

# International Human Rights Standards in High-School Textbooks

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The concept of international human rights is still unfamiliar to many in Japan. Koshi Yamazaki in his book *International Human Rights—to know, to research, to think*, (Osaka: Buraku Liberation Publishing House, 1997) explains that international human rights standards should be recognized and realized internationally and domestically.

How are international human rights standards treated in high-school textbooks?

This article examines documents that refer mainly to international human rights law, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. This article also discusses how apartheid was abolished, as described in 17 high-school textbooks used in the contemporary society (*gendai-shakai*) subject.

## Social Studies in Elementary, Junior, and Senior High School

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology authorizes private publishers to produce textbooks and determines the fundamental standards, objectives, and content of all subjects.

### Social studies in elementary school

Students start to learn social studies from third grade in elementary school. In third grade, students learn about public institutions and the environment where they live (ward,

town, village). In fourth grade, students learn about the industries and cultures in neighboring regions and prefectures. In fifth grade, students learn mainly about industry, trade, and population in the whole country. In sixth grade, students learn about international organizations such as the United Nations as well as the history, politics, and economics of Japan, which are linked to social studies in junior high school.

### Civics in junior high school

Social studies in junior high school consists of three areas: geography, history, and civics.

The civics curriculum is as follows:

- Contemporary social life
  - Individual and society
  - Contemporary culture and life
  - Information and society
- Improvement of the nation and economy
  - Our daily life and the economy
  - The nation's welfare
  - Economics and international cooperation
- Democracy and international society
  - Respect for people and the Constitution
  - Democracy and political participation
  - International society and peace.

\*Translated from Japanese to English by Masumi Yamashina.

### Social studies in senior high school

Social studies consists of geography and history, and civics. Civics consists of contemporary society, ethics, and politics and economics. Senior high school students may choose either contemporary society or ethics and politics and economics.

The six-year elementary and three-year junior high school are compulsory. Senior high school is not. However, 94% of students go on to senior high school full-time. If we count those who study part-time or take correspondence courses or attend vocational high schools, 97.3% of all students go beyond junior high school.

### Contemporary society in senior high school

The curriculum prescribes the following:

- People and cultures in contemporary society
  - Climate and life
  - Life and tradition in Japan
  - Contemporary society and challenges facing younger people
- Environment and human life
  - Protection of the environment, and ethics
- Politics and economics
  - Changing regional society
  - The nation's welfare and the government's economic activities
  - The Constitution and democracy
  - Democratic ethics
- International society
  - Changing international politics
  - Trends in international economics and cooperation
  - Challenges facing humankind.

Following the guidelines, 11 publishers have published 17 textbooks on contemporary society. However, the publishers decide on the books' topics and explanations. Below are typical observations of several textbooks.

#### • *International human rights standards*

Generally, two topics in the books mention international human rights documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In Constitution and democracy, 16 of 17 textbooks discuss fundamental human rights. In international organizations and challenges facing humankind, 14 textbooks discuss human rights documents.

Three textbooks take up the Equal Employment Opportunity Law, and the link between the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and democratic ethics. Six books discuss the UDHR. Eight take up international human rights under selected topics such as contemporary social concerns.

Some topics are as follows:

- The challenge of building peace and respecting human rights
- The end of apartheid in South Africa
- The rights of indigenous peoples and international protection of human rights
- Foreign laborers in Japan
- UN activities: commitment to maintain peace and protect human rights
- The children are our future
- Internal internationalization.

#### • *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*

These documents are cited in all the textbooks. Fifteen mention the UDHR in footnotes or the reference section, and include excerpts. Eleven contain comments such as "The UDHR sets the principles and standards of international protection of human rights" and "The UDHR proclaims that human rights should be protected internationally." Six books that do not directly mention the meaning of the UDHR mention international protection of human rights and then introduce the UDHR:

- “Human rights are not only the concern of the state and nation, but also of people everywhere, and should be protected regardless of where and whose rights they are.”
- “The protection of human rights is of international concern. For example, discrimination against and oppression of ethnic minorities and opposition groups are subject to sanction and criticism from international organizations.”
- “The protection of human rights is becoming a worldwide concern.”

Nine books give the historical background of international protection of human rights. One states: “The need for international protection of human rights was strongly felt in the aftermath of the scourge of war and the fascist suppression of freedom and human rights.”

Fifteen books explain this idea: “The covenants were made to give concrete shape to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They create legally binding obligations for each contracting party to implement the covenants.”

- *The Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*

The CRC is found in the index of all the textbooks. Fifteen have the CEDAW in their indexes, seven mention the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and two mention the Convention on the Status of Refugees. No textbook mentions all four conventions.

All 10 textbooks that mention the link of human rights with Japanese domestic law also mention the CEDAW and Equal Employment Opportunity Law, stating that “to ratify these conventions, domestic laws must be made consistent with the contents of the convention. The Equal Employment Opportunity Law was enacted in line with CEDAW.” Four books

mention the CEDAW and the amendment of the Nationality Law, and one mentions CEDAW and coeducational domestic science classes.

The government ratified the CEDAW in 1985 after amending the Nationality Law in 1984 (which used to allow Japanese nationality only to those whose father was Japanese, and now allows it if either parent is Japanese), the Courses of Study (allowing both boys and girls to learn domestic science), and the Labor Standards Act (to make the sexes equal in employment). The government also enacted the Equal Employment Opportunity Law.

- *Changing the world by protecting international human rights*

Thirteen books have “apartheid” in their indexes and 10 explain the abolition of apartheid as international protection of human rights. The descriptions are mainly concrete:

- “Violations of human rights will be criticized not only by the state but also by international society, which called apartheid in South Africa a gross infringement of human rights.”
- “The United Nations adopted again and again resolutions against apartheid, and imposed economic sanctions on South Africa.”
- “Western countries imposed economic sanctions on South Africa, and the international community supported the movement for liberation.”

- *Making international human rights easier to understand*

All the textbooks mention the UDHR and international covenants, and almost all describe them in detail. Over half the textbooks mention the CEDAW, and the abolition of apartheid. However, the textbooks’ descriptions and degree of detail vary. Some have only brief descriptions. Textbooks should show how these instruments can be used to protect human

rights domestically and internationally. If students think of international protection of human rights as an issue involving only foreign countries and of humanitarian assistance, they will not easily see that the problem has an important domestic impact. Eight textbooks link the CEDAW and domestic law, and also discuss the abolition of apartheid. Two do not have the CEDAW or apartheid in their indexes. The textbooks, therefore, impart different understandings of international human rights.

The textbooks not only explain political and economic systems, but also bring up the challenges of contemporary society. For example,

“the North-South issue” is found in 15 books, “the problem of cumulative debt” in 13, “the issue of refugees” in 13, and “Amnesty International” in 9.

### **Conclusion**

To better understand international human rights, students must not only learn about international treaties but also examine the various domestic and international challenges in light of the international protection of human rights.