

## LITERACY PROMOTION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AWARENESS AND PROTECTION- THE CASE OF NIGERIA

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### **Abstract**

*The idea of human rights came into being due to man's injustice to man. The United Nations Organization, viewing this problem with all seriousness and concern, made the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 to encourage the protection, promotion and respect for fundamental human rights. Yet every day, from one country to another, these rights are being violated, and in some countries without the slightest compunction, especially in Africa and with particular reference to Nigeria. This is due, largely, to illiteracy on the part of the stakeholders – citizens (who cannot assert their rights due to ignorance or fear) and government officials (who ignorantly and/or intentionally overstep their boundaries). It is therefore important to intimate and sensitize people on their rights and freedoms through literacy promotion. This paper clarifies the meaning of literacy and human rights. It also examines the human rights approved by the United Nations Organization, and discusses the human rights situation in Nigeria as well as the implications of promoting human rights through literacy acquisition. Data for the study were collected from secondary sources (documents) such as textbooks, journals, magazines, bulletins, government publications and internet materials, while analysis was done qualitatively. The paper recommends that Government should provide free education at all levels, so that people who are too poor to afford the cost of education can avail themselves of the opportunity. Government should also endeavour to, among others, mount human rights literacy campaigns and enlightenment programmes, using the media as well as local groups and leaders. This will make it possible for every segment of people in the country to be reached.*

**Keywords:** Human rights, Literacy, United Nations

### **INTRODUCTION**

Human rights are the precious rights of all who live under the protection of a sovereign democratic government, rich or poor, young or old, black or white, man or woman, alien or citizen (Nwagwu, 2014). Such rights or liberties are germane to the operation of a democratic government. They (rights) are not merely a means of attaining self-government or a democratic government. Rather, they are ends in themselves.

The central idea of human rights is that of co-existence, such as existence among individuals and between individuals and between individuals and institutions, including the state. Rights are not only universal but also the birthright of all human beings. Therefore, ideally, there should be mutual respect for individual and collective rights in these relationships. Conversely, the spirit of the United Nations

Organization's Human Rights Charter is being violated where this respect is lacking. Human rights are standards laid down by society for the treatment of members (Alhassan, 2007). These standards are derived from and reflection of the political organization and economic and social systems in society.

However, due to man's injustice to man, the United Nations Organization had to declare the Fundamental Human Rights on December 10, 1948 (Fadeyiye, 2005). Fundamental human rights were first entrenched in the Constitution of independent Nigeria in 1960 as recommended by the Sir Henry Willink Commission of Inquiry (Ewere, 2012). Chapter four of the (current) 1999 Nigerian Constitution (as amended) provides for fundamental human rights. Yet, every day, from one country to another, these rights are being violated, and in some countries without the slightest compunction, especially in Africa and with specific reference to Nigeria. This is due, mainly, to illiteracy on the part of the stakeholders – citizens (who cannot assert their rights due to ignorance or fear) and government officials (who ignorantly and/or intentionally overstep their boundaries). It is therefore important to intimate and sensitize people on their rights and freedoms through literacy programmes. In line with this contention, Smith (2002) aptly states that literacy and numeracy, if harnessed, can develop stronger understandings of human rights among people, especially school students.

The objective of this paper therefore is to examine the place and role of literacy in promoting human rights in Nigeria. The paper attempts to clarify the meanings of literacy and human rights approved by the United Nations Organization. It also discusses the human rights situation in Nigeria as well as the implications of promoting human rights through literacy programmes. Recommendations for effective human rights promotion through literacy acquisition, inter alia, are also made with a view to improving the ugly situation in Nigeria.

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

### Literacy

Literacy as a concept is viewed from various perspectives of value. While some see it as an ability to access and respond to messages and ideas in the printed text (Ihebuzor, 1999), others view it as the ability to read, write and compute (Okpe, 1998). Literacy is a human right as well as a fundamental tool for every form of learning in and out of school (Gathumbi, 2009). These scholars conceptualize the term as an art and a process through which illiterate individuals are liberated from the clutches of ignorance, bondage, superstition, fatalism and backwardness through functional education which endows them with the skills of reading, writing and computing.

Literacy is defined in the mass literacy theory (<http://www.tendollarsforliteracy.org/>) as a combination of education, earning potential and empowerment. Here, education involves development of knowledge, skill and character; earning potential means education of citizens with a focus on income generation, economic mobility, small business and trade development, life coping skills, cultural and social responsibility; while empowerment denotes equipping individuals and communities with the ability to undertake and organize small trades and to make choices by promoting an understanding of their basic rights and social responsibilities.

Honwana (1999) sees such functional literacy as a term that goes beyond the acquisition of reading and writing skills and that it embraces a variety of tools and skills necessary to access information, create knowledge, promote continuing learning and active participation in society. It helps people to deepen the understanding of their origins, roots, traditions and cultures. Besides, it prepares people to be contributory members in the society. According to Gathumbi (2009), it is a prerequisite for participation in social, economic and political activities in a society. Conversely, illiteracy brings about incapacitation, isolation and loneliness. According to Agada (2007), one who is unable to read and write is confined to the world that barely goes beyond tradition and is a prisoner of ignorance and, above all, a prey to many fears in a world that he does not understand. In the words of Gathumbi (2009):

*illiteracy connotes exclusion of the most devastating type... because the individual is figuratively blind as he must not only need someone else who is literate to interpret grapheme for him, but more importantly he cannot function in today's world that demands some form of reading, writing and computing in almost all situations.*

## Human Rights

The concept of human rights has existed under several names in European thought for many centuries, at least since the time of King John of England (Alhassan, 2007). After the King violated a number of ancient laws and customs by which England was governed, his subjects forced him to sign the Magna Carta, or Great Charter, on June 15, 1215 which enumerated a number of what later came to be known as human rights.

Human rights, as seen by Njoku (2000), are those inherent rights of man which he enjoys by virtue of the fact that he is a human being, and a dignified member of human society. Pats-Acholonu (1999) has observed that, sometimes, the term “human rights” is preceded by the word “fundamental” especially as is the case in our constitutions. According to him, they are fundamental because they are endowed by only nature or God the Almighty to be exercised in this world. Thus, fundamental human rights are to serve as a basis of man’s existence – to protect his security, comfort and happiness on earth. They are often guaranteed and protected by the state against flagrant violation, and this is usually done through constitutional provisions and international conventions. However, human rights differ from fundamental human rights. The former are wider in scope than the latter which are the human rights that have been recognized by the state and given state support (Ezeilo, 1998).

It is noteworthy that human rights do not consist only of civil and political rights but also of economic, social and cultural rights. By this, people have the right to form and belong to groups and associations of their choice, such as students associations, trade unions, political parties and the rights to adequate standard of living. The rights also include those to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health as well as the right to education. That is why Smith (2002) plausibly contends that the right to quality education is one of the most fundamental human rights. The availability of these rights radiates orderliness, obedience to state laws, love, tolerance and understanding as well as enforcing us to get along well with one another, and enabling us to coexist peacefully as a people (Nwagwu, 2011; Ezeanya, 2011).

## HUMAN RIGHTS APPROVED BY THE UNITED NATIONS ORGANIZATION

The United Nations Organization has called on all member states and governments of the world to respect, protect, promote and to incorporate in their national constitutions a number of human rights and fundamental freedoms. This was sequel to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10, 1948 as:

*a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction (United Nations, 1948).*

The rights and freedoms approved by the United Nations (1948) include:

- Right to life,
- Right to dignity of human person,
- Right to personal liberty,
- Right to fair hearing,
- Right to private and family life,
- Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion,
- Right to freedom of expression and the press,
- Right to peaceful assembly and association,
- Right to freedom of movement,
- Right to acquire and own immovable property anywhere, and
- Right to property.

These rights and freedoms, contained in chapter IV, sections 33-46 of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, are mainly civil and political rights and are not inclusive of the economic, social and cultural rights – otherwise known as fundamental objectives and directive principles of state policy – which are in turn enshrined in chapter II of the said Nigerian constitution.

Therefore, in case of infringement of any of these rights and freedoms, a legal mechanism for redress is also constitutionally provided. For example, section 46 of the constitution allows aggrieved persons to seek legal redress in the High Court.

### **HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN NIGERIA**

Fundamental human rights have been a vital feature/provision of the Nigerian constitution since her independence in 1960. The reasons for the entrenchment of the human rights in the constitution are quite cogent and include the following, according to Njoku (2004).

- a. To allay the fears of the minorities;
- b. To promote good governance;
- c. To check the excesses of government particularly the executive and its agencies;
- d. To make the government responsive to the needs, comfort and aspiration of the citizens;
- e. To ensure that the policies and programmes as well as political actions of the government are not detrimental to the welfare and happiness of the people; and
- f. To enthrone respect for fundamental human rights in the political human culture.

Unfortunately, however, Nigerian leaders (both civilian and military) have failed to properly uphold these rights since independence. More often than not, they thwart or interpret them to suit their selfish interests and to the detriment of the people. The following cases are some of the instances of human rights abuses by both the civilian and military regimes in Nigeria (Iyidobi, 2001; Ewere, 2012; World Human Rights Watch's Report, 2015; Ani, 2017).

- i. The unwarranted waging and prosecution of a 30-month civil war from 1967 to 1970 which claimed thousands of lives;
- ii. The gruesome hanging of Ken Saro Wiwa and other human rights crusaders; the murder of Dele Giwa, Kudirat Abiola, M.K.O Abiola, Bola Ige, Prof. Chimere Ikulu etc during the despotic military rule of Ibrahim Babangida and Sani Abacha;
- iii. Incidence of religious unrest especially between Christians and Muslims in the north that usually claim lives and property and said to have political and ethnic undertones;
- iv. The greater population of Nigerians who live in sub-human dehumanizing conditions without adequate food, shelter and clothing (including internally displaced persons (IDPs), lack of employment opportunities and irregular and/or non-payment of salaries;
- v. The arbitrary rigging of the 2003, 2007 and 2011 general elections which is a living testimony of how leaders can neglect the rights of the people;
- vi. Most of the rights of the people which have been rubbished – freedom of movement, freedom of religion, denial of children's right to education and women still being regarded as second class citizens;
- vii. Citizens not being able to help matters due to lack of proper education. As they are ignorant of their rights, they do not know if and when their rights are violated or when they are denied of their rights outrightly. Moreover, some people lack self-worth, and so they easily make themselves instruments of denying others their rights. Examples include armed robbers, assassins, thugs, kidnappers, Fulani herdsmen, ethnic militants and a host of others.
- viii. Intensified violence by Boko Haram continues to undermine the status of human rights in Nigeria. The sect continues to bomb towns and villages in the North East, a result of which many lives and property are lost. Boko Haram also abducts women and girls and forcefully conscripts men and boys.
- ix. Impunity is another aberration. Impunity has elevated corruption as a national way of life, and those involved in corruption are not only allowed to get away with it but end up being celebrated. Such corrupt officials even occupy the most important positions in government

and governmental institutions and organizations in Nigeria. However, the efforts of the current Muhammadu Buhari administration in tackling corruption and Boko Haram insurgency, among others, in the country are highly commendable, as they are yielding fruitful results.

- x. Proliferation of arms and ammunition constitutes another threat to human rights protection in the country, as they are a threat to security. People cannot feel protected when terrorists move about freely and weapons circulate stealthily.

It can be seen from the foregoing discussion that in spite of the entrenchment of the provisions on fundamental human rights in the 1979 and 1999 constitutions of Nigeria, the rights of individuals continue to be infringed upon daily. The police brutality in Nigeria is another example of many attacks on the rights of individuals. There are also cases of political victimization and killings of political opponents in many states of the federation. It should be noted however that the case of Nigeria is not only that of perpetual human rights abuses. Nigeria has made serious improvements in human rights, though there are areas where significant improvement is still needed (Lagi, 2016; Wikipedia, 2017). There are therefore laudable instances of genuine respect for, and protection of, fundamental human rights too. The following few incidents are cases in point:-

- i. When, in 1980, the Majority Leader of Borno State House of Assembly, Alhaji Shugaba, was deported by Shagari's government, he sought the protection of law and got the High Court to declare the deportation order as null and void and unconstitutional (Olawale, 1982).
- ii. In 1981, a writer wrote an article in the Daily Times newspaper criticizing members of the Senate for devoting their time chasing contracts instead of facing their legislative functions. The Senators were enraged and consequently passed a motion summoning the then Editor of the paper, Mr. Tony Momoh, to appear before her to answer some questions on the article. Tony Momoh instead went to court and the court declared the Senate order unconstitutional because it infringed on the right of the Editor and of a writer who can express his views freely.
- iii. The Oyo State Government paid farmers whose lands were acquired for the building of a new township called Ajoda. Similarly, the Federal Government and State Governments continue to pay huge compensation for the various lands acquired for development purposes. This is because individual's properties cannot be confiscated by the government without the payment of adequate compensation.
- iv. Individuals in the country can team up to form (or join) political parties of their choices and/or embark on ideologies that are different from the known ones. Thus, there are about 65 different political parties existing in the country presently, and they all participated in the recent (2015) general elections. This is done in the spirit of freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association enshrined in the constitution.
- v. Since Nigeria returned to democratic governance, several actions of the Executive and National Assembly laws that infringed the rights of people have been boldly declared unconstitutional by the courts. This is because the Judiciary is fairly free and independent in the country. However, cases of corruption are now being identified in the Nigerian Judiciary, which is disheartening.
- vi. Election tribunals made up of eminent or renowned judges are set up to handle election petitions. These tribunals handle such issues and, in most cases, adjudicate fairly, upholding some cases and nullifying others. An example is the election of the Edo State Governor, Oserheinmen Osunbor, in the 2007 general elections which was nullified on March 20, 2008 and the declaration of Adams Oshiomhole as winner (TELL, 25/04/11 page 18). Chief Peter Obi of Anambra State who was also subsequently declared winner of the 2007 gubernatorial elections in the state is another case in point. Similar other cases abound.
- vii. The passing and signing into law of the Freedom of Information Bill in Nigeria is another commendable step taken to ensure human rights protection in the country. According to Adefaye (2011), the signing of the Bill into law by President Goodluck Jonathan is a personal commitment to openness, transparency, accountability and good governance, and that the law has expanded the frontiers of press freedom.
- viii. The enactment of the Child Rights Act in 2003 to check child abuse is also commendable. Though not yet domesticated in some few states in the country, the Act prohibits child marriage, child labour and child servitude. Despite the enactment of the Act, however, there are reported

- cases of abuse of the child in the stated ways including domestic servitude, existence of baby factories and child trafficking.
- ix. Many human rights organizations such as the Civil Liberties Organization (CLO), Legal Defense and Assistance Project (LEDAP), Access to Justice (AJ), Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and a host of others have emerged in Nigeria. These governmental and non-governmental organizations help to educate the people on their rights, expose cases of governmental denial of such rights as well as promote and protect them (the rights). However, some Nigerians are unaware of the existence of these organizations.
  - x. Also important is the peaceful transfer of presidential power from incumbent Goodluck Jonathan to Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 after the opposition won the general elections at both the presidential and legislative levels for the first time in the history of the country. This transfer of power from the government party to the opposition within the ambit of the constitution constitutes a landmark in human rights promotion in Nigeria as it allowed the will of the people to prevail.
  - xi. The presidential system of government practiced in Nigeria makes room for a clear separation of powers and, of course, checks and balances among the three arms of government. Each arm checks or balances the powers of the others, thereby reducing human rights abuses, among other functions (Anifowose and Enemu, 1999; Odeh, 2013; Lagi, 2016; Wikipedia, 2016; Wikipedia, 2017).

Examined above are some of the numerous ways in which fundamental rights and freedoms are promoted and protected in Nigeria. There however exist various formal limitations to these rights. They include emergency laws, laws of libel, slander and trespassing.

#### **IMPLICATIONS OF PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS THROUGH LITERACY**

It is necessary and important to raise the level of people's knowledge and awareness on human rights, and these will be made easier through a systematized literacy programme. For though human rights are applicable to all citizens, many of them cannot assert their rights due to ignorance or illiteracy.

According to LitCam – The Frankfurt Book Fair Literacy Campaign- Conference (2010:1):

*Reading, writing and numeracy (literacy) are the basic skills needed today to enable people to live in a responsible and independent way. Basic education is a crucial prerequisite allowing citizens to take active part in important community processes and society in general.*

The implication of this statement by LitCam is that literate citizenry is more likely to be conscious of the need to know and enjoy its freedom and to participate in other activities of society than the illiterates. Individuals in a given nation require good education for self-reliance and overall total development (Alhassan, 2007). Therefore, when people are given human rights education, they will not only assert and protect their rights but also respect those of other people. This will result in more harmonious relationships and peaceful co-existence.

In the words of Ghandi (1988):

*Good education is the key to development of our most valuable assets, and our human resources. It is through education that hard bound traditional age-old prejudices give way to reason and the scientific spirit. It is through good education that society is modernized.*

In its efforts in this direction, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) says it will ensure that 80 per cent of Nigerians are aware of their fundamental human rights. According to the Executive Secretary, Angwe (2016), the Commission will partner the National Orientation Agency (NOA) to translate the section of the 1999 Constitution on human rights into the three major languages. The aim of this plan is to enable the people to read about their rights in the various languages. They will thereby be empowered to cry out when their rights are violated.

In a nutshell, Nigeria as the most populous black nation with multifarious problems, including human rights abuses, needs good education for the emancipation of her people from illiteracy, ignorance and squalor among others. Such literate and enlightened people will live free, independent and responsible lives in a civilized society.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has affirmed that human rights are a universal phenomenon. It is therefore wise that domestic efforts are increased to ensure that they are respected, promoted and protected. Although fundamental human rights provisions have been featuring remarkably in Nigerian constitutions since independence, certain factors have been hindering their effective practice and promotion; prominent among such factors are illiteracy, ignorance, arrogance, brutality and incidence of policy. It is thus necessary to intimate and sensitize people on their rights and freedoms through literacy programmes.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The need to promote human rights through literacy programmes in Nigeria has been delineated. The following suggestions or recommendations as to how the government and people in the country can take positive steps to intimate and sensitize Nigerians on the matter are vital.

- i. Government should provide free education at all levels, so that people who are too poor to afford the cost of education can avail themselves of the opportunity. Through this means the beneficiaries will also receive human rights education.
- ii. Government should also endeavour to mount human rights literacy campaign and enlightenment programmes, using the media (i.e. television, radio and newspapers) as well as local groups and leaders. This will make it possible for every segment of Nigerians to be reached.
- iii. Education on human rights should be incorporated into the school curriculum at all levels of education (i.e. primary to university). This will enable students not only to be taught but also to read for themselves the theory and practice of human rights. It is true that an important and essential skill for learning any subject(s) or topic(s) is reading. Reading – an intellectual and thinking process – enables students to discover new ideas, new concepts and generalization in order to find answers to questions and valuable critical issues.
- iv. Teachers handling human rights courses should use their initiatives to utilize relevant activities and visual aids to impart knowledge into students. They should encourage their students to participate in activities or programmes organized for them. This will enable them gain experience in this kind of work.
- v. Students who cannot offer human rights as a major course due to the nature of their programmes (such as engineering, science and technology courses) should study it as either an elective course or in General Studies. Of particular relevance here is the Citizenship Education subject. This can be enlarged to comprehensively embrace human rights lessons so that they will know their rights and freedoms.
- vi. Human rights lessons should be introduced into Adult Education programmes, especially for the teacher trainees in National Teachers' Institute (NTI). This will enable them also to imbibe the knowledge of fundamental human rights and to apply it appropriately.
- vii. Human rights education should be extended to the law enforcement agencies, such as the police, prison service, remand homes, immigration and the military. Through this process, the idea, role and importance of human rights will be inculcated into them, and they will subsequently begin to have respect for the rights of others.
- viii. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) should assist in the promotion of human rights in Nigeria through literacy acquisition. While NGOs can finance some literacy campaign programmes on human rights, UNESCO can encourage the independence and autonomy of academic institutions and programmes.
- ix. Teachers should become more sensitive and vigilant so that they do not exhibit acts of prejudice, hostility, racism, tribalism or other forms of discrimination that will amount to human right abuses. If they do, they will bring the proposed human rights education into disrepute. Example, they say, is better than precept.

- x. Individuals and groups found violating or abusing human rights should be punished publicly without fear or favour to serve as a deterrent to others. People in this group include armed ethnic militants, Boko Haram insurgents, child rights violators, illegal arms dealers, corrupt government officials, etc. It is also a part of the learning process as both the punished and onlookers will begin to know and appreciate the place and role of human rights in the society.

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