

CHAPTER 1

What Are Human Rights?

For human rights to have any impact on social work, those within the profession need to develop a relevant understanding of human rights. Too often, social workers encounter references to human rights only within a political or legal context. Viewed within the confines of politics or law, human rights might appear to have only slight relevance to social work.

The unfortunate restriction of human rights to political situations, especially those in other countries, has served to demean the importance of human rights to social work. For instance, when U.S. politicians speak of human rights, they typically do so in the context of a country far away and less economically developed than the United States. “This African country needs to respect human rights before we send them aid,” a politician might say. What does that mean, though? To which human rights is the politician referring? Clearly the politician assumes that we all know what he or she is talking about and would readily agree: countries must respect human rights before our government will assist them.

In addition to politicians muddying the waters about human rights, lawyers also contribute to the murkiness of this topic. Lawyers often present human rights in legalistic language that has more application to the courtroom or some academic treatise than everyday life. No wonder social workers frequently find the topic of human rights vague and better suited to politicians and lawyers whose explanations about the topic appear divorced from social work. Yet, human rights have great relevance to the social work profession. The restriction of human rights to political and legal fields can only depreciate the importance of human rights to social work issues. A careful study of human rights exposes this parochial view. Social workers have at least as much claim to the exercise of human rights principles as do politicians and lawyers. Social workers such as Jane Addams and Alice Salomon have a long history of infusing human rights concepts into their profession.

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Definition of Human Rights

Human rights encompass a wide variety of political, economic, and social areas. Human rights define needs but also present a set of rights for each individual, no matter where that individual resides. The concept of human rights can generally be defined as follows:

Human rights are those rights, which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. Human rights and fundamental freedoms allow us to fully develop and use our human qualities, our intelligence, our talents and our conscience and to satisfy our spiritual and other needs. (United Nations, 1987)

Of course, this definition is quite general and raises questions about whose “nature” is being defined.

Americans might feel that having access to electricity and running water is inherent in their nature, while some Africans might feel that simply having enough to eat is enough to live with dignity. Whose nature prevails? Are some people entitled to greater human rights than others because they possess the means with which to obtain or purchase valuable resources? Certainly not. Every individual is entitled to the same human rights. The difficulty arises in allocating resources to achieve human rights. A fundamental issue concerning human rights lies in constructing policies by which human rights apply to all, not simply select individuals and groups (Reichert, 2003). By classifying certain rights and freedoms as human rights, all governments recognize a common goal of creating conditions to guarantee those rights and freedoms. Obvious difficulties arise, though, in actually ensuring those rights and freedoms.

Another difficulty with the definition of human rights relates to the emphasis on “rights,” which may seem overbearing. If everyone has a “right” to something, does that person also have an obligation to conduct herself or himself in a certain way? Should not the granting of human rights be connected to human obligations? If someone has an opportunity to work and earn a living but refuses to take that opportunity, why should that person have a right to public assistance? This question poses a dilemma concerning the exercise of human rights. The humane treatment of prisoners requires that they receive adequate medical care or food during their stay in prison. Yet, within the United States, those not serving time in prison have no guarantee to adequate medical care or food. This inconsistency of treatment appears to contradict human rights principles. Why is someone who has perpetrated a crime against society entitled to a social benefit that others are not? From a human rights perspective, regardless of circumstances, everyone is entitled to a basic existence encompassed by human rights principles. Aside from deficient social policies that allow inequitable situations, everyone shares a common humanity, whether that person is a priest, prisoner, teacher, or social worker.

Possibly the concept of a common humanity presents the most illusive and contested aspect of human rights. However, to carve out exceptions would destroy this essential foundation: human rights are inherent to the human existence.

Three Sets of Human Rights

The previous definition of human rights contradicts the notion that human rights refer only to political and civil rights, such as freedom of speech and religion, freedom to conduct democratic elections, and freedom from discrimination. Just as important within the previously given definition of human rights would be the right to food, housing, water, health care, employment, safety, and other rights necessary to the human existence. Also included within the meaning of human rights is the need for intergovernmental cooperation in resolving world issues. These three categories of human rights, generally referred to as sets or generations, cover a wide spectrum of items necessary for the human existence.

First Set of Human Rights

The first set of human rights lists political and individual freedoms that are similar to what U.S. citizens view as human rights. Political and civil human rights include the right to a fair trial, freedom of speech and religion, freedom of movement and assembly, and guarantees against discrimination, slavery, and torture (United Nations, 1948, arts. 2–15). Some might describe these rights as “negative,” in that they restrict the role of government. In other words, government or other authority shall refrain from doing a certain act. This “shall not” set of guidelines emphasizes noninterference by government, or a negative position.

Second Set of Human Rights

The second set of human rights goes beyond political and civil rights. This set of rights attempts to ensure each resident of a country an adequate standard of living based on the resources of that country. Under this second set, everyone “has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.” In addition, “motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance,” and everyone has the right to a free education at the elementary level (United Nations, 1948, arts. 16–27). This set of human rights is frequently referred to as “positive” rights, in that government and individuals must take action to preserve or satisfy these rights. In other words, government shall provide these rights.

While many in the United States applaud themselves for their strong commitment to the first set of human rights, it is within the second set of rights that Americans frequently come up short. Compared to many other countries, the United States fails to fulfill its obligation to promote positive human rights (Press, 2000; Reichert & McCormick, 1997). For instance, not providing health care to all residents in the United States violates human rights principles just as prohibiting free speech violates those principles.

Third Set of Human Rights

A third and final set of human rights involves collective or solidarity rights among nations. This set of human rights is the least developed among the three

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types of human rights. Under this set of rights, everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which human rights can be fully realized (United Nations, 1948, arts. 28–30). Essentially, promotion of collective human rights requires inter-governmental cooperation on world issues, such as environmental protection and economic development. One group of countries should not dictate conditions to another group when these conditions would inhibit the growth or prosperity of the other group. Industrialized countries should not take advantage of less economically developed countries by exploiting resources.

Viewing human rights in terms of three sets may inhibit uniformity in promoting human rights. With three different sets of rights, a logical response might be to favor one set of rights over another, as the United States does. Are political and civil rights more important than economic, social, and cultural rights or international solidarity? The purpose of sorting human rights into sets is not to establish distinctions or preferences but to assist in the understanding of human rights. Ideally, there would be no distinction or preference between sets of rights. However, countries and individuals continue to emphasize some human rights over others.

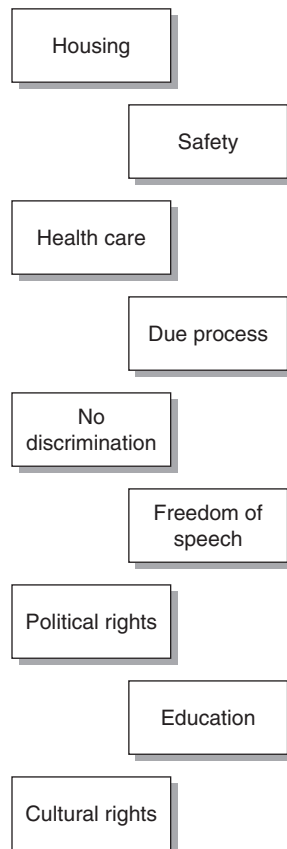


Figure 1.1 Human Rights

For this reason, knowledge of the different sets can assist in understanding different treatment often given to particular rights.

Social Work and Human Rights

Based on established concepts and definitions of human rights, social workers can readily identify a connection between human rights and their profession. The social work profession concerns itself with helping people (NASW, 1999). Human rights cover an entire range of political, economic, and cultural needs required to form a humane society. By any measure, social work and human rights have much in common. While a social work practice based on human rights is no panacea for discrimination, inequality, poverty, and other social problems, knowledge of human rights can help the profession better understand its role as a helping profession.

The social work profession has an obligation to advocate for human rights, with the first step being recognition that human rights play an important part of social work policies and practices. Unfortunately, a primary obstacle in integrating human rights into the profession is the adherence to social justice as the guiding principle of social work. While important to social work, social justice by itself does not provide a concrete set of guidelines for social workers to follow (Reichert, 2003). Social justice sounds nice but remains vague. The International Federation of Social Workers has taken a major step in moving beyond social justice by highlighting its adherence to human rights within its code of ethics (IFSW, 2005). The recognition that social justice needs to incorporate human rights education is a first step toward fulfilling the goal of making social work a human rights profession.

Universality and Indivisibility

Two concepts crucial to understanding human rights are known as universality and indivisibility. Social workers should comprehend the importance of these concepts when relating human rights to policies and practices.

Universality

The framework for carrying out human rights requires that human rights apply to everyone, with no exceptions. Every individual has the right to enjoy human rights, wherever the individual resides. In many cases, this basic premise of universality presents little or no disagreement within cultures or governments. Few persons would disagree that everyone is entitled to adequate nutrition, medical care, and housing as basic human rights. While these items may be more abundant or affordable in some areas of the world, governments everywhere accept the universal need that people have to adequate nutrition, medical care, and shelter.

This universality principle differs from many social programs within the United States that are restricted to certain individuals, especially those with low income. For instance, many parents in the United States who do not have employer-based

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medical care may qualify for a government provided “medical card,” based on the income of the parents. In some instances, the program only covers children of low-income parents, as if the parents have no corresponding need to have medical coverage. Parents who earn too much income do not qualify for any coverage, including coverage for their children. Yet, the cost of private health coverage will frequently be beyond the means of those individuals who do not qualify for the medical card. This exclusion of some individuals from health care coverage violates the universality principle inherent in human rights. The United States stands alone among industrialized countries in the lack of a plan to provide health care to all its residents. While most people in the United States probably agree that everyone should have health care, the reality is quite different.

The notion of universality may clash with particular cultures, laws, policies, or morals that fail to even consider the human right in question (Reichert, 2003). For example, the human right to be free from discrimination and to enjoy human dignity should obviously apply to everyone anywhere in the world. However, some countries allow discrimination against women because of cultural or religious norms that frown upon women performing certain acts reserved for men, such as voting or driving a car. The United States still allows capital punishment for individuals who are 18 or older, which violates established human rights principles (www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/a_ccpr.htm). Other countries carve out additional exceptions to established human rights.

Human rights principles require sensitivity to culture and religion, and cultural and religious norms often prevail. This dilemma of universality raises the question “Which should prevail, the cultural or religious norm or the human right?” Obviously, if human rights apply to everyone, then the human right to be free from discrimination or capital punishment for juveniles must take precedence over sensitivity to culture and religious norms. Yet, a human right also exists to be free to carry out cultural and religious practices. In these circumstances, cultural and religious beliefs will often prevail simply because the powers that be determine the priority of human rights. In many instances, universality of human rights will be tempered by local practices. No easy resolution of this conflict exists. However, if the vast majority of countries throughout the world have accepted a particular human right, cultural, religious, or other authority for contradicting this right should be carefully examined.

Indivisibility

The second crucial concept in understanding human rights is that of indivisibility. The concept of indivisibility refers to the necessity that governments and individuals recognize each human right and not selectively promote some rights over others.

The absence of a guarantee to everyone of adequate health care within the United States highlights the importance of indivisibility among human rights. Opponents of universal health care might say that, even without an entitlement to health care, everyone receives adequate care—all they have to do is show up at the emergency room of a public hospital. By law, that hospital must treat the patient. Why should government go any further than that in providing this human right?

The problem here is that simply receiving treatment at an emergency room does not ensure adequate medical care. An individual without medical insurance may fail to attend to an illness that becomes life threatening or debilitating. Emergency room treatment would not even cover many situations that are chronic or cannot be dealt with as an emergency. Impaired health reduces an individual's enjoyment of other human rights, such as the promotion of family or employment. Impaired health could even affect the will or ability of an individual to participate in an election or other activities viewed as political human rights. Consequently, the denial of, or the refusal to recognize, one human right can easily impact the enjoyment of other human rights and directly or indirectly deny those rights. For this reason, indivisibility plays a key role in the exercise of human rights.

While the promotion of one human right over another should not occur, the reality, as with the concept of universality, becomes murky. Certainly not every country can afford to provide all the economic rights defined by the United Nations as human rights. Should not this excuse that country from recognizing or promoting those rights? Is it not more important to ensure elections, free speech, and religion and other political rights than attempt to satisfy economic rights? Even without sufficient funds to promote economic and social human rights, countries should still make efforts to fulfill these rights. Cooperation and assistance among countries becomes essential when facing such catastrophic situations as HIV-AIDS.

Certainly countries and organizations with limited resources will be selective in allocating funds to various activities. However, by understanding the importance of all human rights, social workers can advocate for the use of funds to be more targeted toward human rights policies than might otherwise be the case.

Differences clearly exist in definitions or interpretations of human rights, especially in respect to conflicts with universality and indivisibility. Who, then, decides whether to recognize a particular human right that the United Nations has included within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or other document? Refer back to the discussion on health care in the United States regarding the provision of medical care. Based on the Universal Declaration, everyone is entitled to adequate medical care, with this right holding the same importance as any political or civil right. The United States, however, does not view the situation within a human rights context. Why not? To examine the process of how a country defines human rights, social workers should ask the following questions.

Who Defines a Human Right?

In many cases, the United Nations, acting through its various committees, issues documents on specific human rights. Member countries then decide on whether to adopt or enforce these rights. Within the United States, government leaders, with input through individuals and nongovernmental organizations, influence the defining of human rights. Other countries may define human rights differently than the United States, but the common factor is that, regardless of any UN document on human rights, the definition remains localized. This country-by-country, culture-by-culture method of defining human rights clearly chips away at the universality concept.

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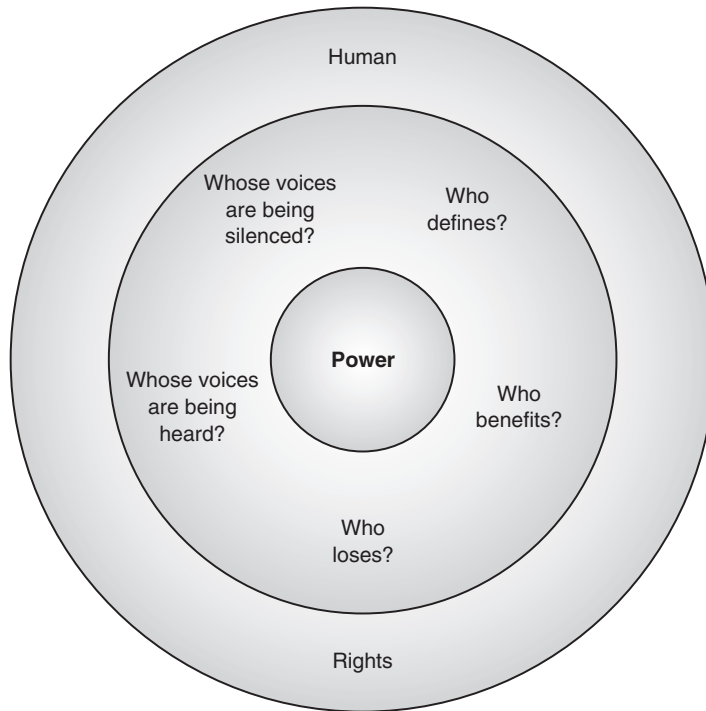


Figure 1.2 Human Rights and Important Questions

The United States, along with every member country of the United Nations, has agreed to respect human rights specified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which includes the right for *everyone* to have adequate health care (United Nations, 1948, art. 25). Yet, in practice, the United States does not fulfill this promise to provide everyone with adequate medical care. The U.S. definition of adequate medical care omits any entitlement to health care. This refusal to recognize that everyone has a human right to adequate health care stems primarily from cultural and government traditions against “socialized medicine” or government intervention in health care systems (Mintz, 2004). The established practice that employers, not the government, provide health care to working adults accepts gaps within health care coverage. No law exists requiring employers to provide health care to employees, and many small employers cannot afford to offer this benefit. Self-employed persons must pay for their own medical coverage, with the cost of premiums often exceeding what they can afford. Unemployed adults usually have little or no access to medical coverage and must fend for themselves. The elderly, persons with disabilities, and children of low-income parents generally have the best possibility of qualifying for government-provided medical coverage.

Attempts to introduce universal health care in the United States have simply not succeeded. From a human rights perspective, those who define this human right are legislators, as influenced by individuals or groups, including the wealthy, insurance companies, and the American Medical Association. While legislators would never

admit to violating a human right, the absence of a universal health care system can hardly be justified under human rights principles agreed upon by the United States. A disconnect between relatively clear human rights principles issued through UN committees and the actual definition of these principles as practiced by individual countries appears frequently.

Who Benefits From the Definition?

To better understand why a particular country defines a human right differently from the United Nations or another country, social workers need to examine those who benefit from the definition. Using the example of health care in the United States, those benefiting from a restrictive view of adequate health care would be taxpayers who do not want to pay additional taxes to cover the uninsured. Politicians can keep taxes lower because less public funding is needed for covering the uninsured. Lower taxes may benefit all taxpayers, but the greatest benefit of lower taxes generally goes to those who pay more taxes, the wealthiest. Doctors may object to universal health care because they believe the government would then control their working environments and rates of compensation. Health care corporations and insurance companies benefit from a private system of health care that enables them to charge higher prices for medical services or coverage to increase profits. Some individuals may also feel they benefit from a private system of health care because the current system allows them to choose their own doctor, although with the introduction of so-called managed care, choice of doctor is not always available.

Clearly, many individuals and groups perceive advantages from not fully extending health care benefits to everyone. The influence of these individuals and groups has always been sufficient to prevent legislators from instituting a health care system that would provide adequate care to everyone.

Who Loses From the Definition?

In the case of not providing everyone with adequate health care, obvious losers are those who do not receive the care. They must either forego care or incur bills for care, knowing that they cannot pay the cost of the services. However, other groups also lose from this definition. Hospitals may provide services to the uninsured but fail to collect the cost of these services. As a result, hospitals bill patients with medical coverage more to cover the cost of treating those who have no coverage. Doctors may also bill paying clients more to cover unpaid services. Employers who provide insurance to their employees may also find this cost increasing because of the overall cost increase in coverage simply to fund unpaid medical bills. Therefore, in a convoluted manner, some of those who benefit from the failure to cover everyone's health care may also find themselves losing because of additional costs.

Because the most obvious losers in the health care debate are individuals without insurance, many of whom are unemployed and possibly do not vote, legislators may not feel sufficiently pressured to recognize this segment when defining the human right of adequate health care. Only when the losers become more prominent

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and their voices more powerful will legislators consider revising the definition of this human right to include everyone.

Whose Voices Are Heard in Enforcing Human Rights?

Continuing with the health care example, the voices of those without medical coverage appear to be extremely weak, while the voices of the health care providers are extremely strong; the voices of those who speak against “socialized medicine” carry much more weight than the voices of those who want universal health care.

The previous three questions examine the process of how countries and groups define a specific human right. Essentially, the definition and carrying out of human rights remains a local affair, even within the context of universality. This cultural or local view of many human rights generally encounters little opposition from other countries.

However, situations may arise when local definitions of human rights create disagreement between different countries. A recent example of this clash between countries is the situation in Iraq. The United States accused Iraq and its head, Saddam Hussein, of human rights violations, including torture and genocide. Did the United States and its coalition of countries have a right to remove Hussein on the basis of these violations? The questions that examine the process of defining a human right are equally relevant in examining whether allegations of human rights violations by one country give another country the right to intervene within the internal affairs of that country. Where the voices defining the human right and benefiting from enforcement of that right are louder or more powerful than those voices not benefiting from enforcement, the more powerful voices may decide to take action. This action may consist of economic and other sanctions and, in situations perceived to be serious, military activity, as was the case in Iraq.

Social workers need to understand the process of defining human rights and the weaknesses of this process. In theory, everyone in every country should enjoy the same human rights. The reality is different, with cultural, historical, legal, and other types of factors contributing to the skewed definitions of human rights encountered in different countries. Yet, even with the less-than-perfect practice of defining particular human rights, general agreement on the definition of many human rights does exist. Domestic violence is an area where more and more countries and cultures are recognizing that women, as well as men, should enjoy freedom from violence within the household (Reichert, 1998). Other human rights that have gained stature and a more commonly agreed upon definition include prohibitions against torture, children’s safety and welfare, freedom of speech, and many other political and economic human rights. The need to define human rights coherently stands out as an unfulfilled challenge in the realm of human rights principles.

Cultural Relativism—Justification for Ignoring Universality?

The concept of universality within human rights frequently clashes with the concept known as cultural relativism. In short, cultural relativism refers to the

notion that cultural traditions or norms have priority when a particular human right conflicts with those traditions or norms. In many cases, cultural relativism plays little or no role in the promotion of human rights. After all, except in rare circumstances, cultural norms would never sanction the denial of adequate food or medical care to those in need. Culture generally does not condone torture or genocide. Nor does culture accept the physical or mental abuse of the elderly.

However, cultural traditions do condone many practices, which clearly violate human rights principles. For instance, physical abuse of spouses or children may very well be tolerated within some cultures. Some societies may totally suppress freedom of speech, relying on a much narrower definition of free speech than that espoused by the United States. Should these and other apparent violations of human rights be downplayed because they are the “cultural” norm? A strong argument exists against this use of culture to justify what are truly human rights violations.

Consider the following: Heshu Yones was just 16 when her father slit her throat because of her choice of boyfriend. Sahjda Bibi was 21 when a cousin stabbed her to death in her wedding dress for marrying against family wishes. Rukhsana Naz was strangled by her brother and mother for getting pregnant by a lover. The slaughter of a succession of young women by their male family members in recent years has alerted Britain to a problem that has migrated to Western Europe along with growing minority communities from South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East: these are known as “honor crimes.”

For their perpetrators, these crimes have “honor” because they fulfill tribal custom to redeem the shame that some women have supposedly brought upon their families (Rice-Oxley, 2004). The problem of “honor killings” raises the precise issues that cultural relativism brings to the area of human rights.

Honor killing, say activists, is just the tip of an iceberg of abusive practice toward women that also includes forced marriage, genital mutilation, domestic imprisonment, prescriptive dress codes such as *hijab*, and barred access to education and the workplace. . . . The effort to combat the brutal treatment of women in certain ethnic minorities raises a delicate question: How do authorities crack down on unacceptable practices without offending minority culture? . . . Feminists say the law often puts culture ahead of the safety of women. Communities say their culture is sacrosanct, inalienable. (Rice-Oxley, 2004, p. 6)

Should cultural relativism prevail in these circumstances? By most standards, the answer is no. Culture is not static. If worldwide trends—and not simply in the Western world—move toward greater respect for women’s and children’s rights, then cultural relativism must reflect these trends. Using culture as an excuse for what many know is wrong within the contemporary world should not be tolerated.

Of course, cries of cultural relativism come not simply from non-Western communities. Take into account the recent events of prisoner abuse by Americans in Iraq and Afghanistan. Until these episodes were made public and roundly condemned from allies of America, many U.S. officials might have considered these actions as part of the new landscape made necessary by the attacks on the World

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Trade Center on September 11, 2001. To accept torture as a means of interrogation can only be viewed as culturally regressive. Culture does change, but in this case, the change would be backward. The United States has been in the forefront of promoting the human right prohibiting torture or inhumane treatment. To now tolerate these acts as culturally necessary would violate established human rights principles. The same view should apply to detaining prisoners without any right to legal counsel or knowledge of charges and the opportunity to defend against those charges. Fortunately, sufficient voices have opposed these actions by the United States to at least limit a backward tilt into cultural relativism.

Human Rights Terms

The language of human rights contains some terms that social workers should master as part of their own vocabulary.

Declaration. The most common document referred to within the area of human rights is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which this book covers in the next chapter. What does *declaration* mean? In respect to human rights documents, a declaration presents a formal and solemn nonbinding statement listing general principles and broad obligations (Human Rights Resource Center, 2005). While the Universal Declaration lists significant principles of human rights, no country is obligated to enforce those principles. Yet, because every country that becomes a member of the United Nations agrees to recognize the Universal Declaration as a model, this declaration does have importance. In other words, while a country has no obligation to enforce a declaration it has signed, by failing to comply with that declaration, the country is indicating bad faith and may lose respect within the world community.

Covenant. A covenant on human rights principles serves as an agreement between two or more countries that they will enforce provisions of the covenants with specific laws (Black, 1968). In contrast to a declaration, a covenant agreed to by a country does impose an affirmative obligation to enforce provisions within the covenant.

Convention. A convention refers to an international agreement that contains provisions to promote or protect specific human rights or fundamental provisions (Human Rights Resource Center, 2005). As with a covenant, a country that signs a convention has an obligation to enforce provisions within the convention. For instance, in discussions about prisoner abuse by U.S. military within Iraq and elsewhere, references to the Geneva Convention seem inevitable. These conventions obligate those countries that have approved them, like the United States, to respect human rights of prisoners (Holtzman, 2005). Yet, even though the United States entered into the Geneva Conventions, some U.S. officials have advocated the bypassing of these human rights principles because of the war on terror (Holtzman, 2005, pp. 20–24).

The key distinction between declarations and covenants or conventions is that of obligation. Countries approving a covenant or convention intend to bind themselves to the provisions of the document. Countries approving a declaration merely indicate their intent to follow provisions within the declaration. The language of a covenant or convention generally requires a country to undertake action to ensure specific human rights, whereas the language of a declaration focuses more on the need to recognize particular human rights. For that reason, a covenant or convention often follows a declaration.

Enforcement of Human Rights

Within the United States, enforcement of specific human rights has been highly selective. Court decisions rarely refer to human rights, and legislators may ignore human rights principles in drafting laws that involve human rights (Davis, 2000; Reichert & McCormick, 1998). Unfortunately, this neglect of human rights principles by judges and lawmakers does little to encourage or promote a more pervasive system of human rights within the United States.

Some European countries are subject to the European Court of Human Rights, which actually allows an individual to bring a case of an alleged violation of human rights before it (European Court of Human Rights, 2005). This avenue does provide some relief from specific violations of human rights, which include both economic and political rights.

Ideally, governments everywhere would take seriously all provisions within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and do their best to enforce those rights. However, even though enforcement of human rights remains deficient in many countries, social workers can be advocates for change and encourage better enforcement. By better understanding the meaning of human rights, social workers will be at the forefront in the effort to bring about a society and culture that truly respects the importance of human rights.

Exercises

Exercise 1: Human Dignity and Rights

Consider the following statements by Eleanor Roosevelt:

Where, after all, do universal rights begin? In small places, close to home, so close and small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world. (Roosevelt, 1948)

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Now consider the mission statement for U.S. social workers as cited in the NASW code of ethics:

The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. (NASW, 1999)

Part A: Human Dignity

Keeping in mind the statement by Eleanor Roosevelt and the NASW mission statement, consider the concept of "human dignity." On one side of a sheet of paper, list "qualities" necessary to fully develop and define humans, and on the other side list "rights" needed to develop or protect those qualities. For example:

<i>Qualities</i>	<i>Rights</i>
a. Ability to reason	a. Freedom of speech
b. Desire for spiritual growth	b. Freedom of religion
c. Need of food, health care, education, and other social needs	c. Guarantee of food, medical treatment, education, and promotion of family life

After completing your lists, discuss or reflect upon the following questions:

- What does it mean to be fully human? How is that different from just "being alive" or "surviving"?
- Based on your lists, what needs do people have in order to live in dignity?
- Are all humans essentially equal? What is the value of human differences?
- Under any circumstances, can or should any of the listed human qualities be taken from us?
- What are possible effects on both the individual and broader society when a person or government attempts to deprive someone of something that is necessary to human dignity?
- What would be the effect if you had to give up one of the human qualities on your list?

Part B: Rights

Discuss the different meanings of *right*, such as correct, opposite of left, just. Make a list of these meanings. What is the meaning of *right* when we speak of human right?

Relying on what you now know about the term *human rights*, create your own definition of this term. List different possibilities.

Consider the following statement: Human rights belong to all people regardless of their sex, race, color, language, national origin, age, class, religion, or political belief. They are universal, inalienable, indivisible, and interdependent.

What is meant by universal? Inalienable? Indivisible? Interdependent? Use a dictionary to obtain initial definitions.

Compare the following sets:

Survival: Subsistence

Human Dignity: Conveniences/Luxuries

Discuss the relationship of these sets within the context of human rights. For example, should conveniences be classified as human rights?

After discussion of the two sets, refer to the chart/lists made in Part A of this exercise. Place each of the items listed as a human quality under as many of the headings you believe appropriate. For example, if health care was listed as a human quality in your list, determine whether health care is necessary for survival or subsistence. Is health care necessary for human dignity or is it more of a convenience or luxury?

Items to discuss:

- Should human rights address only what a human being needs to survive? Why or why not?
- Should human rights also protect those things you classified as “conveniences and luxuries”? Why or why not?
- Some people in the world have only what is necessary to survive (if even that much) and others have luxury and conveniences. Is this situation just? Is it a human rights violation?
- Can something be done to equalize the enjoyment of human dignity? Should something be done? If so, how? And by whom?
- Discuss the relationship between human dignity and human rights.

(modified from Human Rights Resource Center, 2005)

Exercise 2: Standing Up for “Rights”

This exercise requires a group of about six people and a facilitator. If done in a large class, separate the class into groups of six or seven.

- A facilitator asks each person in a group to remember a time when he or she stood up for his or her rights or the rights of other people. For example, a person may remember a time in childhood when the person supported a friend against a bully or a false accusation.
- After a few minutes of reflecting on an incident of standing up for rights, each member of the group relates the circumstances of the incident to another member. At this point, the group can separate into smaller numbers of twos or threes.
- After the exchanges of incidents, all members of the group come back together for general discussions. Each person in the group should have available the following information:

1. The time when I “stood up” for rights.
2. What happened.
3. Where it happened.
4. The motive: Why did I stand up?
5. Who or what were my sources of support?

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- The facilitator now asks each member of a group to tell his or her story, keeping closely to the previously listed five points. After each member of the group has related his or her incident, the facilitator now raises the following points for discussion:
 1. Were your experiences similar/different to those of others in the group? For example, did they happen in public/private, at home/work?
 2. Did the place of the incident involve both positive and negative aspects? Did the persons involved react in ways both positive and negative?
 3. Did anyone mention the law or authorities as a source of support? Why or why not?
 4. How did you feel when you remembered the incident of “standing up”?
 5. Were these positive experiences? Why or why not?
 6. How many members of the group experienced support or solidarity from friends/colleagues/family? Do you believe this type of support is useful when we stand up for human rights?
 7. Using the information in this chapter about human rights, did members find their experiences related to human rights principles?

(modified from Human Rights Resource Center, 2005)

Exercise 3: Social Workers and Human Rights

This exercise can be done with a group or individually as an assignment.

1. Using *only* information and human rights concepts presented in this chapter, list five social work issues that involve human rights.
2. What human rights are involved with each of the issues? Are those rights political/civil rights or economic/social?
3. Do you believe that some of the rights related to the social work issues have more importance than others? How would you rank the importance of the rights involved, using a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most important?
4. How do you believe that human rights play an important role in social work? Discuss.

Exercise 4: Enforcement of Human Rights

This exercise can be done with a group or individually as an assignment.

1. Explain the difference between a “declaration” and a “covenant.” List these differences either on a board for every member of the group to see or on paper if doing the exercise alone.
2. Should countries that support a human rights declaration be required to enforce provisions of that declaration? Why or why not? List reasons.

3. As a social worker, would you support the human right that requires respect for individual cultural traditions when one of those traditions may harm others (e.g., circumcision, domestic violence)? If not, what reasons would you give for refusing to respect the cultural tradition? List those reasons. If you believe that cultural traditions should always be respected, list reasons for allowing the harm done to others by respecting the cultural traditions.
4. Can there ever be universal enforcement of human rights? Discuss.

Exercise 5: Using the Media

The purpose of this exercise is to use the media (e.g., television, newspapers, Internet, movies) to become familiar with human rights issues.

1. Based on information gathered through the media, list a human rights issue that relates to your local community. Discuss how the media source reported the human rights issue. Did they describe the issue as one involving human rights?
2. Based on information gathered through the media, list a human rights issue that relates to the United States as a nation. Did they describe the issue as one involving human rights?
3. Based on information gathered through the media, list a human rights issue that relates to regions outside the United States. How was this issue described by the media? As a human rights issue?
4. After listing the human rights issues, how do you see those issues relating to social work?

(modified from Human Rights Resource Center, 2005)

Exercise 6: Universality

The purpose of this exercise is to discuss the meaning of universality within a human rights context.

Analyze this statement from Amnesty International: "Human Rights belong to everyone or they are guaranteed to no one."

In your response, discuss the following:

- Can everyone realistically have the same human rights considering the different levels of income, different governments, and different cultures?
- Do you believe that even if some groups do not enjoy human rights, others have no guarantee of human rights?
- Do those who enjoy human rights have a social responsibility to ensure that everyone else can obtain human rights?
- How does the Amnesty International statement relate to social work values?

Exercise 7: Indivisibility

The purpose of this exercise is to discuss the meaning of indivisibility within a human rights context.

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1. Should political and civil human rights have priority over economic, social, and cultural human rights? For instance, is freedom of speech more important than adequate health care?
2. List ways in which political and civil rights are dependent upon economic, social, and cultural human rights. List ways in which economic, social, and cultural human rights are dependent upon political and civil rights.
3. Do you believe that social work values have more relevance to one set of human rights than another? Give reasons.