

Human Rights

Human rights and human right laws are of growing importance to our societies. Everyone agrees that human rights are important and need to be defended. But do they? Does everyone agree that human rights are fundamental and that they should be defended?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted and proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 217 A(III) of 10 Dec.1948. It came out of a feeling of revulsion after World War 2 and was championed by the late President Roosevelt's wife Eleanor. The declaration was rooted in the feelings of the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man and the American Declaration of Independence.

The American declaration of Independence contained these ringing sentences:

'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.'

Yet this did not apply to slaves. And the French Revolutions' Declaration of the Rights of Man approved by the National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789, was just that, a Declaration of the Rights of Man, not women. The first article states that:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.

Olympe de Gouges, a butcher's daughter and revolutionary wrote a Declaration of the Rights of Women in 1791 to directly challenge the inferiority presumed of women by the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Both of these declarations sounded noble but were not universal, hence the third attempt. So with a Universal Declaration all should be well, but if you look closely at the signatory nations to the Declaration we see the same hypocrisy at work. Few of the world's nations respect their citizen's rights yet they still belong to the United Nations. They pay lip-service to the ideals of the Declaration and hide behind the prohibition in the United Nations charter for other nations to interfere with their internal affairs.

It seems clear that not everyone up-holds the ideals of human rights. But what of the idea of rights themselves – is there an alternative view?

Rights are given or conferred by someone to another or by a state to its people. Rights are not earned. A criminal who has violated someone else's rights can still claim protection of their rights. There is no morality to human rights. Morality involves choices, choices to do things, to live a certain way. Human rights are outside morality and merely something to be defended.

A better concept for society would not be the system of rights that you get no matter what and can only be violated but a system of mutual obligations. Instead of a person having a right to privacy, you would have an obligation to not disturb that person's privacy. As you can see obligations are the other side of the coin from rights but they are the **moral** side.

Imagine the government violates your rights, then you have to take them to court (if you can) to defend your rights. The government did wrong but you have to defend yourself. Imagine instead that the government did not meet its obligations, then it would have to defend its conduct.

It is a subtle distinction but one that has major implications and reflects the reality of society. In the beginning there were not rights, but in the beginning there was society and society works on co-operation and contracts which are really obligations. Rights are an abstract concept. Obligations (and meeting them) are crucial for society. Everyone has obligations and if we all met them society would be a better place. Not everyone deserves their rights.

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A: *'Do not confine your children to your own learning, for they were born in another time.'* Hebrew Proverb

In pairs, discuss to what extent you agree or disagree with this statement. How has society changed since your childhood? Write your ideas below.

| Childhood | Now |
|-----------|-----|
| | |

B: Here are definitions of ideas connected with Human Rights. Do you know the words?

- 1) **S** _____ a belief that people have about a person, group or custom which may not be true in reality
- 2) **R** _____ an attitude of treating people in ways which are not rude or harmful
- 3) **F** _____ the quality of being impartial and correct
- 4) **P** _____ an unreasonable dislike of or preference for a person, group or custom, especially based on race, religion or sex
- 5) **J** _____ a position or situation where people have the same rights and advantages
- 6) **L** _____ attributing labels that obscure all other thinking about a person
- 7) **D** _____ the practice of treating somebody or a group in society less fairly than others
- 8) **E** _____ the quality of treating people equally or in a way that is reasonable

C: Human Rights are fundamental and should be defended. To what extent is this the case?

D: Now read the text on Human Rights. What is your reaction?

E: 'Human Rights are fundamental to society'. In two groups, prepare arguments for or against this statement.

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Teacher's Notes

Summary: To provide Ss with opportunities for developing language of discussion and giving/asking for opinions.

Procedure:

1. Read out the quote to the class. Ask the class to discuss in pairs to what extent they agree or disagree.
2. Give out a copy of the worksheet and hold a short feedback slot. Refer to the instructions for section A. Ss discuss changes (positive and negative) in society in pairs and make notes. Circulate and help with vocabulary.
3. Hold longer feedback slot. Ideas which Ss may suggest:
freedom of speech, tolerance, sexual discrimination, racism, violence etc
4. Refer to instructions for section B. Ss work in pairs to complete the words.
Key: *stereotyping, respect, fairness, prejudice, justice, labelling, discrimination, equality*
5. Refer to instructions for section C. The text questions the fundamental importance of Human Rights. Encourage Ss to discuss this statement with reference to both global and local situation.
6. Ss read the text and consider their reactions either silently or with a partner.
7. **Discussion:**
 - a) Divide the class into two even groups and refer Ss to the topic of discussion in section E – ‘Human Rights are fundamental to society’.
 - b) Group A thinks of arguments for and group B against. Each member of the group should write down all of the arguments that come up.
 - c) When each group have 6 or 7 arguments, bring everyone together.
 - d) Elicit ways of agreeing and disagreeing with regard to language and context (consider politeness, turn taking etc):
May I come in here? Basically..., I reckon..., Could I say something? Actually..., Well, from my point of view..., Wait a minute..., Don't you think that..., What about you? What's your reaction? I tend to feel that...
 - e) Pair off Ss so each pair consists of a student from group A and one from group B. Ss face each other across the table.
 - f) Ss conduct a debate taking in turns to raise a point from their notes
 - g) *Optional: Put pairs into groups of 4, then 8 then whole class if debates are developing well.*