

SESSION 3

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS IN THE UK



In this session

Students will learn about a different set of human rights called economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) and why they are so important. It will introduce basic terms, and human rights laws and standards surrounding them. Students will look at real examples of ESCR violations in the UK, and imagine as the Prime Minister what positive changes they'd make.

This is part of our set of sessions in our Further Education pack.

Aims

- To gain an understanding of economic, social and cultural rights (ESCR) and what they are
- To learn about how ESCR protect us and provide a basis through which to fight poverty and inequality
- To analyse real-life examples and identify effective remedies for violations and abuses of ESCR
- To take action to protect and promote ESCR

You will need

- Access to the internet to watch the video clip:
[Before Our Eyes](#) (2 minutes)

Handouts: Key definitions and images card sort sheet (one per pair)
Economic, social and cultural rights – fact sheet (one per pair)
Real-life examples (one per pair)

Teacher note

You may have students in your classroom or school who have their ESCR restricted or not fully realised. Before you teach this session, please let students know and ask them to share any concerns or worries they may have with you. Also take note of any pupils who are pupil premium as this may help you to understand where additional support may be required.

Inform students that you will listen to their concerns respectfully if they choose to share their story with you and that support is available (such as their pastoral lead, head of year, form tutor or school safeguarding lead) if they need someone to talk to after the session.

At the start make it clear to students that everyone comes to the lesson with different lived experiences and that all opinions must be presented in a sensible and respectful manner.

INTRODUCTION 20 minutes

Terminology

Tell the class you will be talking about people's economic, social and cultural rights. Are they aware of what they are and why they matter?

Using the *Key definitions and images card sort sheet*, ask students to work in pairs and match:

- The different terms with their meaning or definition
- The different rights to the human rights enjoyed and human rights violations images

Give them around five or so minutes to do this. If any students finish early, ask them to think of ways to explain these key terms to an 11-year-old.

Reflect on their answers as a class and correct any misconceptions.

Are they surprised to know that people's economic, social and cultural rights are routinely violated in the UK? Take some answers from the class.

Our 'everyday' rights

Explain that ESCR are often referred to as 'everyday' rights because they impact our everyday lives. Losing access to one of these rights can lead to violations of other rights because they are all connected. For example, bad sanitation can lead to poor health.

Tell them to imagine all the basic needs in life lined up like a row of dominoes. When one topples – like losing a job – it triggers a chain reaction that affects everything else, like money for food to having a safe and secure home.

Ask students to take one right (listed on the card sort handout) and say how its violation can lead to another.



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Answers can include:

The right to education – without an education, access to higher paying jobs can be difficult.

The right to social security – without adequate and easily accessible social security, people cannot make ends meet making it difficult to afford food and other basic needs.

The right to health – without good health care, accessing a GP is hard, NHS waiting lists are long, and people must wait too long for care and treatment.

Moreover, economic, social and cultural rights aren't protected in law in the same way that civil and political rights are protected by the Human Rights Act. This means governments can play political football with issues like disability payments, without the deterrent that their decisions might be challenged in court.

For example, the two-child limit on welfare payments has had a widespread impact on families, leading to an increase in child poverty across the UK.

Hand out the ESCR fact sheet for students to read. Ask them to discuss the questions on the sheet with a partner and explain the reasons behind their answers.

Watch a video

If time allows, play Amnesty's clip [Before Our Eyes](#) (2 minutes) which tells the story of a young mother who is placed in a shocking standard of accommodation with devastating consequences.

Teacher note Please review the clip to ensure it is appropriate for your class. Provide a content warning based on your students' experiences.

TASK 1 20 minutes

Exploring real-life examples

What is the reality around economic, social and cultural rights in the UK?

Divide the class into pairs and allocate one real-life example to each pair. They will need to refer to their copy of the ESCR fact sheet too.

Inform the class that they have 10 minutes to read the real-life example and consider the questions on their sheet:

- What challenges do people in the real-life example face?
- How are their human rights restricted or enjoyed?
- Which human rights are impacted in the real-life example? Use the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights fact sheet.
- How does a single social or economic rights violation lead to other rights violations?
- What actions could help restore their ESCR?
- How can the government help create this change?
- Why is it important to take action?

Next, take 10 minutes of feedback to cover the two real-life examples, or tell pairs to team up with another pair, and ask them to compare and discuss their two different real-life examples.

FINALLY... 15 minutes

Your call for change

Tell students to imagine they are the Prime Minister with the power and resources to ensure people can access their economic, social and cultural rights all the time. What would you do?

Divide the class into pairs.

Ask them to create a 5-step action plan to ensure all people in the UK can fully access their rights. They need to include information about the resources needed to make this change.

They could choose a few rights to focus on and think about ways to make sure they are fulfilled. For instance, on the issue of healthcare, the NHS could be reformed, with better funding for mental health in particular. On housing, the government could build more social homes, control landlords so housing is of a high standard before renting.

They could start by thinking about the things in their lives that they value most, and/or the challenges they face. And the rights that are important to people they know and their community.

Ask pairs to present their recommendations and solutions to another pair, explaining why they are a good idea.

As a class or in pairs, talk about choosing one action they can act on which can help change happen in their community.

Extension

Students can: Write to their MP to raise the issue of ESCR rights and the impact of not having them on their lives or those of others they know.

Older students can: Take Amnesty International's free online course: [Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) (5 hours, intermediate level)

SESSION 3 RESOURCE

KEY DEFINITIONS AND EXAMPLES

CARD SORT

FOR THE STUDENT



Cut up the key words, definitions and images and ask students to match them up

FOOD IS A HUMAN RIGHT



THE REALITY OF FOOD INSECURITY



Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR)

A group of rights that include protections for the basic things we need to live, including food, water, sanitation, health, housing and social security. It also covers things we need to live a dignified life like education, workers' rights and rights affected by the ongoing climate crisis. All these rights intersect and impact each other.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILY IS A HUMAN RIGHT



THE REALITY OF FAMILY SUPPORT



International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)

An international human rights treaty that the UK agreed to uphold in 1976. It ensures that everyone enjoys economic, social and cultural rights including the right to food, health, adequate housing, education, workers' rights and social security.

EDUCATION IS A HUMAN RIGHT



THE REALITY OF EDUCATION



The right to education

A right to help you develop as a person and better understand and enjoy other rights. It refers to lifelong education at all levels, compulsory free primary education, and governments prioritising and budgeting for free, affordable and quality public education which is inclusive and accessible for all students.

SOCIAL SECURITY IS A HUMAN RIGHT



THE REALITY OF SOCIAL SECURITY



The right to social security

A right to access social security to make sure you can enjoy an adequate standard of living even when you do not have enough money to provide for your own basic needs.

WORK IS A HUMAN RIGHT



THE REALITY OF WORK



The right to work

This right includes the right to access opportunities and conditions that can help you earn money and enjoy an adequate standard of living. It calls on governments to help people access job opportunities. It also includes the right to join a union and engage in collective action.

HOME IS A HUMAN RIGHT



THE REALITY OF HOUSING



The right to housing

The right to live in a safe and secure place to call home. This includes being legally allowed to live there, and having access to basic services and infrastructure, such as water and sanitation. It must be affordable and protect you and your family from bad weather, disease and pollution. Nobody should be homeless.

HEALTHCARE IS A HUMAN RIGHT



THE REALITY OF HEALTHCARE



The right to health

The right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. It entitles people to a system of health protection and calls on the government to ensure the specific needs of different groups, including children, women, those living with disabilities and older people, are understood and adequately addressed.

SESSION 3 RESOURCE

ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS FACT SHEET

FOR THE STUDENT



What are Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR)?

They are the rights of everyday life for everyday people essential for our well-being and dignity. They are the rights we need to live our lives daily, the food we eat, the homes we live in, and the education on offer to young people.

Where do these rights come from?

These rights are set out in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Although the UK ratified this international treaty in 1976, social, cultural and economic rights are not yet protected in law. This makes it difficult for people to seek justice through the courts when their rights are violated.

Examples of violations

Violations of ESCR occur when a State fails in its obligations to respect, protect and fulfil these rights. Some examples:

- Failure to prevent hunger (right to food, right to life)
- Denying access to information and services related to sexual and reproductive health (right to health)
- Not providing education opportunities for children with disabilities (right to education)

The reality of ESCR in the UK

Here is a basic list of the economic and social rights that affect us all. We also include the challenges people in the UK face, as revealed in Amnesty International's report [Broken Britain: Voices from the frontline of the fight for everyday rights](#) (2024). As part of the report, Amnesty consulted communities who face poverty and inequality in their everyday lives.

The right to an adequate standard of living, including the rights to food and to be free from hunger, to clothing and adequate housing to ensure a dignified life.

Amnesty's report revealed alarming trends of people on social security (not keeping up with rising living costs) or in low paid work not being able to feed themselves or their families and struggling to meet the costs of clothing and heating. Many people rely on food banks.

The right to social security, including accessing social security reasonably, and the right to equal enjoyment of adequate protection in the event of unemployment, sickness, old age.

Amnesty's report revealed the rules, processes and penalties in the social security system are a source of confusion, insecurity and humiliation. Applying for social security often costs money. Social security rates are inadequate to cover basic needs, and people often face a struggle to know what they are entitled to and to establish their eligibility.

The right to health, including the right to access health facilities for physical and mental wellbeing.

LEARNING ABOUT
HUMAN RIGHTS
IN FURTHER
EDUCATION

Amnesty's report revealed many people think the quality of care and treatment in the UK was good – if you could get it. But accessing healthcare can be difficult, especially for vulnerable groups and in certain parts of the country. Limited capacity and long waiting lists in mental health services were a particular concern for many.

The right to education, including the right to free and compulsory primary education and to available and accessible secondary and higher education.

Amnesty's report revealed many people had positive experiences of primary and secondary education, but inequalities persist. Quality of education varies, and the needs of some children go unmet – for example, those from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, or from minoritised ethnic groups. Children from lower income families can miss out on school activities. It can be hard to ensure support for special educational needs.

The right to work, including the rights to fair wages and equal pay to safe and healthy working conditions.

Amnesty's report revealed that in some parts of the country it is difficult to find jobs, and adequate training and support may not be available. People also raised concerns about low pay, discrimination and insecurity in employment, and challenges for women with caring responsibilities.

The right to housing, including affordability and protection against forced evictions and homelessness, and rights to a stable and safe home with basic services and infrastructure such as water and sanitation.

Many people and families across the UK do not have access to safe, secure and affordable housing. [Amnesty International UK's 2022 Homelessness report in England](#) shed light on housing insecurity and homelessness support.

In numbers

80-90%

of people in the UK think economic, social and cultural rights are important, above all the rights to health, food and education.

73%

of people support the principle of rights – including ESCR – being protected in law.

Source: [Amnesty poll, 2023](#), with a representative sample of 2,005 adults across the UK

Discussion questions

- 1 Are you surprised by any of the examples? Why? Why not?
- 2 Do all people in the UK enjoy their ESCR without discrimination?
- 3 Are there any groups of people that you think have less access to their rights?
- 4 What actions can the government take to ensure that more people can access their ESCR?
- 5 Think about the everyday rights of people living in your local area. Are there any ESCR frequently restricted or removed? Which ones, and what is the impact?
- 6 What changes would you like to see in your local area so that everyone can enjoy all their ESCR?

SESSION 3 RESOURCE

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES

FOR THE
STUDENT



Living Rent march through
Glasgow, 2023
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REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE 1

Charlotte's story

I was working as a carer but lost my job after I got hit by a car. Even though I couldn't walk, I was refused disability living allowance because they said I wasn't sick enough. I couldn't even get out of bed at that time. I couldn't take my children to school. But they said I could work if I had a wheelchair – but there was no way I could do my job in a wheelchair.

Without being able to work, there wasn't enough money and the benefits weren't enough: I only got child benefits, child tax allowance and housing benefit. I only had one meal a day and that was made up of leftovers from my children's meals, otherwise I wouldn't have had enough to feed them. Some days I didn't even have that – I mainly drank water to stop feeling hungry.

I found out that I was also in rent arrears because, even though my housing benefit was supposed to be paid direct to the landlord, it turned out my rent hadn't been paid for six months.

The bailiffs came and told me I had to leave right away if I didn't pay. Even though I had nowhere to go, this classed me as making myself intentionally homeless, which wasn't true. I had to pay the arrears – I don't know what happened to the housing benefit, where it went and why it didn't get paid.

The local authority moved us to a hotel, where we stayed for six months. It was on the other side of the city, far away from my support network. I lost the connections I needed to get by – family and friends – and we were far away from my children's schools. I watched my kids go from happy, bright and bubbly to being secluded, isolated, depressed and anxious.

We lived in one drafty room with two beds and a shower room that had mould. We had no facilities for washing our clothes. There was a shared kitchen on the ground floor, but people stole our food and used our pots and pans.

It was hard to get the food we needed, even from food banks because we have nut allergies and also we don't eat pork. One time someone took our last meal, all the food we had, and the hotel manager took pity on us and got us a takeaway so at least my children could eat.

Even though we were moved to a house, it wasn't much better. It was even further away and the kitchen and bathroom downstairs were riddled with mould. Water came in from under the front door, there were big cracks in the ceiling and fungus was growing under the kitchen sink.

LEARNING ABOUT
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REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE 1 Cont'd

I had to keep the windows open in the kitchen otherwise I couldn't breathe – I wouldn't allow the children to go in there because it was too unhealthy. My children and I have suffered chest infections as a result of the housing conditions and also have asthma that has got worse over the years, especially for my son who now needs to use two inhalers.

We all have eczema, my daughter and I have depression, autism and ADHD, which means we find change and instability very difficult. My daughter also has dyslexia and hypermobility. My son and I also have anxiety.

Finally, after years of not getting properly assessed for my health conditions, I was recognised as being disabled in 2021. But the system still feels, 'Oh you're homeless because you've done it to yourself – not interested.'

They're still blaming the person, and see people as homeless because they're taking drugs, drinking alcohol, or because they made a bad decision. That's not the case – but that's the narrative they're still pushing.

Nine times out of 10 someone is homeless because they are a vulnerable person being taken advantage of.

Source: [Broken Britain: Voices from the frontline of the fight for everyday rights](#)
Amnesty International UK, August 2024

Discuss with your partner

- What challenges do people in the real-life example face?
- How are their human rights restricted or enjoyed?
- Which human rights are impacted in the real-life example? Use the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights fact sheet.
- How does a single social or economic rights violation lead to other rights violations?
- What actions could help restore their ESCR?
- How can the government help create this change?
- Why is it important to take action?



RAPAR at a Unity Rally,
Altrincham, Greater
Manchester, 2024
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REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE 2

Rahwa Beyene's story

Rahwa is from RAPAR (Refugee Asylum Participatory Action Research) in Manchester. She was a co-lead researcher on a report by [Growing Rights Instead of Poverty Partnership](#) (GRIPP) submitted to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in January 2023.

I am originally from Eritrea and have obtained asylum in the UK. I came here three years ago and, for almost nine months, I had no support. Then I started going to RAPAR (Refugee Asylum Participatory Action Research) meetings. I thought, I want to advocate, to amplify the voices, I have the lived experience.

I feel most strongly about the right to work. Right now, most displaced people in the UK are banned from working and forced to live in poverty. I wasn't allowed to work and had to live on £35 [now £40 a week at the time of writing]. During the research for this report, one person told me that 'just waiting for the government to support us is degrading'. Not allowing displaced people to support themselves has a bigger negative impact than the money. You lose your self-esteem, skills and experience.

There is stigma associated with being displaced. People often stay silent because they are scared having a say might affect their case. There are the challenges of accessing funds and around housing.

The GRIPP project is massive for me because this collective of people all have the same mindset – working together through a lived experience and taking a human rights approach to ending poverty for all. We show that poverty hurts all of our rights. The domino effect.

For the report, we talked to around 70 of our members, people seeking asylum, refugees and undocumented people, asking what it means to be unable to work while waiting for asylum and the impact of that. The stories they told were a hard time for me because sometimes you only think about your struggle.

Some had been granted leave to remain but had not been able to find a job because there is a big gap in their CV. One member said he's been waiting for 18 years for his asylum claim to be processed and had lost his energy, hope, and any chance to make life better. It was heart-breaking.

The work ban is harmful to everyone. It takes its harshest toll on displaced people but also the UK economy misses out on tax revenue and the skills we can give back to the community.

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE 2 Cont'd

Relying on the government assistance of between £10 and £40 per week [loaded on to a cash card to use for essentials] isn't enough to even cover basic needs, like food, transport, clothing, the internet to connect to the GP, and if you have children, it makes life very, very hard. Now the cost of living is increasing so much but how can anyone live on this and have an adequate standard of living?

Human rights are self-worth. They demand an accountable government. Back home in Eritrea, we don't have any rights at all, we cannot say anything, or participate actively and effectively. Here, on the other hand, we can say to the government 'This is wrong, this is not being done'.

Discuss with your partner

- What challenges do people in the real-life example face?
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Tracey Herrington
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Definitions

Universal Credit

A monthly payment people on a low income or out of work can claim to help with living costs.

Debt deduction

A reduction in social security payments in order to repay debts, for example money owed to the government or a third party organisation.

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE 3

Tracey Herrington's story

Tracey is from [Thrive Teesside](#), a small organisation based in one of the most deprived areas of the UK. The charity contributed to a report by [Growing Rights Instead of Poverty Partnership \(GRIPP\)](#) submitted to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in January 2023.

I was born into poverty, came out of it for a while and fell back into poverty when I separated from my husband. I'm not in poverty today but I work in a precarious voluntary sector so I could be there again in a couple of months.

I live in the most disadvantaged ward in Hartlepool. We have high levels of deprivation, high health inequalities, lots of crime, and very little social mobility, opportunities and access to services. I see social injustice every day, including the way women are treated, and it's what I work against. But we're a close-knit community.

Thrive Teesside is very relationship-based. People come to us if a debt deduction has brought their universal credit limit lower and is causing hardship, or they may not have enough food in the house and need a referral to a community pantry. They may be struggling on zero-hour contracts or can't access tech making it hard to apply for social security online.

People shouldn't have to be put on hold, talked to like second-class citizens, or not even that. We give people a voice in whatever ways they want it, for example Thriving Women [a spoken word project].

A lot of our members say 'We're not heard. We're demonised'. The GRIPP submission was one opportunity to add their insight in a valued way. One person, Kath, talked about how our forgotten communities being unable to realise their potential is not a personal choice or bad decision making on their part, it is a direct consequence of the system.

The report highlights how inadequate social security is and insufficient to cover the essentials we all need to get by. Universal credit has destroyed lives. It has undermined people's ability to seek work properly and caused untold stress and anxiety. The reality of debt deductions – taken without gaining consent first or considering the impact – drives people into hardship and depression. Facing a cost-of-living crisis – this is not new to the community we work alongside, it merely makes lives harder.

Discuss with your partner

- What challenges do people in the real-life example face?
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