

Introduction: Minority Rights

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The central thread woven through this Digest is the concept of vulnerability. Minority status, broadly construed, represents a core characteristic that carries with it particular human rights implications. Historically, minorities are frequently targeted for exploitation and scapegoated when things go badly. Without the capacity to protect themselves and without spokespersons to stand with them in solidarity, minority groups are specifically susceptible to gross exercises of power and abuse and too often denied access to channels through which to make claims and demand redress. Violations of minority rights are commonly structural in nature, as discriminatory practices are built into political and economic systems to deny fundamental rights, such as to vote or to own property. Violence and deprivation that disproportionately affect minority groups are symptomatic of the inequality and humiliation that human rights seek to remedy. Minority rights, as a category of rights, are intended to direct special attention to the plight of those people under attack by virtue of their vulnerability.

'Minority rights' as a concept consists of more than a numeric determination, however. Distinction as a minority group refers to the group's lack of dominance within society, not necessarily tied to its status as less-than-half of the total population. Traditional minority groups include ethnic, cultural, national, and linguistic categories that constitute cohesive, self-identifying units. Digest entries that feature the plight of the Roma in Europe, Tibetans in India, and indigenous movements in Latin America fall neatly into familiar conceptions of minority groups. Additionally, children are the focus of two entries. This inclusion represents an expansion of the conception of "minority" because age-based discrimination is not commonly thought of in this context. However, access to education and vulnerability in a warzone, for instance, speak to concrete human rights issues that affect children in unique ways. Dalits in India constitute a class-based perspective on questions of minority rights often overlooked and, finally, sexuality and gender comprise two more new lenses through which to highlight abuse; The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community strives to be recognized as a minority group demanding protection, and the designation of women as a minority group is influential, but not without its controversy. Often the subject of feminist critique, it is argued that, as a vulnerable *majority*, women require separate distinction and are done a disservice to be included with minority groups. This question is more than theoretical and contains many practical implications for the approach taken by advocates.

Minority rights may be an elastic term that applies in different ways to different groups, but at the center of its usefulness and application is the identification of human rights concerns that are best addressed on the group level. The standard depiction of human rights is in their capacity as rights possessed by individuals and claimed against the state. However, in the evolution of our understanding about rights, the terminology of "group rights" has also evolved. First attributed to movements for national liberation and struggles against colonialism, the right to self-determination is best expressed on the group level. However, it is not the only group right. Over time, group rights have come to be a popular frame with which to advance minority interests that are not best captured by the generic "human rights" moniker. Women's rights is the best example of this. Women's rights are largely rights that all humans possess, but placing them within a gendered context allows activists to leverage the ways in which women face specific challenges that non-women do not. This is to say,

while all humans are endowed with the right to personal integrity, sexual violence against women is a particular kind of violation best addressed with a gendered approach. The move from individual rights to group rights is a tactical attempt by advocates to see their cause rise in stature on the public and global agenda. Minority rights, as a group rights approach, possesses currency that emphasizes vulnerability confronting groups as whole units, distinct from forms of abuse targeting individuals.

The digest entries below offer a fresh and contemporary perspective on the issue of minority rights. This valuable research provides updated insight and information into problems that, sadly, are still realities, such as those facing the Dalits and the Roma. As well, new cases of minority rights are introduced, including the role of minority membership in human trafficking and issues facing Muslims in the United States. The most important contribution of this Digest is its breadth. Entries span the globe and the gamut of populations vulnerable to human rights violation, due primarily to their status as minorities.