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What Are Human Rights? And Why Are They Crucial For Our Society?



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What are and where do Human Rights come from? This article provides a brief overview of the history of Human Rights, examines their relevance and highlights their presence in recent times. It is intended to provide basic information for those who are interested in the concept, encourage further research and promote the projects of EKO.

After the Second World War in 1945 and the atrocities that took place, the United Nations decided that it was time to create a series of rights recognising the inalienable dignity of human beings. Free of discrimination, inequality or distinctions of any kind, human dignity from that point onwards are promoted as universal, equal and inalienable.

But the history of Human Rights is much older...These have been the antecedents and the major milestones in the history of Human Rights:

539 B.C. | Conquest of Babylon

In the conquest of Babylon, Cyrus the Great freed all slaves, while announcing religious freedom. This historical moment, arguably, is the beginning point of the contextualization of the term "Human Rights" (EACNUR, 2018).

4th century B.C | Aristotle

Aristotle argued in his publication "Nicomachean Ethics" on the concept of justice based on logic and rationales. He, due to his philosophical background, distinguished between "natural justice" and "legal justice". Aristotle defined justice as "natural" and "that it has the same validity everywhere and does not depend on acceptance". Thus, he proposed that justice lies in the exercise of reason liberated from the distorting effects of prejudice or desire (The world guide, n.d.).

106-43 B.C | Cicero

As a moralist, Cicero defended humanism and the supremacy of natural law against violence and torture. He received extensive training in law and Hellenistic philosophy. Cicero became one of the main actors responsible for its introduction to the Roman elite classes and educational efforts (Thinking and culture, 2015).



1215 | Magna Carta

A thousand years later, the first document that recognizes the rights of people was the Magna Carta Libertatum, or better known as Magna Carte. It was signed by the King of England (EACNUR, 2018).

1776 | Independence of America

The concept of "natural rights" was also included in the Declaration of Independence of the United States of the year 1776. It recognized that principles are equitable for all humans, having inalienable rights, such as the right to life and liberty (EACNUR, 2018).

1762 | The Social Contract

Rousseau was a great philosopher who contributed with his knowledge to the struggle for individual freedom. One of his great works was the elaboration of "The Social Contract", a famous political document where he presented his arguments in favour of civil liberty and the ideological foundation of the French Revolution (Artavia, E., 2012).

1789 | French Revolution

After the declaration of independence of America in the year 1776, the ideals that were born there flourished again in the French Revolution, emphasizing the importance of Human Rights as "natural". The idea of Human Rights was very strong, so that it spread throughout the rest of Europe, although, however, in the rest of the continents people were colonized and their Human Rights were violated (EACNUR, 2018).

1915 | Mahatma Gandhi

But the rest of the continents also began to become aware of "Human Rights", that is how in Asia Gandhi begins to spread via peaceful protests the idea that everyone had rights, regardless of their origin or place of birth (EACNUR, 2018).



1945 | Foundational Charter of the United Nations and coining of the term

The appearance of the term "Human Rights" was not until June 26, 1945. When after the Second World War, the letter of the United Nations was carried out (EACNUR, 2018).

1948 | Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On December 10, 1948, the UN Assembly in Paris, Human Rights as a milestone in the history were proclaimed. It was the first time in history that Human Rights were not only considered as fundamental, but in addition the need to protect them throughout the world was adapted (EACNUR, 2018).

21st century | A long way to go

Nowadays, all countries have signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But there are fallbacks. Though globally Human Rights are accepted, nevertheless it does not have the same weight as the law. Many people are still deprived of their most basic rights, as enforcement and prosecution in regards to Human Rights violations is still limited. Some of the examples include the presence of slavery even today, discrimination and persecution of people because of their ethnicity or religion, and the high number of displaced and stateless people (at least 10 million people do not have a nationality). There are many factors that deprives individuals, as well as groups of the basic rights such as equality, education or marriage (EACNUR, 2018).



Categorization of Human Rights

Thanks to all these historical events, today we can enjoy the right to life, the right to liberty and freedom, the right to the pursuit of happiness, the right to live your life free of discrimination, the right to freedom of speech or the right to freedom of thought (and many more). Inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.

Some rights were included in the laws long before others, which were accepted after long social struggles.

That is why we can classify Human Rights into three large groups, which are called first, second and third generation (Prestel, C., n.d.):

The first generation

The first generation of Human Rights mainly defends the value of freedom, by considering and urging to limit the exercise of power and ensuring the political participation of citizens in its main functions (right to life, security, right to vote or strike). This generation includes civil and political rights, and thus are highlighting the rights of people within a group, society or state. The first generation was largely accepted between the 18th and 19th century.

The second generation

The second generation promotes the value of equality. It aims at guaranteeing decent living conditions for all (right to health, education, work ...). In this way, economic, social and cultural rights are included between the 19th and 20th century.

The third generation

Peaceful and constructive relations are promoted by the third generation. This generation defends the value of solidarity (right to a clean environment, peace and development).



The fourth generation

The fourth generation of Human Rights is highly debated, and arguably, they do not exist. It is this generation that considers the rights of future generations, as well as rights that do not belong to individuals or groups, but to humanity as a whole. Within this segment, certain topics, such as the human genome, genetic manipulation, in vitro fertilization, experiences with human embryos, forces and assisted euthanasia, as well as sterilization and artificial life after brain death and eugenics are highlighted, studied and evaluated. Similarly, within political context these topics are highly debated and it cannot be said that there is an international, nor EU-wide consensus on these topics (Vasile, A., 2009).

Why are Human Rights important?

Human Rights are essential for the well being and development of individuals, as well as within their communities. They protect all people, as they reflect the minimum standards necessary for people to live in dignity. Human Rights give people the right to choose how they want to live, how to express themselves, among other aspects. They also guarantee life, equality, freedom and security and protect people against the abuses of those in positions of greater power. Human Rights are specifically compiled in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and must be respected by all nations in the world. This is fundamental, since it stipulates the protection of people from all kinds of abuse, unequal treatment or discrimination.

No person (regardless of their condition, status or actions) can be removed from their Human Rights. This, however, does not mean that Human Rights abuses and violations do not occur. Unfortunately, we see daily in newspapers and television stories of abuse, discrimination, violence, racism, murder and poverty.



For example, Amnesty International's 2009 World Report and other sources show numerous atrocities and violations of Human Rights worldwide (United for Human Rights, 2008-2018):

- Cases of torture or abuse were recorded in at least 81 countries
- In at least 54 countries, there were people who faced unfair trials
- Restrictions in their freedom of expression in at least 77 countries

Not only these statistics are horrifying, but women and children in particular are marginalized in numerous ways. Press and media are often not free in many countries, prosecuted or silenced in many ways. Even within Europe press freedom and the safety of journalist is not guaranteed as the Council of Europe states that “among the most widespread threats to journalists’ safety in Europe today is police violence against journalists covering demonstrations” (COE, 2014), A further contemporary issue concerns dissenters, who are silenced, too often permanently. While some gains have been made over the course of the last six decades, Human Rights violations are still a scourge today. Also, statistics of loss of dignity and life through child abuse, gang violence, child labour and child soldiers are staggeringly high.

The following are current statistics in five key areas of Human Rights abuse (Youth for Human Rights, 2002-2018):

Child abuse

According to the United Nations Children's Fund "40 million children below the age of 15 suffer from abuse and neglect" (2007). Despite the great efforts of NGOs and the community in general, many children are threatened by various abuses and live in precarious families or are suffering from negligent tutors. Little by little, people work to defend their rights, the rights of one of the most fragile parts of our population, but there is still much to do.



Gang violence

"100 percent of cities with populations greater than or equal to 250,000 reported gang activity" according to the US Department of Justice (Egley, A., Howell, J.C. & Aline, K., 2006). Thus, Human Rights play an especially significant role within the context of cities and urbanised environments.

Child labour

The International Labour Organisation stated in 2002 that "246 million children, one in every six children aged 5 to 17, are involved in child labour". Thus, the protection of Human Rights not only differs in a geographical sense, but also according to different age groups. The safety of children is a challenge and concern of NGOs and other organisations internationally.

Child soldiers

UNICEF estimates that "more than 300,000 children under 18 are currently being exploited in over thirty armed conflicts worldwide" (Yapi International, n.d.). Considering the contemporary political situation globally, it is important to notice that many participating in armed conflicts are minors. Indeed, engaged in conflict are not only minors, but also children under the age of 7. The US Department of States found that "while the majority of child soldiers are between the ages of 15 and 18, some are as young as 7 or 8 years of age" (2005).

Human trafficking

Most might think that slavery no longer is an issue in the world and outlawed for many decades. However the horrific truth is that "it is estimated that there are 27 million people in the world today who are enslaved" (US Department of State Trafficking in Persons Report, 2006). The "business" of human lives is very visible in border regions and currently the endangering situation in, for example, Libya is well known. It is said that "every year 600,000 to 800,000 persons are trafficked across international borders" (ff). Considering that these are estimates and that most cases might not be reported to any authority, the actual number of trafficked humans might be a lot higher.



And these are not the only cases of violation of Human Rights. Below presented are contemporary cases of the year 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2018):

- **September** - Multiple deaths in Nicaragua, because of government repression.
- **August** - Google develops a version of its search engine adapted to the demands of censorship in China, which would allow the company to settle in the country.
- **August** - Thousands of Mexican children have been detained in the United States, separated from their parents and subjected to inhumane treatment.
- **August** - At least two thousand victims of trafficking in Mexico.
- **August** - Costa Rica still prohibits gay marriage, although the derogation has been requested.
- **July** - Torture is reported in an Ethiopian prison.

In just 3 months, there are many cases of Human Rights violations throughout the world. And of course there are many more, such as the right to a home or the right to life that are not fulfilled daily.

Human Rights violations can also be found increasingly in Europe (Human Rights Watch, 2017)

- **Migration and Asylum** - The recent migration wave has had vast impacts on the provision and protection of Human Rights. Significant violations, which have been called out by several NGOs and international organisations include the “strategy of containment in cooperation with Libyan authorities”, the consequent deaths in the Mediterranean Sea (one in eighteen die crossing (Telegraph, 2018)) and violations of countries, such as Hungary “for the way it detained asylum seekers and returned them to Serbia”. Especially in the Mediterranean Sea, the issue of rescue activities is concerning. Human Rights Watch states that “NGOs performed roughly 40% of all rescues in the central Mediterranean in the first half of 2017, but by September several NGOs had suspended activities due to security concerns and increased interceptions, sometimes reckless and accompanied by abuse, but Libyan coast guard forces”.



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- **Discrimination and Intolerance:** The rise of populist movements and the extreme right within Europe has caused further problems in relation to Human Rights. In many countries of the European Union, such as France, Austria, Netherlands, Germany, Greece and so on, right-wing parties have gained seats in parliament, came in second in the elections or are even part of the coalition government. In turn, within public rhetoric “racism, xenophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment and violence” can be found and according to the Council of Europe’s Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) notes that “hate speech had entered the political mainstream”. Violations can mostly be found or are perpetrated against migrants, Muslims and Roma. Significant to highlight are the reported cases, however the dark figure cannot be ignored, as the EU actor Fundamental Right Agency (FRA) argues that “many hate crimes in the EU remain unreported and invisible, leaving victims without redress”.
- **Gender:** LGBT and related groups remain marginalised even within Europe. Furthermore, sexual violence and harassment of women, and thus the protection of their Human Rights continues to be a challenge. For example, the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women, which the EU signed, has yet to be ratified by eleven of its Member States (such as the UK, Greece and Hungary).
- **Terrorism and Counterterrorism:** ISIS, far-right and left, and other groups publicly announced their role in terroristic attacks in Europe, such as in Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, Spain, Sweden and the UK. According to Human Rights Watch, these attacks have in total “killed over 60 people and left hundred injured”. Consequent regulations passed by the EU and by its Member States have infringed Human Rights, freedoms of expression and non-discrimination principles. Many human rights groups have “expressed concern about insufficient safeguards and vague terminology”.



At this point the question arises: Has any progress been made to reduce Human Rights violations?

According to Council of Europe Portal (Jagland, T., 2017):

"A breakthrough, although sometimes it seems like a simple drop in the ocean. It considers the abolition of slavery, the vote of women, the countries that have abolished the death penalty, the release of prisoners of conscience as a result of international pressure, the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, the cases that have been judged before the European Court and the laws that have had to be changed as a consequence. Consider the fact that the gradual change in international culture means that even the most authoritarian regimes now have to take Human Rights into consideration in order to be accepted on the international stage. There have been many positive results, especially in the last 50 years, but much remains to be done."

But what happens when two Human Rights come into conflict? How to know which is more important?

The main thing is to check the laws of the country. The major problem is that Human Rights are not regulated in a legal or regulatory way. It is more accurate to categorise them as values, morals or principles. Thus, they provide legislators with a guideline, but the specific translation into national law and also the possibilities and ways of enforcement are to a large extent left to the governments themselves. The current situation shows laws, which are differently applied and practices in each country. Unfortunately, this promotes inequalities between countries and in turn gives room for potential violations of Human Rights without effective means of persecution.

What is the relationship between Human Rights and Education?

Education is one of the most influential factors against the violation of Human Rights. **Human Rights Education (HRE)** helps the empowerment of people who fight for their rights and others', which aim at ensuring that those in positions of power are held accountable. All this is possible as they know their rights, their responsibilities and duties. They may become part of the Human Rights movement and support values and promote Human Rights in their communities and societies, and throughout the world (International Amnesty, 2018).



EKO believes that training on Human Rights is essential to raise awareness of the importance of Human Rights and promotes actively education thereof. **Dialogue, seminars, workshops, and cultural exchanges** are important approaches to knowledge and empowerment in relation to Human Rights. In this way, it is possible to highlight the importance of critical thinking and support the youth and youth workers to gain greater experiences and knowledge.

Participants of EKO's educational projects in Human Rights will gain an in-depth understanding of the historical and philosophical definition of Human Rights: From the traditional conceptualisation of justice and morals, the American and Industrial Revolution, to the impact of globalisation and contemporary challenges. By considering the complex development of the concept of Human Rights and other supportive national and international legal instruments, youngsters will be able to place individual rights, rights within groups and communities, as well as rights protecting minorities, marginalised and vulnerable groups.

Human Rights Education aspires to provide insights into contemporary challenges, such as the right to peace, right to a health environment, right to development and so on, and to build up a well structured understanding of relevant literature and theories. Human Rights are a social issue that concerns us all over the world, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights already claims. In our hand is the need to be more aware and act in accordance with it, promoting the fulfilment of rights, as well as the arising responsibilities.



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