



LESSON 8

TEACHER'S NOTES: BACKGROUND TO UDHR

WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?

Human rights are what every human being needs to live a healthy and fulfilled life and to participate fully in society. They are entitlements – you have them just because you are human.

Human rights are:

- universal – they apply to everyone equally
- inalienable – they cannot be taken away from people
- indivisible – they are all connected: failure to protect one right can lead to abuse of other rights, just as taking action to fulfil one right can lead to the fulfilment of other rights

Human rights are underpinned by a set of common values that have been prevalent in societies, civilisations and religions throughout history, such as fairness, respect, equality, dignity and autonomy.

WHAT IS THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS?

Atrocities committed by states during the Second World War, and in particular the appalling abuses of the Holocaust, led the newly formed United Nations to establish a Human Rights Commission in 1947. A group of government leaders came together, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, to draft a new document in an attempt to prevent such human rights abuses from happening again. The vision of these leaders was not only influenced by events in Europe; other world events such as the assassination of Gandhi in India and the beginning of apartheid in South Africa were also at the forefront of their minds.

The resulting document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), was adopted by the countries of the UN in 1948 and it remains the most famous and most important of all human rights frameworks in the world. The preamble recognises a universal entitlement to rights for all humans, and sets the aim of contributing towards freedom, justice and peace in the world. Human rights are defined in the subsequent 30 articles.

The UDHR is not legally binding for countries, but it has formed the basis of a range of treaties that are legally binding, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment. Regional groups of countries and individual states have incorporated these human rights into their own treaties, such as the European Convention on Human Rights and the UK Human Rights Act.