

Introduction to human rights



HUMAN RIGHTS

- Every person has dignity and value. One of the ways that we recognize the fundamental worth of every person is by acknowledging and respecting their human rights.
- Human rights are a set of principles concerned with equality and fairness. They recognize our freedom to make choices about our lives and to develop our potential as human beings. They are about living a life free from fear, harassment or discrimination.

- Human rights can broadly be defined as a number of basic rights that people from around the world have agreed are essential.

These include

- the right to life,
- the right to a fair trial,
- freedom from torture and other cruel and inhuman treatment,
- freedom of thoughts and speech,
- freedom of religion,
- and the rights to health, education and an adequate standard of living.

- According to Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), Human Rights can be defined as
- “Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, whatever our nationality, place of residence, sex, national or ethnic origin, color, religion, language, or any other status. We are all equally entitled to our human rights without discrimination. These rights are all interrelated, interdependent and indivisible.”

- These human rights are the same for all people everywhere – men and women, young and old, rich and poor, regardless of our background, where we live, what we think or what we believe. This is what makes human rights ‘universal’.

Characteristics of Human Rights:

1. Human rights are founded on respect for the dignity and worth of each person;
2. Human rights are universal, meaning that they are applied equally and without discrimination to all people;
3. Human rights are inalienable, in that no one can have his or her human rights taken away other than in specific situations – for example, the right to liberty can be restricted if a person is found guilty of a crime by a court of law;

4. Human rights are indivisible, interrelated and interdependent, for the reason that it is insufficient to respect some human rights and not others. In practice, the violation of one right will often affect the respect of several other rights.

Who has a responsibility to protect human rights?

- A person's ability to enjoy their human rights depends on other people respecting those rights. This means that human rights involve responsibility and duties towards other people and the community
- Individuals have a responsibility to ensure that they exercise their rights with consideration for the rights of others. For example, when someone uses their right to **freedom of speech**, they should do so without interfering with someone else's **right to privacy**.

- According to **Vienna World Conference on Human Rights in 1993**, the duty of States to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- Governments have a particular responsibility to ensure that people are able to enjoy their rights.
- They are required to establish and maintain laws and services that enable people to enjoy a life in which their rights are respected and protected.

- For example, the right to education says that everyone have right **to a good education**. This means that governments have an obligation to provide good quality education facilities and services to their people.
- Whether or not governments actually do this, it is generally accepted that this is the government's responsibility and people can call them to account if they fail to respect or protect their basic human rights.

What do human rights cover?

- Human rights cover virtually every area of human activity.

civil and political rights,

which refer to a person's rights to take part in the civil and political life of their community without discrimination. These include rights and freedoms such as the right to vote, the right to privacy, freedom of speech and freedom from torture.

Economic, social and cultural rights

which relate to a person's rights to prosper and grow, and to take part in social and cultural activities. This group includes rights such as the right to health, the right to education and the right to work.

Difference

- One of the main differences between these two groups of rights is that, in the case of civil and political rights, governments must make sure that they, or any other group, are **not denying** people access to their rights, whereas in relation to economic, social and cultural rights, governments must **take active steps** to ensure rights are being fulfilled.

collective rights

there are some rights that also belong to groups of people. This is often in recognition of the fact that these groups have been disadvantaged and marginalized throughout history and consequently need greater protection of their rights.

Rights that can only apply to individuals, for example the right to a fair trial is called **individual rights**.

Why are human rights important?

- Values of tolerance, equality and respect can help reduce **friction** within society.
- Putting human rights ideas into practice can help us create the kind of society we want to live in.
- Human rights are an important part of how people interact with others at all levels in society - in the family, the community, schools, the workplace, in politics and in international relations.

- It is vital therefore that people everywhere should strive to understand what human rights are. When people better understand human rights, it is easier for them to promote justice and the well-being of society.
- In recent decades, there has been a tremendous growth in how we think about and apply human rights ideas. This has had many positive results - knowledge about human rights can empower individuals and offer solutions for specific problems.

Can my human rights be taken away from me?

- A person's human rights cannot be taken away. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that no State, group or person '[has] any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms
- This doesn't mean that abuses and violations of human rights don't occur. On television and in newspapers every day we hear tragic stories of murder, violence, racism, hunger, unemployment, poverty, abuse, homelessness and discrimination.

- However, the Universal Declaration and other human rights treaties are more than just noble aspirations. They are essential legal principles.
- To meet their international human rights obligations, many nations have incorporated these principles into their own laws.
- This provides an opportunity for individuals to have a complaint settled by a court in their own country.