

Forum: Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)

Issue: Cultural rights of minorities and migrant communities in host countries

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Introduction

International migration has made many societies increasingly culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse. Migrants may move for employment, education, family reunification, conflict or persecution, creating an important policy question for host countries: how can migrant and minority communities preserve their cultural identities while successfully integrating into wider society?

Cultural rights form part of the International Human-Rights Framework. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) protects the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities to enjoy their culture, practise their religion and use their language (United Nations General Assembly, 1966). The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW) also requires States Parties to respect migrant workers' cultural identities (United Nations General Assembly, 1990).

However, cultural rights are not unlimited. Governments must also protect equality, public safety, children's rights and the rights of others. This is relevant because some cultural or religious practices may conflict with national laws or internationally recognised human rights. For example, governments may need to intervene when a practice results in discrimination, threatens public safety, limits a child's access to education, or restricts another person's freedom and equal treatment. At the same time, restrictions on cultural practices should not be used as an excuse to discriminate against migrant or minority communities. This creates tension between cultural preservation, integration, assimilation and social cohesion.

The issue should therefore not be treated simply as a choice between multiculturalism and assimilation. The challenge is to create societies where minorities and migrants can retain meaningful aspects of their identities while participating fully in the economic, political and social life of their host countries

Definition of Key Terms

Cultural Rights

Human rights concerning participation in cultural life and the ability to preserve, practise and develop cultural identity, language, religion and traditions.

Minority

A group within a state whose members share ethnic, religious, linguistic or cultural characteristics that distinguish them from the majority. There is no universally accepted legal definition.

Migrant

A person who moves away from their usual place of residence, either within or across international borders, for reasons such as employment, education, family or economic opportunities.

Refugee

A person who has fled their country because of persecution or serious threats and receives specific protection under international refugee law.

Host Country

The country where migrants or refugees reside after leaving their country of origin. It balances migrants' cultural rights with integration, equal treatment and social cohesion.

Assimilation

An approach in which migrants are expected to adopt the dominant culture, language and social norms of the host society, often with limited recognition of cultural differences.

Multiculturalism

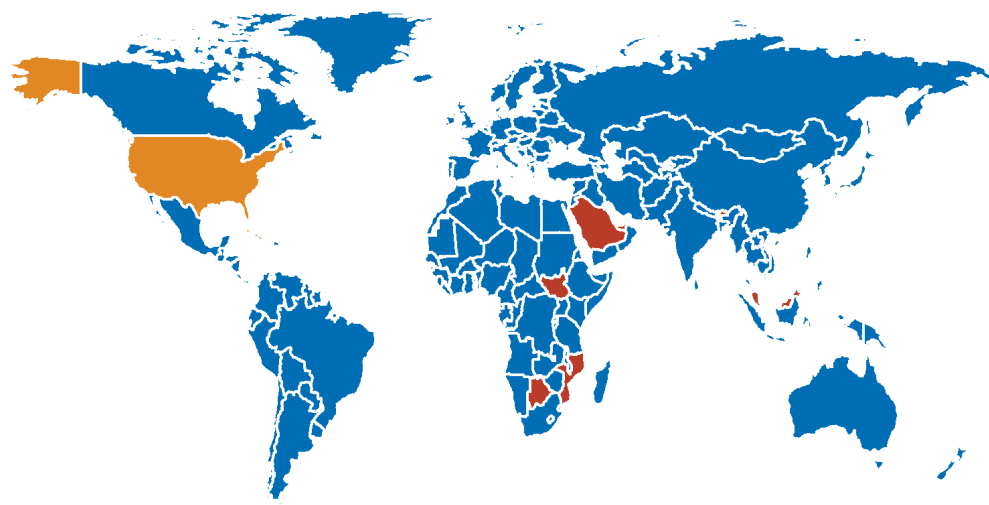
Policies recognising and accommodating cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity within a society.

Background information

Cultural rights became increasingly recognised after the Second World War through the development of International Human Rights Law. Article 27 of the ICCPR protects minority culture, religion and language. The 1992 UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities states that governments should protect minority identities and create conditions allowing minorities to develop their languages, religions and traditions (United Nations General Assembly, 1992). For migrant communities, Article 31 of the ICRMW requires States Parties to respect migrant workers' cultural identities and links with their countries of origin. UNESCO's 2005 Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions also provides an international framework for protecting cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2005).

Despite these frameworks, several interconnected issues continue to affect minorities and migrant communities. Language rights are important because access to education, public services, and cultural activities may become difficult when minority languages receive limited institutional support. Religious and cultural practices can also create debate when they interact with national laws, public institutions or integration policies. Another issue is cultural participation and representation: minority and migrant communities may have limited opportunities to participate in cultural institutions or see their traditions represented in public life.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)



Status of Ratification: ■ no action ■ signatory state ■ state party

Figure 1: Ratification status of the ICESCR, showing State Parties, signatory states and states that have taken no action.

A further challenge is balancing integration with cultural preservation. Host countries often seek to promote social cohesion and participation in national institutions, while minority and migrant communities may seek to maintain their languages, traditions and connections with their countries or communities of origin. These objectives are not necessarily incompatible, but disagreements can emerge over education, language policies, religious expression and public cultural practices. The issue therefore extends beyond simply recognising cultural rights in international law; governments must determine how these rights can be implemented while also addressing equality, social cohesion and other legal obligations.

Language and Education

Language is closely connected to cultural identity. Migrant communities may seek to teach heritage languages, establish community-language schools and use minority languages in cultural activities. However, knowledge of the host country's language is important for education, employment and civic participation. Policies should therefore combine host-language education with opportunities to preserve heritage languages. Schools are important because they can promote integration while addressing discrimination. Multicultural curricula, language support and teacher training can help migrant students participate fully without abandoning their identities (European Commission, 2025).

Religion and Cultural Expression

Religious freedom may involve religious clothing, places of worship, dietary requirements, holidays, and education. These issues can become controversial when cultural or religious practices conflict with national laws or other human rights.

Cultural rights also include participation in art, literature, music, festivals and other forms of expression. Supporting cultural participation can strengthen minority identities while encouraging communication between different communities (UNESCO, 2005).

Integration versus Assimilation

Supporters of multiculturalism argue that respecting cultural identities can create stronger feelings of belonging and reduce discrimination, while critics argue that excessive cultural separation may weaken social cohesion and create isolated communities (Bloemraad & Wright, 2014; Koopmans, 2013).

Research suggests neither full assimilation nor unrestricted multiculturalism is always successful. More balanced approaches promote cultural recognition while encouraging participation in shared institutions, national-language learning and intercultural contact (Koopmans, 2013; Kymlicka, 2010).

Major Countries and Organisations Involved

United Nation

The United Nations provides the main international legal framework for cultural and minority rights through the ICCPR, the ICRMW and the UN Minority Rights Declaration (United Nations General Assembly, 1966, 1990, 1992). Its general position supports non-discrimination, freedom of religion, linguistic rights and participation in cultural life. However, implementation remains primarily the responsibility of individual states.

UNESCO

UNESCO plays a major role in protecting cultural diversity. Its 2005 Convention encourages states to create conditions where different cultural expressions can develop and be shared. UNESCO generally supports cultural participation, intercultural dialogue and policies that allow minorities to contribute to national cultural life (UNESCO, 2005).

UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) focuses mainly on refugees. It defines integration as a two-way process in which refugees adapt to host societies while maintaining their cultural identities, and host institutions adjust to greater diversity. UNHCR therefore generally opposes forced assimilation and supports social, economic and cultural integration.

European Union

The EU's Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 addresses education, employment, healthcare, housing, anti-discrimination and political participation. The EU generally supports equal access to institutions alongside targeted assistance for migrants. However, individual member states differ greatly in their attitudes towards migration, multiculturalism and assimilation (European Commission, 2025).

Council of Europe

The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities protects language, religion, traditions and cultural heritage while encouraging effective participation in public life. However, its protections mainly apply to recognised national minorities, meaning newly arrived migrant communities may not always receive identical protections.

Canada

Canada adopted official multiculturalism in 1971 and passed the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988. Canadian policy generally supports the idea that people can maintain cultural identities while participating fully in Canadian society. It is therefore likely to support multiculturalism, anti-discrimination policies, intercultural dialogue and community participation.

Possible solutions

Establish National Cultural Rights Frameworks

States should establish clear national frameworks that guarantee freedom of culture, religion, language and lawful cultural organisation while protecting individuals from discrimination. These frameworks should clearly define the responsibilities of governments and public institutions toward minority and migrant communities. Cultural rights should remain consistent with international human-rights law and should not be used to justify

practices that violate the fundamental rights of others.

Combine Language Integration and Cultural Preservation

Governments should provide affordable and accessible host-language courses to help migrants participate in education, employment and public life. At the same time, communities should have opportunities to maintain their heritage languages through schools, community programmes, libraries and cultural organisations. This approach can support integration without requiring migrants and minorities to abandon important parts of their cultural identity.

Promote Intercultural Education

Schools should incorporate migration, human rights, cultural diversity and anti-discrimination into appropriate areas of the curriculum. Teachers should also receive training to work effectively in multilingual and multicultural classrooms (European Commission, 2025). Schools could organise intercultural activities and discussions that allow students from different backgrounds to learn about one another while developing respect for cultural differences.

Support Cultural Programmes

Governments and international organisations could provide funding for cultural festivals, libraries, community arts, heritage-language programmes, museums and sporting activities. Such programmes can provide opportunities for minority and migrant communities to preserve and share their cultural traditions. Funding should especially support activities that encourage interaction between different communities rather than creating greater social separation.

Strengthen Anti-Discrimination Measures

States should strengthen accessible systems for reporting discrimination and ensure that existing equality legislation is effectively enforced. Authorities should investigate credible complaints and provide appropriate remedies when discrimination occurs. Training for teachers, police officers, healthcare workers and other public officials could also help ensure that minority and migrant communities receive equal treatment when accessing public services.

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