*, I argue that all actors socially connected to structural injustice and able to act, need to take action to address the injustice. One problem with the word responsibility is that people often use it in the common legal meaning focused on who is to blame or liable. This is what Iris

(/fighting-for-rights-in-the-streets-of-hong-kong/)

Fighting for rights : the streets—not jus the courts—of Hon Kong

(/fighting-for-rights-in-the-streets-of-hong-kong/)

By: KATRIN KINZELBACH (/KATRIN-KINZELBACH/) & EVA PILS (/EVA-PILS/)

Español (/fighting-for-rights-in-the-streets-of-hong-kong/?

lang=Spanish) | 简体中: (/fighting-for-rights-in-the-streets-of-hong-kong/?lang=Chinese)

Young has called backward-looking responsibility or the “liability model.”

(<https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195392388.001.0001/acprof-9780195392388>) She focused on political responsibility that is forward-looking. This

kind of responsibility asks not “who is to blame,” but “what should we do?”

Forward-looking responsibility is necessary to address the Coronavirus pandemic and to think about what we should do in the world after the pandemic. I also draw on

Max Weber’s idea of an ethic of responsibility in *Politics as a Vocation*

([https://archive.org/details/weber\\_max\\_1864\\_1920\\_politics\\_as\\_a\\_vocation/page/n1/mode/2up](https://archive.org/details/weber_max_1864_1920_politics_as_a_vocation/page/n1/mode/2up))

to stress that it is not enough to act with good intentions. We also need to have done our research about the most effective way to act so that our actions have the impact we seek.

**Even if all governments were taking efficient action, but individuals didn’t also do their share by staying home and washing their hands, the crisis would not be averted.**

This framework is useful in the context of the Coronavirus crisis because it involves both a range of rights and responsibilities of many actors. Our right to health, but also rights to liberty, freedom of movement, to education, to information, to food and shelter are all at stake. As countries ramp up exclusionary travel and border policies, some of these rights may be imperiled, and governments need to strike a balance between protecting health and respecting human rights, as the WHO Secretary General recognized in his briefing on March 12 (<https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-mission-briefing-on-covid-19---12-march-2020>). A quarantine is a legitimate state policy in times of health emergencies, but the state must attend to the rights of individuals caught in the quarantine to adequate health care, food, and shelter.

This balancing of rights is foreseen in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which speaks of limiting rights to “respect the rights and freedoms of others” . The UDHR goes further, however, and recognizes that each of us has “duties to the community”, and its preamble calls on all of us to promote rights. The drafters were keen to highlight that realizing the full potential of the UDHR was a collective effort.

In order for everyone to enjoy these rights, all actors socially connected to this problem and able to act must practice responsibilities that are not always well defined. To protect our collective right to health, we may need to recognize that we have a right to freedom of movement, but also a responsibility not to travel in certain circumstances; a right to education, but a responsibility to accept that it may be suspended temporarily or delivered on-line.

Global health governance institutions can provide a pathway to implement the human right to health. (<https://www.openglobalrights.org/From-revolution-to-bureaucratization-human-rights-law-becomes-central-to-global-health-governance/>)

International organizations, especially WHO, appear to have stepped up to this responsibility in impressive ways in recent weeks. I recommend anyone

(/seeing-business-and-human-rights-a-a-web-of-corporate-accountability/) Seeing business and human rights as a web of corporate accountability (/seeing-business-and-human-rights-a-a-web-of-corporate-accountability/) By: JOANNE BAUER (/JOANNE-BAUER/) Español (/seeing-business-and-human-rights-as-a-web-of-corporate-accountability/?lang=Spanish)

who wants to be well-informed in a way that both prevents panic and promotes action to spend time on the [coronavirus part of the WHO website](https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus) (<https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>).

**In order for everyone to enjoy these rights, all actors socially connected to this problem and able to act must practice responsibilities that are not always well defined.**

Some states are doing a far better job at exercising responsibility than others. The US case is especially worrisome, [where CDC action has been hampered](https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/487068-trump-coronavirus-response-seen-as-threat-to-cdc-confidence) (<https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/487068-trump-coronavirus-response-seen-as-threat-to-cdc-confidence>) by the initial political instincts of the Trump administration to downplay the problem. In this context, one of the responsibilities I devote chapters to in my book—the responsibility to vote—becomes even more important. The dangers of this narcissistic nationalist leader hostile to science and facts could not be more apparent than in the case of a genuine international crisis when poor US leadership is literally a life and death issue.

But responsibilities do not stop with national governments—they also exist for state and municipal governments, health care institutions, the media, non-profits, universities, and down to the individual. At the individual level, our responsibilities in the face of the COVID-19 crisis include the responsibility to wash hands, to stay at home if we feel unwell, to cover mouths and noses when coughing or sneezing, but also to be informed and not to panic. Who would have thought that developing new norms about hand washing would become a global governance issue?

Individual responsibilities may include such non-actions such as not hoarding basic goods. For example, [most people don't need face masks, and should leave them for those who are sick or are caring for sick people](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks)

(<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>). But what is most important is that individuals don't exercise their responsibilities in an isolated manner, but in coordination with institutions and social connection with others, even as we provide the “social distance” (1 meter) necessary to limit transmission of the disease (<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>).

It is a persistent but somewhat troubling finding of international relations theory that change in on ideas and institutions is more likely to occur in the wake of crisis. This crisis is already yielding a nationalist response, [with the US suspending all travel from Europe to the United States for 30 days](https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-announces-30-day-suspension-of-travel-from-europe/) (<https://www.politico.eu/article/trump-announces-30-day-suspension-of-travel-from-europe/>), [a policy European officials said was taken unilaterally and without any consultation](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51857462). (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51857462>) But a forward-looking rights and responsibilities approach suggests we need more well-coordinated national and international responses. More and better global governance is necessary

(/what-can-national-action-plans-on-business-and-human-rights-do-for-womens-rights/)

What can national action plans on business and human rights do for women's rights?

(/what-can-national-action-plans-on-business-and-human-rights-do-for-womens-rights/)

By: NORA GÖTZMAN  
(/NORA-GÖTZMANN & WANGUI KIMOTHIC  
(/WANGUI-KIMOTHIC/)

Français (/what-can-national-action-plans-on-business-and-human-rights-do-for-womens-rights/?

lang=French) | Español

(/what-can-national-action-plans-on-business-and-human-rights-do-for-womens-rights/?lang=Spanish)

for solving the COVID-19 crisis and the economic recession that could grow out of it. Our biggest responsibility may be to figure out how to convert this crisis into a step forward for global governance rather than a step away from it.

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED: March 16, 2020

[OpenPage \(/openPage/\)](#) [Global \(/global/\)](#)

- [\(/kathryn-sikkink/\)](#)  
Kathryn Sikkink is a Regents Professor Emerita at the University of Minnesota and the Ryan Family Professor of Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School.

[\(/putting-human-rights-at-the-centre-of-struggles-for-health-and-social-equality/\)](#)  
[Putting human rights at the centre of struggles for health and social equality](#)  
[\(/putting-human-rights-at-the-centre-of-struggles-for-health-and-social-equality/\)](#)  
 By: ALICIA ELY YAMIN  
[\(/ALICIA-ELY-YAMIN/\)](#)  
 Español [\(/putting-human-rights-at-the-centre-of-struggles-for-health-and-social-equality/?lang=Spanish\)](#)

## COMMENTS

0 Comments [OpenGlobalRights](#) [Disqus' Privacy Policy](#) [Login](#)

[Recommend](#) [Tweet](#) [Share](#) [Sort by Best](#)



Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS ?

Name

Be the first to comment.

[Subscribe](#) [Add Disqus to your site](#) [Do Not Sell My Data](#)

**WRITE FOR US**  
[\(/write-for-openglobalrights/\)](#)

**SIGN UP FOR OUR WEEKLY NEWSLETTER**

**FOLLOW US ON**



**SIGN-UP**

**CONNECT WITH US**



- English ([https://twitter.com/ogr\\_fr](https://twitter.com/ogr_fr))
- Français ([https://twitter.com/ogr\\_fr](https://twitter.com/ogr_fr))
- Español ([https://twitter.com/ogr\\_es](https://twitter.com/ogr_es))
- العربية ([https://twitter.com/ogr\\_ar](https://twitter.com/ogr_ar))
- English ([https://www...business\\_id=4](https://www.busi...business_id=4))
- Français ([https://www...business\\_id=4](https://www...business_id=4))
- Español ([https://www...business\\_id=4](https://www...business_id=4))
- العربية ([https://www...business\\_id=4](https://www...business_id=4))