

11 things everyone should know about human rights

LIVING RIGHTS

TODAY / YESTERDAY / TOMORROW

1. Human rights are not a new concept

The idea that people should have certain fundamental rights is an old one. Precisely what these rights are has been debated for centuries by people from different cultures and religions around the world.



Left: A 15-year-old Jewish refugee from Germany, Susanne Berglind, on her arrival in Sweden in 1945. She and her sister were the only members of her family to survive the Holocaust. Photo: Private

Right: A syrian girl fleeing the war and escaping to Europe, landing on the Greek island of Lesbos, september 2015. Photo: Ashley Cooper /Corbis via Getty images

3.

Human rights cover almost everything

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is brief but still manages to cover all aspects of human life. It deals with everything from the right to enjoy privacy to the right to have enough to eat and a roof over your head. It states among other things that all people shall have the right to:

- ▶ life, liberty and personal security
- ▶ think and say what they like
- ▶ a fair trial
- ▶ marry and start a family with whoever they want
- ▶ food, clothing, housing
- ▶ work and education
- ▶ good health

2.

The world needs common rules on human rights

During the Second World War millions of people were murdered and persecuted because the Nazis viewed them as inferior beings, citing such grounds as their sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity or disability. As a result of the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity, many people came to realise that the world needed common rules on how people may and may not be treated. Until then, all nations had been allowed to decide this for themselves.

In 1945, at the end of the war, the United Nations (UN) was created. A working group was given the task of producing a list of human rights. The group drew on ideas from cultures and religions all over the world. The result was a two-page list of fundamental rights, presented in 1948 – a simple document that was to have profound consequences. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, sometimes called just the Universal Declaration.

4.

The human rights are for everyone

The Universal Declaration sets out the individual and legal rights of all people all over the world. It begins by stating that we are all equal in dignity and rights and that no-one may be discriminated against or treated differently or unfairly due to their ethnic origin, sex, language, religion, political opinion or social status. In Sweden, discrimination is also prohibited on the grounds of sexual orientation, age, transgender identity or expression, or being differently abled.

Some important milestones in the fight for human rights

1945 The United Nations, UN, is founded and the UN charter is adopted.

1946 The UN appoints a commission, a working group, for human rights.

1948 The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights is adopted..

1949 Adoption of the Geneva Conventions, international agreements designed to protect victims of armed conflict.

1965 Adoption of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD)

1966 Adoption of the UN covenants on civil and political rights and on economic, social and cultural rights.

1979 Adoption of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

1984 Adoption of the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment.

1989 Adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

1993 The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is established.



Left: Children liberated from the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz Birkenau in 1945. The UN was founded later the same year, and in 1948 the UN Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. Many international agreements have been added since, including a UN convention protecting people against enforced disappearance. Photo: USHMM

Right: A child soldier forcibly recruited by one of Liberia's armed groups during the 1994 civil war. Photo: Patrick Robert/Sygma/Corbis/Scanpix

5. World peace is impossible without human rights
When the UN was created, it was universally agreed that world peace was only possible if all states respected human rights. Thus when rights are not respected, war may result. Past violations of human rights have been the cause of many present-day conflicts, and today's violations may spark tomorrow's wars.



When the UN was founded in 1945, one of its prime tasks was to deal with the flows of refugees after the war. It has since had to confront many different challenges.

Left: Some of thousands of Jewish refugee children that arrived in England without their parents between 1938 and 1939. Photo: Bettmann/Getty images

Right: Rally for LGBT rights in Berlin 2014. Photo: Markus Winkler/CC

7. Your rights are everyone's rights
The Universal Declaration helps us to live together as human beings. It is not just about demanding one's own rights but also about respecting the rights of others.

8. Each of your rights represents a government obligation
Ultimately, it is the duty and responsibility of each state to ensure that the rights of its own population are protected, respected and realised. This also means that all public officials, including police officers, teachers, judges and care staff, must know about human rights and act in accordance with the principles laid down in the Universal Declaration.

9. The UN Declaration is a part of international law
The UN has built up a system of rules on human rights that is a part of international law. The rules deal with things that many countries have in common and which would not work without intergovernmental agreements. Things like postal services, sea fishing, air traffic, humanitarian law and, of course, human rights.

6. All rights are equally important
Human rights are universal and apply everywhere. They are indivisible and interdependent. The right to housing and medical care, for instance, can never be deemed more important than the right to education – or vice versa. When people enjoy both freedom of expression and good health, they are stronger and better able to influence their own lives. Governments, therefore, cannot choose to respect only certain rights that they feel suit their own political systems.

1988 Adoption of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, ICC.

2002 The International Criminal Court begins its work.

2003 Adoption of the United Nations Convention on Migrants' Rights.

2004 The UN appoints a Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide.

2005 The UN member states agree at a summit meeting on a new principle of international law: The Responsibility to Protect (civilian populations as far as possible from such things as genocide, ethnic cleansing and war crimes).

2006 The UN establishes a Human Rights Council. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is adopted.

2010 Adoption of the UN Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

2011 First UN report on sexual orientation and gender identity is adopted, as well as Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

2015 The UN adopts 17 Global Goals for Sustainable Development come into effect to achieve the following three things by 2030 – end poverty, combat climate change and fight injustice and inequality.



Left: Dora Rakowski, a Jewish girl, lived in hiding until the war ended in 1945 but her parents were sent to the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz Birkenau. Her mother survived but her father and many relatives died. Photo: Miriam Rakowski/USHMM

Right: Chan Kim Srun was executed in the Tuol Sleng prison in Cambodia. Her newborn, Sek Say, survived and searched for her mother for years. At Tuol Sleng, circa 14,000 people were tortured and executed in the Khmer Rouge's genocidal massacre of over 1.5 million Cambodians between 1975 and 1979. Photo: DCCAM

10.

Human rights must be constantly defended

Since 1948, the UN, individual states and voluntary organisations have all sought to further protection of and respect for human rights. And considerable progress has been made since the arrival of the Universal Declaration. Unfortunately, we have a long way to go before the the equal worth of all human beings are respected everywhere. The equal worth of all, the right to not be discriminated, the right to life, the right to not be kept in slavery and the right to not be tortured are basic to the Universal Declaration. Yet people around the world are being discriminated against, killed, enslaved and tortured every year. New genocides have occurred since the Holocaust, for instance in Cambodia and Rwanda and during the Balkan wars. Clearly, each new generation must continue to fight to defend and strengthen human rights.



Left: The UN and the world failed to prevent the genocidal slaughter of almost a million people in Rwanda in 1994. Afterwards, the UN set up the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in order to hold the responsible leaders to account.

Photo: Christophe Calais/Getty images

Right: After the Second World War, leading Nazis were put on trial in Nuremberg in Germany. One of the charges was crimes against humanity. Among those sentenced to death was Hitler's close aide Hermann Göring. Photo: Harvard University/CC

11.

We all need to be familiar with human rights

Awareness of our rights is essential if they are to be used as a means of bringing about change and improvement in our lives and the lives of others. We must know our rights as citizens and governments must know their obligations. Do you know enough to feel empowered to have control over your own life?

Learn more

Find more information on human rights on the Living History Forum website, including a two minute film about the history of human rights and how they affect your life. The film is part of the educational package All people!, for teachers and students in grades 4–6 who want to study human rights and the equal value of all people, in depth, from a historical perspective.

LIVING RIGHTS is produced by the Living History Forum, a Swedish public agency. Our work is based on the belief that one can learn from the past in seeking to prevent and combat intolerance – strengthening democracy and respect for the equal value of all people .

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