



## BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS & THE UDHR

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- **Definition of Human Rights**

Human rights are held by all persons equally, universally, and forever. Human rights are the basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity. These rights are inalienable. This means you cannot lose these rights just as you cannot cease to be a human being. Human rights are indivisible. In other words, no right is more important than another. Human rights are interdependent. Each right is connected with other rights.

The UDHR is both inspirational and practical. Human rights principles hold the vision of a free, just, and peaceful world. On a practical level, the UDHR sets minimum standards of how individuals and institutions everywhere should treat people. To promote human rights is to demand that the human dignity of all people is respected. By accepting universal human rights, ones also accept duties to the community to defend human dignity.

Human rights should not be understood as only issues that occur in far-away places. Human rights are present in our everyday lives and in our local community.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said, *“Where, after all, do universal rights begin? In small places, close to home...Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.”*

- **Historical Context of the UDHR**

The UDHR grew from a global commitment to prevent future atrocities experienced during World War II. The concept of defending human dignity based on a sense of shared community has its roots in many cultural and religious traditions. Sacred texts such as the Koran and the bible, as well as civic documents, such as the Magna Carta (1215) and the US Constitution and Bill of Rights (1791) provide a foundation for human rights.

At the end of World War II, nations came together to create the United Nations with a charter to promote international peace and prevent conflict. Calls from across the globe voiced their demand for mechanisms beyond international conflict resolution. Strong support for an international framework to protect citizens from abuses by their government and to hold nations accountable for the treatment of those living in their borders culminated in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



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- **Drafting and Adoption of the UDHR**
  - **Human Rights Commission**

A Human Rights Commission was created with members including human rights experts from around the world. In 1945 over 5,000 participants attended the [conference in San Francisco \(1945\)](#) to address the role of individual rights within the United Nations. The Commission elected Eleanor Roosevelt as their chairperson because of her political stature and personal commitment to social justice. Under the leadership of the “First Lady of the World” the document survived various iterations, attacks and political pressure stemming from the emerging Cold War.



On December 10, 1948, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by forty-eight of the fifty-six members of the United Nations, with eight abstentions. The abstaining members were Byelorussia, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Ukraine, The USSR, Yugoslavia, South Africa and Saudi Arabia. The language of the document was designed to not simply suggest or recommend, but to proclaim a universal vision. By creating it as a universal declaration, not a treaty, it was intended not to be legally binding, but morally binding. Over the last 72 years, the influence of the document has been substantial. Its principles have been incorporated by most of the more than 185 nations in the UN. The UDHR has become an international standard for all people and nations.

- **Clarification of differences between Declaration and Convention/Covenant/Treaty**

Convention, covenant and treaty are synonymous and refer to a legally binding agreement between governments that have signed them. In the United States a treaty may be signed by the President, but must be ratified by the US Senate. A Declaration is a document stating agreed upon standards, but it is not legally binding. While the UDHR is a Declaration, it has led to the ratification of a number of treaties, and, in and of itself, is now considered Customary Law, again, as noted above, as the international standard for all people and nations.

### Relevance of the UDHR to Current Civic Dialogue and Engagement

- Since 1948 the document has served to articulate a promise of all countries to create a world described by its words
- While the document calls for widespread education to make its message known, only 8% of the U.S. population are aware of its existence
- The document provides a framework to see current endeavors, whether civil rights, women’s rights, or workplace safety, inclusion and opportunity, share a common goal of achieving fairness, equality and dignity for all.
- Requires individual and local action to realize its words.

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### Definition of Human Rights Education

- In proclaiming the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education in December 1994, the General Assembly defined human rights education as *"a life-long process by which people at all levels of development and in all strata of society learn respect for the dignity of others and the means and methods of ensuring that respect in all societies."* The Assembly emphasized that the responsibility for human rights education rested with all elements of society--government, nongovernmental organizations, professional associations, and all other sectors of civil society, as well as individuals.
- Human rights education and training encompasses:
  - Education about human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;
  - Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;
  - Education for human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others.
- On December 11, 2011, the UN General Assembly adopted the [Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training](#) that spells out the importance of Human Rights Education at every level of community, from schools to public agencies, based on the principles of the UDHR.