

How has the Promotion or Defense of Human Rights Changed Our World?

“KHAHAR. KHAHAR. VAYSTA,” they called. They were telling me to stop, but my heart was screaming, begging for me to run. My brain quickly quelled my heart’s request, as I had just seen their murderous guns obediently hanging by their sides. In retrospect, it was probably over 100 degrees Fahrenheit with my coat and scarf on, but in that moment, every fiber of my being was frozen.

No other words would come out of my mouth for the remainder of our encounter. As the guards walked away towards their police car in the bustling streets of Tehran, I looked down at the paper they had given me. I had been given a list of violations, like a parking ticket. I was being fined. Fined for the color on my nails; fined for the “indecent” length of my coat; fined for the 2 inches of hair showing on my head; fined for being me. I had never better understood the true meaning of “freedom of expression” than when I sat down on a nearby side street looking over the paper, revisiting the list of words again and again. In the few minutes I had to myself, sitting on that quiet street, a storm of anger gushed from inside of me. For the first time, I found myself shedding bitter tears of frustration. I wanted to tear off my wretched coat and rip the scarf off of my soaking head, but I couldn’t. I was helpless; unable to speak up for myself; unable to do anything but forcibly embrace the oppressive boot of the government pushing down on my throat.

Growing up in suburban New City, “human rights violations” was never more than a phrase; a phrase that made me feel bad for a few moments; a phrase that made me shake my head at some oppressive government. Before my chance encounter with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, during my trip to Iran, I had never known what it meant to have my rights violated. And I could never really understand what it meant to be oppressed, because living in a country that has adopted and worked towards the protection of human rights, means I don’t need to worry about the fate of my family when I write to senators and representatives urging them to reconsider the fate of a man on death row. I don’t need to be worried when other Amnesty International members and I hand out fact sheets on the human rights violations in Guantanamo Bay. We are not afraid because our rights have always been protected. We are not punished for speaking our minds at a protest, pouring out our hearts and souls on a blog, or expressing ourselves through the clothing we wear or through images we paint. We, unlike so many around the world, are protected. We are safe. We are free. And because of this we can move our nation forward. In fact, we even have the ability to move the world forward.

The protection of human rights has opened the doors for progress – progress that can be classified into social and even scientific components. With the freedom of expression and speech comes the ability to think freely and challenge certain standards. Imagine if Newton or Einstein were prohibited from publishing or speaking about any of their theories? Where would we be? While the rights of men and women in Iran, China, Zimbabwe, and other countries are still being brutally violated we must realize how much we have to gain if we keep pushing for the protection and defense of their fundamental human rights. With the promotion of mankind’s basic human rights we are creating a chain that links us all together. This unity is what will change our world so that the developing minds in China can work freely with minds in Russia, the United States, and Iraq without feeling the need to censor their words. This unity will allow us to foster equality and liberty.

And so the defense of human rights hasn’t simply implemented a few changes in our world. The defense of human rights has allowed our world to thrive; it has paved the way for each and every social, economic, and scientific advancement. The promotion of human rights has given us the power to carefully mold the world we live in today. It has allowed us to be who we are and grow into who we’re meant to be.