

Introduction: What are Human Rights?

A political dissident is jailed in Myanmar without being given a fair trial. A massive oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico threatens the livelihood of fishermen on the Atlantic coast. A child is kidnapped, drugged, and forced to take up arms in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Young Muslim students are banned from wearing traditional headscarves in French public schools. A man in India without access to clean water dies of a treatable disease. A guard looks on as an inmate is assaulted in a Texas jail. A woman working at a business firm in New York is paid less than her male counterparts.

Each of these scenarios reminds us of how vulnerable each human being is to injustice. The scenarios raise two fundamental questions: What are the basic freedoms and entitlements of every human being? How should we protect these freedoms and entitlements? It is within the idea of human rights that we can look for answers to these questions.

What are human rights?

Human rights are fundamental rights and freedoms that all people are entitled to simply by the fact that they are human. Today, it is generally accepted around the world that governments have a responsibility to ensure and protect certain rights for their people. Human

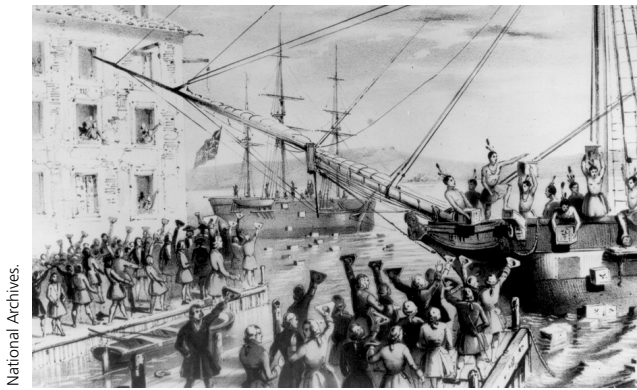
rights laws mainly focus on how governments treat their people, but also make governments responsible for protecting individuals from abuse by other individuals.

Over the past several decades, discussion about human rights has permeated international relations, creating a surge in treaties, institutions, and social movements. Human rights have been at the center of many political struggles and are a means to protect the powerless from the powerful.

Yet while the general principle of human rights has been broadly accepted, human rights abuses persist and questions about the subject remain hotly contested. What exactly are human rights? Given the diversity of values held by people around the world, is it possible to agree on one definition of human rights? Should some rights take priority over other rights? What action should be taken to protect human rights? These questions have significant implications for the policy decisions of governments and ultimately for the lives of individuals.

While the idea that governments should ensure equal rights for all of their citizens is relatively new, questions about what rights are, to whom they are extended, and how they should be protected have been debated for centuries.

Human Rights in History



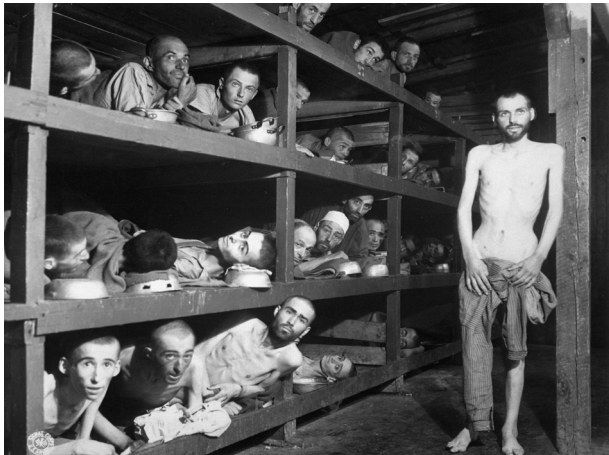
National Archives.

1773. The Boston Tea Party was an early event in the American Revolution. American colonists demanded and fought for civil and political rights from the King of England. In the years that followed, many peoples around the world began to demand and expect these rights from governments.



Library of Congress, Division of Prints and Photographs, LC-USZ62-50393.

1915. Twenty thousand women march for the right to vote in New York City. Women received the right to vote in the United States in 1920 when the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. Increased political participation has contributed to an evolving role of women in society in the United States and around the world.



Private H. Miller, National Archives, 535561.

1945. Survivors of the Nazi Holocaust at the Buchenwald concentration camp. In response to the murder of millions by the Nazi government, the international community adopted treaties and agreements to protect human rights and to hold governments and individuals accountable for violating human rights. This began what some have referred to as “the age of rights.”



Jonathan McIntosh (CC BY 2.0).

2004. A boy bathes in polluted water in Jakarta, Indonesia. The idea that human rights include more than rights to political participation and protection from murderous governments is widely accepted today. Many argue that this boy has a right to clean water and safe living conditions. Others believe that these are not actually rights, but rather aspirations.