Summary:

The twentieth century has included some of the worst atrocities of human rights on a world scale, as well as some of the strongest mobilizations to protect and champion them. This course offers a critical look at the trends and debates concerning global human rights. Taking a sociological perspective to frame our discussion, we will focus on:

1) the lived experience of human rights, especially for groups that are politically and economically marginalized, with special emphasis on gender, race, class, sexuality and nation;

2) the social forces that motivate violations of human rights, and the social conditions under which human rights policies are drafted;

3) the social impact of political mobilizations concerning human rights, from above by official actors and below by grassroots activists.

Our framing will also be global in order to consider the local variations in how human rights are played out as well as the transnational systems which contribute to them. Through our discussion, we will draw examples from all regions of the world with focused attention to the global south. Course materials will reflect a wide range of sources, from theoretical essays, to state declarations, to academic research, to onsite reports from non-profit organizations. The schedule will be divided in three sections: starting with theoretical debates and definitions of human rights; second, specific issues of human rights in everyday life; and third, strategies and solutions for addressing human rights globally.

Conceptual Groundings of Global Human Rights

Definitions: What are human rights? Who gets to decide? How has that definition changed over time? We’ll compare human rights conventions from a variety of sources (state legal codes, the UN High Commission, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, etc.), and ask how they represent the institutional environments in which they are embedded, and what are their merits and drawbacks.

Theoretical Debates: What are the rights of different actors – states vs. communities vs. individuals? What is the difference between “universal” and “culturally relative” rights? Which social institutions are pivotal for shaping human rights – religion, media, legal systems, economy, etc.?
Global Context: Why take a global view of human rights? What is globalization? How has the increased transnational mobility of capital, transnational firms, information, and technology empowered perpetrators of human rights crimes? How do the socio-political divisions of global north and south shape the configurations and victims of human rights in this contemporary era?

The Lived Experience of Human Rights

The following includes sample topics for discussion:

Access to Food and Water: Global inefficiencies in distributing food, displacement of water supplies for the poor through the building of dams

Environmental Justice: Toxic incinerators in residential communities, industrial pollution contaminating land, air and water for urban populations, pesticides affecting farmers in rural areas

Labor Rights: Sweatshops, multinational factories, forced and substandard labor conditions, corporate responsibility, global anti-sweatshop campaigns

Health: Access to adequate care and personal confidentiality; global spread of AIDS; pharmaceutical industry control and drug testing on people in the global south

Refugees: Displacement of masses of people in wartime, famine, and natural disasters; disproportionate representation of women and children as refugees

Women's Rights: Sex trafficking, mass rape in armed conflict, segregation in daily life, exclusion from political participation, assault for not conforming to gender norms; also Amartya Sen’s “100 million missing women” from poor health, female infanticide, war, etc.

LGBT Rights: Homophobic violence and hate crimes in the form of torture, killing and executions; legal harassment in the form of unjust arrests, and denial of family rights and recognition; social exclusion and prohibitions against forming NGOs

Racial Apartheid: Discrimination by national or ethnic origin, language, color, religion; ethnic genocide; denial of rights to indigenous peoples; UN Conference on Race

Strategies and Solutions:

Social Movements and Activism: Which grassroots groups have been working on human rights? How well (or unwell) have they been working together? What is the potential of recent global collectivities like the World Social Forum, a site uniquely positioned to represent the global south, for advancing human rights?
Role of States, Private Sector, Inter-Government and Non-Governmental Organizations:
Who is responsible for enforcing human rights, especially when the sources and dynamics are global and cut cross state borders? What are the costs and benefits of involving private firms in human rights strategy? What are the prospects for a rights regime on a global scale?