


## Part 1: Human Rights Fundamentals

Part 1 Contents: 

# A Short History of Human Rights

The belief that everyone, by virtue of her or his humanity, is entitled to certain human rights is fairly new. Its roots, however, lie in earlier tradition and documents of many cultures; it took the catalyst of World War II to propel human rights onto the global stage and into the global conscience.

Throughout much of history, people acquired rights and responsibilities through their membership in a group – a family, indigenous nation, religion, class, community, or state. Most societies have had traditions similar to the "golden rule" of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The Hindu Vedas, the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, the Bible, the Quran (Koran), and the Analects of Confucius are five of the oldest written sources which address questions of people's duties, rights, and responsibilities. In addition, the Inca and Aztec codes of conduct and justice and an Iroquois Constitution were Native American sources that existed well before the 18th century. In fact, all societies, whether in oral or written tradition, have had systems of propriety and justice as well as ways of tending to the health and welfare of their members.

## Precursors of 20th Century Human Rights Documents

Documents asserting individual rights, such the Magna Carta (1215), the English Bill of Rights (1689), the French Declaration on the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789), and the US Constitution and Bill of Rights (1791) are the written precursors to many of today's human rights documents. Yet many of these documents, when originally translated into policy, excluded women, people of color, and members of certain social, religious, economic, and political groups. Nevertheless, oppressed people throughout the world have drawn on the principles these documents express to support revolutions that assert the right to self-determination.

Contemporary international human rights law and the establishment of the United Nations (UN) have important historical antecedents. Efforts in the 19th century to prohibit the slave trade and to limit the horrors of war are prime examples. In 1919, countries established the [\*International Labor Organization \(ILO\)\*](#) to oversee [\*treaties\*](#) protecting workers with respect to their rights, including their health and safety. Concern over the protection of certain minority groups was raised by the

League of Nations at the end of the First World War. However, this organization for international peace and cooperation, created by the victorious European allies, never achieved its goals. The League floundered because the United States refused to join and because the League failed to prevent Japan's invasion of China and Manchuria (1931) and Italy's attack on Ethiopia (1935). It finally died with the onset of the Second World War (1939).

## The Birth of the United Nations

The idea of human rights emerged stronger after World War II. The extermination by Nazi Germany of over six million Jews, Sinti and Romani (gypsies), homosexuals, and persons with disabilities horrified the world. Trials were held in Nuremberg and Tokyo after World War II, and officials from the defeated countries were punished for committing war crimes, "crimes against peace," and "crimes against humanity."

Governments then committed themselves to establishing the United Nations, with the primary goal of bolstering international peace and preventing conflict. People wanted to ensure that never again would anyone be unjustly denied life, freedom, food, shelter, and nationality. The essence of these emerging human rights principles was captured in President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union Address when he spoke of a world founded on four essential freedoms: freedom of speech and religion and freedom from want and fear (See [Using Human Rights Here & Now](#)). The calls came from across the globe for human rights standards to protect citizens from abuses by their governments, standards against which nations could be held accountable for the treatment of those living within their borders. These voices played a critical role in the San Francisco meeting that drafted the [United Nations Charter](#) in 1945.

## The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

[Member states](#) of the United Nations pledged to promote respect for the human rights of all. To advance this goal, the UN established a [Commission on Human Rights](#) and charged it with the task of drafting a document spelling out the meaning of the fundamental rights and freedoms proclaimed in the Charter. The Commission, guided by Eleanor Roosevelt's forceful leadership, captured the world's attention.

On December 10, 1948, the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights \(UDHR\)](#) was adopted by the 56 members of the United Nations. The vote was unanimous, although eight nations chose to abstain.

The UDHR, commonly referred to as the international Magna Carta, extended the revolution in international law ushered in by the United Nations Charter – namely, that how a government treats its own citizens is now a matter of legitimate international concern, and not simply a domestic issue. It claims that all rights are [interdependent](#) and [indivisible](#). Its Preamble eloquently asserts that:

*[R]ecognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.*

The influence of the UDHR has been substantial. Its principles have been incorporated into the constitutions of most of the more than 185 nations now in the UN. Although a [declaration](#) is not a legally binding document, the Universal Declaration has achieved the status of [customary international law](#) because people regard it "as a common standard of achievement for all people and all nations."

## The Human Rights Covenants

With the goal of establishing mechanisms for enforcing the UDHR, the UN Commission on Human Rights proceeded to draft two [treaties](#): the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and its optional [Protocol](#) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Together with the Universal Declaration, they are commonly referred to as the [International Bill of Human Rights](#). The ICCPR focuses on such issues as the right to life, freedom of speech, religion, and voting. The ICESCR focuses on such issues as food, education, health, and shelter. Both [covenants](#) trumpet the extension of rights to all persons and prohibit discrimination.

As of 1997, over 130 nations have [ratified](#) these covenants. The United States, however, has ratified only the ICCPR, and even that with many reservations, or formal exceptions, to its full compliance. (See [From Concept to Convention: How Human Rights Law Evolves](#)).

## Subsequent Human Rights Documents

In addition to the covenants in the International Bill of Human Rights, the United Nations has adopted more than 20 principal treaties further elaborating human rights. These include conventions to prevent and prohibit specific abuses like torture and [genocide](#) and to protect especially vulnerable populations, such as refugees (Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951), women ([Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#), 1979), and children ([Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), 1989). As of 1997 the United States has ratified only these conventions:

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide

The Convention on the Political Rights of Women

The Slavery Convention of 1926

The Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

In Europe, the Americas, and Africa, regional documents for the protection and promotion of human rights extend the International Bill of Human Rights. For example, African states have created their own Charter of Human and People's Rights (1981), and Muslim states have created the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990). The dramatic changes in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin

America since 1989 have powerfully demonstrated a surge in demand for respect of human rights. Popular movements in China, Korea, and other Asian nations reveal a similar commitment to these principles.

## **The Role of Nongovernmental Organizations**

Globally the champions of human rights have most often been citizens, not government officials. In particular, [nongovernmental organizations \(NGOs\)](#) have played a cardinal role in focusing the international community on human rights issues. For example, NGO activities surrounding the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, drew unprecedented attention to serious violations of the human rights of women. NGOs such as Amnesty International, the Antislavery Society, the International Commission of Jurists, the International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs, Human Rights Watch, Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, and Survivors International monitor the actions of governments and pressure them to act according to human rights principles.

Government officials who understand the human rights framework can also effect far reaching change for freedom. Many United States Presidents such as Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Jimmy Carter have taken strong stands for human rights. In other countries leaders like Nelson Mandela and Václav Havel have brought about great changes under the banner of human rights.

Human rights is an idea whose time has come. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a call to freedom and justice for people throughout the world. Every day governments that violate the rights of their citizens are challenged and called to task. Every day human beings worldwide mobilize and confront injustice and inhumanity. Like drops of water falling on a rock, they wear down the forces of oppression and move the world closer to achieving the principles expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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