



Background: Universal Human Rights



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The signing of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* on December 10, 1948, was a very important occasion. Representatives of 48 countries came together at the United Nations in Paris to make a profound statement on the value and dignity of human life. After several drafts and much debate, the final version of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was created. It was a list of basic rights which the international community agreed upon as being those to which all human beings are naturally and equally entitled.

The horrors experienced during World War II, especially the Holocaust committed by the Nazi regime, shocked the world. War could no longer be used as an excuse to commit crimes against humanity, and the suffering and death of millions of innocent people could no longer be ignored. For the first time in history, the international community agreed that gross violations of human rights would not be tolerated. It was a monumental decision. Human rights were finally acknowledged as a global concern.

A strong and unified declaration against human rights violations was necessary in order to prevent such violations from recurring. The United Nations, established in 1945, began to develop a set of standards that would make the respect of human rights an international priority. A commission was appointed to begin drafting a list of universally accepted rights and freedoms, which was soon to be known as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

The Commission on Human Rights, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt (wife of American president Theodore Roosevelt), set to work. The Commission needed to create a declaration that all countries around the world could adopt as their own. This was no easy task. The ideas needed to be *universal*. This meant that they had to apply to go beyond different political and religious beliefs, and different cultures. The Commission enlisted the help of several people, including a Canadian named John Peters Humphrey.

Dr. Humphrey was a young law professor from McGill University in Montréal and a renowned authority on international law. He wrote the first draft of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and worked to guide it through to its adoption on December 10, 1948. His tremendous contribution to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and to the development of subsequent human rights law is a source of great pride for all Canadians.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* reflects fundamental beliefs shared by countries around the world regarding human rights. The document is divided into two sections: the preamble, which describes the reasons why the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was created; and the 30 Articles that list our basic human rights.

There are two main themes contained in the Preamble. The first is the belief that in order "to promote social progress and better standards of life," laws that protect human rights must be

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enforced and respected universally. The second is the belief that by upholding human rights, "freedom, justice, and peace in the world" can be achieved. In short, respecting human rights means a better world for everyone.

There are 30 Articles in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which cover six different categories of human rights. The six categories are

1. Political Rights (e.g., the right to vote and to participate in government)
2. Civil Rights (e.g., freedom of opinion and expression)
3. Equality Rights (e.g., the right to be free from discrimination)
4. Economic Rights (e.g., fair wages and safe working conditions)
5. Social Rights (e.g., the right to education and to adequate health care)
6. Cultural Rights (e.g., the right to speak your native language)

Although each of these rights may differ from one another, they are all considered to be *human rights*.

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is a profoundly important document for people all over the world because it is founded on three key principles:

- Human rights are **inalienable**: no one can ever take them away from you.
- Human rights are also **indivisible**: you cannot be entitled to some of them and denied others.
- Human rights are **interdependent**: they are all part of a larger framework and work together so you can enjoy a safe, free, and productive life.

Yet the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* itself is not a law, because every country is entitled to make its own laws. Countries that have signed the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* cannot be held legally responsible if they break their promise to protect and preserve human rights and freedoms. The Declaration is a standard for countries to follow. It expresses the basic principles and ideals that the world holds for human rights.

Using the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as a guide, governments are responsible for creating national laws to protect universal human rights. Citizens can then use their own judicial and legal systems to prosecute individuals or groups that have violated human rights. In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms has incorporated the human rights standards of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* into Canadian law.

Source: "Action Guide on Human Rights" produced by the United Nations Association of Canada
<www.unac.org/rights/>