

Human Rights Project

a project of
Urban Justice Center

HUMAN RIGHTS 101

Fact Sheet Series #1

Introduction

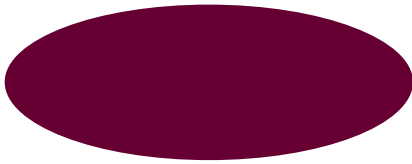
Human Rights, as we know them today, were formally recognized with the founding of the United Nations in 1945, and the subsequent adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR). It was right after the Second World War, and the international community embraced human rights as a means to addressing the ensuing poverty and preventing future violence. The 30 articles of the UDHR form a comprehensive statement covering economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights. The UDHR, while not legally binding, is widely regarded as carrying the authority of international customary law. In 1966, the United Nations also adopted two other international instruments — the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). They entered into force ten years later. Together, these three documents — UDHR, ICESCR, & ICCPR — constitute the International Bill of Human Rights.

**What are
Human
Rights?**

Human rights are a set of values that all human beings can claim in order to live in dignity and freedom. These rights are a set of social and legal contracts between governments, institutions, and individuals identified in a body of mechanisms, tools & methods that both make governments accountable for implementing them, and empower people to act when they are not being met. Human rights set minimum standards for how people everywhere should be treated. They place an obligation on governments to ensure that we enjoy our rights, and empower people with tools for action when our rights are not met.

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Human Rights Project
666 Broadway, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10012
www.hrpujc.org



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- **Human rights are universal, meaning that every human being is entitled to them irrespective of his or her identity or status.**
- **Human rights are inalienable, meaning that they cannot be forfeited or taken away as long as we are alive.**
- **Human rights are interdependent and indivisible, meaning that human beings must enjoy all their rights and that the exercise of any one right depends on the ability to claim other rights.**

Human Rights Instruments and the Treaty System

There are a number of human rights instruments that set out various principles which constitute the fundamental rights. Some of the instruments are legally binding, others are not. Those referred to as declarations, principles, guidelines, standard rules and recommendations have no binding legal effect. Their value lies in their recognition and acceptance by the international community. They are distinguished from those international treaties that are referred to as covenants, protocols or conventions, all of which are legally binding on states that ratify or accede to them.

Enforcement mechanisms are built into each treaty. Each treaty has a committee of independent experts that oversees its implementation. When countries ratify a treaty, they are bound to certain obligations with respect to that treaty including submitting “progress” reports to the treaty committee. The report details the country’s progress on implementing the treaty in question. Non-governmental groups are also allowed to submit shadow reports in response to the country report.

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)
- International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)
- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
- International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (MWC)