

# UNDERSTANDING HUMAN RIGHTS

What are human rights, where did they come from  
and how can we protect them?





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# What are human rights?

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As part of your normal everyday life, you exercise your human rights and you may not even realise it. When you relax on the weekend, when you study or access public services, you are enacting your fundamental rights.

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Human rights belong to everyone simply by virtue of being human — you don't have to be part of a group, country or institution to be entitled to human rights. They are not a luxury, or a privilege, but a basic right. They are the same for every person, regardless of gender, race, religion, language, nationality or political affiliation. Human rights can be collective — for example, environmental rights or the right to benefit from economic development — or they can be individual, such as the right to rest and leisure. They are universal, indivisible, cannot be taken away and cannot be given up.

But what are our human rights and where did they come from?

## The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

After the horrors of World War II, the newly formed United Nations proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard for all people and all nations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights set out, for the first time, basic human rights to be universally protected. Along with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the three form the International Bill of Human Rights. The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the UN in 2007, and by Australia in 2009.

The concept of human rights and humanity have their roots in 19th century European Enlightenment, but the main concepts are shared among many cultures, religions and communities.

## Types of human rights

There are 30 human rights in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The list of human rights covers civil, economic, legal, social, individual, communal and political rights. Examples of human rights are freedom of association and assembly, freedom of belief and religion and freedom of movement. [Head here to read all 30 human rights.](#)

## Human rights for children

Children also have fundamental rights; these were outlined in the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child. This list of human rights specifically sets out special protections for children, such as the right to play, to healthy development and to maintain contact with parents.



Khilgaon, Dhaka; Kulsum with women from Ela Mitra Women's Club. Oxfam supported Let Her Decide and Participate (LHDP) project in Sirajganj is working to give women a say in their own future and making them a leader of social change. Photo: Peter Caton/OxfamAus



# What are human rights violations?

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Human rights violations of some kind occur in all countries, even in Australia. Your ability to go to school, drink clean water or say what you think all depend on the protection of your fundamental human rights.

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When thinking of examples of human rights violations, we often think of crimes against humanity, genocide, war, torture or slavery carried out by states. These are particularly brutal cases because they violate virtually all the freedoms and rights of the people affected.

There are many other ways of violating the 30 articles of human rights that aren't as obvious, and which can go unnoticed. The right of consenting adults to marry, the right to own property, the right to equal pay for equal work, and the right to choose the type

of education given to your children are all examples of human rights that are commonly violated around the world.

When a section of society does not have access to the most basic rights, such as education or housing, human rights are also being infringed. When people cannot express themselves freely about whichever political party is running the country, human rights are being infringed. When the information in the media is biased because of censorship, human rights are being infringed.



Omlaing, Cambodia: Khan stands with her husband and one of their grandsons on the family's land. The Phnom Penh Sugar (PPS) plantation is on the other side of the fence behind them. Like other families in the village, they were evicted in 2010 and the company offered them a small plot of land. From 2011 to 2014, Australia's ANZ bank partially financed the PPS plantation complex in Kampong Speu, Cambodia. During this time, PPS was implicated in a range of human rights abuses – from child labour to forced evictions, as well as causing food shortages. Before the bank decided to invest, concerns about land seizures and forced evictions were raised, but they proceeded with financing the project. Photo: Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom/OxfamAUS.

# Who protects human rights?

Photo: Alice Donovan Rouse on Unsplash



*“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. [...] Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerted citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world.”*

– Eleanor Roosevelt<sup>1</sup>

The importance of human rights lies with everyone to perform and protect theirs and others’ human rights. While the implied responsibilities in human rights are often focused on groups, such as governments and refugees, meeting them also involves responsibilities of the person claiming that right, to actively claim it, and to do so responsibly. Non-government organisations (NGO), community groups, governments, businesses and religious organisations are all responsible for protecting human rights. There are also national and international groups that deal with human rights violations.

## Human rights law

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights lists the types of human rights, however it is not legally binding. International human rights law works across nations and regions, to promote and protect human rights.

The United Nations Human Rights Council enforces international human rights law in all UN member states; however, there is no international court

to administer human rights law. The International Criminal Court enables violators of human rights to be brought to justice but only has jurisdiction over genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The European Court of Human Rights is an international court established by the European Convention on Human Rights, made up of the member states of the Council of Europe.

The Human Rights Law Centre of Australia uses legal action, advocacy, research and capacity building to protect and promote human rights here in Australia and Australian activities overseas.

The Australian Human Rights Commission Act was established in 1986 in response to Australia signing a range of international covenants and declarations on civil and political rights, rights of the child, rights of disabled persons and employment discrimination. It put into Australian law the protection of fundamental rights and protection from discrimination.

1. United Nations, ‘The Universal Declaration of Human Rights turns 70’, <http://www.un.org/en/events/humanrightsday/>



# What are NGOs doing to address human rights issues?

Human rights continue to be violated in all regions of the world. To combat this, NGOs and human rights organisations put pressure on governments to ensure that people's interests are respected. They mobilise human rights activists and perform expert investigation and reporting. Different organisations implement a diverse range of actions that bring

about change in societies where human rights are being violated. For example, Amnesty International raises awareness about cases of human rights violation, UNICEF fights for children's access to education, and Human Rights Watch publishes an annual report on human rights violations.



Meradia, Bangladesh: Taramon Bibi women's club in Meradia have been threatened by men to stop advocating for women's rights. However, they continue to bravely take to the streets and make their voices heard in their community. Photo: Peter Caton/OxfamAus.

## Human rights and Oxfam

Oxfam is another proud champion for human rights. We work with local partners in some of the world's most vulnerable communities, striving to improve access to clean, safe drinking water.

Human rights are reflected in how Oxfam works, how we treat our staff and how we achieve outcomes for the communities we serve. We have a broad understanding of the importance of human

rights to different individuals and groups. Human rights are not just relevant in a legal or institutional context. Human rights also inform our understanding of cultural diversity and the collective nature of many communities. And Oxfam is not the only organisation committed to upholding human rights. Many community development organisations, like us, keep the principles of human rights at the heart of their work.

## Protection of human rights

Much of the work done by NGOs aims to prevent human rights violations over the long term. They achieve this by creating development programs that promote fairer, more egalitarian health care, education and agriculture, and various other social improvements. In this way, people can improve their living conditions over time, receive decent salaries and send their children to school.

These advantages empower people to be more aware of their rights, to have more influence over their governments, and to actively take part in

decision-making processes that impact their future. And when people are empowered and know their rights, they are less vulnerable to exploitation by states and multinationals.

“Although you are never quite prepared to face the suffering of so many people, no matter how much I suffer and rage with impotence, I always try to find something positive in everything I do, something that makes continuing worthwhile ... and I always manage to find it, no matter how many calamities I witness.

“Accompanying a child soldier back home and seeing the reunion with his family, seeing the face of a woman who receives food for her children, the father who retrieves his dignity by taking clothes home to his family... These are the things that make you get up in the mornings and want to continue fighting for a better world. Because together we can do it.”

– Celeste Villar, Humanitarian Action Project Coordinator



Lucknow, India: Ram shows his voter ID card. Oxfam partners with the Vigyan Foundation to support local domestic workers, homeless people, and construction workers in 100 slums, helping improve access to identity cards, government schemes, education, and clean water and sanitation. They also provide information about workers' rights, promote education and raise awareness about issues such as gender-based violence. Photo: Anubhav/OxfamIndia.



# What can I do to protect human rights?

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If you want to join the fight to defend and uphold human rights, there are a number of things you can do. Small daily actions can make a big difference to other people, so it is vital that you know what tools you have available to improve our world.

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## Know your basic human rights

Reading this e-book is a good start! Knowledge is power, and the more you know about human rights, the more you can do to protect them. Human rights don't exist in isolation, they can only be achieved in some form of community.

For example, one person on a desert island has no human rights — they only make sense if there are others to satisfy those rights. Human rights do not imply the freedom to exercise them without limit; with rights come responsibilities. Each individual has a duty and obligation to exercise rights responsibly, like weighing freedom of expression against freedom from vilification.

## Buy Fair Trade

The Fair Trade cooperatives set up in poor countries are a good example of what NGOs like Oxfam are doing to protect peoples' basic human rights — in this case, the right to a decent salary. Did you know that every time you buy one of these products you can be sure that you are not contributing to the exploitation of children or women? As the name suggests, fair trade is fair!

## Celebrate Human Rights Day

Every year on 10 December, people around the world commemorate the day that the UN formally adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Find a demonstration, talk, seminar or event in your area to show your support.

## Shop ethically

**The Shop Ethical! app** is a handy tool for conscientious consumers to use when shopping. It provides information about how different companies — particularly multinationals or conglomerates — treat their workers, how they treat the environment, and whether they have any human rights violations on their record.

## Make a donation

Supporting Oxfam's work is a great way to participate in a human rights campaign. When kind people like you make regular contributions, we can project how much money we'll have available for various rights-based projects and programs, and we can allocate funds to different projects in the most effective way. To donate to Oxfam head [here](#).

## Become an Oxfam member

Get involved in shaping Oxfam Australia's future by becoming a member. If you are an Australian citizen, you can become a member [here](#).

## Become a volunteer

Whether this is out in the streets or in the offices, becoming part of the organisation is one of the best ways to contribute to change. Volunteers are a key part of the workings of an NGO; without them it would not be possible to turn life-changing projects into reality. To volunteer with Oxfam, head [here](#).





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