

The Legacy of Slavery and Racism in International Relations: Understanding Modern Human Rights Issues through the Lens of the Emancipation Proclamation

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ABSTRACT

The abolition of slavery, formally declared through the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, represented a watershed moment in the global pursuit of human rights. Yet, the end of legalised slavery did not dissolve the structural and institutionalised racism that continues to shape international relations and global governance. This study examines the enduring legacy of slavery and its impact on the development of human rights discourse within the international system. While slavery as an institution was dismantled in the nineteenth century, racial hierarchies and discriminatory ideologies became embedded in treaties, legal frameworks, and global institutions, perpetuating unequal power relations among states and peoples. Employing a qualitative research design, the study analyses treaties, historical records, and critical literature to trace how racialised thinking was reproduced in international law and policy. The findings reveal that systemic racism persists in the operations of international organisations, the application of human rights norms, and the treatment of marginalised groups across borders. These dynamics demonstrate that the legacies of slavery continue to hinder genuine equality in global governance. By highlighting these continuities, the study underscores the urgent need for a reassessment of international norms and practices. It argues that confronting historical injustices requires a deliberate commitment by global actors to acknowledge, redress, and dismantle entrenched racial inequalities. Ultimately, the paper calls for a more inclusive and equitable international order that not only recognises the historical roots of human rights struggles but also actively advances justice in the present.

Keywords: Slavery, Racism, Emancipation Proclamation, Human Rights, Racial Capitalism,

INTRODUCTION

During the "New Imperialism" era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, seven Western European powers, Belgium, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, invaded, conquered, and colonised most of Africa in the Scramble for Africa, also known as the Partition of Africa, the Conquest of Africa, or the Rape of Africa. These powers were motivated by the Second Industrial Revolution (Pakenham, 2020). Ten per cent of the continent was officially governed by Europe in 1870. This percentage increased to about 90% by 1914; the only nations that still maintained their sovereignty were Liberia, Ethiopia, Egbaland, according to Daly (2019), the Egbaland United Government, a government of the Egbaland people, was legally recognised as independent by the British until it was annexed into the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria in 1914, along with Aussa, Senusiyya, Mbunda, the Dervish State, the Darfur Sultanate, and the Ovambo kingdoms, most of which were later conquered. It is important to note that no African countries were invited or permitted to sit at the table where they were scrambled (Bassil, 2006; Brantlinger, 1985; Fokkens, 2023; Uzoigwe, 1984).

The 1884 Berlin Conference, which governed European colonies and trade in Africa, is regarded as indicative of the "scramble". The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw intense political rivalry between European empires, which fuelled colonialism. The latter years of the nineteenth century saw a shift from "informal imperialism" (military influence and economic domination) to direct rule. With the decline of European colonial empires following the two World Wars, most African colonies gained independence during the Cold War and decided to maintain their colonial borders at the Organisation of African Unity conference in 1964 due to fears of civil wars and regional instability, emphasising Pan-Africanism (Bassil, 2006; Brantlinger, 1985; Fokkens,

2023; Pakenham, 2020; Uzoigwe, 1984). The legacy of slavery persists in modern society, causing racial disparities in education, employment, healthcare, and justice systems. These issues are rooted in historical and systemic factors, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of their historical context and ongoing implications.

The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Lincoln in 1863, serves as a crucial historical reference point for understanding the evolution of human rights issues related to racism and slavery. Racism, a belief that race is an important factor in human traits and capacities, is a persistent issue in International Relations (IR), with historical events like slavery and colonialism impacting contemporary human rights issues. The study of racism in IR and the legacy of the Emancipation Proclamation remains a critical area of research with significant implications for human rights and social justice. Lukin (2020) and Ugwanyi et al. (2025) posit that it is safe to analyse racism through the lens of Karl Marx's "class struggle". Racism remains a persistent issue in IR, with historical events like slavery and colonialism impacting contemporary human rights issues. The study of racism in IR and the legacy of the Emancipation Proclamation remains a critical area of research, with significant implications for human rights and social justice (Lukin, 2020; & Ugwanyi et al., 2025).

Racism in IR implies the existence of discrimination, prejudice, or antagonism within nation-states. Racism is not a factor that enters nation-states from the outside but rather is racialised from the emergence of imperial polities and continues to reproduce racialised hierarchies. Since the formation of nation-states, racism has been the main factor salient in IR. The Emancipation Proclamation and the abolition of the slave trade led to a century of racial violence against black people, thousands of lynchings, mass killings, and a presupposition of insignificance and guilt that persists to this day. (Brown, 2020). Arguing that race is not just a perspective on IR, Zvobgo and Loken, (2020) emphasized that, racism is a central organizing feature of world politics, they claimed that "anti-Japanese racism guided and sustained U.S engagement in World War II," "broader anti-Asian sentiment influenced the development and structure of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," and "During the Cold War, racism and anti-communism were inextricably linked in the containment strategy that defined Washington's approach to Africa, Asia, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America." In the opinion, Zvobgo and Loken, (2020) today "race shapes threat perception and responses to violent extremism, inside and outside the 'war on terror'". This could be what Prompted Bhambra, et al., (2020) to ask; "Why Is Mainstream IR Blind to Racism"? Universal racism is an ideology that consolidates American centrism by extrapolating racism to the entire world's history, inflating it and becoming a major factor in social development. (BusumtwiSam & Kashyap, 2025; Lukin, 2020; Ugwanyi et al., 2025).

The concept of racism was used to divide European and African Americans based on their ancestral enslavement. Proponents justified this system by portraying the United States as a champion of human freedom and democracy. However, the conspiracy theory emerged after George Floyd's brutal murder in Minneapolis, six weeks after the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, who were blacks killed by white fathers and sons. This led to a growing awareness of racism and anti-Blackness in America. This has resulted in a more inclusive and just society, acknowledging the long-standing discrimination that has historically disadvantaged African Americans. (Brown, 2020; Tanyu, 2020). The 19th-century European colonisation of Africa led to the destruction of traditional African societies and economies. This historical racism becomes complex in modern IR, creating a perpendicular split between white and non-white peoples.

The United Nations acknowledged the need for reparatory justice to address the lasting impacts of slavery and colonialism. (United Nations, 2024). Furthermore, academic analyses reveal that international legal systems have historically marginalised non-European perspectives, thereby sustaining a Eurocentric worldview that often overlooks the rights and experiences of formerly colonised populations (Anderson, 2023). This study critically scrutinises the intersection of historical emancipation efforts and present-day IR, exploring how the vestiges of slavery continue to influence human rights practices and policies. Focusing on the historical impact of the Emancipation Proclamation on international human rights and its role in shaping legal frameworks. It also investigates the persistence of systemic racism, rooted in slavery, in contemporary IR and global governance structures. The study evaluates contemporary human rights challenges, focusing on marginalised African descendant communities. It critically assesses the effectiveness of international legal instruments in addressing the enduring impacts of slavery and racism. The study proposes policy recommendations to mitigate the legacy of slavery and combat systemic racism in IR and human rights practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical Context of Slavery

Slavery has existed across cultures, ethnicities, and religions before the dawn of civilisation. The agricultural conditions during the Neolithic Revolution made mass chattel slavery practicable in a variety of nations. Slavery was institutionalised by the time the earliest civilisations appeared, such as Sumer in Mesopotamia circa 3500 BC. Slavery was widespread and commonplace in Africa from the 15th to the 18th centuries. Various types of slavery occurred in African communities, including court slaves, household slaves, and agricultural labourers. European involvement in the transatlantic slave trade dates to the 16th century, when Portuguese merchants began sending enslaved Africans to their American possessions. During the transatlantic slave trade, millions of Africans were forcibly removed from their homes and transported across the Atlantic Ocean in appalling conditions. Over the course of four centuries, nearly 12.5 million Africans were arrested and sent to the Americas, leaving only 10.7 million survivors. This trade had severe consequences for African communities, depriving them of their healthiest and most capable individuals (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2017; Uzuegbunam et al., 2024; Webb, 2023).

Slavery became legal in North America by the early 18th century, with the first known arrival of enslaved Africans in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. By the middle of the nineteenth century, there were approximately four million enslaved persons in the United States alone. The Civil War (1861-1865) resulted in substantial changes to slavery in America, including President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which declared all enslaved people free. However, the legacy of slavery continues to have an impact on American culture, as seen by continuous conversations about race relations and social justice movements aiming at correcting historical injustice. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 during the American Civil War, was a watershed moment in American history. It declared that all enslaved individuals in Confederate-held territories would be freed (Blackiston, 1922). While it was an important step towards eradicating slavery, its immediate impact was limited because it did not apply to Border States or areas under Union rule. However, it represented a commitment to human rights and laid the framework for future civil rights advancements. After formal abolition, African Americans faced systemic racism and discrimination through Jim Crow laws and other oppressive measures that sought to maintain white supremacy. The legacy of slavery continues to influence American society today through ongoing discussions about racial relations and social justice movements aimed at addressing historical injustices (Bhattacharyya & Bhattacharyya, 2020; Katz, 2024; Mueller, 2022; Read, 2023).

A growing body of literature has documented how refugee protection systems reveal racialised hierarchies in international law. While refugee law is formally race-neutral, the treatment of refugees exposes stark disparities. Studies show that refugees from African and Middle Eastern countries face higher barriers to asylum, detention, and deportation compared to those from Europe (Achiime, 2021; FitzGerald, 2019). The differential treatment of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 compared to African and Syrian refugees illustrates how humanitarianism is often mediated by racial logics (De Genova, 2022). This case study demonstrates how the legacies of slavery and colonial racialisation continue to influence who is considered worthy of protection under international law. It further highlights the persistence of racial bias within contemporary human rights frameworks, aligning with findings that emancipation-era racial hierarchies remain operative today.

2.2 Evolution of Human Rights Discourse

Following World War II, a global movement to recognise human rights emerged, leading to the establishment of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. However, systematic racism persists in various forms, impacting diplomatic initiatives, trade agreements, and humanitarian operations. Countries with a colonial past are often scrutinised for their treatment of minority communities, and immigration regulations often reflect racial biases, limiting global mobility and resource access. (Ramcharan, 2021; Mahoney & Mahoney, 2023). Human rights discourse has evolved in a complex and dynamic manner, shaped by historical events, intellectual concepts, and the collective experiences of societies worldwide. According to Nowak (2021), the discourse on human rights can be divided into three generations, each reflecting different societal demands and beliefs. The first is Civil and Political Rights. This initial generation of human rights emerged predominantly during the Enlightenment era of the 17th and 18th centuries. These rights, often referred to as civil and political

rights, prioritise individual liberties and protections against state abuses. They include fundamental rights such as the right to life, free expression, freedom from torture, and the right to participate in governance. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) are significant agreements that define these rights. Historically, these rights were developed in response to oppressive governments that restricted individual liberty. The Magna Carta (1215), the English Bill of Rights (1689), and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) established the core principles that would eventually shape international human rights legislation. However, during periods such as the Cold War, there was widespread criticism of how these rights took precedence over social and economic rights (Ramcharan, 2021; Mahoney & Mahoney, 2023; Nowak, 2021).

With the industrialised societies of the 19th century, new demands emerged concerning economic stability and social welfare. This led to the recognition of second-generation rights (economic, social, and cultural rights), which emphasise equality and access to essential commodities and services necessary for a dignified life. These include the right to work, education, healthcare, decent living conditions, and cultural participation. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) articulates these rights, but implementation has historically been challenging due to differing national priorities. Critics have often regarded these rights as less vital than civil and political rights; nonetheless, there is increasing recognition that they are equally important for safeguarding human dignity (Fitzgerald, 2024; Ramcharan, 2021; Mahoney & Mahoney, 2023; Nowak, 2021).

Economic, social, and cultural rights are essential human rights recognised in international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). States have a legal obligation to respect, protect, and fulfil these rights, avoiding interference with their enjoyment. They must also prevent third parties from violating these rights and take positive steps to facilitate their realisation by providing necessary resources or services. The principle of "progressive realisation" recognises that immediate fulfilment may not be achievable due to resource limitations. Implementing second-generation rights presents challenges such as resource allocation, political will, and monitoring mechanisms. Governments often find it difficult to prioritise economic security amidst competing demands, and the political environment can influence their commitment to ESCR obligations. Furthermore, effective monitoring mechanisms at national and international levels are often absent for assessing compliance with ESCR obligations. (Fitzgerald, 2024; Ramcharan, 2021; Mahoney & Mahoney, 2023; Nowak, 2021). Second-generation rights are vital to ensure that all individuals can live a dignified life free from poverty and hardship. They highlight the connection between individual well-being and societal structures that promote fair access to fundamental resources such as education, healthcare, employment opportunities, housing security, and cultural participation.

In recent decades, a third generation of human rights has developed to address global issues such as poverty, environmental damage, conflict, and globalisation. These solidarity rights tackle common challenges like the right to development, peace, a healthy environment, humanitarian aid, and self-determination. Third-generation rights are vital for tackling modern concerns that cannot be resolved solely through individualist approaches and must be addressed at both national and international levels. They include entitlements such as education, health, employment, an adequate standard of living, and cultural rights. These rights are recognised in international instruments like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The legal foundation for second-generation rights is laid out through international treaties, such as the UDHR, which sets out fundamental human rights that should be universally protected. The ICESCR, adopted in 1966, highlights the principle of "progressive realisation," where states have a legal duty to respect, protect, and fulfil these rights, recognising that immediate full implementation may not be achievable due to resource limitations or other factors. (Fitzgerald, 2024; Ramcharan, 2021; Mahoney & Mahoney, 2023; Nowak, 2021).

Third-generation rights, which are linked with first- and second-generation rights, face implementation challenges such as resource allocation, political will, and monitoring mechanisms. Resource allocation is vital for economic security, while political will shapes government priorities. Monitoring mechanisms are often insufficient at both national and international levels. These rights focus on collective interests like development, peace, a healthy environment, and cultural heritage. They affirm that all individuals have the right to participate in economic, social, cultural, and political development. The right to peace is essential for realising other human

rights, and humanitarian assistance remains crucial during crises. Third-generation rights are less legally binding than first- or second-generation rights, and accountability presents a significant challenge, as they frequently require action from the international community rather than individual states (Fitzgerald, 2024; Ramcharan, 2021; Mahoney & Mahoney, 2023; Nowak, 2021). Third-generation solidarity rights address collective needs and responsibilities, recognising that individual well-being is fundamentally connected to societal conditions. Global cooperation is essential in addressing issues such as poverty, environmental degradation, conflict resolution, and sustainable development.

2.3 Interdependence of Human Rights and racism

Scholars have increasingly demonstrated that many international treaties adopted after slavery and colonialism did not dismantle racial hierarchies but instead preserved them. Research highlights that the very structure of global governance was based on treaties that favoured colonial powers while marginalising newly emancipated or colonised peoples (Pahuja, 2020). These continuities show how the ideology of racial superiority persisted even after formal abolition, affecting the distribution of resources, the recognition of sovereignty, and the framing of human rights. For instance, international economic treaties often imposed asymmetrical obligations that reinforced dependency, echoing the exploitative philosophies of slavery and empire (Getachew, 2019). This body of work underscores that colonial legacies remain embedded in treaty law, complicating efforts to realise universal human rights. The Vienna Declaration of 1993 emphasises that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interconnected (Mubangizi, 2025; Porter, 2020). This indicates that civil liberties cannot be fully realised without addressing economic inequalities, and social welfare cannot be achieved without protecting political freedoms. The discourse on human rights continues to grow today, with new issues emerging from technological advances in fields such as genetic engineering and artificial intelligence. As cultures adapt to these developments, alongside traditional challenges like discrimination or inequality based on race or gender identity, ongoing dialogue will shape future understandings of human dignity. The principles of universality, equality, and non-discrimination form the foundation of human rights. The interdependence of human rights refers to the idea that all human rights are interconnected and that the violation of one can negatively impact others' realisation. This concept is especially crucial when considering racism, as it shows how racial discrimination undermines not only individual rights but also the broader framework of human rights (Lerner, 2024; Mubangizi, 2025; Porter, 2020).

The interdependence of human rights and racism is a crucial area of study, as systemic racism undermines the realisation of fundamental human rights. Racism, particularly in its systemic form, infringes upon multiple human rights simultaneously, leading to disparities in education, healthcare, employment, and access to justice. This form of racism operates across various levels, including institutional policies, social norms, and individual behaviours, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination and inequality. International legal frameworks aim to eliminate racial discrimination through binding treaties and transformative norms, but their effectiveness in eradicating racism has been questioned. For example, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) provides a comprehensive definition of racial discrimination but has historically focused on addressing acts of racial discrimination without explicitly defining or prohibiting racism itself. This oversight limits the law's capacity to tackle the ideological and systemic aspects of racism (Lerner, 2024; Mubangizi, 2025; Porter, 2020).

Systemic racism has profound implications for the enjoyment of human rights, manifesting in various forms, such as environmental racism, where marginalised communities are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, violating their rights to health and a safe environment. Additionally, systemic racism contributes to disparities in mental health outcomes among people of colour, as chronic exposure to discrimination and inequality leads to increased stress and psychological distress. Incorporating intersectionality into human rights frameworks ensures a more comprehensive and effective response to racism and its multifaceted impacts (Roberts et al., 2022). The interdependence of human rights and racism underscores the importance of addressing systemic racism to realise the full range of human rights for all individuals. International legal frameworks must evolve to define and prohibit racism in all its forms, and policies must adopt intersectional approaches to combat the complex nature of racial discrimination. The connection between human rights and racism highlights the need for comprehensive methods to dismantle systemic disparities while fostering universal respect for all fundamental freedoms.

The Emancipation Proclamation and Its Global Impact

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 is often regarded as a crucial moment in the abolition of slavery; nonetheless, its language reveals both liberatory aims and inherent limitations. Lincoln's edict explicitly states that "all persons held as slaves within the rebellious states are, and henceforward shall be free" (Emancipation Proclamation, 1863, para. 1). However, the decree only applied to Confederate-controlled territory, leaving slavery intact in Union-aligned border states. Scholars such as Foner (2019) argue that selective emancipation shows how freedom was depicted as a wartime necessity rather than a universal moral principle, thereby establishing the foundation for a racialised citizenship in the United States. The Emancipation Proclamation not only altered the course of American history but also had international ramifications. It signalled a shift in the moral compass of nations, prompting global debates on human rights and the legitimacy of slavery. However, scholars argue that the proclamation's influence on international law remains underexplored, necessitating a deeper examination of its role in shaping global anti-slavery norms (Banaji et al., 2021; Gevers, 2023). The Emancipation Proclamation was a pivotal moment in American history that changed the course of the Civil War and had significant international implications.

The proclamation also paved the way for the United States to officially recognise Haiti, a former slave colony that had gained independence from France in 1804. This recognition was seen to shore up independence movements in the hemisphere and counterbalance European influence (Banaji et al., 2021; Gevers, 2023).

The Emancipation Proclamation, a key event in the Civil War, played a significant role in shaping foreign public opinion and diplomatic relations. It linked the Union's war efforts to the abolition of slavery, garnering support from anti-slavery nations, particularly in Europe. Countries like the United Kingdom and France, which had already abolished slavery, found it politically untenable to support the Confederacy, diminishing its chances of official recognition and support. The proclamation also served as a diplomatic tool, reinforcing the Union's moral stance and deterring foreign intervention. This shift in foreign public opinion effectively ended the Confederacy's hopes of gaining international recognition. The moral implications of supporting a slave-holding entity became a significant deterrent for foreign powers. The proclamation also inspired global movements against slavery and colonialism, underscoring the United States' commitment to human rights and setting a precedent for future international human rights initiatives. The Emancipation Proclamation was a strategic move with profound international implications, redefining the Civil War as a fight against slavery (Falcão, 2024; Roycraft, 2024; Wilson, 2024).

The Proclamation had a profound impact on British policy, making it politically and morally untenable for Great Britain to officially recognise or intervene on behalf of the Confederacy. It also tested the extent of anti-slavery sentiment in Britain. Despite initial British scepticism, the Proclamation effectively leveraged Britain's strong abolitionist principles. Confederate attempts to counter this by offering to ban the import of slaves were largely ineffective once the Proclamation was issued. The succeeding Union triumphs at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in 1863 strengthened the Union's military position, hastening the process and putting an end to any serious talk of British intervention. The Emancipation Proclamation linked the Union cause to the elimination of slavery, preventing foreign involvement and assuring the Confederacy would either drown or swim (Anderson, 2023; Falcão, 2024; Roycraft, 2024; Wilson, 2024). The Emancipation Proclamation fundamentally altered international perceptions of the American Civil War, transforming it from a conflict solely about preserving the Union to a moral crusade against slavery, discouraging European intervention, particularly from Great Britain, which could not morally or politically support a slaveholding Confederacy.

Systemic Racism in IR

Systemic racism is a pervasive issue that extends beyond domestic borders, influencing IR and global politics. The historical foundations of IR are deeply intertwined with racial hierarchies established during colonial times, where white supremacy played a crucial role in shaping the discipline and its practices. This legacy continues to manifest in contemporary global interactions, affecting diplomatic relations, economic policies, and security strategies. Contemporary international systems often reflect entrenched racial hierarchies rooted in colonialism and slavery. The concept of racial capitalism elucidates how economic systems have historically exploited racial differences, perpetuating inequalities in global governance. Moreover, the liberal international order, while promoting equality, has been critiqued for its limited consolidation of egalitarian principles, often sidelining the

voices of formerly colonised nations (Brown, 2025; Falcão, 2024; Roycraft, 2024; Wilson, 2024). The study of race within IR has gained renewed attention in recent years, as scholars explore how racial dynamics influence international politics. The historical marginalisation of Black scholars post-World War II has led to a lack of critical engagement with race in mainstream IR scholarship. Systemic racism is evident in the treatment of marginalised populations within international frameworks, such as migration, foreign aid distribution, and military interventions. Public attitudes towards foreign aid are heavily influenced by racial perceptions of recipient countries, leading to unequal support based on perceived racial hierarchies. Neocolonial military relations often perpetuate these inequalities by reinforcing power dynamics favouring historically dominant nations. The intersection of systemic racism with contemporary global challenges like climate change and economic inequality underscores the urgent need for an integrated approach to studying these issues. Addressing systemic racism within IR requires acknowledging its historical roots and understanding its implications for current global crises (Brown, 2025; Falcão, 2024; Roycraft, 2024; Wilson, 2024).

Systemic racism in IR refers to the inherent structures, norms, and practices inside global institutions and diplomatic frameworks that maintain racial hierarchies and inequities. This type of racism is not often obvious, but it is frequently ingrained in the rules and operations of international organisations, resulting in disproportionate benefits for certain racial or ethnic groups over others. International organisations, such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund, frequently mirror the power relations that emerged throughout colonial and postcolonial periods. These organisations, although professed universal values, may unintentionally reinforce systemic prejudices through their architecture and decision-making processes. For example, the over-representation of Western nations in leadership positions and decision-making organisations can drown out voices from the Global South, continuing a cycle of inequity.

Human Rights Challenges and the Legacy of Slavery

The United Nations, often celebrated as the pinnacle of global human rights governance, has also faced critique for perpetuating racial inequalities. Scholars argue that although the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) promote equality and dignity, their implementation has historically been influenced by power dynamics favouring the Global North (Achiume, 2020; Dancy & Michel, 2022). Postcolonial critiques point out that human rights monitoring often disproportionately focuses on states in the Global South, while systemic racial inequalities in powerful nations receive less scrutiny. This racial paradox reveals that the UN embodies both aspirational ideals and structural exclusions (Achiume, 2020; Dancy & Michel, 2022). By examining contemporary human rights within this paradox, it becomes evident that legacies of slavery and racial ideology remain active within multilateral institutions. The challenges to human rights and the legacy of slavery are deeply connected, with historical injustices continuing to appear in modern forms of exploitation and systemic inequality. Addressing modern slavery and its persistent legacy requires a comprehensive understanding of human rights, historical context, and concerted global efforts, especially through education and remembrance (Achiume, 2020; Dancy & Michel, 2022). The lasting impacts of slavery manifest in various human rights issues today. Reports indicate that racial disparities across Europe are closely linked to historical wrongs, highlighting the importance of addressing colonial legacies to combat systemic racism effectively (Reuters, 2024). Furthermore, the United Nations has called on nations such as the UK to combat rising racist hate speech and to recognise the enduring effects of colonialism and slavery (Darity et al., 2024; Manjapra, 2024). Human rights are fundamental entitlements that are non-discriminatory and universal, covering civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and collective rights. Slavery, forced labour, and human trafficking are serious violations of these rights, depriving individuals of their basic freedoms and dignity. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) clearly condemns slavery, stating that no one shall be held in slavery or servitude.

The most directly violated human rights by slavery and trafficking include the prohibition of discrimination based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, or other status, the right to life, liberty, and security of person, freedom from torture, gendered violence, freedom of movement and association, the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health, just and favourable conditions of work, an adequate standard of living, and social security, and the special protection of children (Achiume, 2020; Dancy & Michel, 2022). The Transatlantic Slave Trade, which forcibly trafficked over 13 to 15 million Africans across the Atlantic for over 400 years, stands as one of history's most horrific crimes against humanity. This brutal enterprise was fuelled by a racist ideology that asserted the inferiority of African people based on their skin colour, leading to the commodification of

human beings, the tearing apart of families and communities, and immense suffering. Despite experiencing severe human rights violations and intergenerational trauma, enslaved people demonstrated remarkable resilience and defiance against forced labour, systemic violence, and oppression (Darity et al., 2024; Manjapra, 2024).

The transatlantic slave trade and subsequent systems of oppression have left indelible marks on societies, particularly in the Americas and Africa. In the United States, the aftermath of slavery has contributed to persistent economic disparities, educational inequities, and health disparities among African American communities. These systemic issues are rooted in historical injustices and continue to hinder the full realisation of human rights for these populations (Pew Research Centre, 2019). In Africa, the slave trade disrupted political systems and economies, leading to long-term instability. The loss of a significant portion of the population and the introduction of exploitative colonial systems have had lasting effects on governance and development (Ibhawoh, 2018). The way societies remember and teach about slavery significantly impacts contemporary human rights discourses. In many cases, there is a tendency to sanitise or omit the brutal realities of slavery from public narratives. For instance, the commercialisation of former slave plantations as tourist attractions often neglects to acknowledge the suffering endured by enslaved individuals, thereby perpetuating a form of historical amnesia (UNESCO, 2024). This lack of honest engagement with history hinders efforts to address the root causes of racial discrimination and to foster a culture of human rights that acknowledges past atrocities.

The enduring impact of slavery has led to increasing calls for reparative justice. Advocates argue that acknowledging and addressing the historical injustices of slavery are essential steps toward achieving human rights for descendants of enslaved people. Efforts include formal apologies, financial reparations, and institutional reforms aimed at dismantling systemic racism (United Nations, 2023). These initiatives are seen as crucial for healing historical wounds and promoting a more equitable society. The legacy of slavery presents ongoing challenges to the realisation of human rights. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes acknowledging historical injustices, reforming institutions, and promoting inclusive narratives. By confronting the enduring impacts of slavery, societies can work toward a future where human rights are truly universal and indivisible.

Reparations and Global Movements

Reparations are compensation for wrongs or injustices, often linked to systemic harms like slavery, colonisation, genocide, or racial discrimination. Global movements advocating for reparations emphasise the connection between historical accountability and contemporary demands for justice and development. Key global movements include Pan-African Movements, African American Reparations Movement, Indigenous Peoples' Movements, post-Holocaust and WWII Reparations, and Global South vs. Global North Advocacy. Key figures include Marcus Garvey, Kwame Nkrumah, M.K.O. Abiola, the African Union, and grassroots movements like the Movement for Black Lives. The late Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale (M.K.O) Abiola, a Nigerian businessman, philanthropist, and politician, is widely remembered not only for his contested 1993 presidential victory but also for his vocal international advocacy for reparations to Africa. Abiola argued that the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, colonial exploitation, and economic marginalisation justified formal reparations to African nations and peoples of African descent globally. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Abiola emerged as a leading figure in global reparations discourse. He used his wealth, international networks, and political clout to call for compensation to Africa for the centuries-long exploitation of its human and natural resources. His advocacy gained traction at global forums, including the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), where he proposed the establishment of a Reparations Commission. He emphasised that reparations were not merely about financial compensation but about justice, dignity, and restoring historical memory.

Abiola's work helped to formalise Africa's reparation claims at the continental level. His efforts contributed to the OAU's 1993 declaration to pursue reparations, which laid the groundwork for ongoing campaigns led by civil society groups, scholars, and political leaders. While his death in 1998 under controversial circumstances halted his personal efforts, his contributions continue to inspire reparations discourse, particularly in Pan-African circles and among Caribbean and African diaspora communities. Calls for reparations have gained renewed momentum globally, especially in the wake of movements such as Black Lives Matter and post-colonial debates on structural inequality. Abiola's vision aligns with contemporary demands for historical redress, debt cancellation, restitution of looted artefacts, and systemic reforms addressing neo-colonial economic structures.

He argued for compensation for slavery, colonialism, and the economic disenfranchisement of African nations (Giulia, 2023; Howard-Hassmann, 2004). MKO supported intellectuals who opposed global injustice, such as Wole Soyinka, Ali Mazrui, and Walter Rodney. Modern reparations claims, like those made before the UN and international courts, were made possible in part by his efforts. Globally, the call for reparations has grown stronger. The international community's increasing awareness of the need to address historical injustices through concrete action is shown by initiatives such as the Global Coalition Against Systemic Racism and for Reparations (Mohan, 2025). Furthermore, local efforts like the reparations programme in Evanston, Illinois, serve as examples of practical steps to counteract the long-lasting negative effects of slavery (Enyia, 2025).

The global reparations movement has gained momentum in recent years, with various countries and organisations calling for reparations for historical injustices like slavery and colonialism. The transatlantic slave trade and colonialism have contributed to the wealth and prosperity of Western nations while perpetuating poverty and underdevelopment in colonised and enslaved communities. The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the African Union have joined the movement, declaring 2025 as the "Year of Reparations" and establishing a Global Reparation Fund to compensate Africans for the slave trade. Key demands include financial compensation, restitution, and rehabilitation, while addressing ongoing legacies of slavery and colonialism, including poverty, inequality, and social injustice. However, there are still significant challenges and resistance to overcome, with some governments and institutions restraining calls for reparations. The reparations movement is expected to continue growing as more communities and organisations become involved and the historical context and ongoing legacies of slavery and colonialism become more widely recognised.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Race Theory (CRT) by Derrick Bell introduced the concept of "interest convergence" in his 1973 work, *Race, Racism and American Law*. CRT challenges the belief that legal reforms alone could eradicate systemic racism, suggesting that racial justice progresses when they align with the dominant group's interests. It offers a foundational framework for examining how systemic racism is embedded within legal and political structures, including IR. By applying CRT, we can interrogate how international laws and treaties may perpetuate racial hierarchies established during the era of slavery.

Racial Capitalism Theory (RCT), popularised by Cedric J. Robinson, argues that capitalism is inherently racial, with racial hierarchies and exploitation being fundamental. This perspective is crucial in understanding how the legacy of slavery continues to influence economic disparities and power dynamics on a global scale. The commodification of enslaved Africans was not merely a byproduct of capitalism but a central mechanism for wealth accumulation in Western nations. Understanding racial capitalism allows for a deeper analysis of how economic systems are intertwined with racial oppression, informing current human rights challenges.

Postcolonial International Relations Theory (PIRT) challenges traditional Eurocentric theories by examining how Western narratives construct the East as the "other," justifying colonial domination. Key figures include Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. PIRT critiques the Eurocentric biases in traditional IR theories, highlighting how colonial histories and power imbalances continue to shape global politics. The integration of three theoretical frameworks - Critical Race Theory (CRT), Racial Capitalism (racial capitalism), and PIRT - offers a comprehensive understanding of how the legacy of slavery continues to influence IR and human rights discourses, providing crucial insights for addressing contemporary issues rooted in the legacy of slavery.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in documentary analysis to examine the historical and contemporary manifestations of racial ideologies within international systems. The qualitative technique is ideal for this study because it provides for a more nuanced understanding of social conceptions like race, power, and hegemony as they are incorporated in political discourses, institutions, and global governance systems. The study is interpretive in nature, using critical qualitative inquiry to investigate how racial ideologies have been constructed, maintained, and operationalised in international relations over time. It uses Critical Race Theory, Postcolonial Studies, and International Relations (IR) scholarship to provide a theoretical framework for

analysing documents. These interdisciplinary views help to deconstruct the racialised underpinnings of global systems, which are frequently normalised or rendered invisible in conventional IR discourse.

This study's data is gathered from a wide range of primary and secondary documentation materials, including historical records (such as colonial charters, diplomatic correspondence, and institutional archives). International treaties and conventions (such as the Berlin Conference, the Treaty of Versailles, and the founding papers of the United Nations), as well as academic writings and peer-reviewed articles by critical race theorists, postcolonial scholars, and international relations experts. Access to crucial historical records is provided through publicly available digital archives, government depositories, and university libraries when needed.

The data is analysed using both thematic and critical discourse analysis. Thematic analysis reveals repeating patterns in racial ideologies and global power relations, whereas critical discourse analysis examines how language in official documents generates and sustains racial hierarchies. Through this dual analytic lens, the study deciphers both overt and subtle racial narratives within international policy, law, and institutional norms. Many international treaties and organisations continue to reflect Eurocentric perspectives, marginalising non-Western voices. Scholarly literature highlights the efforts of marginalised groups and nations in challenging dominant racial narratives and advocating for more inclusive international policies. Over time, there has been a shift from overtly racist language to more subtle forms of racial bias in IR, often under the guise of neutrality or universality.

As this study relies solely on publicly available documents and secondary sources, it does not involve human subjects and therefore does not raise ethical issues requiring institutional review board (IRB) approval. Nevertheless, scholarly integrity and accurate representation of cited authors and sources are upheld throughout the research.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings underscore the deep-rooted nature of racial ideologies in the fabric of international systems. The institutionalisation of racial hierarchies has had lasting impacts, influencing contemporary global power dynamics and perpetuating inequalities. The persistence of Eurocentric norms suggests that, despite formal commitments to equality, many international institutions continue to operate within frameworks that privilege Western perspectives. This aligns with critiques from scholars who argue that IR theory often overlooks or marginalises non-Western experiences and viewpoints.

The Emancipation Proclamation and the Limits of Legal Freedom

The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 is often celebrated as a turning point in the abolition of slavery, yet its language reveals both emancipatory intent and structural limitations. Lincoln's decree explicitly states that "all persons held as slaves within the rebellious states are, and henceforward shall be free" (Emancipation Proclamation, 1863, para. 1). However, the proclamation only applied to Confederate-controlled areas, leaving slavery intact in border states loyal to the Union. Scholars have argued that this selective emancipation reveals how freedom was framed as a wartime necessity rather than a universal moral principle, laying the groundwork for a racial citizenship structure in the United States (Foner, 2019). Archival materials and peer-reviewed articles reveal that IR have been shaped by racial hierarchies from slavery and colonialism, leading to unequal power dynamics and marginalisation of Africans. The United Nations acknowledges racism as the reason for Africans' exclusion from healthcare, education, justice, and opportunities outside Africa. Racial capitalism explains the economic systems that benefit from the exploitation of racialised groups, such as the transatlantic slave trade and colonial economies.

Colonial Continuities in International Treaties

The racial hierarchies embedded in slavery were reproduced in later international legal instruments. For example, the Berlin Conference Act of 1885 justified colonial expansion under the guise of a "civilising mission," effectively codifying racialised governance in international law (Pakenham, 2020). Similarly, the League of Nations Mandate System (1919) introduced the principle of "tutelage" for colonised peoples, asserting that some nations were "not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world" (League of Nations Covenant, 1919, Art. 22). This logic echoed slavery-era ideologies of racial inferiority and positioned

Western powers as guardians over non-Western societies. Historical and scholarly documents reveal a persistent disparity, prompting calls for reparatory justice frameworks.

Human Rights and the Racial Paradox of the United Nations

The founding of the United Nations in 1945 marked a new era of international human rights discourse, yet racial contradictions persisted. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) proclaimed the "equal dignity and rights of all members of the human family," decolonisation struggles revealed a gap between rhetoric and practice. African and Asian states consistently pointed to racial discrimination in colonial and apartheid systems as evidence that the human rights framework had been selectively applied (Foner, 2019; Roberts et al., 2022). The persistence of structural racism in international institutions illustrates the continuity of slavery-era hierarchies into the modern era (Dancy & Michel, 2022). Validating most scholarly opinion that postcolonial legacies highlight the enduring impact of colonialism on global structures, with former colonial powers often influencing former colonies' political autonomy and economic development.

Contemporary Case Study: Refugee Protection and Racialised Human Rights

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine exposed racial disparities in the implementation of international refugee law. Reports documented those African and South Asian students fleeing Ukraine faced discrimination at borders, with some denied entry or placed in separate queues (UNHCR, 2022). While European states quickly activated the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainian nationals, non-European refugees from the same conflict received delayed or limited access to protection (Koca, 2023). Critical race theorists recognise a racial hierarchy ingrained in modern human rights regimes, where whiteness continues to influence access to protection, which is reflected in this selective application of refugee rights (Achiume, 2020; Koca, 2023).

When combined, these results show how the racial logics of slavery were reshaped by subsequent international legal frameworks rather than being eliminated by emancipation. Slavery's legacy continues to shape the boundaries of belonging and the unequal enforcement of human rights, as evidenced by the Emancipation Proclamation's partial freedom, the Berlin Conference's colonial "civilising mission," the League of Nations' mandate system, and the current racial disparities in refugee protection.

The analysis of historical treaties, diplomatic correspondence, and critical literature indicates that the abolition of slavery, while legally momentous, did not remove the racial inequalities that existed inside the international system. The documents accompanying the Emancipation Proclamation demonstrate both advances in human rights recognition and its limitations, as freed persons were nonetheless barred from full political and economic participation. A closer examination of post-liberation treaties reveals how colonial powers reframed emancipation using imperial logics, sustaining global racial hierarchies. These findings show that structural racial inequities continue to impact access to justice, recognition, and protection under international law, making present human rights debates inextricably linked to the past.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the legacy of slavery and racism in international relations through the lens of the Emancipation Proclamation, tracing how racial ideologies embedded in historical treaties, declarations, and legal texts continue to shape modern human rights discourse. By analysing historical documents and critical literature, the findings highlight that the principles of equality and emancipation were never fully universalised but rather mediated through racial hierarchies that persist in contemporary global governance. The persistence of racialised norms in international relations underscores the need to situate modern human rights issues within their historical contexts, where emancipation was both a legal milestone and a site of exclusion. The study concludes that the Emancipation Proclamation was a significant step towards ending slavery in the United States, but the struggle against racism and its legacy continues. Contemporary human rights issues are deeply intertwined with the historical context of slavery and ongoing systemic racism. The international community needs to acknowledge and address these historical injustices to move forward on human rights. The study emphasised that the legacy of slavery is deeply embedded in the fabric of IR and continues to manifest in systemic racism, economic inequality, and the marginalisation of people of African descent. Despite the abolition of slavery and the enactment of human rights declarations, the structures and ideologies established during the colonial era persist, necessitating deliberate and sustained efforts to dismantle them.

RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends that the legacy of slavery and contemporary human rights issues requires governments and international organisations to develop policies that acknowledge and rectify historical injustices, promote equity and inclusion, and focus on the history of slavery and its ongoing impacts. The United Nations acknowledges the need to address these issues, but there is a gap between recognition and actionable methodology, especially within the African continent. International cooperation should be fostered to address global human rights challenges, building on documents like the Emancipation Proclamation. Key resources for understanding these issues include the United Nations and scholarly research on slavery's history and impacts. Governments and international institutions should develop reparatory justice frameworks, including financial reparations, policy reforms, and institutional changes. Education is a powerful tool in combating the legacy of slavery, and structural reforms in international institutions are necessary to ensure equitable representation and participation of formerly colonised nations and marginalised groups.

The study further recommends the urgent need:

1. For Scholarship: Researchers should broaden empirical inquiry by engaging with archives, oral histories, and regional treaties that capture the lived experiences of formerly enslaved populations and their descendants. Comparative studies across regions (e.g., Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas) can highlight how emancipation and racial ideologies influenced international law differently across contexts. Future work should adopt mixed methods, combining historical analysis with contemporary interviews or case studies, to trace the continuity of racial hierarchies in modern international relations.
2. For Policy: International organisations (e.g., the UN, AU, OAS) should formally integrate historical justice into human rights frameworks, recognising how legacies of slavery shape inequalities today. Policy frameworks addressing reparations, economic justice, and anti-racism should explicitly connect to international treaties and conventions that once upheld racial hierarchies. Diplomatic training programs should include modules on the history of slavery and racism in shaping international relations, equipping policymakers to design more historically conscious human rights interventions.
3. For Practice: Civil society organisations should use historical narratives (e.g., the Emancipation Proclamation) as advocacy tools to link past injustices with present struggles for racial equity. Human rights education should foreground slavery's role in shaping modern global inequalities, moving beyond abstract legal principles to contextualised, historically informed teaching. Activists and practitioners can build alliances across regions with shared legacies of slavery, strengthening global solidarity movements that advocate for systemic change in international governance.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this manuscript.

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