

## Human Rights Day, 21 March

| [home](#) |

**What is Human Rights Day?** Human Rights Day (21 March) is the day set aside to celebrate human rights and to remind all South Africans of their human rights.

**What are human rights?** Human rights are the rights that everyone has, simply because they are human beings. They are the rights we all have from the moment we are born. We do not have to earn them and they cannot easily be taken away from us.

The list of human rights protected in South Africa is the Bill of Rights, which is Chapter 2 of the Constitution. The Constitution is the highest law of South Africa. Everyone in South Africa, including the government, must follow it. The rules set out in a Constitution are very hard to change, and so the rights in the Bill of Rights are also very hard to change. This means that it is difficult for anyone to change your rights or to try and take them away from you.

**Rights and responsibilities** Because everyone has these rights regardless of their race, age or gender, we all have to respect other people's rights as well. It is no good saying that you have these rights if you are doing things at the same time, which go against other people's rights. And, we must all respect and follow the laws of the country as well.

**Why do we celebrate Human Rights Day on 21 March?** On 21 March 1960, events were planned for many parts of the country, for people to protest against the Pass Laws. These laws required all Africans living or working in and around towns to carry a document (known as a pass) with them at all times. Failure to carry this document would lead to arrest by the police and to people being sent away from the towns in which they lived.

On this day people decided to go to police stations without their passes and to demand that the police arrest them. The idea was that so many people would be arrested and the jails would become so full that the country would not be able to function properly. It was hoped that this would lead to the Pass Laws being scrapped.

At Sharpeville in Gauteng, thousands of people gathered at the police station demanding to be arrested. They were met by 300 police officers. After a scuffle broke out, the police opened fire on the crowd. At least sixty-seven people were killed and 180 injured by the shooting.

These people were protesting against unfair laws and were really demanding their human rights. Many of these rights are now included in our Bill of Rights, and include the rights to:

- Equality (Section 9)
- Human dignity (Section 10)
- Freedom of expression (Section 16)
- Assembly, demonstration, picket and petition (Section 17)
- Freedom of association (Section 18) and
- Freedom of movement and residence (Section 21).

**We celebrate this day each year to remind us of the great suffering and loss of life that accompanied the struggle for human rights. It is to remind us that people in South Africa will never again be denied their human rights.**