

Embracing Human Rights in Ugandan Prisons

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Ugandan prisons are under-resourced settings that far from adhere to international human rights standards. Implementing human rights in such an institution may seem insurmountable, if not threatening, to its staff. In spite of these circumstances, prisoners and staff in Ugandan prisons generally welcome human rights as a reform agenda bringing about tangible improvements. The present paper seeks to unpack this embrace of human rights by listening to the human rights talk of prison staff. This talk indicates that human rights reform is not simply a “purely rhetorical-opportunistic appropriation of global discourse” (Bierschenk 2010:15), nor just “double speak” to paper over the inherent gap between “the formal and the real” in an African bureaucracy (Olivier de Sardan 2009:45). Although these processes play a role in policy-to-practice translations in Ugandan prisons, they are not scuttling the impact of human rights. The technical and ethical dimensions of human rights are both powerful and malleable enough for staff to cobble together a take on human rights that can help them engage change. In that sense, human rights are locally produced as a means, not an end, to potentially steer the precarious uncertainty of prison life and institutional change towards stability and control.

This malleability obviously entails that human rights standards and values are sometimes thinned, if not thwarted, in practice. This is illustrated through the analysis of the emic notion of ‘reasonable caning’. In the context of a ban on corporal punishment in 2006, prison staff are seen to take stands against inhumane violence and continue to legitimize ‘reasonable caning’ while aligning with human rights. Since standards and values are so obviously negotiated and implemented contingently, it is in conclusion argued that human rights reform cannot simply be analysed in its own terms. What seem to cut across staff’s embrace is not simply more or less human rights, but the rooting of powerful transformative processes of legalisation, humanisation and managerialism. It is these processes that impinge on Ugandan prisons and which need further attention if we want to understand what human rights in this context translate into. However, the embrace of human rights in Ugandan prisons is not merely a reaction to the export of powerful global discourses. Embracing human rights is rather an active and multifaceted aspiration for Ugandan prison staff to get purchase on legal technologies, re-conceptualisations of propriety and neo-liberal management practices that affect their lives.