

AWARENESS ON BASIC CONCEPTS OF HUMAN RIGHTS AMONG A SAMPLE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Although human rights (HR) are strongly related to law, they are basically entrenched in people's experiences. People use different frames of reference in viewing rights, which means they use different dimensions and approaches to understand and practice HR. A popular opinion is that everybody ought to be aware of their rights and the mechanisms, which safeguard their rights. As reports on the knowledge of HR among university students are scarce in Sri Lanka, we evaluated the same among undergraduates of one faculty, representing a sample of university students, which geographically represented the ethnic community.

A two-page questionnaire with 19 close-ended questions with multiple choices was administered to 218 students in all the batches. Adequate time (approximately one hour) was given to answer the questionnaire.

Although nearly half agreed that HR are a set of legal and moral principles, only a little over a ¼ were absolutely sure of the correct answer to this question. Nearly ¾ were aware that HR principles apply at times of arbitrary arrest by police. Only ½ was aware of the universal declaration of human rights (UDHR) (38%), the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (33%), and the International Covenant on Civil and political Rights (30%). Very few respondents were aware of the convention against racial discrimination and convention against torture, and 50% was not aware that Sri Lanka has signed the child rights convention. One third was unaware that HR could apply in university admissions. A vast majority did not know that one couldn't charge a private institution using routine human rights mechanisms.

When analysing the knowledge on strategies available to safeguard HR in Sri Lanka, only 1/5 was aware that the complaint needs to be lodged with an ombudsman, and ¾ was not aware that informing the police was not the appropriate strategy when their rights are violated. Interestingly, nearly half the respondents had thought that the World Bank is the international authority on HR.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the knowledge on HR in this sample of university students is not satisfactory and awareness programs are necessary on relevant aspects of HR that would safeguard their rights. Since this sample consisted only of a group of students who studied biological sciences in secondary and tertiary education, the findings need to be compared with undergraduates in humanities and in engineering.

This research was funded by the Human Rights Centre of the University of Peradeniya.