



2014, Vol. 13,
No. 25

Mtoto. Children's Rights in the Post-colonial World

SUMMARY

Nelson Mandela said that “there can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children,” and there is no denying his statement, but to be able to treat them properly one needs to understand the reality in which we are living. And it is a world built upon centuries of inequality and discrimination. Thus there is a distinctive correlation between contemporary society and postcolonial heritage as the tension between the West and the East – or Global North and Global South – is influencing daily lives, especially of those most vulnerable: women and children. After examining the meaning of “postcolonialism” in the relation to the history of colonization the article touches the subject of human rights in general, and children’s rights in particular, from an interdisciplinary perspective, and discusses the need of understanding the diversity, and reinventing international dialogue in terms of education of youth for sustainability.

→ **KEYWORDS** – CHILDREN’S RIGHTS, HUMAN RIGHTS, POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND HISTORY

STRESZCZENIE

Mtoto. Prawa dziecka w postkolonialnym świecie

Nelson Mandela powiedział, że „nie może być bardziej żarliwego objawienia duszy społeczeństwa niż poprzez to jak traktuje swoje dzieci” i nie ma jak zaprzeczyć tym słowom, jednakże, by móc traktować je prawidłowo, najpierw należy zrozumieć rzeczywistość, w której się żyje. A jest to świat zbudowany na wiekach nierówności i dyskryminacji. Tym samym istnieje wyraźna korelacja między współczesnym społeczeństwem a postkolonialną spuścizną, jak można zauważyć, śledząc napięcia między Wschodem a Zachodem – Globalnym Południem a Globalną Północą, które wpływają na codzienne życie każdej osoby, zwłaszcza tych najwrażliwszych: kobiet i dzieci. Po zbadaniu

znaczenia „postkolonializmu” w relacji do historii kolonizacji artykuł dotyczy tematu praw człowieka, szczególnie praw dziecka, z perspektywy interdyscyplinarnej oraz omawia potrzebę zrozumienia różnorodności i ponownego zaprojektowania międzynarodowego dialogu pod kątem edukacji młodych dla dobra przyszłości.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE** – PRAWA DZIECKA, PRAWA CZŁOWIEKA, TEORIA
I HISTORIA POSTKOLONIALIZMU

When I was 5 years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down “happy.” They told me I didn’t understand the assignment, and I told them they didn’t understand life.

John Lennon

Introduction

An African proverb says that “it takes a village to raise a child,”¹ and it is very true since every element of the surrounding influences and reflects upon the development of each person. Environment plays incredibly important role, and its structure defines one’s identity. It is well known that we live in a global village. Western standards teach us about unity, about equality and freedom, but these each, have roots in a dark past of imperialism. Grown out of such soil our village has a difficult path ahead, with young-ones being raised having possibilities unavailable to previous generations. Children nowadays face the need of finding identity in a world which is “global,” “postcolonial,” “mobile” and “multicultural,” a reality which is rarely understood by their parents. Thus stronger protection of their rights seems to be unavoidable evolution of the society for our village to be ready for their proper upbringing.

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis “the child learns to see itself as distinct from the rest of the world by regarding its own mirror image, but becomes a full subject only when it enters the

¹ This and other African proverbs used in the text are taken from: <<http://af-ritorial.com/the-best-72-african-wise-proverbs/>>.

world of language.”² And both language and culture stand behind the origins of postcolonial and oriental theories.³ Those – as scientific terms – started to be forged in the 1950s. A threshold was marked by an international conference in Bandung. After the World Wars in a bipolar reality of a new, Cold War conflict, representatives of 29 countries of Africa and Asia met in April 1955 to discuss and design both a political and economic place for themselves in that world. That meeting marked a turning point for their foreign policies and relations with the West in general,⁴ and more specifically their former colonizers. All the participants unanimously decided that they would stay out of the artificial division of the world for “the East” (“Orient”) and “the West,” instead the countries would follow their own path, using then established New Asian-African Strategic Partnership. The Bandung Conference was also a birthplace of the Non-Aligned Movement⁵ – for all those wishing to build a clear opposition to the falling colonization-oriented system, especially foreign influences in Africa.⁶ The declarations and plans which started to emerge during the 1955 meeting drew a thick line separating colonizers from former colonies, built foundations for a modern, postcolonial, reality, where children were considered of a great significance, being “test tubes” of changes as they “introduce the possibility of very different ways of being and knowing.” The child is an important trope in representations of language and indigeneity because these are so firmly traversed by conceptual boundaries which, in children, are yet to be fully established.”⁷ To understand what “postcolonialism” really is it is crucial to understand

² A. Loomba, *Colonialism-postcolonialism*, London 1998, p. 37.

³ With Edward Said as the forerunner with his *Orientalism* (London 1977).

⁴ Term represents here Anglo-Saxon countries (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and Western Europe.

⁵ Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) is a coalition of states which are not aligned in any formal way with or against major power blocs. Since 2012 it has 120 members. See: <<http://www.nam.gov.za/>>.

⁶ Cf. Y. Mulyana, *The 1955 Bandung Conference and its present significance*, “The Jakarta Post”, <<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/04/29/the-1955-bandung-conference-and-its-present-significance.html>> (access: 05.01.2013).

⁷ B. Ashcroft, *On Post-Colonial Futures: transformations of a Colonial Culture*, London 2001, p. 54.

what “colonialism” is “with a discussion of the legacy of colonial experience and anti-colonial thought.”⁸

Colonialism, postcolonialism and human rights

The simplest definition of “colonialism” is that it is a mechanism of control which requires the act of submitting one people to the power of another. Its clarity is clouded by the frequent equating with “imperialism” which, in turn, relates to also to political and economical mastery over a dependent territory.⁹ To make a distinction between them it is necessary to look into the etymology of the terms. Both derive from Latin, and for ancient Romans *colonus* meant “a farmer,” while *imperium* – “a government.” Thus colonialism was usually connected to a practice of a transfer of people, building their settlements and bases for a development on the new territories, being politically subordinate to the metropolitan state, but constantly interacting with native inhabitants on various levels, e.g. cultural or economical. Over the centuries it became glorified by European thinkers as a way of exporting Western standards to the simple people of newly conquered lands, bringing them up to the level of the Old World.¹⁰ But reality denied that notion, which was noticed in the loud work *Discourse on Colonialism* where Aimé Césaire writes that colonization was *not* a good nor proper way for establishing communication between different civilizations. From the perspective of time passed, it is clear that the reality of Western expeditions was far from the plans and the ideals did not have much in common with humanistic values of the Enlightenment.

Obviously such a sick construction sooner or later had to collapse. That happened together with the global military conflicts

⁸ R. Majumdar, *Postcolonialism, Decolonization and Globalization*, Bloomsbury Publishing, <http://www.bloomsburyacademic.com/view/WritingPostcolonialHistory_9781849663298/chapter-ba-9781849663298-chapter-001.xml?print> (access: 26.01.2013).

⁹ Cf. M. Kohn, *Colonialism*, in: *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>> (access: 06.01.2014).

¹⁰ This fact was nicely summerized by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks*: “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (Quote via <<http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/949036-peau-noire-masques-blancs>>).

of the first half of the XXth century. As previously noted, in the 50's there appeared a new theoretical discourse on the topic of postcolonialism. As Professor Diana Brydon writes:

Postcolonial studies offers a wealth of detailed stories of past and ongoing injustices, including some associated with humanitarian missions of intervention; an inquiry into the challenges of memorialization and a reminder of the ways in which memory can be tied to forgetting; some valuable critiques of current human rights discourses and practices; some cautions about potential pitfalls; and some thinking about alternative approaches to imagining a justice that is yet to come.¹¹

Furthermore, Brydon points out that the history of postcolonialism might be seen as parallel to the history of human rights, because of the fact that "it is all about people asserting their rights to exercise their autonomy."¹² But the postcolonial world is left with dual systems, having separate sets of regulations, separate understandings of "rights," for colonizers and the indigenous populations, and as a phenomenon it cannot be generalized. It shows a great amount of variations in a context of the relation between basic rights, legislated law, state courtrooms, customs and local practices. The hypocrisy of the West might be exemplified by the French,¹³ since XVIIIth century revolutionists proclaimed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in 1793 but at the same time were eager to dehumanize colonized people. The gap between what is stated – the equality of every man and woman – and the reality in which we live, especially the unequal treatment of children, is clear.

In *Geopolitics and the Post-colonial: Rethinking North-South Relations* David Slater notes that

the post-colonial carries with it an important ethico-political dimension that is rooted in the critique of colonialism and

¹¹ D. Brydon, *Postcolonial and Global Approaches to Human Rights*, in: *Globalization and Cultural Studies Blog*, <<http://dianabrydon.com/2012/01/09/post-colonial-and-global-approaches-to-human-rights/>> (access: 09.01.2014).

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Frantz Fanon puts an emphasis on their policy in his works: *The Wretched of the Earth and Black Skin, White Masks*.

imperialism and in the re-validation of autonomy and resistance to subordination.¹⁴

Isn't this a very good metaphor of child-parent relations? In the light of the combination of human rights and postcolonialism in which we live "the time of official apologies, truth and reconciliation commissions, and calls for restitution."¹⁵ But the developed world, consisting mainly of former colonizers, remains an egoistic entity which hides behind its structures, and theories, easily forgetting the oldest and simplest wisdom which is thriving in more traditional societies. Ganda people say that "parents give birth to the body of their children, but not always to their characters."¹⁶ In the same way, the collapse of the colonies marked the beginning of the independent existence of many nations, each with its own unique history and legacy, a character built before European domination. Many children with their own needs, and the Western "parent" still tries to unify them under international regulations.

With such a background the human rights movement emerged in an aftermath of the Second World War, culminating in the form of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, signed in Paris in 1948 by the participants of the United Nations General Assembly. The document codified norms designed to help protect "people everywhere from severe political, legal, and social abuses. Examples of human rights are the right to freedom of religion, the right to a fair trial, the right not to be tortured, and the right to engage in political activity."¹⁷ Their existence in international political relations has brought as much good in the form of enhancing awareness and legal reforms of existing laws as much evil that came with conflicts and restrictions for their protection. For the West they seem to be just another tool for modern style conquests, counted by the number of investments and the amount of resources exported.

Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* has written that "we believe that an individual must endeavor to assume the

¹⁴ D. Brydon, *Postcolonial and Global Approaches to Human Rights*, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ They are a native ethnic group in Buganda, a subnational kingdom within Uganda.

¹⁷ See more: Human Rights, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rights-human/>> (access: 14.01.2014).

universalism inherent in the human condition.”¹⁸ Such a belief undergirds the acts of UN. But what about the youngest children who are not yet *de facto* individuals according to common understanding? What about those trapped in the mechanisms of labor migration, finding themselves among foreign cultures and customs? Post-colonial times came paired with rapid globalization, enhanced mobility, and informatization of daily life, coated in pop-culture and the commercialism of the West. And as much as they lack in true universality, they bring concrete benefits for particular groups.

Children's Rights

One of more specific sets of rights was created especially for children by the League of Nations already in 1924 with the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child. A little more than 30 years later, in 1959, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which can be summarized in these points:

1. All children have the right to what follows, no matter what their race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, or where they were born or who they were born to.
2. You have the special right to grow up and to develop physically and spiritually in a healthy and normal way, free and with dignity.
3. You have a right to a name and to be a member of a country.
4. You have a right to special care and protection and to good food, housing and medical services.
5. You have the right to special care if handicapped in any way.
6. You have the right to love and understanding, preferably from parents and family, but from the government where these cannot help.
7. You have the right to go to school for free, to play, and to have an equal chance to develop yourself and to learn to be responsible and useful. // Your parents have special responsibilities for your education and guidance.
8. You have the right always to be among the first to get help.
9. You have the right to be protected against cruel acts or exploitation, e.g. you shall not be obliged to do work which hinders

¹⁸ Quote via <<http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/949036-peau-noire-masques-blancs>>.

your development both physically and mentally. // You should not work before a minimum age and never when that would hinder your health, and your moral and physical development.

10. You should be taught peace, understanding, tolerance and friendship among all people.¹⁹

With those articles the world officially recognized the needs of the youngest, but it still became enmeshed in the postcolonial snare of trying to implement laws from above, hoping for the states to influence their citizens. Children's rights are derived from more general human rights and inherit the basic problem of the latter, namely that the category of human is understood differently in various cultures and does not always encompass everyone, leaving many – women or children, the elderly or handicapped – without any rights. Moreover, the UN and politicians have forgotten about those huge gaps between societies, especially in the rural areas. Governments may even ratify the documents, but they leave the necessary dialogue on paper, just to be able to cash in more personal gains in terms of international trade and commerce.

At the same time the horizontal efforts, through education, are limited. Humanitarian and voluntary actions are able to bring change, yes, but it is still not enough on a global scale. Children are especially in danger of being lost as their world is changing faster than ever, before they can even define themselves. The frightening thing is that in the case of many children struggling nowadays to find their place in the postcolonial world their identity is often being created *for* and not *by* them, and that is their only way to gain acceptance.²⁰ In *Looking White People in the Eye*, Sherene Razack identifies three ideas that most often enable her North American students to deny that oppression exists. These are: "rights thinking, essential woman, and the culturalization of differences,"²¹ but for those living in the developing world those are often denied, when societies fail to defend even the basic cells of the communities – families. There everything starts but it

¹⁹ This plain language version and the original can be found here: <<http://www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/humanrights/resources.asp>>.

²⁰ See more: D. Hernandez, B. Rehman, *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism*, Emeryville 2002.

²¹ S. Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye: Gender, race, and Culture in Courtrooms and Classrooms*, Toronto 1998, p. 17.

is relatively rare to hear sentences like this one: "Both my father and my mother raised us to be proud of who we were. Shame was not part of my vocabulary. As a child I was proud to identify myself with brown, with poor, with Indian, with *other*."²² These kind of statements need a strong backbone, which comes with a proper upbringing.

Protecting the rights of children starts with protecting the rights of women – their mothers. To adapt to the contemporary international environment, with it putting pressure on the issues related to the human rights, many countries are step by step replacing their traditional, customary and religious laws with new legislation based on the ideas forged in the West. The reforms launched in developing countries are designed to help governments in the cooperation with their counterparts in the developed world more than with relations with their own citizens.

In practice, there are still gaps between human rights ideals like principle of gender equality and self-determination and the local norms that govern women's everyday lives. (...) in [the] books by Susan Hirsch and Anne Griffiths²³ [it is shown] how women are relying on a combination of individual rights and family-based entitlements for their day-to-day survival.²⁴

The Western answer to the problem was standard – create more laws with the accumulation in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and although it was ratified by more than 150 nation states, it remains to be more of a guide-book than actual game-changer. It supported reforms for equality, but again it did so in a top-down fashion, forgetting that shifts in mind-sets cannot be enforced simply by signing papers.

²² D. Hernandez, B. Rehman, *Colonize This!: Young Women of Color on Today's Feminism*, op. cit., p. 18.

²³ A. Griffiths, *In the Shadow of Marriage: Gender and Justice in an African Community*, Chicago 1997; S.E. Hirsch, *Pronouncing and Persevering: Gender and the Discourses of Disputing in an African Islamic Court*, Chicago 1998.

²⁴ A. Hellum, *Human Rights and gender relations in postcolonial Africa: options and limits for the subjects of legal pluralism*, in: *North South. Gendered views from Norway*, KiLDEN. Information Centre for Gender Research in Norway, <http://eng.kilden.forskningsradet.no/artikkel/vis.html?tid=54098&within_tid=54080> (access: 09.01.2014).

The solution is obvious. The changes should rather be implemented in societies through the education of their youngest members. The need to discard colonial heritage, which displays itself in the form of written regional customary laws, often lacking even close resemblance to the international human rights standards, is an obvious start in a road towards a better future for children. Sadly though, the rules are dictated globally more often by the economy than by any other factors. The crisis touches the core with more strength; women and children are the most vulnerable. Research conducted by UN (Human Settlements Programme 2008) shows that hand in hand with the financial crisis comes a rise in domestic violence, when frustration and anger accumulate in the hearts and minds of men, they threaten the security of others.²⁵

Furthermore, in the former colonies local traditions and divisions of labor roles were turned upside down by Europeans who introduced with different division of labor rapidly implemented Old World's system, leaving natives in cultural shock and not helping them in adapting to the new roles. Colonizers forced men to hard work in construction sites, building the infrastructure necessary for new industries, in mines, plantations etc – in this way women were even more burdened as no-one was left to take care of the household.²⁶ Moreover globalization has brought those changes to ever greater numbers of people with new forms of slavery and a dependence on labor.

For many the word “slavery” brings to mind pictures from the history: transatlantic trade, buying and selling human beings, which, in the modern world, we were suppose to leave far behind. (...) But today, in reality, slavery not only still exists but is growing. Statistics are showing that in the scale of the world there are 27 million people (men, women, children) staying in slavery (Bales, 1999). Women (...) are forced to prostitution (...), children are smuggled between countries (...), and men are forced hard labor (...). Nowadays slavery might touch people of ages, sexes and races, it happens on every continent and in almost

²⁵ J. Ghosh, *Kryzysy finansowe i ich konsekwencje dla kobiet. Rys historyczny*, in: *Kobiety, gender i globalny rozwój. Wybór tekstów*, ed. N. Visvanathan, L. Duggan and N. Wiegiersma, L. Nisnoff, Warszawa 2012, p. 41-47.

²⁶ E. Boserup, *Rola kobiety w rozwoju gospodarczym*, in: *Kobiety, gender i globalny rozwój. Wybór tekstów*, op. cit., p. 59-61.

every country. In most of the cases it is based on the need of repaying debts, and in its worst version – child labor.²⁷

Contemporary children might be victims of the violations of the human rights due to many factors, both direct and indirect. The former speak for themselves, such as the case of Chinese doctor, Zhang Shuxia, who was selling newborns to human traffickers. For seven infants she earned \$33,000, one of them has died, and the doctor herself was sentenced to death.²⁸ By comparison the latter ones come quietly but can be equally destructive. When a family is broken due to debts or kidnappings, and one or both parents are not there for their children they are condemned to lives inside of the system,²⁹ a system which is like a child itself, and according to an old proverb “You cannot beat a child to take away its tears.” Only patience can bring about change. Many children's rights activists are already working tirelessly to bring violations of human rights to the attention of policymakers. Their efforts are recognized but fail to be permanent³⁰ as they have to face a duality well-described by Anne Hellum:

A characteristic feature of the legal systems of most former European colonies in Africa and Asia is the plurality of customary and religious laws that coexist with the received European law. The dual legal systems, in which different laws applied to different races, were the cornerstone of apartheid. Upon independence, the new African governments set out on law reform programs that aimed at greater race, class, and gender equality.³¹

In the material world of today we lack the patience to suffer for equality in any form, to listen and understand “the other.” Children are the first ones to become sufferers of such a reality. Often they are considered to be an investment, one of the most

²⁷ B. Herzfeld, *Niewolnictwo i gender: podwójny wyzysk kobiet*, in: *Kobiety, gender i globalny rozwój. Wybór tekstów*, op. cit., p. 286-293.

²⁸ J.T. Quigley, *Chinese Doctor Who Sold Newborns to Human Traffickers Sentenced to Death*, “The Diplomat”, <<http://thediplomat.com/2014/01/chinese-doctor-who-sold-newborns-to-human-traffickers-sentenced-to-death/>> (access: 15.01.2014).

²⁹ See also: B. Herzfeld, *Niewolnictwo i gender*, op. cit.

³⁰ See the case of Kailash Satyarthi and Swami Agnivesh in India (*Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations. Reading race, gender and class*, ed. G. Chowdhry, S. Nair, New York 2004, p. 247).

³¹ A. Hellum, *Human Rights and gender relations in postcolonial Africa*, op. cit.

expensive ones to that, and many parents of the developed world have a tendency to treat them as such. They are throwing money into their education, and buying the pupils' happiness with various possessions, whilst not realizing that time spent with them means much more for the child's development. On the other hand, on the other side of the global coin, parents are "producing children," investing this way in the future of themselves, being in the need of cheap labor. One of Razack's points seems to be crucial in this context: "As long as we see ourselves as not implicated in relations of power, as innocent, we cannot begin to walk the path of social justice and to thread our way through the complexities of power relations."³² A child's innocence in the postcolonial world is often lost earlier than ever before and they deserve extra efforts to protect it.

Conclusion

Even considering the fact that tools connected to the human rights are Western- and Euro-centric it is easy to acknowledge that simple standing in unity is essential for the development of any social movement, even if we agree on the fact universal laws are currently only an idealistic concept. Regardless of the existing diversity between nations, cultures and traditions violations of basic rights should be viewed in a standardized way. Although many years have passed since the collapse of imperial times of colonization and the adoption of Universal Declaration of Human Rights there are still questions that need to be answered in the near future. Can human rights, and more specifically, children's rights help in undoing previous harms? Can they really be universal or do they need to be more flexible, being redesigned, to bear in mind the collectivity of some societies? Hesitancy, and uncertainty are common themes in post-colonial theory as they are aftereffects of white-man crimes against "colorful-others."³³ It is a burden of Western illusion of superiority over the rest; a hangover of colonization. From the perspective of children's

³² S. Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye*, op. cit., p. 22.

³³ Famous Indian literary theorist, philosopher and university professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has summarized that problem in a well-known sentence: "White men saving brown women from brown men".

rights it doesn't really matter, since upbringing is as relative as the human conditions. While the postcolonial reality for many children means having no access to quality education or a danger of being sold (sic!), to those who benefited from the power given by imperialism problems of the young ones have totally different sound, e.g. a cyberbullying."³⁴ And because of that we need to reinvent the fundamental definitions and theoretical constructions, using knowledge gathered throughout the centuries all over the world, leaving behind Euro-centrism. As another African proverb puts it: "You always learn a lot more when you lose than when you win." The developing world over the last couple of centuries has lost a lot of the dignity associated with its previous wealth. Now it is time to use the lesson learnt, and move towards the future. Youth is the key.

Through international and intercultural friendship, young people should benefit from cultural diversity and, through their actions today, help to preserve it for generations to come. Thus, while youth are the key to the future, it is essential that they shape the present too.³⁵

By thinking equal-horizontal instead of superior-vertical about youth, and remembering that not "a single creature on earth has more or less right to be here" (Anthony Douglas Williams) we might be able to find a common ground for the mutual benefit and sustainable development in the pursuit of happiness.

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³⁴ See: A. Srivastava, R. Gamble, J. Boey, *Cyberbullying in Australia: Clarifying the Problem, Considering the Solutions*, "The International Journal of Children's Rights", vol. 21, issue 1, 2013, p. 25-45.

³⁵ Koïchiro Matsuura, UNESCO, 2004.

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