

# Freedom

**It is difficult to find a definition of freedom that captures the concept completely. Freedom covers so many areas: political freedom, spiritual freedom and freedom of choice. We may often say that we feel free and have a sense of freedom.**

For most people freedom is fundamentally important, even if we do not think about it on a daily basis. Perhaps we only wake up to realise how important our freedom is when it is threatened.

## **Freedom to and freedom from**

Human rights and philosophy distinguish between negative freedom (freedom from) and positive freedom (freedom to). If a person is to be free, they must first be free from external exclusion, control and restrictions. Only then will we be able to explore and develop all our inherent abilities and possibilities. Then we must use our freedom to make choices and act. Such a positive understanding of freedom thus touches on more than only the absence of external restrictions. Freedom is also spiritual freedom – feeling free within ourselves and having independence of mind – as well as the ability and capacity to control oneself, know oneself and make our own choices. Such freedom is not a given; positive freedom must be trained and learnt through concrete experiences.

## **Freedom values gaining ground**

The ideal that people should be free and have the equal right to self-determination and co-determination in society has been gaining ground over the last three centuries. While the ideas of freedom and human rights have gained a stronger foothold, the demand to remove power-hungry leaders and unjust governments has found stronger voices. Discriminated and weak groups have fought for and won better rights and conditions.

## **The UN and human rights**

After World War II, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was adopted by the UN General Assembly. For the first time the most important types of freedom were defined as something each person in the world – female and male – is entitled to. A number of international agreements on human rights have since seen the light of day. Many of them are legally binding. This means that the states that ratify the agreements must modify their national legislation so that their laws are in harmony with human rights. In 1979 the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (also called the Women's Convention) was adopted, and in 1989 the UN adopted the Convention of the Rights of the Child (also called the Children's Convention). These treaties have given stronger protection to women and children across the world.

The states undertake to be bound by the international agreements on human rights and have the main responsibility for their realisation.

In some situations there may be legitimate reasons for limiting freedom. Human rights and national legislation define when the authorities can do this. For example, people cannot have so much freedom that it encroaches on the rights of others.

## **Sources:**

[Filosofi i skolen. Frihet.](#)

[What is freedom? \(Vimeo\).](#) Espen Gamlund and Lars Fr. Svendsen.