

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

And the United Nations Conventions that Protect Them

What are Rights?

Rights are entitlements that every human being has regardless of sex, race, religion, nationality, disability, or any other differences.

Who gave us rights?

All human beings have rights. They are inalienable – which means they cannot be taken from you by anyone, including the government, law enforcement officials, doctors, religious leaders, your boss, members of your family, or your spouse.

Do women and men have different rights?

All human beings, women and men, have the same rights and freedoms. Some rights are specifically related to women, (e.g., rights related to sexual violence, pregnancy, and childbearing).

Do women and men have different responsibilities?

All human beings have the responsibility to protect and ensure the rights of others. No one woman or man has the right to deny or violate another person's rights.

Who has the responsibility to protect our rights?

International conventions hold governments accountable for protecting the rights of their citizens. However, all of us have a responsibility to respect and protect the human rights of others.

Why are there international documents on human rights?

After the terrible human rights abuses that happened during World War II, the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations (UN) drafted a Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). People from around the world contributed their ideas and beliefs to this document. The General Assembly of the UN adopted the UDHR in 1948. It describes the inalienable rights of all members of the human family. Since then, many more conventions have been written that describe human rights and the rights of particularly vulnerable groups, such as women.

What is a convention?

A convention is a document that defines human rights. It is a legally binding international agreement between countries. When a country ratifies a

convention, it means that they agree to ensure that the rights described in the convention are enjoyed by all people in their country or jurisdiction.

What is the difference between a convention and a declaration?

Conventions are a part of international law and are legally binding to state parties. Declarations are non-binding but carry significant moral commitment and responsibility in the international community.

Which conventions relate to women?

The International Bill of Human Rights includes: the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR), the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). All of the articles in these documents apply equally to women and men.

The *Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW)* offers the most comprehensive coverage of women's rights for both public and private spheres.

Other Documents that are important for women are: The *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action* and the *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW)*,

Below, common experiences women face are listed with references to the articles in various conventions that protect and promote their rights.

Equality and Non-Discrimination

- All people have the same human rights and freedoms. These rights are inherent in all human beings. UDHR 1.
- No human being should be treated differently or have their rights denied because of their sex, race, color, language, religion, political, opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status. UDHR 2; ICCPR 2:1; ICESCR 3
- Women have the right to live without discrimination based on their sex. CEDAW 1, 2, 3; DEVAW 3e
- Women have the right to be treated equally under the law and to be protected by the law without discrimination. UDHR 7; ICCPR 14; CEDAW 2c, 15:1, DEVAW 3d

- Women have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. UDHR 18; ICCPR 18
- Women have the right to freely express their opinion without fear or punishment. UDHR 19, ICCPR 19
- All human beings have the right to live in a world where their rights and freedoms are respected. UDHR 28

Work and Education

- Women have the right to work and to freely choose their job. UDHR 23:1, CEDAW 11
- Women and men are entitled to economic, social, and cultural rights that allow them dignity and freedom as individuals. UDHR 22, ICESCR 1
- Women have the right to rest and leisure. UDHR 24
- Women and girls have the same rights to all forms of education as men & boys. CEDAW 10

Participation

- Women have the right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community and to enjoy the arts and all the benefits of scientific progress. UDHR 27, CEDAW 13c

Marriage

- Women have the same right as men to freely choose a spouse and not be coerced into a marriage. UDHR 16, CEDAW 16:1
- Women have the same rights and responsibilities as men during their marriage. CEDAW 16:1
- Women have the same rights as men when a marriage ends. CEDAW 16:1c
- Women have the same right as their spouse to family planning services. CEDAW 12:1, 14:2b, 16:1e
- Women have the same rights as their spouse to choose a family name and a profession. CEDAW 16:1g
- Women have the same rights as men with respect to their nationality and that of their children. CEDAW 9:1, 9:2

Violence Against Women

- Women have the right to protection from violence within the family. CEDAW 1 and 16, DEVAW 2a
- Countries should condemn and put an end to violence against women including trafficking and forced prostitution. DEVAW 2b
- Women have the right to the highest attainable level of physical and mental health and the right to equal access to health services, including family planning. CEDAW 12, DEVAW 3f
- Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person. UDHR 2, DEVAW 3a, c
- Women have the right to live without suffering, torture, or any form of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. UDHR 5, DEVAW 3h

What can you do to promote women's human rights?

- Educate friends, family, colleagues, and the community about women's rights and the conventions.
- Share this information sheet with others and discuss what you think about the conventions.
- Educate women that the violence happening against them is a violation of their human rights and international law.
- Encourage the media to publicize human rights violations.
- Lobby your elected officials to change the law to better protect women's rights.
- Elect officials who understand human rights and will promote women's interests and equity.
- Volunteer your time and energy at your local human or women's rights organization.

Name and contact information
of your organization

From: *Mobilising Communities to Prevent Domestic Violence: A Resource Guide for Organisations in East and Southern Africa*, Raising Voices 2003

- Women have the same rights and responsibilities as men toward their children regardless of their marital status. CEDAW 16: 1d