

Human Rights Lawyer's Association Report: African Prisons Project

I would like to express my thanks to the Human Rights Lawyer Association for awarding me a bursary towards my internship with the African Prisons Project (APP) in Uganda. Without their support I would not have been able to undertake this internship and had the opportunity to experience first hand the need for human rights representation in Uganda.

Uganda is one of the world's poorest countries. In 2012, 38% of its population lived on less than \$1.25 dollars a day. Uganda has one of the lowest life expectancies in the world at an average of 59 years. In the 1970's and 1980's the country was notorious for its human rights abuses, first during the military dictatorship of Idi Amin from 1971-79, and then after the return to power of Milton Obote from 1980-1985. Since the late 1980's Uganda has rebounded from the abyss of civil war to become relatively stable and peaceful. It has endured more than a decade of despotic rule, which has resulted in the country's current levels of poverty.

APP is a charity dedicated to restoring hope and dignity to prisoners across Africa. APP believes in the need to recognise the inherent worth and intrinsic value of every human being. Their objective is to train and treat prisoners in a way that will encourage them to lead a good and useful life on release, and to equip them with support and facilities to carry this out. They believe in using holistic methods of rehabilitation, which can be replicated by prison services across Africa despite financial limitations.

APP has been working with the University of London to offer inmates in Africa the chance to study law and achieve a law degree. More than 90% of inmates in countries like Uganda have to defend themselves in court. Providing prisoners with access to justice endeavors to equip them with the knowledge to better understand their legal position and enables them to better themselves in the future. The programme is also offered to prison staff so that they too may have the opportunity to empower positive change in their lives.

During my internship with APP I volunteered in the Access to Justice Department as a Law Teacher in both Luzira Men's Prison (Upper Prison) and Luzira Women's prison (Lower Prison). I taught Public Law including Human Rights, and Civil Procedure every day. Further, I constructed a Lesson Plan and Course Guide for each of these modules, which can be used by future students and volunteers. I was also able to participate as a judge in a moot competition; the first of its kind that has been held between prisoners and Ugandan lawyers. This was an incredible opportunity to teach inmates how to analyse a case problem and give them the chance to construct legal argument and express their views in a formal domain.

In general, the conditions in African prisons are very basic, with many having been built decades ago and currently operating well above capacity. Prisoners are forced to live in incredibly overcrowded cells. The diseases bred in such cramped living conditions coupled with inadequate medical treatment and malnutrition can cause severe infections and death.

Luzira men's prison holds approximately 3,400 men; 204 of them in the condemned

section as they are on death row. Luzira women's prison holds just under 1,000 women with approximately 100 of them awaiting the death penalty. Meeting with inmates every day brought to life the reality of prisons in Uganda. I learnt that in Uganda the death penalty is given for witchcraft, and homosexuality is illegal and can be punishable by a life sentence. Almost all prisoners have never met a lawyer. I had the opportunity to meet an individual on death row who has been imprisoned half of his life. He has been trying to appeal for over 15 years but is told he cannot because his case file is lost. He has never had legal advice or representation.

Furthermore I became aware of how gender inequality can be a hindrance to education. This can result in women having a lower social status and being economically reliant on men. Such economic reliance can result in some women staying in abusive relationships as they have nowhere to turn for financial support. I listened to some desperate domestic violence cases whilst speaking to the female inmates.

In teaching Human Rights Law to prisoners I learnt about international human rights, in particular the African Union and its prominent role in developing African Jurisprudence on human rights. The African system of human rights is in its infancy. However, what is remarkable is its very existence and the considerable progress that it has made in difficult conditions. It is easy to forget that like Uganda, many African countries only came out of colonialism some 50 years ago. I observed the trial of an inmate accused of human trafficking in the Internal War Crimes Court. I appreciated the importance of creating reliable legal frameworks and found the comparisons between the British and Ugandan procedures in the Ugandan House of Parliament very interesting.

APP is at the heart of promoting individual dignity and worth. The way in which APP seeks to project their values extensively across the African continent is truly remarkable for a charity with modest means. On a professional and personal level this internship was thoroughly rewarding. I acquired a greater understanding of the law in Uganda, valuable skills with regard to advocacy and dealing with vulnerable clients and knowledge of culture and politics in East Africa. It was so sad to witness the plight of those who are subjected to injustices in the judicial system. APP is a small organisation but it has the potential to make a profound impact on the individuals that it helps and I am privileged to have been a part of such a noble cause.

Anushka Kangesu
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