

# The Role of Libraries in supporting Human Rights

Dr. Chiku Mnubi-Mchombu

*Human Rights and Documentation Centre, University of Namibia*

*Know them, demand them, defend them*

(World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993. English and Stapleton, 1997:5)

## Introduction

Human Rights can be defined as those basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity as human beings. Human rights are the foundation of freedom, justice and peace. Their respect allows the individual and community to develop fully.

Mubangizi (2004) stated that human rights are referred to by various names and phrases. These include fundamental rights, basic rights, natural rights and sometimes common rights. Although these phrases don't mean the same thing, they are usually used interchangeably.

Hubbard (2001:27) defined human rights as universal moral rights that belong equally to all people because they are human beings. It has been stated that, one person's right to swing his/her arm ends where the other person's nose begins.

Fundamental and basic rights are these rights which must not be taken away by any legislation or act of the state and which are often set out in the fundamental law of the country E.g. bill of rights in the constitution.

Human rights are entitlements or legal claims one has by virtue of being human - against the state. Human rights are protected in the constitutions of the country; e.g International Bill of Human Rights, treaties or agreements that the government has signed which obliges them to ensure these rights and freedoms.

Historically, human rights principles have been in existence for ages, but it was not until the end of World War II that member states of the newly established United Nations agreed on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and set down for the first time a list of human rights and fundamental freedoms. These were considered by

the community of nations to be minimum standards by which governments should treat their citizens.

Knowledge of human rights is important in order for the citizen to demand their rights; to respect and to defend their rights. Former President Nelson Mandela once commented that, human rights education is important in the campaign to develop human rights culture (Amnesty International, 1998:13)

## **Objectives**

The objective of this paper is to establish and to recommend the role of libraries in supporting human rights. In addition, the paper aims at motivating library and information workers to create human rights awareness in their communities.

## **Methodology**

The human rights survey took place from 26<sup>th</sup> April to 26<sup>th</sup> July 2012. One of the main objectives of the study was to support the Office of the Ombudsman to develop the 1<sup>st</sup> National Human Rights Action Plan for Namibia (Nakuta, 2013:25).

A baseline survey was conducted in order to determine the views and opinions of respondents on different human rights issues in Namibia. This includes: legal guarantees of human rights in domestic law as well as commitment to international human rights instruments such as UN conventions. The result from the study will guide the Ombudsman office to formulate the National Human Rights Action Plan in Namibia.

The study used three methods of data collection, which were interviews, focus group discussion and questionnaires. There was a response rate of 1272 which is 99% interviews which took place in the thirteen regions. This was followed by 20 focus group discussions which were held over a period of May to September 2012 on various themes which took place in each region, and there were 50 key informants who were interviewed on various issues based on the expertise on the subject in the 13 regions (Nakuta, 2013:26).

The household survey included questions on knowledge of human rights; socio and economic rights (right to housing; poverty; water and sanitation); civil and political rights; access to information; women's rights; environmental rights; minority rights; children's rights; corruption; and detainees and prisoner rights.

The centre used experienced enumerators from 13 regions and University of Namibia students to collect data for this study.

Before the main survey was conducted, a pilot study took place in Khomas region in April 2012 with the aim to test the instruments. Some questions were amended as a result of feedback. The target was to have 128 participants which represent 10% of the sample. The actual sample was 83 (65%) participants in the study from Khomas region who took part.

## Literature Review

Libraries and information centres provide a very important role of acquiring, preserving and disseminating information in any country. In Bhutan, South Asia, for example, public libraries provide safe spaces for women and girls to develop their talents and build confidence with a violence free zone. (Deibert, 2013 Online). They learned how to solve problems together. In Jhuwan library in Nepal, the library provided different programs to educate women about key maternal health issues in order to achieve one of the Millenium Development Goals (READ Nepal, online). In Namibia, the Legal Assistance Centre, publishes all the research findings reports on their website in order to disseminate the information. In addition, cases which the center has litigated are also provided on the website for the public to read. A good example is the corporal punishment case where the magistrate court ruled that corporal punishment is not permitted in private schools (Legal Assistance Centre 2013 Online). Such information is very important for the people to know decisions taken by courts and also defend their rights.

## Characteristics of human rights

According to Amnesty International (1998:2), human rights provide the following characteristics:

- Human rights do not have to be given, bought, **earned or inherited**, they belong to people because they are born with them. In other word, human rights are inherent;
- Human Rights are **universal**- human rights are the same for all human beings regardless of sex, gender, religion, political affiliation, social origin or race;
- Human rights are **inalienable**- people still have human rights even when the laws of their countries do not recognize them. For example, a country which practices slavery, these slaves still have rights even though these rights are being violated; and
- **indivisible, interrelated and interdependent**
- It is insufficient to respect some human rights and not others.
- In practice, the violation of one right will often affect the respect of several other rights.
- All human rights should therefore be seen as having equal importance
- For example **indivisible** – to live in dignity, all human beings are entitled to freedom, security and descent standards of living. In other words the categories of rights are dependent of each other.

## **What does it mean to have a Human Right?**

Having a human right is having an individual entitlement (or freedom) to act in a particular way or for the state to act in a particular way towards you (Amnesty International, 1998 and Hubbard, 2001).

### **Human rights can be categorized into three different groups. These are:**

1. Civil and Political Rights- freedom of people to think, act, and make choices. Conte, Davidson and Burchill (2004:2) pointed out that, civil and political rights are these rights which are calculated to protect an individual's physical and mental integrity; to ensure that they are not victims of discrimination; and to preserve their right to a fair trial. Political rights are those which ensure that individuals are able to participate fully in civil society. For example: Freedom of conscience, freedom of religion; freedom of expression, freedom of speech; freedom of assembly; freedom of association; right to vote; freedom of movement; right to life and right to liberty.
2. Economic and social rights - According to Hansen (2000:4) these are security-oriented rights such as: the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of the individual and his or her family, including adequate food, adequate clothing, clean water and adequate housing; right to education; right to work; right to privacy and family life; the right to social security.
3. Environmental, cultural and developmental rights - These include the right to live in an environment that is clean and protected from destruction, and rights to cultural, political and economic development.

The discussion above demonstrates the importance of human rights in Namibia. The next section presents data on the perceptions of respondents to human rights including level of knowledge and preserved protection of human rights.

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

### ***Demographic Information***

There were 83 participants, 49 (59%) were male and 34 (41%) were female. The study showed that, majority 41 (51%) of the participants were young people below 30 years of age. Around 3 (4%) of respondent did not indicate their age groups.

Table 1: Age Groups

Age	N	%
<=19	9	11
20-24	22	28
25-29	10	13*
30-34	17	21
35-39	7	9
40-44	4	5
45-49	8	10
50-54	2	3
55-59	1	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100</b>

## Education Level

The study showed that, majority 53 (64%) of the respondents have attended or completed secondary education. A few 2 (2%) had no formal education, while 17 (21%) had tertiary education. Around 4 (5%) did not indicate their educational level.

## Marital Status

The majority of the respondents 59 (72%) were never married or singles. A few 11 (13%) of the respondents were married.

## Language Used

In this pilot study, 58 (70%) of respondents were Oshiwambo speakers, followed by 9 (11%) Otjiherero; 8 (10%) Nama-Damara; 3 (4%) each were Afrikaans and English speakers. A few, 2%, were Rukwangali speakers.

## Employment Status

The study showed that the majority 24 (30%) of the respondents were unemployed, looking for jobs or casual labourers. About 23 (28%) of respondent had formal wage employment while none of the respondent were involved with farming. Since the study took place in an urban area, this is not a surprise because it is not easy to get land for farming in urban areas like Khomas.

## **Knowledge of Human Rights**

The study wanted to find out the knowledge of human rights. Participants were asked if they have heard the word human rights before, more than half 75 (90%) responded positively. All 11 (100%) who were 45 years and above, confirmed that they have heard the term before, 45 (92%) were female respondents of which, 17 (100%) were those who attained tertiary education and also 2 (100%) had no formal education.

## **Constitution**

The study wanted to find out if the respondents have seen a copy of the constitution. 48 (72%) of the respondents have seen the copy of the constitution. When we look the results by gender, 29(85%) of male respondents have seen the copy of the constitution compared with female respondents. More than half, 13 (78%) who were 30 years and above, have never seen a copy of the constitution.

A follow up question was asked if the respondents have read the constitution. The study showed that, 24 (39%) have not read the constitution. When the results were cross tabulated, the results showed that 6 (75%) with 45 years and above have not read the constitution.

The next question was to find the relevance of the constitution. The majority 53 (84%) suggested the constitution was relevant in their life.

## **Human Rights**

The study asked where the participants had learned about human rights. The majority, 27 (55%), who were 30 years and below learned the term human rights at school. A good number, 10 (46%) of these who were 45 years and above learned through radio, newspaper or television. The study shows the distinction of sources used between a younger generation and older people. When the results were tabulated based on gender, they showed that, the majority 28 (42%) of females got the information both from school and 24 (36%) from radio, newspaper or television. On an educational level, those who attained secondary and tertiary education learned the term human rights at school with 26 (32%) and 12 (46%) respectively.

## **Human Rights Protection**

A question was posed to find the perception of respondents as to whether human rights are protected.

The study showed that, 31 (76%) of these who were 30 years and below, believed human rights are protected. Around 10 (30%) of male respondents believed that human rights are not protected. The 2 (100%) respondents with no formal education believed that human rights are protected in Namibia.

Another question was asked what the respondents would do if their rights are violated. Table 2 shows the responses where the majority 69 (56%) suggested they would go to the police. A few 10 (8%) respondents suggested that they would go to the Ombudsman; and defend themselves.

**Table 2: What would you do if your rights are threatened or violated by other persons?**

	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Go to the Police	69	56
Inform family /neighbours	14	11
Go to Ombudsman Office	10	8
Defend myself	10	8
Inform traditional leader	5	4
Other	16	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>124</b>	<b>100</b>

When data was cross tabulated by gender, it showed that 42 (61%) of female respondents would go to the police and 8 (15%) of male respondents suggested to defend themselves.

Another question was where the respondents had learned about the term human rights. Adults from 45 years and above, learned from radio, newspaper or television. In contrast, more than half 27 (55%) of respondents with less than 30 years learned from school. Unfortunately, the library was not mentioned by any group. Data by educational level shows that, respondents with no formal education and those with primary education 1 (5%) and 4 (50%) both learned from radio, newspaper or television; while those with secondary and tertiary education learned from school with 26 (32%) and 12 (46%) respectively.

## **Discussion of Findings**

Data presented in the study shows that the, majority of respondents, 13 (78%) who were 30 years and above have never seen a copy of the constitution. In addition, those who have seen a copy 24 (39%) have not read the constitution. These are young and active members of the society, it is important for them to access the constitution in order to read and know their rights.

The schools play an important role in educating the learners about human rights, as 27 (55%) who were 30 years and below learnt the term human rights at school. A good number, 10 (46%) of these, who were 45 years and above, learned through radio, newspaper or television. Libraries did not feature in any of the responses, either the respondents are not aware of their existence or they did not consider libraries as a place where one can get information on human rights.

It is not surprising when 44% of respondents did not know where to report human rights violations. Some 11% of respondents suggested informing family /neighbors; while 8% each suggested they would defend themselves; or they would use other means to protect their rights (13).

In Namibia, violence against women and children is one of the major human rights violations. The community needs to know their rights so that they can defend and demand them. Thus, the role of libraries and information centers to promote human rights is very crucial, but respondents were not aware that their libraries could provide such information.

### **How can libraries promote human rights:**

There are several methods by which libraries and information centers can promote human rights, these include:

- Libraries and information centers should provide copies of the constitution for people to read to understand their rights. For example in 2012 and 2013, the human rights and documentation centre secured copies of the constitution and distributed them to the University students so that they could read and know their rights;
- Libraries and information centres should work in collaboration with civil society to organize discussion forums in order to disseminate information on domestic violence. For example, the Legal Assistance Centre conducts a lot of research on gender based violence, but the research findings are disseminated through their website. One finds that not many women in rural areas will access such information due to lack of connectivity and ignorance in using technology. Such forums will popularize the dangers of domestic violence and create awareness of this evil practice in society.
- Libraries can make use of professionals like social workers from the Ministry of Gender or Ministry of Labor to organize workshop to sensitize the people on issue of child abuse. For example to sensitize people about the danger of child labour. The Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) conducts a lot of research on labour issues which include the danger of child labour. The Ministry could work closely with libraries in order to sensitize people about the issue of child labour



- The use of posters and other illustrations to create awareness on the contact information on where to report if a person's rights are violated
- The Office of the Ombudsman or Anticorruption Commission, can use libraries and information centres to publicize their work and also use the libraries to distribute their materials so that people can have access to them
- Libraries and information centre should have in stock all international instruments which have been ratified by their countries for the citizen to familiarize themselves. For example, the Human Rights and Documentation Centre provides all instruments to its users.
- Librarians and information workers must be involved in research in order to find solutions to problems. For example, the Human Rights and Documentation Centre was involved in a human rights baseline study on behalf of the ombudsman office. Such a study is important because it provides an insight on human rights perceptions by the sample, in order to provide the right materials at the right time.
- Libraries can assist job seekers to prepare CVs and seek employment; or providing materials for entrepreneur to improve their skills in order to reduce poverty in the country. As we know, a number of youth are unemployed, thus they are looking for different opportunities such as tenders from government; and other job opportunities.
- Libraries should provide internet services for the users to access human rights information. Libraries and information centres in the rural areas where youth need more access to HIV/AIDS information can subscribe to different databases providing information on HIV/AIDs or information on jobs availability. We know that our youth are technology savvy whereby they make use of their smart phone for example to access information which will assist them to make the right decision.

## Conclusion

Human rights are values we all share because they are about recognising the value and dignity of all people. In learning about human rights, we learn about ideals of respect, fairness, justice and equality. We also learn about standing up for our own rights and about our responsibility to respect the rights of others. Understanding human rights shapes our thinking and our actions because human rights are about real-life issues.

Strong libraries and information centers can play an important role in ensuring citizens know their rights, demand, and defend them.

## References

Amnesty International, 1998. Siniko Towards a Human Rights Culture in Africa.: a manual for teaching human rights. London: Amnesty International

Atuti, Richard Masaranga, 2011. The Role of Libraries in Nurturing Democracy. In Claire M. Walker. Libraries as Gateways to Information and Democracy Improving Networking, Advocacy and Lobbying Strategies: papers and presentations delivered at six workshops, April – November 2008. p262-265. Nairobi: Goethe Institute

Beyond Access n.d. Libraries Powering Development: how Public Libraries contribute towards reaching the Millennium Development Goals. Available at: <http://www.beyondaccess.net>

Conte, Alex; Davidson Scott and Burchill Richard. 2004. Defining Civil and Political Rights: the jurisprudence of the United Nations Human Right Committee. Hants: Ashgate

Deibert, Nolen. 2013. International Women's Day: what are public libraries doing? Available at <http://beyondaccess.net/2013/03/08/international-womens-day-what-are-public-libraries-doing/>

English Kathryn and Stapleton, Adam. 1997. The Human Rights Handbook: a practical guide to monitoring human rights. Cape Town: Juta.

Gierycz, Dorota, 1997. Education on the Human Rights of Women as a vehicle for change. In George Andreopoulos and Richard Claude, Human Rights Education for the Twenty-First Century. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.p96-118

Hansen, Stephen. 2000. Economic Social & Cultural Rights: terminology and potential violations. Washington DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science

Hubbard, Dianne. 2001. Law for All Volume 1: introduction to Namibian law. Windhoek:Namibia Institute for Democracy and Out of Africa Publishers.

Nakuta, John. 2013. Baseline Study Report on Human Rights in Namibia. Windhoek: Ombudsman Namibia.

Nashuuta, Lahja. 2013. Recognizing the potential of ICT in fighting HIV/ AIDS. In The Southern Times, 20-26 September, pg.39

Priti, Jain and Nfila, R..B 2011.Developing Strategic Partnerships for Development: a case of Botswana. Library Review Vol.60 (5) 370-382

READ Nepal, 2013. Why Nepal? Available at: <http://www.readglobal.org/our-work/read-nepal>  
Sipila, Sinikka. 2013. Strong Libraries, strong societies. In IFLA Journal, Volume 39 (1) March 2013, pg.79.