

HUMAN RIGHTS: WITH REGARDS TO VULNERABLE GROUPS AND RESPECT FOR HUMAN DIGNITY

By

Victor, Stephen Dutse

*Department of Christian Religious Studies
Kaduna State College of Education Gidan Waya, P.M.B. 1024
Kafanchan, Kaduna State, Nigeria
Email: langba4christ@gmail.com*

Abstract

The position of this paper focused on the dignity of the human person vis-a-vis his human right. Every human being has a purpose in life and an inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected irrespective of their status, gender or social class. Dignity is a concept which talks about a person's intrinsic worth- a value of all people, which they are born with as human beings while human rights are "the basic rights and freedom to which all humans are entitled" such as rights to life, rights to work etc. The main thrust of this paper is based on the observation of the writer that the dignity and right of the vulnerable groups in Nigeria seem not to be adequately addressed. Some of the challenges observed as faced by these groups range from oppression, affront, discrimination, contempt and the impending effective implementation of the universal declaration of human rights and the dignity of the human person as enshrined in the proclamation of the General Assembly of the United Nations resolution 217 A in Paris on 10th November, 1948 as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and nations which is based on the fact that: all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another in a spirit of brotherhood (Article 01 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). Possible measures to eradicating the identified challenges will be presented in ensuring that the dignity and right of the vulnerable groups are protected. Way forward and conclusion are drawn based on the discussion.

Introduction

Human rights is a global phenomenon, it cuts across all races, religion and social background. It is a general notion embracing rights that are attributed to individuals, groups of individuals, and all mankind at large. There is generally acceptable definition of human rights instead, legal instrument usually contains different lists of right which they are supposed to promote, secure or protect the human person (Gasioko iv).

Human rights as a concept studies and touches every aspect of human's in the society. The idea that all things are equal within the application or distribution of human rights remains idealistic and uprights naive. For these reasons, human rights advocates have emphasize the significance of the vulnerable groups and the need to pay a special attention to human rights and dignity of those groups. Since all human persons are on equal situations, treating in the same manner invariably eradicates injustices.

This paper will examine some vulnerable groups in Nigeria, their plights, their dignity, struggle and human rights interventions in their affairs. The work will also be paddled towards proffering solution or a way forward in ensuring that the rights and dignity of these vulnerable groups are well protected as enshrined in the constitution.

Clarification of Terms

Here the paper will be discussing the three (3) major terms from the topic: Human Rights, Vulnerability and Human Dignity.

Human Rights

The concept of human rights is the result of long philosophical, political, legal and social reflection inseparably connected to the social democratic traditions.

The concept emanated right from the time and ideas of profound thinkers, such as Aristotle, Cicero, Grotius, and Montesquie and so many prestigious just whose works and reflections were found in many documents with institutional character which emphasize a well deliberate conception of human rights and liberties and much later was adopted as a universal declaration of human rights in December, 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization (Conway and Norton 21).

The adoption of these human rights came to be as a result of every day crisis arising from the evolution of the contemporary society (Machachalan 4). And this declaration remains as relevant today as it was on the day in 1948 that it was proclaimed and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. The extraordinary vision and resolve of the drafts produced a document that, for the first time, articulated the rights and freedom to which every human being equally inalienably entitled (United Nations ii).

The characteristics of human rights according to Rhoda Howard, include the following: universality, the act in the interest of all person at all times, primacy, there 'trump' in all other decisional considerations, fundamental, ethical status, deserving of unqualified respect because the equal 'worth' of human soul or identity and its interest and life plan, the manifest, they exist independently, they take the interest of persons above consequential consideration, and they apply to all and only humans as a common standard for achievement for all people and all nations. Human rights seem to enable us not only to focus on our need but to do so explicitly through measurements (65).

From the historical background of human rights, it's stated many centuries ago, owing to its important to human existence. Universal Declaration of Human Rights was in 1948, adopted by the United Nations, as a common standard of achievement for all people and all nations. The declaration indicates that all human beings are born free, equal and in dignity and rights, endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood. Everyone has the right to life and security, rights to recognition everywhere as a person before the law, the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the right of freedom of peaceful assembly and association, the rights of social security, the rights of work, to free choice of employment, rights to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and his families and many among other things (Francis 36).

Vulnerability

Vulnerability derives from the Latin word *vulnerare* (to be wounded) and described the potential to be harmed physically or psychologically (Miriam Webster Dictionary). Cambridge English Dictionary online also defines it as: the quality of being vulnerable (able to be easily hurt, influenced, or attacked), or something that is vulnerable. Furthermore, Oxford Advance English Dictionary 9th Edition online defines vulnerability as the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally.

Vulnerability is often understood as the counterpart of resilience and is increasingly studied as a state of being prone to assault, abuse or attack by stronger groups or by advantageous class of individuals. The above definitions succinctly depict that a person who stands vulnerable can be hurt emotionally/psychologically or physically because of his/her condition.

However, vulnerable groups may be defined as a social group who experienced limited resources and consequently high relative risk for morbidity and premature mortality, and this may include children, the aged, ethnic minorities, displaced persons, people suffering from chronic illness and persons with disabilities etc (Flaskerud and Winslow 68). Most importantly, the paper has recognized that the social discrimination and bias arise on such categories are as a result of social hierarchies, similar exclusionary practices against the under-privileged or disadvantaged persons may be due to their social status, class, gender, race, deformity, creed and culture by the privilege or "powerful" groups undermining their dignity as human, their fundamental human rights and their rights to health, other social services and to social inclusion to being full participant in the society.

Human Dignity

Human dignity is the recognition that human beings' possess a special value intrinsic to their humanity as such are worthy of respect simply because they are human beings. This

concept, is foundational to our ethical reflection as Christian ethicist who are firmly committed to the belief that human dignity is an inherent quality in all human beings in virtue of our having been created in the image of God. Thus every human being, regardless of age, ability, status, gender, ethnicity e.t.c., is to be treated with respect. Furthermore, we believe that how one understands this concept affects how one views and engages issues of human dignity across his/her entire life span.

Doron (2-3) further opined that one of the first applications of human dignity in international documents is found in the preamble of the Charter of the United Nations (1945) where is stated that:

We the people of the United Nations determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our life time has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.

Here, one can discern that human dignity and human rights are two separate and interdependent concepts, although this interdependence is not yet explained in its hierarchical and explicit formulation. But however, it is worthy of note to understand that in recognizing that these rights drive from the inherent dignity of the human person and that these are regarded as a supreme value that not only stands separated from human rights but also supersedes them. Human rights are derived from human dignity while the later encompasses the essential characteristics of human beings (Doron 4).

Women as Vulnerable Group

In societies around the world, female status is generally viewed as inferior and subordinate to male status. Societies have modelled their gender role expectations on these assumptions of the 'natural order' of humankind. Social structures reflect a subordinate of females to males. This subordinate occurs within the organization and conduct of welfare, the hierarchical ordering for influential religious institutions, attribution of political power, authority of the judiciary, and influences that shape content of the law (Mayer 91).

The historic subordination, silencing and imposing inferiority on women are not simply features of society but a condition of society. Legal precept traditionally excludes women from centers of male gendered power, including legislatures, military institutions, religious orders, universities, medicine and law. (Okagbie 65).

The Plight of Women as Vulnerable Group

Gender Discrimination against Women

Gender discrimination involves treating someone unfavourably just because of the person sex. It can also involve treating an individual less favourably because of his or her sex. Gender discrimination otherwise known as sexism therefore, is prejudice or based on a person's sex or gender. Sexism affects both men and women, but primarily women. It has been linked to stereotypes and gender roles, and many include the belief that one sex or gender is intrinsically superior to another.

Women in the society generally are prone to discrimination in various ways as results of them being women (sex) which, to a large extent affects their rights as human being. When a boy is born in most developing countries, louder congratulations are exclaimed by friends and relatives. To them, a son means insurance, because he will inherit his father's property and get a job to help support the family. When a girl is born, reaction is very different. Some women even weep when they found out that their baby is a girl due to the high premium placed on male child. A girl cannot help but feel inferior when everything around her tells her that she is worthless than a boy. In Fact, her identity is forged as soon as her family and society limit her opportunities and declare her to be second rate (Brownidge 34).

Tragically, female children are most defenceless against the trauma of gender discrimination. The birth of a girl causes upheavals for poor family which barely has enough resources to survive. The monetary drained of a daughter feels more severe, especially in societies in which dowry is practiced. Dowry is goods and money a bride's family pays the husband's family originally intended to help with marriage expenses, but came to be seen as payment for taking on the burden another women. In some countries dowries are extravagant, cost years of wages, and often throwing the woman's family in debts. In many countries across the world, full poverty-stricken families see daughters as economics predicament, which always result to widespread of neglect of the girl child.

Women Circumcision – Clitoritomy – Female Genital Mutilation

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines women circumcision as “the partial or total removal of external female genitalia or other injuries to female genital organs for non-medical reasons”. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) “cutting off” or female circumcision, it's the ritual removal of some or all the external female genitalia, the procedure to which it is conducted varies from days after birth to puberty.

The effects of Genital Mutilation can lead to complications during pregnancy and birth. The practice is rooted in gender inequality; attempt to control women's sexuality and ideas about purity, modesty and aesthetics. It is even some times initiated and done by

women who see it as a source of honour and who fear that failing to have their daughters cut will expose them to social exclusion (Timberlake 58).

The practice has outlawed or restricted in most of the countries in which it occurs but laws are poorly enforced, efforts have been made in the international community to stop the practice since 1970. And in 2012, the U.N General Assembly, recognizing Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as human rights violation, voted unanimously to intensify those efforts (Mary 89).

Maltreatment of Widows

Although both the widow and the widower naturally experience basically equal pains for the death of their partner, the widow suffers many deprivations, some of which are very inhuman, barbaric and uncouth, especially from African background. This is so because of the cultural practices that is put in place which discriminate against women and violate their fundamental human rights. The various cultural prescriptions on mourning, inheritance and remarriage among other things with sharp discrimination against women have posed a lot of difficulties for the women folk over the years (Mary 78). Mourning for instance, is in many societies, based on laid down prescriptions to the detriment of women. In Islamic societies, the widow observes the ‘**TAKABA**’ which is four months and ten days mourning period in seclusion not talking to any one and sitting in a particular place for sometimes. In fact, in some places the widow is barred from leaving the room where the corpse was laid, sleeping in uncomfortable bed, not taking her normal bath, not viewing inside the grave, eating pounded yam, fowl and goat meat (Ponday 7). Similarly, many societies across the world place so many inhuman restrictions for widow for a fixed period of time ranging from seven days to a year depending on the culture. These restrictions have to do with movement, feeding, personal hygiene, dressing, and self-expression amongst many others things, which subject widow to emotional and physical abuse.

Children as Vulnerably Group

Perhaps even more than women, children occupy a special role within human rights protections. Children need special protection because of their fragile stage of development. Children are readily susceptible to abuse and neglect and often do not have means to defend themselves against these wrongs. In its convention on the rights of children, the United Nations stated that the child by reason of his/her physical and mental maturity needs special safe guard and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth” (United Nations 1989), most, if not all, countries have difficulty recognizing the vulnerability of children in respect to human rights and other abuse, throughout the United States agencies exist with the pacific goal of protecting children from abuse and neglect. States have established juvenile courts to hear allegations of abuses and neglect by adult and criminal acts by juveniles. These courts

have primary goal of assisting parents and children and at least in history, are not adversarial as other court proceedings.

The Plight of Children as Vulnerable Groups

Child Labour

Child labour refers to the employment of children in any work that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular schools that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful. It means work that is prohibited for children of certain age groups. It is a work performed by children who are under the minimum age legally specified for that kind of work, or work which, because of its detained nature or conditions, is considered unacceptable for children and is prohibited. Such children do not go to school or have more time to play, do not receive proper nutrition or care, and are denied the chance to be children. They are under such conditions exposed to hazardous environment, slavery, or other form of forced labour, illicit activities including drug trafficking and prostitutions, as well as involvement in arms conflict (Pole 56).

Historically, children become prone during the industrial revolutions period with which as young as four years were employed in production factories with dangerous, often fatal, working condition, based on the understanding of which it came to be considered human rights violation. Karl Marx was an out spoken proponent of child labour saying “British industries” have lived by sucking blood and that of children too” and the US capital is financed by the “capitalized blood of children” (Pole 78). Child labour is still common in many parts of the world today, estimation for which ranges about 250 to 304 million of children age 5 – 17 involved in any economic activity are counted. Regrettably, most of the child labourers are employed by their parents or relatives. Children who work for pay or in-kind compensation are usually found in rural settings, than urban centers. Less than three (3) percent of child labour aged 5 - 17 across the world work outside their household or away from their parents or relatives (Eichler and Burke 67).

International Labour Organization (ILO) suggest that poverty is the greatest single cause behind child labour, for impoverished households; income from child’s work is usually crucial for his or her survival for that household, lack of meaningful alternatives, such as affordable schools and quality education, according to International Labour Organization (ILO) is another factor driving children to harmful labour. Cultural factors can also not be exonerated from child labour, some societies which rationalized and encouraged child labour, view it as good for character-building and skill development of children, illiteracy also, to a large extent contributes to this awful situation (Patil and Sastry 78). However, the establishment of United Nations International Emergency Funds (UNICEF) and United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization

(UNESCO) remain one of the strongest challenges. But today child labour with all its exploitative tendencies is still strife.

Child Abuse

Child abuse refers to international acts that result in physical or emotional harm to children. The term child abuse covers a wide range of behaviour, from actual physical assault by parents or other adult caretakers to neglect of child's basic need. Child abuse is difficult to measure; it is recognized as a major social problem especially in industrialized nations (Eichler and Burke 68), cultures around the world have different standards in deciding what constitutes child abuse, in Sweden, for example, the law prohibits any physical punishment of children, including spanking. By contrast, in some countries of Asia, Africa and the Caribbean parents are expected to punish their children by hitting them.

Rights of the Child

In February, 28, 1924 at an impressive ceremony held in the Geneva Museum of Arts and History, the code known as the Declaration of Geneva was signed by all to save the children international union before the present of diplomat and representative of international organizations and churches.

In September 1924 the Declaration received a boost from the League of Nations when it adopted a resolution urging members' states to be guided in dealing with Child welfare by the principles of the Declaration. Principle I stated that "each child must be provided with requisite means for his or her normal development both materially and spiritually." Principle II stated that the child that is hungry must be fed and the child that is sick must be nursed. Principle III stated that the child must be the first to receive relief in time of distress. Principle IV stated that the child must be enabled to earn a livelihood and must be protected from every form of exploitation, and principle V stated that the child must be raised in the consciousness that its talent must be devoted to the service of its fellow men (Obilade 224).

Person with Disabilities as Vulnerable Group

Another group receiving special protection within the human rights context is the person with disabilities, including mental illness. In 1975, the United Nations adopted a declaration on the right of persons with disabilities. The declaration defines a person with disability as any person that is unable to ensure by him or herself, wholly or partly, the necessity of a normal individual and or social life. As a result of deficiency, either congenital or not in his or her physical or mental capabilities. Persons with disabilities are entitled to measures designed to enable them become self-reliant as possible.

Economic and social security and a decent level of living of people with disabilities have the right to secure and retain employment or engage in a useful, productive and

remunerative occupation and to join trade unions; live with their families and to participate in all social, creative, or recreational activities and protection against exploitation and treatment of a discriminatory, abusive or degrading nature (Pandey 56).

Older Persons as Vulnerable Group

According to the United Nations cited by Susan Timberlake, persons aged 60 and above are often considered as older persons and who find themselves in circumstances that render them less active within the society. At this time of their lives, many people begin to think about withdrawing from employment and retiring. Income levels may drop at retirement time and in many countries the elderly often become dependent of their children or other relatives. Attention to the needs and care of the elderly can easily subside, as their presence becomes diminished within the mainstream of the society. In addition, other persons may lose mental and physical capabilities, leaving them vulnerable to financial, physical and other types of exploitation. In 1999 the United Nations issued a document known as Principles for Older Persons, the referred specially to five areas:

- i. **Independence:** Older Persons should have access to adequate food, water, shelter, clothing, and health care through the provision of income from family, community support and be self-help. Older Person should have the opportunity to be free from any form of compulsion from any member of the family or the community.
- ii. **Participation:** Older Persons should remain integrated in the society, participate actively in the formulation and implementation of policies that directly affect their well-being, and share their knowledge and skills with the younger generation. Older Persons should be able to serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interest and capabilities and to form associations.
- iii. **Care:** Older Persons should benefit from the family and community care and have access to adequate and appropriate health care. Older Persons should have access to social and legal services to enhance their autonomy, protection and care.
- iv. **Self-fulfillment:** Older Persons should be able to pursue opportunity for the full development of their potential. Older Persons should have access to the educational, cultural, spiritual and recreational resources of the society.
- v. **Dignity:** Older Persons should be able to live in dignity and security and be free of exploitation and physical or mental abuse (67).

The Human Right Protection of Vulnerable Groups

The aim of human right instruments is the protection of those vulnerable to violation of their fundamental human rights. They are particular groups who for various reasons are weak and vulnerable or are traditionally victim of violation and consequently require special protection for the equal and effective enjoyment of their human rights. Often human rights instrument set out additional guarantees to person belonging to these

groups; the committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural rights for example, has repeatedly stressed that International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (ICESCR) is a vehicle for the protection of vulnerable within society, requiring states to extend special protective measure to them and ensure some degree of priority consideration, even in the face of severe resources constraints.

This part focuses on groups that are especially vulnerable to abuse of human rights, groups that are structurally discriminated against, like women and groups that have difficulties in defending themselves and are therefore in need of special protection.

Resolutions and Way Forward

The truth is that people are suffering and in dire need of help. This needed help could come from government, NGOs, faith based organizations and any person that is interested in maintaining the dignity and equality of all citizens. We all need to be pragmatic in tackling this scourge.

Government Intervention

The government is saddled with the responsibility of securing the lives of its citizens. To this effect, adequate security for all should be provided by the government, accessible education, Health care, better employment e.t.c. for the most vulnerable is important. It is also pertinent to note, that vulnerable people are exposed, ever more in conflict situation that is why the government has to invest more in the social welfare packages.

In Nigeria, according to Vice President Yemi Osinbajo “about five hundred billion naira has been provided for social interventions, including cash transfers to the very poorest, including the market women and persons who are engage in informal trade, about a million of those, even in compiling the names and list of those who are poorest has been a difficult process but we have been greatly assisted by the World Bank and the Bill Gate Foundation” (This Day Newspaper). This bold step of the government should be encouraged and sustained in order to eradicate poverty and vulnerability.

Although, releasing of funds for vulnerable groups is necessary, this paper is of the opinion that adequate security is paramount in ensuring proper maintenance of our collective human rights. For instance, the case of the Chibok girls who were abducted on the 14th April 2014 about five years ago and their counterparts the “Buni Yadi” Secondary School in Yobe State, where 59 students were killed in their boarding house just a couple of months before the Chibok’s incident. And of course, several others who had been abducted and killed at various times before those incidents. Even the present killings in Southern Kaduna, the herdsmen attack in Zamfara State, Benue etc are pointers that there is gross security lapses in Nigeria and if this is not addressed, the issue of vulnerability will continue to reoccur.

Non – Governmental Organization (NGOs) Intervention

Take for instance, the project of the wife of the Nigeria president, Mrs. Aisha Buhari carried out in her bid to alleviate the suffering of “Boko Haram” insurgent victims through her humanitarian campaign in the North Eastern part of Nigeria on the platform of her Non-governmental Organization. Future Assured Initiative.” She constituted a committee of women in Maiduguri to take the responsibility of the distribution of drugs and food items for the needy and malnourished children in the region. The committee headed by Mrs. Nana Shetima, wife of Borno State Governor will compliment government efforts aimed at addressing some challenges among the vulnerable groups.

It was on this platform that the wife of the President presented food items and other household utensils to more than 360 families and returnees to Benisheikh town in Borno and neighboring communities affected by the insurgency. She also supported families whose children were killed in Federal Government, College Buni Yadi, Yobe State with 200 million naira (Ubandoma 1). This is a laudable gesture and needs to be emulated by all and sundry in order to alleviate the sufferings of mothers and vulnerable children in the crisis ravaged region. Remember, United Nations reports stated that seventy-five thousand children were malnourished in the affected areas and are in dire need of food.

Faith Based Organizations

This group is doing well in helping to curb the suffering of vulnerable groups around the world and in Nigeria in particular. For instance, Stefanos foundation, a Faith Based Human Right Advocacy founded by Richard Wurmbrand in Nigeria in 2001 has been working to intervene in the on-going Ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. Since the wake of violence in 2002, Stefanos Foundation has been working with several communities in Northern Nigeria, and in states such as Nassarawa, Benue, Plateau, Kaduna e.t.c that are under continuous terror attacks from Marauders and also those sacked by “Boko Haram” group in Borno, Yobe and Adamawa States (Lipdo 12). This group in 2013, learnt of the emigration of over 1,211 Nigerians from Kunde, Tatsa, Himbe, Gathoghre, Gharaza and other villages of the Gwoza hills who fled from ‘Boko Haram insurgents’ invasions of their villages. They abandoned their homes and properties on 12th June, 2013 and arrived Zalif village in Cameroon on the 2nd July, 2013. The Cameroon security agents moved them to Gawar to a camp organized by United Nations office of Cameroon. Stefanos Foundation sent relief to the refugees from 2nd – 3rd November, 2013. Due to the poor state of the camp in Gawar, the organization began to draw attentions of Nigerians to the need of the refugees there but because of delay in response of this overwhelming needs; the foundation visited Cameroon Camp of Zamay from the 4th – 5th 2014 to assess the situation on ground” after that visit, Stefanos on 10-5-2014 relocated ten families to Kugabaru in Nasarawa State to a house rented by the organization. After the emergence of ‘Boko Haram’ first caliphate in Gwoza, on the 24th August, 2014, the Stefanos Foundation on the 1st November, 2014 established the camp Zang Commerical

Secondary School Bukuru in Jos. The particular camp kept over 470 families in a transit camp and over 300 families have also been successfully integrated into various host communities (Lipdo 13). This kind of gesture should be emulated by religious groups in other to alleviate the sufferings of the vulnerable groups.

Conclusion

Some human rights advocates and critics dislike the separation of particular groups for special treatment, that human rights apply to everyone and not an individual or groups that merits special attention. In spite of the perils that vulnerable groups encountered, the writer still believes that the emergence of the concept of vulnerable groups has a positive implication, it is a welcome development. In particular, its insertion represents a crucial step towards an enhanced anti-discrimination and more robust idea of equality. This paper has exposed the fact that the term 'vulnerable groups' is not a mere rhetorical term. The term does something; it addresses and readdresses different aspects of inequality in more substantive manner. However, without providing additional protection to certain groups, it becomes too easy to discriminate or otherwise exploit these groups. The writer of this paper has proffered solutions. In which if adhered to will foster unity and equality of all as incorporated in the Human rights law.

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