

# General Assembly Third Committee (Social, Humanitarian and Cultural)

The [General Assembly Third Committee](#) focuses its discussions on social, humanitarian and cultural concerns that arise in the General Assembly, although its work often overlaps with that of other United Nations organs, including the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies. Human rights, education and cultural preservation are typical issues for the Third Committee. Notably, the Third Committee would not discuss the legal implications of human rights matters, as those are under the purview of the Sixth Committee, nor would it call for special studies or deploy monitors, as those tasks are handled by the Human Rights Council. Note: if the Security Council, which is given the primary task of ensuring peace and security by the Charter, is discussing a particular issue, the General Assembly Third Committee will cease its own deliberations and defer to the Security Council. Additionally, only the Fifth Committee is able to set or discuss the United Nations budget. No other body, including the Third Committee, is able to do so.

## Topic #1: Universal realization of the right of peoples to self-determination

The principle of self-determination concerns the right of people to have freedom from external rule, [to have the independence to choose their own form of government](#) and the liberties necessary to be an autonomous political entity. While the principle of self-determination also argues for all groups of people to have the opportunity to determine their political governance, there are tensions with other United Nations principles, [notably sovereignty](#). The concept of self-determination frequently challenges the fundamental international norm of state sovereignty, making international consensus difficult. Efforts and encouragement towards self-determination for various groups [compete with domestic government authority](#), challenge the [preservation of the existing governance structure](#) and call to question the available international protections

for peoples that are [refused recognition](#) by their existing governments. The tensions between self-determination and sovereignty, where [internal political negotiations are also beholden to support from other countries](#), create conditions for conflict. Despite the significance of the right of peoples to self-determination, there is no agreed upon mechanism for enforcement.

The [Charter of the United Nations](#) declares self-determination to be one of its most integral ideals. Additionally, the 1948 [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (UDHR) was one of the first international human rights documents to acknowledge the rights of all humans to political and social freedom. The UDHR promoted the movement towards independence for countries experiencing colonial occupation. In 1960, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the [Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples](#), calling for the end of colonial authority. The Declaration addressed the need for people, including those in [non-self governing territories](#) whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government, to [determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development](#). In 1966, the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) more thoroughly elaborated the rights of citizens to amnesty, the self-determination of liberty and rule of law, and freedom from arbitrary imprisonment and slavery. In the same year, the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) affirmed the right of all peoples to self-determination and required Member States to promote respect for and realization of that right. Subsequently, Security Council resolutions addressing various regional and intra-state conflicts repeatedly underscore the right to self-determination as necessary for the realization of human rights for all people. The General Assembly continued to prompt [colonial administering powers](#) to intensify negotiation and mediation with non-self-governing territories in order to [facilitate a fair and effective self-determination process](#). Such as in Western Sahara where disputes about leadership and control of the territory have required intervention and guidance by the [United Nation Mission to for the Referendum in Western Sahara](#).

Since 1946, the United Nations has tracked non-self-governing territories—there are currently [17 such territories](#), down from its initial 78—which largely consist of island territories in the Caribbean, Atlantic and Pacific. In recent years, the United Nations has paid special attention to the abilities of indigenous peoples to

exercise their right to self-determination within existing States, a shift from traditional applications of self-determination exercised through [referenda for independence or secession](#). The 2007 [Declaration on the Rights to Indigenous Peoples](#) called upon Member States to recognize that communities of indigenous peoples have the right to express their unique origins and identity. However, concerns about [how territories for indigenous peoples](#) are defined in the Declaration as well as the vast possible interpretations and applications of those definitions in legal frameworks serve as barriers towards self-determination for indigenous peoples.

In 2004, the United Nations recognized that violations of the right of people to self-determination and other human rights abuses resulted greatly from [foreign military occupation](#) and their participation in activities aimed at [overthrowing legitimate authorities](#). The United Nations stressed that when [mercenaries and private military contractors](#) are involved in foreign military intervention it serves as a threat to peace and security. In order to address the use of mercenaries and military force, the United Nations has encouraged the withdrawal of foreign forces in various regions, calling for full adherence to the principles of [non-interference, non-intervention, non-use of force or threat of use of force and the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force](#). The United Nations General Assembly further highlighted how the persistence of the occupation of territories perpetuated the conditions that uprooted people from their homes as refugees and displaced persons and [violated human rights treaties and the core humanitarian law conventions](#).

While the United Nations emphasizes the importance of the right of people to self-determination, progress towards accomplishing this right for all people is hindered by increased conflict and occupation across multiple regions. The General Assembly remains vigilant about the right of people to self-determination and continues to [promote the establishment, maintenance and strengthening of international peace](#)— including the [opposition of repression and aggression](#) by foreign militaries occupying territories. While progress on decolonization continues, the United Nations remains concerned about non-self-governing territories and affirms its support for [peoples under colonial rule](#) to exercise their right to self-determination.

## Questions to consider from your country's perspective:

- How can the United Nations reconcile its role in advocating for self-determination with the principle of State sovereignty?
- What further actions could be taken by the international community to mitigate war and conflict in non-self-governing territories that are pursuing self-determination?
- What factors hinder the international community—from non-governmental organizations to the United Nations—in reaffirming and protecting the right of peoples to self-determination?

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## Topic #2: Improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas

Rural women and girls often face particular barriers to social mobility and the realization of their fundamental rights including [unequal access to resources, education and political participation](#) while also remaining [targets of discrimination and violence](#). Although the international community recognizes that women and girls in rural areas play important roles in [eradicating poverty and enhancing sustainable rural development](#), their [food security, social protections against poverty and inclusion](#) remain compromised. In turn, women and girls in rural areas encounter greater risks of [economic growth stagnation and losing their livelihoods due to climate change](#) and the growing threats on sustainable agriculture. Improving the situation of the women and girls in rural areas necessitates increased access to educational opportunities, technology and technical assistance, and diverse economic activities to bridge the gender gap

and make progress towards achieving the goals established by the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW), a comprehensive culmination of the work of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. CEDAW maintained concern for the civil rights and legal protections of women and called for the elimination of discrimination against women. The convention emphasizes that discrimination against women [violates the principles of equal rights and respect for human dignity](#) and highlights the need for equal access to education for women in rural areas. During the [World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women](#) in 1980, the United Nations produced a report that identified persistent disparities between [women's guaranteed rights and their ability to exercise them](#). The report identified rural women and girls as a group requiring special attention due to socioeconomic disadvantages and historic barriers in education and employment. The report further indicated that most States had formally accepted the inclusion of women in development as a desirable [planning objective](#) and had enacted legislative provisions to promote equal rights. However, despite improved legislative frameworks, policies adopted by large transnational corporations employing rural women introduced [new forms of discrimination](#), leaving them vulnerable due to weak enforcement mechanisms. In 1985, the United Nations General Assembly recognized the particular challenges facing rural women and girls in a resolution on the [Improvement of The Situation of Women In Rural Areas](#) and encouraged Member States to share experiences in implementing lasting policies and strategies to [improve the economic and social conditions of women in rural areas](#).

In 1995, the United Nations released the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) which provided a blueprint and guidance on how to “[realize gender equality and the human rights of women and girls, everywhere.](#)” The Beijing Declaration promoted women’s economic independence, including rural women, by [addressing structural causes of poverty through changes in economic frameworks](#). The declaration further recognized the plight of women living in rural areas given development stagnation and the impacts of environmental degradation due to climate change. It noted that [macro- and microeconomic](#)

policies and programmes often failed to consider their impact on women and girl children living in poverty. It also highlighted the disproportionate environmental health risks faced by rural women and girls, whose livelihood and subsistence rely directly on sustainable ecosystems. While international efforts proceeded through the millennium to improve gender equality-including most notably the Millennium Development Goals-few initiatives paid specific attention to the situation in rural areas. The United Nations urged Member States to recognize the connection between the inclusion of local and indigenous women in rural areas with successful and long lasting peacebuilding. In 2008, the United Nations released the report [Rural Women in a Changing World: Opportunities and Challenges](#), which aimed to connect rural women to the global market and highlighted their critical role in supporting [their families' economic survival and contributing to both rural and national economies](#).

In recent years the United Nations and Member States have made substantial efforts to improve the situation for women and girls in rural areas. In 2008, the first [International Day of Rural Women](#) focused on the contribution of rural women to agricultural economies and food production. In recognition of their contributions, UN Women convened a meeting of experts to address [rural women's economic empowerment: institutions, opportunities and participation](#). The expert group recommended the active inclusion of rural women in the development and implementation of [policy instruments to advance environmentally sustainable agriculture](#). While gender disparities remained in educational access, 2008-2012 United Nations data demonstrated [improvements in primary school enrollment for girls](#) in rural developing countries. Maternal health also saw advancements during this time. The World Health Organization developed frameworks in 2010 for Member States to encourage [healthcare professionals to live and work in rural areas](#) which allowed for more births to take place under the assistance of skilled health personnel. Despite progress, women and girls in rural areas remain vulnerable due to compounding factors such as limited access to resources and services, limited opportunities for further education and training, the impacts of climate change, and ongoing [threats of gender-based violence](#).

With only five years remaining to address the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), the United Nations is still working towards finding solutions to

promote equitable access to economic resources and leadership positions for women and girls in rural areas. There is a pressing need for Member States to outline strategies for the women and girls to access quality services. Specifically, the United Nations is working on bridging the digital divide and finding ways to empower women and girls in rural areas through [equitable access to digital and communications technology](#). The United Nations notes that [affordability, safety and security training](#) alongside better digital infrastructure are crucial elements for successful implementation of equitable access to digital education, healthcare and communities. Bridging this divide further provides opportunities for rural women and girls—who often work in [informal](#) sectors and lack access to financial services—to [better protect themselves against financial risk](#), complementing the resourceful financial management strategies they already use. With [agriculture as the primary economic activity of women and girls in rural areas](#), the United Nations continues to be concerned about the range of resources available to them. Member States have demonstrated that [empowering women's land rights can enable greater participation in community governance and decision-making](#) and yet legal rights to land ownership and the ability to operate formal business remain fundamental issues for rural women.. To continue to address the limitations on agricultural ownership, decision making and engagement for women and girls in rural areas, the United Nations General Assembly designated [2026 as the Year of the Woman Farmer](#) to raise awareness on the challenges and disparities that face women in agriculture.

### **Questions to consider from your country's perspective:**

- How can the stagnation and loss of progress in achieving gender equality in rural areas be reversed?
- Quantifying the gender gap is difficult; what are the gaps in data needed to find solutions to closing the gender gap?
- What role do artificial intelligence and other digital technologies play in closing gender gaps for rural women?

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