



Rights and responsibilities

We at Population Matters believe in respect for human rights, both for their own sake and as a prerequisite for long-term sustainability.

According to the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...”* and everyone is entitled to the rights and freedoms in the Declaration, *“without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status....”*

The many entitlements listed in the declaration include freedom from slavery and torture, the right to recognition under the law, equal entitlement to protection against discrimination, the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty, the right to marry given the full and free consent of the parties concerned, and the right to found a family. The full declaration, comprising a preamble and 30 articles, can be found on the UN website.¹

Following the 1968 UN Conference on Human Rights, the following was added: *“Parents have a basic human right to determine freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children.”* This wording protects the right to choose both to have and not to have children, the latter of which is especially important for women in the developing world.

The problem with the wording as it stands with regards to sustainability is that it does imply that individuals are entitled to have as many children as they wish. However, rights are usually subject to the

proviso that exercising them does not violate the rights of, or do fundamental harm to, other rights-holders.

When taken in isolation, the number of children any one person has does not harm or violate the rights of others. Collectively, however, at societal level, the number of children born has a fundamental effect on the prosperity and sustainability of their communities and ultimately that of humanity as a whole. The ethical position is very similar to that of an individual’s direct contribution to climate change — if one person flies round the world ten times per year it makes negligible difference, but should millions choose to do so this would bring about an environmental disaster. In truth, for all to survive and flourish within the limits of our only planet, we have to downsize both consumption and population.

We call on all people to take responsibility for limiting the size of their families. Not only should every child be a wanted child, but we need to move to a position where having zero, one or two children is perceived as the environmentally-responsible choice. This is an ethical imperative for survival of human life as we know it, for future human generations and for the future of the countless other species with which we share the earth.

Read more about [women’s rights](#).

Read more about [personal contributions to sustainability](#).

References

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¹ <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>