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New report details serious human rights abuses and some improvements

New data from the Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI) for 196 countries shows significant challenges remain for many governments.

Among the findings:

- **China** shows no improvement, falling at the very bottom of a 30-country sample for 8 out of the 9 civil and political rights measured, often drawing even with Saudi Arabia.
- The **right to protest** is under threat in many countries.
- Many high income countries continue to have some way to go to meet their basic human rights obligations, especially in areas such as the rights to **food, education, health, and housing**.
- **Child health** scores are generally high throughout the world. There have been significant gains, even in the poorest countries, over the past two decades.
- Countries with high rates of **Covid-19 deaths** showed corresponding deterioration in their right to health scores; countries with low death rates saw their scores continue to improve as has been the trend over recent years.
- Millions of people worldwide do not have access to **clean water or basic sanitation**, even though governments have enough resources to ensure better access.
- **Freedom of religion and belief** is severely restricted in many countries.

The Human Rights Measurement Initiative released its annual scores for 196 countries on Thursday. HRMI, a non-profit, independent research NGO, that measures how well governments respect and protect people's human rights across 14 different human rights themes, from the right to food to voting rights.

Quality of Life rights

HRMI's new data show that rich and poor countries alike face challenges in making sure their people's basic rights are respected and protected.

For five economic and social rights (the rights to food, education, health, housing, and work), HRMI uses a specialised methodology that takes a country's income into account, and compares its achievements with what it ought to be able to manage, at its current level of income. This is in line with international law as expressed in the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

The data show some significant areas of **improvement and progress**. In nearly all low-income countries, scores for children's right to health have steadily improved over the last two decades. For example, Malawi's score for **child health** has risen from 61.4%, in the 'very bad' range in 2000, to 100% in 2020, meaning it is now doing all it can at its level of resources, and will need to increase its income to make further progress.

The new data also show the enormous impact of **Covid-19** on the right to health. Even adjusting for the fall in income wrought by the pandemic, country income-adjusted scores drawing on adult survival rates have fallen sharply.

HRMI co-founder and Economic and Social Rights Lead Dr Susan Randolph said, ‘The vast majority of countries saw their health scores fall, with particularly steep falls in several high income countries—such as Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States—as well as quite a number of low and middle income countries, for example Columbia, and Azerbaijan. There were a few exceptions, for example Botswana, Cyprus, New Zealand, Australia and Japan, which had low levels of Covid-19 deaths. Much of this difference in experience is a reflection of differences in the policies used to contain Covid’s impact which need to be investigated more thoroughly.’

Millions of people worldwide do not have access to **clean water or basic sanitation**, as they deserve. In Africa, in particular, most countries have very low scores in these rights – even when their scores take income into account. HRMI Global Spokesperson Thalia Kehoe Rowden said, ‘All people deserve to live in dignity, and enjoy basic rights like access to water and toilets. Governments around the world can afford to do much more to ensure access – and meet their human rights obligations under international law.’

Civil and Political Rights

China shows no improvement at all, falling at the very bottom of a 30-country sample for 8 out of the 9 civil and political rights measured, often drawing even with Saudi Arabia.

Hong Kong’s scores remain low, having fallen in the last several years and are now much closer to China’s. Taiwan and South Korea continue to have the highest scores in East Asia.

The right to **protest** is under threat in many countries. Scores for freedom of assembly and association and freedom of opinion and expression are alarmingly low in countries as varied as **China, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Mozambique, and Kazakhstan**. Protestors also have other rights violated, experiencing, for example, unfair evictions, discrimination in education, and high rates of state violence.

LGBTQIA+ people continue to face discrimination and human rights violations in many countries. This was particularly pronounced in data for the **United States**, where legislative attacks on trans people’s rights, and on reproductive rights, were a strong theme in the data.

HRMI co-founder Dr K Chad Clay, said, ‘Compared to previous years, we see a large increase in the proportion of our respondents stating that LGBTQIA+ people, women, and girls are at high risk of lacking full enjoyment of their rights to health in the United States. This is sadly not surprising in light of many changes in US policy over the last couple of years. Several states targeted transgender people with laws restricting access to gender-affirming healthcare in 2022, and this trend has sadly continued and intensified in 2023. Likewise, in June 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned the Roe v. Wade decision that guaranteed pregnant people the right to abortion. Several US states followed this decision by implementing bans and restrictions on abortion, jeopardising the full enjoyment of the right to health by many women, girls, and other people who can become pregnant across the country.’

Freedom of religion and belief

In many countries HRMI studied, people’s right to freedom of religion and belief is restricted, often severely.

In China, India, and Vietnam, people from religious minorities were identified as being at extra risk of violations of every single right HRMI measures, from the rights to food and education, to democratic

freedoms, to the rights to be free from torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest and detention, and extrajudicial execution.

By contrast, in South Korea, religious belief was not reported to bring any extra risk of rights violations.

In China, people from religious minorities such as Muslim Uyghurs, Tibetan Buddhists, Christians, and followers of Falun Gong experience violations of all 14 of the rights HRMI measures.

In India, Muslims and Christians were similarly identified as being at extra risk of violations of every single right HRMI measure.

In Vietnam, those at risk included those following a long list of religions including Independent Buddhists, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Cao Daiists, Hmong Christians, Montagnard Christians, and Khmer Krom Buddhists, who all face persecution from the government.

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About the Rights Tracker: The Rights Tracker is a global project to track the human rights performance of countries systematically. Our 2023 dataset launched today includes annual data on eight civil and political rights for up to 44 countries from the years 2017 to 2022, with Bangladesh, Thailand, and the Maldives added this year. Our data also include inaugural scores on the right to freedom of religion and belief in a pilot set of nine countries. Annual data on five economic and social rights for 196 countries from 2007 to 2020, based on the award-winning SERF Index methodology, is also available. Please visit rightstracker.org for the freely available dataset.

About HRMI: The Human Rights Measurement Initiative (HRMI) is an independent non-profit organisation part of a global movement building a world where all people can flourish. We track the human rights progress of countries, producing robust data that anyone can use to push for improvements in how governments treat people. What gets measured gets improved: if something isn't being systematically measured, it can be more easily overlooked and undervalued. HRMI data make it easier for decision-makers to monitor their progress, and prioritise human rights. Advocacy based on sound information is one of the key drivers of change. www.humanrightsmeasurement.org

For media inquiries, please contact:

Thalia Kehoe Rowden

Strategy and Communication Lead, and Global Spokesperson:

thalia.kehoerowden@hrmi.ngo