

February 2023

## A TWO-WAY TRAFFIC BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Mayssah El Nayal

*Professor, Dean, Faculty of Human Sciences, Beirut Arab University, Beirut, Lebanon, mnayal@bau.edu.lb*

Mona G. Sayegh

*Educational Counselor, Licensed Psychotherapist by the Ministry of Public Health, Instructor, and Accredited Trainer by IABC & World Learning Institute, mona.g.sayegh@gmail.com*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bau.edu.lb/schbjournal>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

El Nayal, Mayssah and Sayegh, Mona G. (2023) "A TWO-WAY TRAFFIC BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS," *BAU Journal - Society, Culture and Human Behavior*. Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54729/2789-8296.1140>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the BAU Journals at Digital Commons @ BAU. It has been accepted for inclusion in BAU Journal - Society, Culture and Human Behavior by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ BAU. For more information, please contact [ibtihal@bau.edu.lb](mailto:ibtihal@bau.edu.lb).

---

## A TWO-WAY TRAFFIC BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

### Abstract

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not simply the absence of ailment or infirmity, and mental health as a state of well-being in which the individual is aware of his or her own abilities and is able to contribute to his or her community. On the other hand, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) declares that everyone has the right to a standard of living suitable for the health and well-being of himself and of his family. Therefore, mental health is a right and is protected by law. However, violations of human rights are abundant, causing a lot of drawbacks on different walks of life. Besides, abuse in all of its forms is the backstage culprit in mental disorders and maladjustment with the society. For this reason, it should be counteracted by psychology, education and psychotherapy whose impact is magnified when protected by the power of law.

These facts triggered the authors' interest to investigate how each domain, psychology and human rights, can contribute to maintaining mental wellbeing and protecting humans from discrimination. For this aim, the authors reviewed the literature and legislations and depended on field observation and personal experience and deduced that prominent benefits can be obtained when both domains cooperate together. Practical recommendations that can lead to tremendous progress on both the short and long terms are presented.

### Keywords

Violation of Human Rights, Vulnerable People, Mental Health Issues, Worldwide Legislation, Role of Psychology, Collaboration

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to Grossman (2015), morality and humanity are the basis of our existence. Human rights are about bringing morality into human relationships (Hagenaars, 2016). Unfortunately, the world is currently wearing its clothes upside down. The twenty-first century is holding the legacy of its ancestor, the twentieth, and even speeding up to win the race to the unknown and wreaking havoc on whatever comes on its way in this outrageous competition. It has become a world full of logical fallacies, on which examples are abundant: oppression has become to be known as justice; verbal abuse as free expression; treason as normalization; tyranny as democracy; self-defense as terrorism; taboos as liberation; sexual perversions as legalized freedom, and so on. The list grows to comprise a countless number of examples for which there is no space to mention. But why? What is it that is causing such inconsistencies to be so abundant in the world? Are there no legislations to protect the human rights of the most vulnerable? What role is there for Psychology to play? Can the two realms, psychology and human rights, cooperate to give birth to a hybrid offspring of legislations that guarantees dignity and peace of mind?

## 2. A BRIEF LOOK AT THE CURRENT SITUATION

“A recent study has identified a decline in global freedom over the past 14 years: as of 2019, 64 countries showed deterioration in the civil and political rights of their citizens compared to just the previous year.” (Repucci, 2020). No doubt, psychology, worldwide organizations, and legislations stand for the rights of the abused and protect them from violation since they all aim at maintaining the welfare of human beings. For this reason, the United Nations declared The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, a milestone document in the history of human rights which was ratified by most countries. However, “Despite these positive developments, human rights violations continue to take place. These can include discrimination against a minority group, the illegal use of torture in criminal investigations, the abuse of women and even the use of children as weapons of war in some countries.” (Hagenaars, 2016).

Obviously, many societies are still paying the price of ill-treating many categories of vulnerable people. For example, domestic violence and gender discrimination are taking their emotional toll on women; sex trafficking of children is injuring the hard core of their personalities; humiliation of hunger is damaging the resilience of the poor; discrimination against people with mental disorders is drawing them into seclusion. Unfortunately, this is taking place even in countries whose domestic laws prohibit such disdainful acts and classify them as illegal, and which, even worse, had ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As such, human rights offer psychologists with implications for their practice since they are left alone to repair all the damage. This holds true since the doctrines of human rights are in harmony with the ethical principles of behavior in psychology.

However, despite their seemingly natural relationship, there is no tradition of a close collaboration between the two sectors—human rights and psychology (Twose & Cohrs, 2015 cited in Polli et al.). Possibly this is because of the distinct roots of the two disciplines: that of law in the case of human rights and that of human sciences in the case of psychology; they seem to speak different and separate languages. They appear to be playing out in various arenas without knowing the mutual advantage of working together (Söderström, Wainwright, Hagenaars, Polli, & Wagner, 2019).

On another level, human rights may be violated by means of life-threatening diseases, as what is currently taking place with COVID-19. This necessitates that the psychological and essential human rights and needs be addressed. The Human Rights Committee urges states to approve of proper methods to address the general conditions in society that may pose a direct threat on life. Such measures include disaster management and contingency and emergency planning to increase readiness; ensuring access on a non-discriminatory basis to food, water, shelter, healthcare, and hygiene; and amplifying emergency health services. The right to life of people in the custody or care of governments is undeniably unnegotiable. These are the people in prisons, immigration centers, psychiatric facilities and other residential institutions, especially care homes for the elderly people, where COVID-19 has led to devastating impacts. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has warned that the virus is raging “through places

of detention worldwide, and UN bodies have encouraged states “to release detainees or find non-custodial alternatives” (Donald & Leach, 2020).

However, the situation is not stagnant. In 2013, the Board of Human Rights and Psychology (BoHR) was established by the European Federation of Psychologists Associations (EFPA) in order to raise awareness of the importance of human rights for psychologists and of psychology for human rights. (Hagenaars, 2016). Thus, how can the two players now play in the same field? Definitely, both are fighting for the wellbeing of humans even if with different weapons. How is this taking place?

### **3. UNCOVERING THE COMMON BEDROCK OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND PSYCHOLOGY**

To begin with, it is important to define human rights. René Cassin, one of the principal drafters of UDHR defines human rights as what no one can take away from any human being. They are what everyone needs to live a dignified and fulfilled life and to participate fully in society. They are the entitlements and privileges humans have simply because they are human. They are universal, inalienable, undeniable, and inseparable. In this sense, the inability to secure one right can lead to the abuse of other rights, just as protecting one right can lead to the fulfillment of other rights. (Amnesty International, 2011).

Needless to say, the baseline of our argument rests on the UDHR. One item is chosen to illustrate the backbone of this contention. The first item of Article 25 of the UDHR states that:

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 services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.” (United Nations, n.d.).

It is clear that it is “everyone”, even the people with mental disorders and disabilities; they fit under this item simply because they are humans suffering from something beyond control. In addition, an elaboration on the 1947 WHO declaration stipulates that “health is not merely the absence of illness but a complete state of physical, psychological and social well-being”. In other words, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. (World Health Organization, 2004, p. 20)

On the other hand, Margaret Chan, Director-General of World Health Organization (WHO) in (2013) announces in clear-cut words: “Mental well-being is a fundamental component of WHO’s definition of health. Mental health matters, but the world has a long way to go to achieve it. Many unfortunate trends must be reversed, such as neglect of mental health services and care, and abuses of human rights and discrimination against people with mental disorders and psychosocial disabilities.” (World Health Organization, 2013).

In this sense, keen scrutiny into the aforementioned definitions and quotations unfolds the truth that mental health is an essential component of general health, and that it is a human right entitled to protection by law, for which human right legislations have to give special attention.

On the other hand, psychologists and practitioners bear a huge responsibility in alleviating the harmful consequences that human rights violations have on vulnerable individuals. In addition, university professors, schoolteachers and psychology students are obliged to carry out their societal duty of promoting human rights. This is true because education is the bedrock on which social transformation rests.

Officially, the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) recommends to the international mental health community a 10-step approach for collaborative work among mental health practitioners, service users, and family/carers. The first of these ten recommendations is concerned with the idea that “Respecting human rights is the basis of successful partnerships for mental health.” (Wallcraft, et al., 2011). Thus, it is high time that serious action be taken.

#### **4. URGENT NEED TO TAKE ACTION**

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) notes that the only care available to mentally disturbed people in some countries is in psychiatric hospitals, and many of them are associated with serious abuses of human rights embodied in inhumane treatment and living conditions, such as shackling or lock-up in prison for prolonged periods of time. The report states that one in four people is prone to be affected by mental health conditions throughout their lifetime. It also argues that globally, mental health is not as supported as physical health in terms of budgeting, or medical education and practice. Worse still, stigma hinders, to a great extent, the access to the full range of services that people with mental health conditions need. In addition, almost two thirds of persons with mental health conditions will not try to find treatment for their condition. The report goes on to warn of the danger that poor mental health as a prompting factor for physical health problems, and that persons with mental health conditions have a much-reduced life expectancy compared with the general population, with an estimated drop in life expectancy of 20 years for men and 15 years for women. (Asanbe, Gaba, & Yang, 2018).

On another level, according to recent figures, the direct and indirect economic cost of mental illness is estimated to range from 48 to 50 billion dollars, affecting the labor force and straining the world economy. Individuals with mental illness are experiencing human rights violations on a global scale both within and outside of psychiatric institutions. These violations include denial of employment, marriage, procreation, education, malnutrition, physical abuse, and negligence. Therefore, legislation needs to be modified, updated, or created with relevant systems to enforce implementation of laws. (Mfoafo-M'Carthy & Huls, 2014).

Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) states that we are “facing a global human rights emergency in mental health” as many countries lack the basic legal framework to protect those with a disability. However, violation of human rights does not stem from a shortcoming in existing or international law *per se*; but it is the result of social stigma, prejudice, and other social and economic factors linked with mental illness. (Poreddi, 2013).

#### **5. SOLUTION AND ASPIRATIONS ON THE NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS**

Since social stigma and discrimination are the basic challenges that hinder mental health and constitute a stubborn barrier to seeking and receiving treatment, anti-stigma intervention programs are highly recommended. Such programs include Canada's “Opening Minds” (Pietrus, 2013) and New Zealand's “Like Minds Like Mine”. Interventions like these become a necessity to increase understanding towards people with mental illness and raise awareness among the general population. However, governments in low-and-middle income countries face financial troubles in supporting such programs, so they usually spend the least on mental health, which makes it more and more problematic to provide clinical facilities and anti-stigma interventions. (Asanbe, Gaba, & Yang, 2018)

On the global level, the UN and global agencies such as the OHCHR have supported a number of policy modifications to counteract the stigma and discrimination that people with mental illness and/or with psychosocial disabilities are suffering from. These policies include the organized inclusion of human rights in policies, as well as the recognition of the individual's autonomy, agency and dignity. (Asanbe, Gaba, & Yang, 2018)

For future plans, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, at all ages. Its targets include addressing prevention and treatment, and promoting mental health and well-being. In addition, it aims at the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and the harmful use of alcohol. One of its ambitious goals is to address universal health coverage even though this target focuses on areas where mental health is not specifically referenced. In general, the world leaders who set the Agenda envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity; they aspire to a world ruled by law, justice, equality and non-discrimination where there is respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; they look forward to seeing a world of equal

opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity (United Nations, 2015, pp. 4-9). Even though these goals seem far-fetched, let us have hope.

## **6. PROFITS OF MUTUAL COLLABORATION BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS**

For the first time in history, the human rights for persons with disabilities were specifically formulated in the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN-CRPD). This was deemed necessary because persons with disabilities have been denied their human rights on many levels and in all cultures and societies, despite the fact that all prior human rights legislations, of course, apply to persons with disabilities in the same way as to every human being. (Javed & Amering, 2016).

Moreover, taking into consideration the rights set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the rights recognized in the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons, discrimination on the basis of mental illness is not legitimate. In fact, people who are ill-treated for a mental illness must be bestowed the right to recognition as a person before the law. (Poreddi, 2013).

Some go even further saying that “Perspectives which give insights into the subjective experience of others so that we do not confine the mentally ill to the categories contained in classification systems such as DSM5 and ICD 11 are central to our understanding of each other.” (Indoe, 2020) However, efforts by many mental health professionals who have tried to destigmatize mental illness by explaining it in biological terms have sometimes failed and their attempts backfired in practice (Lauber & Rossler, 2007, cited in Asanbe, Gaba, & Yang, 2018). The problem is that the clinical pathological language used for this purpose is often difficult to comprehend, and when a psychiatric disorder is explained in this way, it tends to lead people to believe that these conditions are unchangeable, which actually exacerbates stigma and intensifies it. No matter what, knowledge, awareness and psycho-education surrounding mental health remain of vital importance to decreasing stigma. (Asanbe, Gaba, & Yang, 2018). Under no circumstances is the ignorance of the etiology of psychiatric disorders allowed to be a gate for enhancing human rights violation. In this sense, it is imperative that psychology take the lead.

## **7. HOW CAN PSYCHOLOGY HELP?**

Obviously, without concrete actions, human rights remain meaningless; without helping individuals grow to their full potential, charters, laws, and conventions remain ink on paper. It is the psychotherapist who breathes the spirit of hope in the souls of helpless people.

Psychologists have the capabilities to make a difference to human rights. The European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) & the Board of Human Rights (BoHR) have argued that the normative framework of Human Rights can greatly inspire psychologists and their associations and spur them into guided action. Psychologists, by their knowledge and experience, can and should contribute not only to the assistance of people suffering from human rights violations, but also to the promotion of the principles and values of human rights and the prevention of such threats (Hagenaars, 2016).

Amidst the dark tension, psychologists' main task is to diagnose the reason of humans' mal-adjustment with their environment and to empower them with the necessary tools to regain their self-esteem and confidence with the aim to help the suffering people through this struggle. For such a reason, psychologists, psychotherapists, and mental care professionals are well-equipped to work through diagnosis and therapy to address the effects which violence, exclusion, humiliation, marginalization, discrimination and dehumanization cause to people.

The task of the psychologists is to help the vulnerable shift their sense of being overwhelmed by the conditions to their dominance over cases of emergency and other circumstances. The least possible outcome would be to adapt to any possible unfavorable circumstances and remain intact. Moreover, psychology tends to expand intervention from trauma-healing techniques and resilience building to concrete assisting actions and, even, to precautionary awareness measures.

Real life success stories prove that psychologists and psychotherapists are not only the catalysts in fighting human rights violation, but they are also the fighters on the frontlines since they are both empowering other co-fighters and healing the wounds the perpetrators have left on the victims' psyches and personalities. It could be also helpful if psychotherapists encourage known people with personal experiences to address their communities by putting faces to mental illness.

Furthermore, a study conducted among psychology professors concluded that incorporating human rights education in psychology curricula is likely to yield more knowledge about human rights, which enables students to recognize some of their duties and protect psychotherapists' clients, practitioners themselves and psychology in general from abuse and misuse. In addition, it urges students to participate in volunteering projects designed for community service, raises their awareness of the meaning of citizenship, improves their decision-making and communication skills as practitioners and helps them avoid bias. In addition, psychologists working with vulnerable groups such as refugees, asylum-seekers, prisoners or people suffering from mental disorders become more engaged in the protection, promotion and education of human rights. (De Palma, 2020).

Psychotherapy can also embrace a "whole person" approach that integrates interdisciplinary mental health services into primary care. In addition, psychologists may collaborate with civil society (NGOs) to engage local governments in necessary legislations and keep an eye on their implementation. They can even conduct and share research with local, national and international bodies to pinpoint the gaps so that they can redress the faults. Finally, implementing systematic training and raising awareness for mental health professionals supply them with updated tools in their careers. (Asanbe, Gaba, & Yang, 2018)

## 8. CONCLUSION

The relationship between psychology and human rights is fundamental and interdependent. Psychology stands up for human rights, and human rights laws protect people with special needs. It has become evident that violations of human rights negatively affect mental health and may even demolish personalities. Besides, mental health practices, programs and legislations, as well as tough and coercive treatment practices can hamper human rights. Consequently, mental health will be the natural outcome of the promotion of human rights. These advantages extend beyond the close relationship between psychology and human rights. Indeed, benefits extend to reach other walks of life such as the social, economic, and cultural domains. Therefore, in addition to the moral and legal responsibilities, there are clinical and economic motives for advancing the mutual cooperation between psychology and human rights. In the end, many questions remain unanswered: Would the superpowers of the world live up to the level of the motto that they are claiming to raise: 'promoting and protecting human rights of the vulnerable people'? Would they allow the most impoverished people to breathe liberty, enjoy equality and prosper with the natural resources of the mother Earth? No matter how gloomy the future may seem, there is always sunshine after the rain.

## REFERENCES

- Amnesty International. (2011). *What Are Human Rights?* Retrieved 1 6, 2020, from [amnesty.org: https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/background\\_info\\_-\\_what\\_are\\_human\\_rights.pdf?swPjK3xr14NvxIe7Fm6enyMRP4vDDLjy=](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/background_info_-_what_are_human_rights.pdf?swPjK3xr14NvxIe7Fm6enyMRP4vDDLjy=)
- Asanbe, C., Gaba, A., & Yang, J. (2018, 12). *Mental health is a human right.* (Psychology International) Retrieved 1 5, 2021, from [apa.org: https://www.apa.org/international/pi/2018/12/mental-health-rights](https://www.apa.org/international/pi/2018/12/mental-health-rights)
- De Palma, A. (2020). *Human Rights Education in a Psychology Curriculum- - a qualitative analysis of the experiences of Psychology educators.* Retrieved 1 4, 2020, from [humanrightspsychology.org: http://humanrightspsychology.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HREducationReportADP.pdf](http://humanrightspsychology.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/HREducationReportADP.pdf)
- Donald, A., & Leach, P. (2020, 5 12). *Human Rights – The Essential Frame of Reference in the Global Response to COVID-19, VerfBlog.* doi: 10.17176/20200512-133728-0.

- Hageaars, P. (2016, 9). Towards a Human Rights based and Oriented Psychology. *Psychology and Developing Societies*. doi:10.1177/0971333616657170
- Indoe, D. (2020, 10). *Psychology and human rights: holding on to truth*. Retrieved 14, 2021, from humanrightspsychology: <http://humanrightspsychology.org/holding-on-to-truth/>
- Javed, A., & Amering, M. (2016). Mental health and human rights: Working in partnership with persons with a lived experience and their families and friends. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 58(3), 250–252. doi:10.4103/0019-5545.192002
- Mfoafo-M'Carthy, M., & Huls, S. (2014). Human Rights Violations and Mental Illness: Implications for Engagement and Adherence. *SAGE Open*, 1-18. doi:10.1177/2158244014526209
- Poreddi, V. R. (2013). People with mental illness and human rights: A developing countries perspective. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 55(2), 117–124. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.4103/0019-5545.111447>
- Repucci, S. (2020). *A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*. Retrieved 16, 2021, from freedomhouse: [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/FINAL\\_FIW\\_2020\\_Abridged.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/FINAL_FIW_2020_Abridged.pdf)
- Söderström, K., Wainwright, T., Hageaars, Polli, & Wagner, U. (2019). Editorial Human Rights Matter to Psychology - Psychology Matters to Human Rights. *European Psychologist*, 24(2), 99-101. doi:10.1027/1016-9040/a000365
- United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations- General Assembly.
- United Nations. (n.d.). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Retrieved from un.org: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>
- Wallcraft, J., Amering, M., Freidin, J., Davar, B., Froggatt, D., Jafri, H., . . . S., T. S. (2011, Oct.). Partnerships for better mental health worldwide: WPA recommendations on best practices in working with service users and family carers. *World Psychiatry*, 10(3), 229–236. doi:10.1002/j.2051-5545.2011.tb00062.x
- World Health Organization. (2004). *Promoting Mental Health: Concepts - Emerging Evidence - Practice. Summary Report*. Geneva: Wrlld Health Organization.
- World Health Organization. (2013). *Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020*. Geneva: WHO Document Production Services. Retrieved 17, 2021, from [https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/action\\_plan\\_2013/bw\\_version.pdf](https://www.who.int/mental_health/action_plan_2013/bw_version.pdf)