HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL WORK IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA

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Abstract

As Welch and Meltzer (1984) observe, since World War II, increasing international attention has been devoted to defining and realising basic goals in human rights and development. However, despite the prominence of these matters as global agenda items, and their extensive normative and institutional history within the United Nations system, problems of human rights violations and underdevelopment still persist throughout much of the Third World. This paper discusses human rights and their realisation in post-colonial Africa. The paper argues that most, if not all, African countries were once colonies of countries such as Belgium, Britain, Germany, France and Portugal. Their citizens were subjected to gross human rights violations by their colonial masters. Unfortunately, when they attained independence, the new African governments continued the pattern and some of them were even more brutal in abusing their people than the colonisers. The paper also highlights the role the social work profession could play in the ambit of human rights in post-colonial Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Africa is a vast continent with abundant material and human resources. It can be argued that the "Scramble for Africa" which took place

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in the early nineteenth century was a direct result of the continent's resources. The "Scramble for Africa" culminated in the Berlin Conference which carved the continent into colonies for Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Portugal and Spain among others. These colonisers went on to rule African countries with an iron hand, persistently abusing the indigenous people's rights. Eventually, this led indigenous Africans to fight for their independence with Ghana becoming the first African country to gain independence from Britain in 1957. Other African countries also gained independence from their colonial masters in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s with South Africa being the last in 1994. Once in power, some of the new African governments inherited the oppressive legislations from the former colonial powers to suppress their citizens. It is against this background that this paper seeks to examine human rights and social work in post-colonial Africa.

Drawing from the author's more than 14 years of experience as a social work practitioner and academic, and evidence from the literature, this paper argues that although human rights have been observed by some African governments, the situation is still grim on the human rights front in many African countries. The paper is divided into four parts. The first part conceptualises human rights. The second part discusses human rights in post-colonial Africa during the years between 1957 and 1990 (the period of one-party states). The third part discusses human rights in post-colonial Africa from 1990 to the present (the period of democratic governance). The last part highlights the role the social work profession could play in dealing with the issue of human rights in Africa.

CONCEPTUALISING HUMAN RIGHTS

According to Noyoo (2004: 360) an examination of the nature and meaning of human rights reveals that several centuries back, thinkers and philosophers were preoccupied with the unravelling of this subject matter. Dlamini (1995) observes that the conception of human rights as an individual's politico-legal claim, placing limitations and obligations upon society and government, is a product of history, although there is no simple ancestry of these ideas. The first theoretical design of the idea of human rights was expressed by the English philosopher John Locke, who identified the basic

rights of people by constructing an imaginary existence of the human person in a stateless situation of nature which he depicted as the idyllic coexistence of individuals in peace, goodwill, mutual assistance and preservation. Using this framework, he construed the natural rights of human beings to life, liberty and property (Dlamini 1995). The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau qualified the notion of human rights by noting that the individual on entering into a civil society subjected his/her own individuality to the general will, undefined and amorphous, of the body politic and exchanged his/her natural rights to life, liberty and equality for certain civil rights which the government had to protect (Dlamini 1995: 13). Later on, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the American Declaration of Independence influenced debates on human rights (Noyoo 2004: 360). Noyoo goes on to say that questions regarding human rights took on global dimensions after the Second World War when the United Nations endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) on 10 December 1948.

Miller (2009) also says that the idea that people have rights can be found in many cultures and ancient traditions. However, by 1945, after the terrible killings during the Second World War, governments around the world began to agree on the need to set standards in human rights that all states would follow. Governments came together as the "United Nations" to work together for peace and development. The UDHR was adopted by the 58 nations who were members of the United Nations in 1948. Today, there are 191 UN member states. Many countries that gained independence after 1948 have incorporated parts of the UDHR into their constitutions. Also countries have promised to uphold human rights by agreeing to other international treaties (Miller 2009). In defining human rights, it is important to note that they are universal and apply to each and every individual without discrimination. As Vincent (1995:9) writes: "It means that everybody has them. The subjects of human rights are not members of this or that society, but of the community of humankind."

The concept of human rights, therefore, can generally be defined as follows: *Human rights are those rights, which are inherent in our nature and without which we cannot live as human beings. Human rights and fundamental freedoms allow us to fully develop and use our human*

qualities, our intelligence, our talents and our conscience and to satisfy our spiritual and other needs (United Nations 1987). Reichert (2006) describes three categories of human rights, generally referred to as sets or generations. They cover a wide spectrum of items necessary for the human existence.

First Set of Human Rights

The first set of human rights lists political and individual freedoms. Political and civil human rights include the right to a fair trial, freedom of speech and religion, freedom of movement and assembly, and guarantees against discrimination, slavery, and torture (United Nations 1948: articles 2-15). Some might describe these rights as "negative," in that they restrict the role of government. In other words, government or other authority shall refrain from committing certain acts. This "shall not" set of guidelines emphasises non-interference by government, or a negative position (Reichert 2006: 3).

Second Set of Human Rights

The second set of human rights goes beyond the political and civil rights. This set of rights attempts to ensure to each resident of a country an adequate standard of living based on the resources of that country. Under this second set, everyone "has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social service." In addition, "motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance," and everyone has the right to free education at the elementary level (United Nations 1948: articles 16-27). This set of human rights is frequently referred to as "positive," in that government and individuals must take action to preserve or satisfy these rights. In other words, government shall provide these rights (Reichert 2006: 3).

Third Set of Human Rights

The third set of human rights involves collective or solidarity rights among nations. This set of human rights is the least developed among the

three types of human rights. Under this set of rights, everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which human rights can be fully realised (United Nations 1948: articles 28-30). Essentially, promotion of collective human rights requires intergovernmental cooperation on world issues, such as environmental protection and economic development. One group of countries should not dictate conditions to another group when these conditions would inhibit the growth or prosperity of the other group. Industrialised countries should not take advantage of the lower economic state of the less economically developed countries by exploiting the resources of the latter (Reichert 2006: 3).

HUMAN RIGHTS IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA (1957-1990): PERIOD OF ONE PARTY STATES

According to Bosl and Diescho (2009) human rights as a legal concept is a relatively recent notion in Africa. However, since the attainment of independence of most African states, human rights violations have been a serious concern for them. Although most of the African countries had fought unjust and oppressive colonial governments to attain independence, their leaders immediately imitated their former rulers in denying human rights to their people once they attained power. Wikipedia (2010) reports that human rights in Africa were first abused by the first ruling parties. Since they boasted of having brought independence to their country, they felt entitled to a reward for their pain during the struggle. They demanded to be allowed to reap the fruits of their labour.

Shaw (1984: 226) writes: "In terms of the denial of human rights and fundamental freedoms in independent African states, the record of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) has been dismal... Besides the dictatorial nature of most of the governments in Africa, there are important barriers to its effectiveness. These include the dominant position of African governments in the countries' socio-economic life, the ideological orientation of some of the OAU member states, the traditional and cultural values and religion." Indeed, after gaining independence, most African states went on to establish one-party states which closed doors for other players to enter the political arena. These one party states played a crucial role in abusing

people's rights in Africa, especially between 1957 and 1990. Some examples from a variety of countries are given below.

Ghana

In Ghana, when the Convention People's Party (CPP) came to power in 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah, it went on to become the dominant party in the body politic of the country until its government was overthrown by the military in 1966. During its reign, no other new political parties were formed, thereby denying Ghanaians their political and civil rights. Furthermore, the government was very corrupt and a lot of people became poor and could not afford their basic needs.

Lesotho

Lesotho became independent in 1966 with the Basotho National Party (BNP) under its chief Leabua Jonathan taking the reins of the government. When the BNP lost the 1975 general elections to the Basotho Congress Party (BCP) led by Ntsu Mokhehle, the BNP refused to give up state power. Prime Minister Jonathan subsequently declared a state of emergency to deal with the anti-BNP wave of the opposition. The opposition BCP's leadership was hounded into exile and arbitrary arrests of political activists became the norm. Many people were detained without trial during this period and many others lost their lives. A paramilitary force was established which frequently violated people's rights. Jonathan's government was eventually removed from power in a military coup led by Major General Mesting Justin Lekhanya in 1986, only for Lekhanya to be toppled by fellow soldiers later on.

Malawi

Malawi gained its independence in 1962 under the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) led by Hastings Kamuzu Banda. His government was very notorious for abusing human rights in Malawi. Banda's government banned all opposition and MCP became the only legal political party in the country. This was possible because Banda became the all feared dictator who later acquired the title of Life President of Malawi - the "Ngwazi." Most of his

political opponents were detained without trial. Academics were also not spared, forcing them to migrate to other countries. Orton and Vera Chirwa (a husband and wife team opposed to Banda's policies) as well as Jack Mapanje (a respected poet) were detained without trial for many years with Orton Chirwa eventually dying because of the ordeal. Banda's party vacated power only after losing in the general elections held in 1992. His party had led Malawi for a whole three decades and the majority of Malawians were poverty-stricken and denied the basic human rights during his rule.

Zambia

Zambia gained independence in 1964 and Kenneth Kaunda's United Independence Party (UNIP) formed the first black government. The UNIP adopted the philosophy of "humanism" which required total loyalty to the leader of the party and government. A one party state was also established denying Zambians their political and civil rights. During the reign of the UNIP many Zambians became impoverished and could not afford the basic necessities of life, especially after the government adopted the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank inspired structural adjustment programme. Zambians rioted in the capital city of Lusaka after subsidies were removed from the staple food, maize. The price of maize rocketed by 400 per cent which was beyond the reach of most Zambians. The UNIP was eventually defeated in the general elections of 1991 after 27 years in power.

Kenya

Under Daniel arap Moi's Kenya African National Union (KANU) Kenya experienced some of the worst forms of human rights violations in its history. When Moi took over after the death of the founding President of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, in 1978 his administration consistently received international criticism of its record on human rights. He consolidated KANU's grip on power and legislated a one party state system of government. Under Moi, security forces regularly subjected opposition leaders and pro-democracy activists to arbitrary arrest, detention without trial, abuse in custody, and other forms of torture. International donors and governments such as the

United States, the United Kingdom and Norway periodically broke off diplomatic relations and suspended aid allocations, pending improvements in upholding human rights.

Uganda

Nuwagaba (2001) notes that during the 1970s Uganda was characterised by political turmoil, civil strife, intrigue, and collapse of political and economic institutions. The decline of institutional structures resulted in the collapse of the industrial sector, and subsequently mass unemployment and massive macroeconomic disequilibria. The situation further deteriorated with the advent of the military junta under Idi Amin who unilaterally expelled the whole Asian community from Uganda and expropriated their property in 1972. Most of them eventually settled in Kenya and the United Kingdom. This was a gross violation of human and property rights by Amin's government. Equally well documented are the economic mismanagement, tyranny and decadence of the subsequent period up to the mid 1980s. The result of all this was the socio-economic regression that created widespread poverty, resulting in violation of Ugandans' rights to basic services such as health care, housing and education.

Zimbabwe

After Zimbabwe attained independence in 1980, Robert Mugabe formed a government of national unity incorporating his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), members of the ZAPU-PF led by Joshua Nkomo, and members of the former ruler Ian Douglas Smith's Rhodesian Front. This government did not last long as Mugabe accused Nkomo and his ZAPU party of trying to overthrow the government following dissident activities in Matabeleland and Midlands provinces. The darkest period in the country's history followed when Mugabe sent his North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade to these provinces resulting in the killing of 20,000 people mainly from the country's minority Ndebele tribe. These killings were later known as the "Gukurahundi Massacres." Nkomo fled the country disguised as a woman and went into exile in Britain. Mugabe went into overdrive striving to form a one-party state in Zimbabwe. He was aided in

this task by his notorious Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO) operators who terrorised any elements of dissent. A new government of national unity was eventually formed in December 1987 with Nkomo and his party joining ZANU-PF. Mugabe succeeded in forming a de facto one party state in Zimbabwe until 1999 when the Movement for Democratic Change was formed. Nevertheless, it can be argued that during the early years of independence access to education and health services was widened throughout the country resulting in Zimbabwe having one of the highest literacy rates in Africa.

Nigeria

Nigeria has also had a long history of human rights abuses since its independence in 1960. Alubo (1992) says that since the attainment of independence, the country has experienced frequent political turbulence manifested particularly by regular military interventions. The 1966 intervention led by the late General Ironsi marked the beginning of what has turned out to be a series of coups, counter coups and coup attempts. The military has ruled the country for the longest periods since the country's independence. It is, therefore, possible to classify Nigeria's post-colonial polity into the First Republic (1960-66), military rule (1966-79), Second Republic (1979-83), and military rule (1983-89). The coups were explained by the extra-constitutional role the military arrogated to itself as *messiahs* and political *watchdogs* (Alubo 1992). Perhaps the most erudite articulation of military messianism in Nigeria was provided by General Babangida as quoted in Barrett (1990:213): "The military has been forced into governance primarily and principally by the necessity to secure the foundation of our polity from collapse. The option was not a choice between shoring up one coalition of civilian rivals against the opposition of another, but in ensuring we did not dissolve into anarchy. Our intervention remains justifiable by the imperatives of securing the wholeness and oneness of our economy and nation. If we really understand the implications of the roles of the military in our national agenda, then we can truly appreciate the full significance of the contribution of the military to our survival as a nation. Those who quarrel about how to share the rooms of a house, the foundation of which is collapsing, can only with extreme charity be condemned for lack of wisdom." However, these

governments did not deliver what they promised and the majority of the people became poorer, unemployment levels rose and the health care delivery system virtually collapsed. There was rampant corruption and opposition to the military governments' policies was suppressed through arrests, detention without trial and the proscription of 'troublesome' organisations (Alubo 1992). Beyond matters of defence and warfare, the military in Nigeria constituted the de facto rulers and became a law unto themselves who abused human rights with impunity.

HUMAN RIGHTS IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA: POST-1990 PERIOD OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The period from 1990 onwards ushered in a movement to democratic governments in most African countries. The autocratic and repressive independence parties were swept out of power, for example in Malawi, Zambia and Lesotho. Many nations in Africa have at least nominally recognised basic human rights for all citizens by creating reasonably independent judiciaries and establishing Human Rights Commissions to deal with human rights issues. Many nations are also signatories of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights. They also belong to the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) which is based in Banjul, Gambia. It is a quasi-judicial body tasked with promoting and protecting human rights and collective people's rights throughout the African continent as well as interpreting the African Charter on Human and People's Rights and considering individual complaints of violations of the Charter.

The peoples of Africa had hoped that human rights violations would be a thing of the past especially during the new democratic dispensation. However, as Wikipedia (2010) notes, the situation of human rights in Africa is generally reported to be poor, and it is seen as an area of grave concern according to the UN, governmental and non-governmental observers. Extensive human rights abuses still occur in several parts of Africa, often under the oversight of the state. Most of such violations can be attributed to political instability, often as a 'side-effect' of civil war. Some few selected countries shall be considered as examples to the current human rights situation in Africa.

Kenya

The Mwai Kibaki government has worked to improve the human rights environment in Kenya and has significantly reduced the use of the legal system to harass government critics. Kenya made some progress in 2003, when it set up the Kenyan National Human Rights Commission with a mandate to ensure Kenya's compliance with international human rights standards. Consequently, under the new government, politically motivated human rights violations have diminished, but other serious human rights abuses persist, a great many at the hands of the security forces, particularly the police. Prison conditions remain life-threatening. However, during the December 2007 elections, violence erupted after opposition parties accused Kibaki's government of rigging the elections. Intense clashes, mainly on tribal lines ensued, leaving 1 500 people dead. A unity government had to be formed after the intervention of the former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Anan. The perpetrators and organisers of these violent clashes are soon to be charged for crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague, Netherlands.

South Africa

South Africa, generally noted for the widely-repudiated policy of apartheid or racial segregation, is recognised as a nation committed to democracy and greater civil liberties since the change of regime in 1994. The policy of reconciliation espoused by Nelson Mandela's government ushered in a period of relative peace in the country and observance of human rights to a great extent. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) was inaugurated in October 1995 as an independent national institution. It draws its mandate from the South African constitution by way of the South African Human Rights Commission Act of 1994. The SAHRC is tasked with monitoring (both proactively and by way of attending to complaints brought before it) violations of human rights. South Africa has also established the Office of the Public Protector which deals with individual complaints from the general public. A variety of institutions such as the Equality Court and the Gender Commission have also been set up. They also deal with human rights issues.

However, poverty and inequality remain the most daunting challenges facing contemporary South Africa. South Africa has been described to have one of the world's most unequal economies, with 51.2 per cent of the annual income going to the richest 10 per cent of the population and less than 3.9 per cent of income earned by the poorest 40 per cent (Marais 1998). Noyoo (2004:362) argues that the most serious impediment to democracy in general and human rights in particular is the level of inequality and the fact that this inequality coincides so neatly with the cleavage between the blacks and whites. One of the abiding legacies of apartheid is the concentration of property in the hands of a very few people, many of whom benefited enormously from the affirmative action policies of the apartheid government (Hendricks 2001).

Ethiopia

Under Meles Zenawi's government, Ethiopia's human rights record has not seriously improved. According to the human rights report of the US Department of State for 2004 and similar sources, the Ethiopian government's human rights record "remained poor, although there were improvements, serious problems remain" (US State Department 2004). The report listed numerous cases where police and security forces are said to have harassed, illegally detained, tortured and killed individuals who were members of opposition groups or accused of being insurgents. Thousands of suspects remain in detention without charge and lengthy pre-trial detention continued to be a problem. The government often ignores citizens' privacy rights and laws regarding search warrants. According to a report released by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in 2008, the Ethiopian army has committed widespread executions, torture and rape in Ogaden as part of a counter-insurgency campaign.

Uganda

Uganda continues to experience difficulty in advancing respect for human rights in matters concerning torture, child labour and liberties. There are as many as thirteen "security" structures for the Museveni government, some directly answerable to the President and not constitutionally based or

established by an Act of Parliament. These organisations persecute opponents of the government, carry out abductions, disappearances, extrajudicial killings and torture, and act both independently and interdependently with each other and in cooperation with the Ugandan police. These organisations also harass the media and official parliamentary opposition (Wikipedia 2010). The conflict in the north of the country between the Ugandan People's Defence Force (UPDF) and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has decimated the economy, retarded the development of affected areas and led to numerous gross human rights violations (Wikipedia 2010). Under a war situation, women and young girls are usually raped, and children are denied access to educational and health services. People also lose their homes as they flee the war zone.

Zimbabwe

Since the formation of the Morgan Tsvangirai-led Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) in 1999, there have been widespread reports of systematic and escalating violations of human rights in Zimbabwe under the Mugabe administration and his party, ZANU-PF. According to human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, the government of Zimbabwe violates the human rights to shelter, food, freedom of movement and residence, freedom of assembly and the protection of the law. There are assaults on the media, the political opposition, civil society activists and human rights defenders. The chaotic land reform programme launched in the year 2000 violated human and property rights of the white farmers and their workers who lost their homes and livelihoods.

From 2001 to September 2006, the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum has recorded over 1200 cases of human rights violations by law enforcement agencies, including 363 cases of torture, 516 cases of assault, 58 cases of death threats, 399 cases of unlawful arrest and 451 cases of unlawful detention. One of the worst forms of human rights violations in Zimbabwe occurred in May 2005 when the government embarked on Operation Murambatsvina, a programme of mass forced evictions and demolition of homes and informal businesses in poor urban areas. Examining the result of the operation, Anna Tibaijuka, the UN Special Envoy on Human Settlement issues in Zimbabwe, reported that some 700,000 people lost their

homes, their livelihoods or both and a further 2.4 million people had been affected in varying degrees, stating that the operation was carried out in an indiscriminate and unjustified manner, with indifference to human suffering and in repeated cases, with disregard to several provisions of national and international legal frameworks. The report concluded that the operation violated several key human rights, including the right to life, property and freedom of movement (Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum 2007). The Presidential Run-Off between Mugabe and Tsvangirai in June 2008 led to extreme violence and gross violation of human rights, especially by ZANU-PF. The MDC's candidate eventually pulled out of the race leading to a power vacuum in the country which was only filled by the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU) in February 2009. The GNU has stabilised the Zimbabwean economy although there are still problems of human rights violations in the country. However, things are looking bright because members of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission were sworn in by President Mugabe at State House on 1 April 2010 (The Zimbabwean 2010). These commissions are mandated by the constitution to ensure that human rights are respected and that future elections are held in a free and fair manner.

Sudan and Cote d'Ivoire

Other notable countries with reported major violations of human rights include, but are not limited to, the Sudan and Cote d'Ivoire. The Darfur region has been in a state of war for the past five years pitting rebel groups who accused the government of Sudan of marginalising their region against the government-sponsored Janjaweed Militia. A total of more than three million people have been reported dead due to the conflict. There is an arrest warrant for President Al-Bashir issued by the International Criminal Court. The Court wants to charge him with crimes against humanity emanating from the Darfur crisis.

In Cote d'Ivoire rebels from the northern part of the country fought with government forces resulting in the country being split into two at the height of the rebellion. Violations also included the rape of women and young girls, mutilation and extrajudicial killings. A peace deal has been signed

between the rebels and the government but the long awaited elections have been consistently postponed by President Lauren Gbagbo.

SOCIAL WORK AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN POST-COLONIAL AFRICA

According to Healy (2008: 75) the human rights movement is founded on a fundamental respect for the dignity and worth of every human being. This respect for human dignity and the worth of individual is at the very heart of social work. Thus, there is a profound harmony between social work and human rights, leading the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW 1988) to introduce their policy papers with the statement: "social work has, from its inception, been a human rights profession, having as its basic tenet the intrinsic value of every human being and as one of its main aims the promotion of equitable social structures, which can offer people security and development while upholding their dignity". Social workers have played a key role in the historical development of human rights through their involvement with various organisations, including the Red Cross, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and Save the Children (Ife 2001). Social work has always concerned itself with people's rights to the satisfaction of their basic needs for food, water, shelter, health care, and is committed to upholding and fostering such rights, which "embody the justification and motivation for social work action" (IFSW 1996: 5). In the section below, the central roles which social workers could play in dealing with human rights issues in post-colonial Africa is highlighted.

Information Gathering, Evaluation and Dissemination

Information gathering, evaluation and dissemination are the prime functions of social workers. Without information on the status of human rights observance, and the particular nature and context of human rights violations, there is little hope for the protection of human rights. After gathering facts and evaluating them, social workers can disseminate them to the wider society. This role was ably played by the Zimbabwe Democracy Project led by Jestina Mukoko who documented all the human rights violations by the Zimbabwean government during the Presidential Run-Off in 2008. Due to

the well-researched information, the government was alarmed and subsequently arrested Mukoko and some of her staff members leading to an international outcry.

Advocacy

Advocacy is another critical role which could be played by social workers in dealing with human rights issues in post-colonial Africa. Advocacy, essentially a legal term, means pleading the cause of another. It is clearly dependent upon information processing, yet goes beyond that, for it entails actively utilising the information in order to take up the case of those whose rights are violated (Scoble 1984: 178). If rights are being systematically violated, it means that the victims are unable to defend themselves within their own political system - either because they are unaware of their rights and of injustices done to them, which is rare, or because the system denies them the resources to assert themselves, and heavily sanctions them for trying (Scoble 1984: 178). Social workers in their advocacy role will be speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves and they can do this by embracing a broad range of communication activities such as public education, consciousness raising, enlisting co-interest groups, that ought to be locally involved, and constituency building. This may also entail attempting to place the information in the electronic and other mass media, and making sure that it reaches the various elites and policy makers.

Solidarity with the Oppressed

Building solidarity with the oppressed is a function which is very critical for social workers in post-colonial Africa. In the first instance, it entails maintaining personal contact with the oppressed to demonstrate that they are not alone, that they have not been forgotten by society. Solidarity implies "not only understanding and empathy towards humankind's pain and suffering, but also identifying and taking a stand with the sufferers and their cause, …expressing their solidarity in words and deeds in the face of any form of people's political, civil, social, economic, cultural, or spiritual rights" (United Nations Centre for Human Rights 1994: 60).

Lobbying

Lobbying can be used by social workers in dealing with human rights issues. Social workers can lobby influential people in society such as Members of Parliament to make sure that they put in place policies which protect people's rights. If there is proper legislation in place, it lessens the risk of people's rights being abused. For instance, through their National Associations of Social Work, social workers in post-colonial Africa can lobby governments to establish Human Rights Commissions in their countries. These commissions, that can play a crucial role in combating human rights violations, exist not in all the countries.

Engaging in Social Action

Motivation to social justice has inspired social workers across the world to engage in social action, sometimes facing imprisonment for their activities in countries with authoritarian regimes. For example, many social workers played active roles in the liberation struggle against apartheid in South Africa. These include Winnie Mandela, Helen Joseph, Maxine Hart (Suttner 1997: 519), Ellen Kuzwayo (1985) and Leila Patel (1992). In Zimbabwe, Joshua Nkomo, a social worker who worked for the railways led the fight for independence against Ian Douglas Smith's regime. However, today many social workers are not always willing to take this route because of fear of losing their jobs, or being harassed by the authorities or overlooked in promotions.

Linking People with Resources

The commitment to assisting disenfranchised people has always distinguished social work from other helping professions. Historically social work has always reached out to those with limited power in society, including the poor, homeless and children. Consequently, one of the primary functions of the social work profession is to link such people with resources. This entails that they must have knowledge of the various social service organisations in their environment. Social workers can then link victims of human rights violations with resources, for example, referring them to

organisations which can provide them with food, shelter and even clothing. Victims of human rights violations are usually psychologically traumatised and need counselling service, and social workers can come in handy in such situations. During the political violence in Kenya, social workers played a crucial role by counselling the displaced people and assisting them in providing alternative accommodation.

Human Rights Training in Social Work

Social work educators in colleges and universities can also play a crucial role in dealing with human rights issues in post-colonial Africa. Their major role is to provide human rights training to social work students on how to handle human rights violations after they graduate. As they will be front-line workers, social work students need to be adequately trained in human rights issues so that they can confidently educate the masses in their communities. The module on human rights should be made compulsory for all social work students. Unfortunately, in some colleges and universities in Africa, human rights issues do not even appear in the curriculum.

Conflict Management

Africa's political landscape has for a long time been characterised by violent and non-violent conflicts. Leatherman et al. (1999) observe that between 1970 and 1997, more than 30 wars had erupted in Africa with most of them being intra-state, and by 1996 alone 14 of the 53 countries in Africa were afflicted by armed conflicts, which accounted for more than half of all war-related deaths worldwide, resulting in more than eight million refugees, returnees and displaced persons. During such conflicts gross human rights violations occur, especially against women and children. Social workers can play a very useful role in the management of conflicts in Africa by devoting themselves to the following tasks. They can undertake research studies to understand the nature of conflicts, their root causes, their manifestations and consequences on African societies and economies, and prepare relevant position papers on possible options for the prevention, management and resolution of specific sets of conflicts. They should document success stories of the challenges accepted by social workers in managing international

conflicts. Finally, social workers must seek and enhance their skills in conflict prevention, management and resolution. This calls for the re-thinking of the teaching of social work in Africa. Students and scholars of social work must equip themselves with knowledge and understanding of international affairs and their impact on the international system (Kinyanjui 2006: 159).

CONCLUSION

This paper has highlighted the fact that most African countries were once victims of colonialism. However, after attaining independence, their governments committed gross human rights violations as evidenced by various examples given in the above discussion. The paper has also conceptualised human rights and highlighted the various roles social workers could play in dealing with human rights issues in post-colonial Africa.

In conclusion, it can safely be argued that realisation of human rights in Africa remains precarious. There has been selective emphasis on civil and political rights to the detriment of socio-economic rights, and political powers in the hands of a few at the national level have by and large emasculated the enjoyment of civil and political rights by the majority of African peoples (Shaw 1984: 224). Social workers in Africa should not shy away from their role of protecting human rights since "principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work". They must rise to the occasion especially considering the fact that we are now in the 21st century.

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