

What Are Human Rights?

Human rights can be defined as those basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity as human beings. Human rights are the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace. Their respect allows the individual and the community to fully develop.

The development of human rights has its roots in the struggle for freedom and equality everywhere in the world. The basis of human rights—such as respect for human life and human dignity—can be found in most religions and philosophies.

They are proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Documents such as the International Covenants on Human Rights set out what governments must do and also what they must not do to respect the rights of their citizens.

Characteristics of Human Rights

Human rights do not have to be bought, earned, or inherited, they belong to people simply because they are human—human rights are *inherent* to each individual.

Human rights cannot be taken away; no one has the right to deprive another person of them for any reason. People still have human rights even when the laws of their countries do not recognize them, or when they violate them—for example, when slavery is practiced, slaves still have rights even though these rights are being violated—human rights are *indivisible*.

Categories of Human Rights

Human rights can be placed into three categories:

Civil and political rights (also called *first generation rights*)—These are ‘liberty-orientated’ and include the rights to life, liberty and security of the individual; freedom from torture and slavery; political participation; freedom of opinion, expression, thought, conscience and religion;

freedom of association and assembly.

Economic and social rights (also called *second generation rights*)—These are ‘security-orientated’ rights, for example, the rights to work, education, a reasonable standard of living; food, shelter, and health care, amongst others.

Environmental, cultural, and developmental rights (also called *third generation rights*)—These include the rights to live in an environment that is clean and protected from destruction, and rights to cultural, political, and economic development.

When we say each person has human rights, we are also saying each person has responsibilities to respect the human rights of others.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The most widely accepted statement of human rights in the world is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Its core message is the inherent value of every human being. The Declaration was unanimously adopted December 10, 1948 by the United Nations (although eight nations abstained). It sets out a list of basic rights for everyone in the world, whatever their race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. It states that governments have promised to uphold certain rights, not only for their own citizens, but also for people in other countries. In other words, national borders are no barrier to helping others achieve their rights. Since 1948, the Universal Declaration has been the international standard for human rights. In 1993 a world conference of 171 states, representing 99% of the world’s population, reaffirmed its commitment to human rights.

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