

WILPF ‘Quick Guide’: Human Rights Council

What is the Human Rights Council?

The Human Rights Council is the main United Nations body responsible for human rights. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) is the secretariat for the Human Rights Council, as it was for the Commission on Human Rights.

How does it work?

The Human Rights Council is an intergovernmental body of 47 member States based in Geneva. It meets for at least 10 weeks a year spread over no fewer than three sessions, and can also hold special sessions. The HRC is a subsidiary body of the General Assembly. Its role includes addressing violations of human rights, including gross and systematic violations, and the promotion of effective coordination and the mainstreaming of human rights within the United Nations system.

NGO/Civil Society Participation:

The General Assembly acknowledged in resolution 60/251 the vital role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society actors at national, regional, and international levels in the

promotion and protection of human rights. These practices and arrangements for NGO/civil society participation in Council sessions continues to develop and evolve, with the Council required to ensure “the most effective contribution” of observers.

Sessions:

The Council meets at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, for at least three regular sessions a year, for a total duration of no less than



The Human Rights Council Chamber

10 weeks. The Council’s main (four-week) session is usually held in March.

Special Sessions of the Council may be requested by member States, and will be granted if supported by at least one third of other Council member States.

The Council organizes panel discussions and special events on specific issues. By September 2008 the Council had held six of these events, including annual discussions on the rights of persons with disabilities and the integration of a gender perspective into its work and the work of its mechanisms.

Universal Periodic Review

The Council monitors the fulfillment by each of the United Nations 192 Member States of its human rights obligations and commitments through the mechanism of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The UPR is based on an interactive dialogue with the State under review.

The UPR is to be seen as a process composed of several steps within a four-year cycle:

- The **preparation of information** to form the basis of the review including information prepared by the State under review (national

reports), a compilation of United Nations information prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), and a summary of stakeholders' submissions, which is also prepared by OHCHR;

- The **review** itself, which takes place in the Working Group on the UPR, composed of the 47 member States of the Council, which meets in three two-weeks sessions each year;
- The **consideration** and adoption of review outcome documents by the Council at its regular sessions; and
- **Follow-up** to the implementation of UPR outcomes by reviewed States.

Relevant stakeholders, including (NGOs), human rights defenders, academic institutions and research institutes, regional organizations and civil society representatives, may participate in some of these steps.

Complaint procedure

The complaint procedure is based on communications received from individuals, groups or organizations that claim to be victims of human rights violations or that have direct, reliable

knowledge of such violations. Two distinct working groups—the Working Group on Communications and the Working Group on Situations—are responsible, respectively, for examining communications and bringing consistent patterns of gross and reliably attested violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms to the Council's attention.

The Council examines reports of the Working Group on Situations in a confidential manner (unless it decides otherwise) and may:

- Discontinue its consideration of a situation when further consideration or action is not warranted;
- Keep a situation under review and request the State concerned to provide further information within a reasonable time;
- Keep a situation under review and appoint an independent and highly qualified expert to monitor the situation and to report back to the Council; or
- Recommend that OHCHR should provide technical cooperation, capacity-building assistance or advisory services to the State concerned.