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The Right of Asylum

Under Article fourteen of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, “*Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.*” Despite this declaration, immigration has been the center of global political conflict. Countries have used every excuse and means possible to prevent asylum seekers from entering their borders.

The United States has had a particularly tumultuous history with immigrants and refugees since the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. These deportation laws resulted from conflicts in Europe aimed at those deemed political threats to the United States. The United States is much more well known for its attack on refugees from the 1880s-1920s. During this period, Congress passed laws restricting the freedoms of immigrants within the United States and preventing asylum seekers from entering the United States. One such law was the Chinese Exclusion Act, approved in 1882, which called explicitly for the exclusion of Chinese immigrants. Federal and state courts had the right to deport Chinese refugees living in the United States, and yet Congress denied all courts the right to grant citizenship. Many such laws limiting Chinese immigrants (along with most other asylum seekers) were passed in the United States alone. National support of asylum seekers has continued to fluctuate, growing stronger during

the late 1900s. However following the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, the nation was overtaken once more by fear of and hatred for refugees. Since then, these rising tensions have caused United States to become divided over the concept of building a wall, permanently preventing immigrants from entering the country from the southern border. Instead of viewing immigrants as asylum seekers fleeing from the only place they've ever known because it is no longer safe, they are regarded as drug dealers and terrorists.

Globally, immigrants appear to be considered nothing more than a hindrance and unwanted mouths to feed. Worldwide, governments have and continue to illegally monitor social media data from migrants. In the European Union, the Asylum Support Office illegally collected social media data of refugees, to detect and obstruct flight routes, until the EU data protection supervisor stopped them. Just last June over 70 drowned after a migrant boat sank off the coast of Greece. It took almost 30 hours for any rescue attempts to be made to the distressed and dying immigrants. Following this incident, questions have been asked about why the authorities didn't do something sooner. Many have seen a trend by Greek patrol boats to assist migrant vessels only if it promises to get them out of Greek waters. Immigrants are thought of as such unwanted pests that even the Coast Guard, meant to rescue and protect, is willing to look the other way.

Immigrants aren't the only ones facing worldwide rejection; asylum seekers escaping countries of war are being turned away as well. Finland, wanting no part in the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, has produced an increasing number of barriers along its border with Russia. Finland is not considering them *asylum seekers* but *Russians*. The increasingly brutal war in Israel has resulted in even more extreme cases of asylum seekers being rejected

entry into bordering nations. The Netherlands decided to suspend asylum decisions for Palestinians in December. The desire to avoid involvement in political issues has outweighed the desire to help asylum seekers who are dying en masse.

Despite the fact seeking asylum in another country is a declared universal human right, allowing asylum seekers entry is still a matter of severe internal political conflict globally. Countries have only complained about a nation's inability to comply with Article 14 when the body count becomes too high for the world to ignore. Refugees and immigrants are viewed as monsters seeking to destroy the countries they seek sovereignty in, rather than *people*. Society has been so consumed by fear that it has lost sight of this simple fact: immigrants and asylum seekers are *human*. Humans, so afraid for their lives and the lives of their families, that they are willing to leave everything behind. They are willing to risk their lives to travel to an unknown country, a country that may still reject them--if they even manage to survive the trip there. Article 14 recognizes refugees and immigrants as humans, so it's about time the world starts acting like it.

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A Right to Change

When it comes to determining the most important human rights issue, it is necessary to consider which issue is most wide reaching, and which is most urgent across the globe. Concerns of freedom of religion may not seem urgent within the United States, but in theocratic Iran, it is much greater of a matter, just as an example. It must also be noted that issues of human rights are often not an isolated issue, as much as they are emblematic of greater societal problems. Child labour is often emblematic of nations that lack much wealth, limiting access to education and requiring that families further utilize all members to make ends meet. Thus to determine the most important human rights issue, we must determine which issues are emblematic, and which are root causes. From what I have considered, this would make the right to vote the most important.

If racial and gender equality, right to privacy, freedom of press, etc, are to be ensured or advanced, action must be taken, but in many nations, the ability to take action is constricted. A primary mechanism by which this is restricted is in regards to the right to vote. When government officials have to appeal to the populace, they are held accountable to that populace, at least to some degree, and that allows for individuals to propose, and run on certain issues. As such, the populace can address human rights issues by voting for candidates running on such issues, thereby correcting them. However, when that right is restricted, the accountability to the

general public is mostly lost. Structures of censorship, repression, and fear are used to keep the populace in line, rather than the populace keeping the officials in line.

This is not to say that officials in non-democratic structures are not held accountable in any way, but they tend to be held more accountable to the nations military leaders, as in the junta-controlled areas of Myanmar, or are accountable to other individuals or nations that fund their repression campaigns, as was seen in Somalia's dependence on the Soviet Union during the rule of Siad Barre. The interests of these institutions tend to not reflect the interests of the people, or human rights. Official's desires for control incentivize them to keep the population repressed, or else they lose their power. Under democratic conditions, keeping power would require responsibility to the populace.

It should be noted also, that when we speak of the right to vote, it is not meant in a symbolic or ritualistic sense. Many of the nations mentioned later do have "the right to vote" but not in a legitimate sense of the word. For example, China still has elections, but only the CPC and party's approved by the CPC participate. Alternate party's also are not intended to work as proper opposition to the CPC, but simply a way to receive input and ideas that may not have been received otherwise. This party control allows elites of the party to exert influence on lower level members who can easily be discarded if they do not follow their role in the party line. Systems of repression are often complex and not simply defined. As such the right to vote in our context is the right to vote freely, democratically, and with little to no restriction.

When looking at nations that are most known for their human rights abuses, such as Iran, North Korea, China, or Afghanistan, they tend to put heavy restrictions on the right to vote. Iran has a single religious leader who chooses which candidates get to run. North Korean rule is inherited by a single family. China is generally controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. All

of these examples erode the influence that the population can exert over governance, and as such limits their ability to take action against human rights abuses. Thus, restrictions on the right to vote tend to be at the root of most human rights issues, rather than symptomatic.

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Understanding the Harsh Realities of Poverty in America

Poverty rates within America are currently at an all time high, with 37.9 million people suffering (US Census Bureau), creating a pressing urgency to find a solution for those who are struggling every day to survive. It is important to bring awareness to the poverty that many financially better off individuals turn a blind eye to, opting to ignore the needy as it is “irrelevant” to their own lives. People above the poverty line often ignore those in need, thinking that those in need of dire assistance are not their problem and assuming that other organizations will be willing to help them. If everybody assumed this, then those in need would never get aid in creating a better life for themselves and their families. It is essential to understand how someone can become stuck in the cycle of poverty, as most often those impoverished come from families that also suffered from poverty. This is not always the case though, as one unfortunate event can change the course of someone’s life permanently. Individuals in poverty have obstacles that prevent them from obtaining a long term job to support themselves and their loved ones, such as unemployment and disability or injury.

Thousands of individuals are laid off or lose their jobs to unforeseen circumstances every day. Many of these people cannot find a job quick enough to continue to pay their bills and provide for their children, leading them down the route of poverty. Jobs can be difficult to find

and hours are hard to manage, especially when you have children to take care of. What is a mother to do when she does not have enough money for daycare, having to sacrifice job opportunities that would greatly help her family's situation? She cannot leave her child all alone, so she apologizes remorsefully for her baby's growling stomach. Those who came from an impoverished family often do not have a high education level, making it extremely difficult to find a well paying job to support themselves. Without a steady source of income, they are unable to pay their bills and keep necessities, such as air conditioning and electricity, on within their homes. Many lose their house or get kicked out of their apartment if they cannot pay rent on time, causing them to turn to the streets for shelter. Homeless people are stereotyped as "lazy" for not making an effort to find employment. This is normally not the case and observers do not understand the struggle of finding a steady job that pays well enough for all the expenses of life.

A small injury, internal or external, can put someone out of work for a long time. Those who were already on the edge of the poverty line, which is a salary below \$13,590 for an individual and \$23,030 for a family of three (Ney), plummet deeper into debt and are unable to make money to stay afloat. Medical treatment is extremely expensive and trying to pay for food and bills simultaneously is impossible for many families. People are forced to make a choice, having to decide what is more important to them, their health or food for their family and a roof to sleep under. Those below the poverty line likely do not have good health insurance, if any at all. Those who are injured and unable to provide for themselves then have to rely on what little the government will give them, having to stretch their cash until the end of the month to survive. One unfortunate accident can affect the rest of an individual's life, making them unable to live as they once did.

Every human has the right to the basic necessities of life. There are millions of homeless and impoverished families across America that are in need of food, employment, and shelter that go without for weeks at a time. Poverty is a vicious, sometimes inescapable, cycle that brings despair onto millions of Americans each day. Understanding how those individuals came to be below the poverty line is essential when attempting to get society to see more than just a faceless homeless person on the street. When one understands their struggles, it is harder to turn away and keep living one's life in oblivion. Poverty is a relevant, urgent issue that needs to be addressed. With everyone working together, it is possible to end poverty in America; one just has to open their eyes and truly see what is right in front of them.

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Senda de Vida

I was standing on the Mexican side of the border on March 16, 2023, when I saw a man scale the 30 foot black metal wall. I was stunned. Considering the barbed wire on the other side, as well as the 30 foot drop, I can only imagine that he was seriously injured in his attempt to come into the United States. I have no idea why he wanted to come into the United States, but it was obvious he was in a desperate situation. People try to come into the U.S. every single day, and most of them go through horrible things, only to get deported without an explanation. Are migrants really “poisoning the blood of our country”? Why does no one mention that our ancestors immigrated to the United States for the same reason that these people do now? There is a lack of any compassion and empathy, and this crisis will only get worse. As a person who was lucky enough to immigrate to this country through adoption at a young age, and having been to the southern U.S. border to serve and listen to countless migrants who are escaping terrible conditions, I can very well say that the neglect the U.S. has shown Central and South American migrants is the most urgent human rights issue of our time.

In the eight years following the beginning of construction of a wall on the southern border of the United States, there has never been more divide, despair, and anger. The wall

stands thirty feet tall and is a symbol of disunity. This is not a political issue, but rather a human rights violation. Continuing to build this wall creates separation and sends an aggressive message to the people of Central and South America. The United States is creating an imbalance, and the people seeking asylum are becoming more and more desperate. They hire coyotes to smuggle them across the border, paying enormous sums of money just for the small chance they actually make it.

Are we going to ignore the millions of people wanting the same opportunities that we have? Not enough people are speaking up, and what began as a problem has now become a large-scale human rights issue and violation. I have heard stories firsthand from these migrants about escaping a home life full of violence, sexual assault, and war. I listened to a father who told a story of being deported when his wife was on her deathbed. A mother separated from her daughter after childbirth because she's an "illegal alien". There needs to be change! The United States needs to wake up and listen to the people who need the most help.

The U.S. claimed that it was a "public safety issue" when they wouldn't allow any foreign person in the country during COVID-19. For the people attempting to escape from problems in their own country, this was devastating. Even following the pandemic, only a hundred people a day were given a court date for a judge to hear their case for asylum. In Mexico, I've seen people log onto their phones at 9:00 AM every morning, using the CBP One app, to try and get an appointment for a court hearing. Knowing that their chances are extremely slim, they don't expect much, but their faces of disappointment have had a lasting impact on me. My heart breaks for them, and the hundreds of thousands of people waiting for their chance. And if they want to bring their entire family, all of them need to receive an appointment time, which drags out the process even longer. The U.S. is destroying any hope that families had at a better

life and they still see these migrants as inferior. In no way are people from Central and South America inferior. They express optimism while facing this upward battle, even on the hardest days.

The lack of action on the immigration crisis has divided us and the people in Central and South America, created enough despair that people are willing to risk their lives climbing over a wall that we put in place, and rejects people trying to escape the danger of life back home. There is no clear-cut solution, but there needs to be a change in current policy, or the United States will be an example of ignorance and false hope, which is the exact opposite of what we say we stand for.