



PHOENICIA UNIVERSITY

A Public Guide to Human Rights & Fundamental Freedoms

From an ancient Persian king to a vote in Paris in 1948 — the surprising story of the rights you already carry, simply by being human.

Based on lecture material on Human Rights Law

1 What Actually Is a “Right”?

It's more than a nice idea. A right is an entitlement. If you're entitled to something, someone else — usually the state — owes you a duty: to act, or to leave you alone. Rights aren't just admirable goals; they're claims you're authorized to make, and enforce.

“To have a right to x means you are entitled to x. If x is threatened or denied, right-holders are authorized to make special claims that ordinarily trump utility, social policy, and other grounds for action.”

— Ronald Dworkin, 1977

Four Things That Make It a “Human” Right

- **Universal**

You have it simply because you're human — no passport, ID or permission required.

- **Inalienable**

It can't be given away, sold, or taken from you. It's a trump card, not a favour.

- **Indivisible**

Civil, political, economic and social rights are all connected — none is “more real” than another.

- **Empowering**

Rights empower — they don't just benefit. A right-holder can assert, claim, enforce, and demand a remedy.

2 You Live Human Rights Every Day

This field isn't abstract. It quietly shapes school, work, protest, and even where you're allowed to live.

1

Going to school

Free, compulsory primary education is a right states must guarantee immediately — no “not enough budget” excuse allowed.

2

Joining a union, or striking

The right to organize and strike is a protected economic right, not just a political act.

3

Speaking your mind online

Freedom of expression is a civil and political right — with real limits, and real ongoing debates.

4

Being arrested

Due process and protection from arbitrary detention trace back over 800 years, to the Magna Carta.

5

Facing eviction

One family's case at the UN proved that losing your home with nowhere to go can violate the right to housing.

6

Holding a passport

Nationality is a recognized human right — no state may arbitrarily strip it from you.

3

Did Human Rights Begin in Ancient Babylon?

What Supposedly Happened

In 539 BC, Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylon. Inscriptions on a baked-clay cylinder describe him freeing slaves, letting people choose their own religion, and declaring racial equality among conquered peoples.

HISTORY SPOTLIGHT

A 2,500-Year-Old Argument

The Cyrus Cylinder, 539 BC

Historians push back hard on the “charter” label. Assyriologist Irving Finkel insists “there were never human rights in antiquity” — the cylinder follows a long Mesopotamian tradition of royal self-praise. But no earlier text combines religious tolerance, freedom of movement, and a ban on arbitrary enslavement quite like it.

Why It's Celebrated Today

The Cyrus Cylinder is often called history's first human rights charter. A replica sits at UN Headquarters in New York, and its text echoes the first four articles of the modern UDHR.

Lesson: even the “origins” of human rights are still being argued over — that's normal for a living idea.



4

Eight Centuries of Writing Rights Down

Long before the United Nations existed, these documents forced rulers to put limits on their own power — on paper.

1215

Magna Carta

English barons force King John to accept due process and limits on arbitrary taxation.

1776

US Declaration of Independence

Individual rights and the “right of revolution” enter global political language.

1919–35

Early ILO Conventions

First international labour standards: minimum age, forced labour, the 40-hour week.

1628

Petition of Right

English Parliament bans imprisonment without cause and taxation without consent.

1789

French Declaration of the Rights of Man

Liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression — for citizens, not yet for all.

1948

The UDHR

The UN adopts 30 articles meant to apply to every human being, everywhere.



5

The Most Translated Document in History

What It Is

Adopted in Paris on 10 December 1948, just three years after WWII, the UDHR sets out 30 articles meant to belong to every person alive. It is a declaration, not a treaty — no state can be sued directly for breaking it.

HISTORY SPOTLIGHT

A Lebanese Voice in the Room

UN General Assembly, Paris, 10 December 1948

Drafted by a committee chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, with French jurist René Cassin and Chinese diplomat P. C. Chang shaping its structure and philosophy — and Lebanese philosopher-diplomat Charles Malik serving as rapporteur, central to its language on human dignity. Final vote: 48 in favour, 0 against, 8 abstentions.

Why the Public Should Care

Its language shaped most modern constitutions. Its adoption date is now Human Rights Day, marked worldwide every December 10th — arguably the most consequential UN vote no one remembers taking.

Eleanor Roosevelt called it “the international Magna Carta for all mankind.”



6 Two Families of Rights, One Shared Dignity

Civil & Political Rights	Economic, Social & Cultural Rights
<i>“The state must leave you alone.”</i> Life, fair trial, free speech, privacy, voting, freedom from torture. Mostly negative duties: the state must not censor, detain arbitrarily, or discriminate.	<i>“The state must actually do something.”</i> Education, health, housing, work, fair wages, social security. Mostly positive duties: usually “progressively realized” — but some parts (like free primary school) must happen immediately.

Did you know? In *Ben Djazia and Bellili v. Spain* (2017), a UN committee ruled Spain violated a family's right to housing by evicting them with nowhere else to go — even though this “soft” right isn't enforced by a court in the usual sense.

When a Court Punished Torture Committed Abroad

What Happened

In 1976, Paraguay's police inspector-general tortured and killed 17-year-old Joelito Filártiga, in apparent retaliation for his father's political activism. Years later, the family found the killer living in New York — and sued him there.

CASE LAW SPOTLIGHT

Filártiga v. Peña-Irala

US Court of Appeals, 2nd Circuit, 1980

The court ruled that deliberate torture by a government official violates a universal norm of international law — one that binds all states, whether or not they signed a treaty saying so. Once the torturer set foot in the US, he could be sued there for what he did in Paraguay.

The Legal Trick

They revived the Alien Tort Statute, an almost forgotten 1789 US law letting foreigners sue in US courts for violations of international law, no matter where the abuse took place.

Lesson: some rights are so fundamental they bind every government on Earth — treaty or not. Lawyers call this a jus cogens norm.

8

Five Ideas Worth Remembering

Concept	What It Means	Real-World Example
Rights = entitlements	Someone else owes you a duty	Right to a fair trial
Ancient roots, live debate	Ideas of tolerance & dignity are old, contested	The Cyrus Cylinder, 539 BC
The UDHR (1948)	A non-binding moral compass for the world	Human Rights Day, Dec 10th
Civil & political rights	State must not interfere	Freedom of expression
Economic, social, cultural rights	State must actively provide	Free primary education



Curious Why a 2,500-Year-Old Cylinder Still Gets Cited Today?

- ◆ That's what studying law feels like: taking the arguments in this deck — dignity, sovereignty, universality, enforcement — and learning to build and win them yourself.
- ◆ Human rights law sits at the crossroads of history, ethics, politics and power.
- ◆ Every case here was argued by someone who studied law first.
- ◆ New questions — AI surveillance, climate migration, statelessness — need new lawyers to answer them.

Think About It *“If a state democratically votes to restrict freedom of expression — is that legitimate?” That question doesn't have one right answer — it has generations of lawyers still arguing it. Maybe you're next.*