

SKIN and Human Rights

Consider the following statements that were true of life under Apartheid for Sandra Laing. While some of them do not refer to an injustice that Sandra suffered directly, they may underline what the general black population had to put up with.

It is your job to decide which you feel describes the worst abuse of human rights and which the least. Rearrange the list in order of seriousness. Your choices will be subjective and so there is no absolute correct answer:

1. Sandra was born into a country where her race was classified at her birth. To be 'white' meant she would enjoy special privileges denied people of other skin colours – especially black South Africans.
2. Sandra grew up enjoying all the privileges of someone born to white parents – she enjoyed better accommodation (a room to herself), toys (her doll) and sanitation than her black playmates who went home each evening to their make-shift homes in the nearby township which probably lacked space and running water.
3. Education for blacks and whites was vastly different. Sandra could expect to be taught in smaller classes by more effective and better paid teachers than her black friends. The amount the state would spend on her schooling would be about three times as much as that spent on a black child of the same age. Schools were segregated and Sandra's white education would prepare her for jobs that her black friends could only dream about. Typically, black children would receive a 'Bantu' education preparing them for unskilled manual jobs and domestic service.
4. As her local rural schools were only for black children, Sandra would have to go to a boarding school – leaving home at just six years old to live with strangers and other white girls.
5. At school Sandra was subject to an increasing amount of bullying. The abuse was both physical and emotional. Far from protecting her, teachers at the school would condone the mistreatment and even participate in it themselves. Corporal punishment was allowed and Sandra was beaten on a number of occasions.
6. Parents would complain about Sandra's presence at Piet Retief School. The school authorities would also join the campaign and in time they would be successful both in getting Sandra re-classified 'coloured' and also getting her expelled. Without a local school she could go to, Sandra was effectively denied education for a long period of time.

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7. As a 'coloured' person, Sandra was not officially allowed to live with her white parents on an equal footing. According to Apartheid laws she should strictly have been forced to live in the servants' quarters at her home. At one point in SKIN we see Sandra visit the living quarters of Nora – the maid. These are to the rear of the house. They are cramped and without electricity.
8. It is clear that Nora, the Laing's maid, has few employment rights. Despite working for the family for many years, we see her being threatened with summary dismissal if she disobeys her employer – Abraham Laing. In South Africa under apartheid laws explicitly laid down that black workers should enjoy fewer privileges than white counterparts and also earn less money for equivalent (if not identical work).
9. Sandra's father Abraham was determined to get Sandra's white status reinstated. In order to do this he publicized her case and in the film SKIN we see her being subjected to a confusing and possibly frightening interrogation by a group of reporters.
10. Sandra is constantly judged on her appearance – despite having her white status re-instated. We witness the way in which certain shops and restaurants are essentially off-limits to a girl with Sandra's looks, complexion and curly hair. When her mother wants to buy her a dress, Sandra has to stand in the street looking at her mother showing of the styles from inside the shop. When she goes to an official office, she is told she cannot sit down on a bench as it is reserved for white people only. When she goes to an ice-cream bar, it is only because she is with a white boy that she is not thrown out.
11. There is no doubt in Abraham Laing's mind that his daughter will marry an Afrikaner man and live the life of an Afrikaner wife. Even the thought of her marrying a white foreign boy is shocking and the idea of her having a relationship with a black man is so appalling, Abraham would be excused resorting to violence to prevent such a thing.
12. It is clear that Sandra's skin colour is a major handicap when seeking a white boyfriend. We witness in SKIN how one Afrikaner boy tries to force himself on Sandra. She escapes being sexually assaulted but suffers bruises.
13. Abraham threatens to shoot Petrus if he catches him near his daughter. We see him fire on him and suffers no consequences. The implication is that while his behaviour may be shocking to Sannie and Sandra, he is quite within his rights to protect his daughter's honour in this extreme manner. Even had he shot Petrus it is likely he would

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have not been punished – his actions being deemed acceptable given the scale of Petrus' far worse crime: carrying on with an Afrikaner girl.

14. When Abraham finally discovers Sandra's relationship with Petrus, he attempts to imprison her. Later in the film we see him promise Sannie, his wife, that if Sandra comes to the house he will shoot her and then himself, such is his shame at what she has done.
15. Sandra though 16 is arrested and thrown into jail for running away with her lover Petrus. She endures a prolonged period of imprisonment.
16. Sandra, now designated 'white' cannot officially live with Petrus or the children she has with him. She is in fact off the official radar of the state, lacking papers and living in a black settlement – but without her identity documents she risks immediate arrest and imprisonment.
17. It is clear that living as a rural black woman means Sandra has no access to proper health care. Happily her first two childbirths are without complications.
18. Sandra does not take part in the struggle against South Africa's injustices, but she does encounter those that do. On a visit to Pretoria she gets caught up in a demonstration outside the Ministry of the Interior and witnesses how the authorities send in police to break it up. It was almost impossible to stage demonstrations during the Apartheid era and to do so was to risk violent reprisals from the authorities, arrest and imprisonment. Numbers of political parties were outlawed such as the African National Congress (ANC) and belonging to them could result in many years in jail.
19. In scenes cut from SKIN, the way in which black people in South Africa were prevented from travelling where they wanted to go. Under the 'Pass' law – all black people had to carry documentation indicating where they were allowed to live and work. Without permission to work or stay in cities, people were acting illegally if they travelled to them in search of work.
20. Under Apartheid it is possible for the authorities to designate an area white-only and expel any black people living there. It is apparent that no compensation is offered and that black homes and businesses can be bulldozed. It is not clear how much notice is given, but in the film SKIN it appears that the demolition teams can descend on people's homes and shops pretty much out of the blue. In reality, the people of Kromkrans had about two weeks to sort themselves out.
21. According to the aims of Apartheid black people need to be 'allowed' to develop separately. In reality this meant expelling them from where

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they live and forcing them to relocate to far poorer land, even more lacking in resources or facilities. Sandra and Petrus were forced to go to Tjakastad Kwa-Ngwane – a homeland near the Swaziland border. It was here that Jenny, Sandra's third child by Petrus became sick and died. There were only 15 doctors for a population of 200,000 people and although Sandra did manage to secure medicine it was not enough. At the same time that Jenny died there was a cholera outbreak in Tjakastad – a direct result of the overcrowding and lack of proper sanitation.

22. Thanks to the combined strain of enforced removals and having to live in extreme poverty in the homelands huge pressure weighs on the family lives of people living in Tjakastad. For those who can there is the chance of traveling to find work in distant mines or factories, but this splits parents from children. For those that remain, the difficulties take their toll. In SKIN we witness how Petrus fares badly under the strain – resorting to drink in order to cope with his problems. He becomes increasingly paranoid and starts to beat Sandra. In the end Sandra has to leave him fearing he will eventually kill her.
23. Sandra had no safety nets. Lacking identity papers she was forced to operate below the radar of the state and could expect no benefits. When times became very tough, the only way she could ensure her children were okay was to put them into care.
24. Sandra survived in the 70s and 80s by taking a number of low paid jobs in factories – including, ironically, one manufacturing cosmetics. In South Africa it was unnecessary for employers to provide black workers with the same employment rights, wages or working conditions. Similarly, trade union activity was actively discouraged.
25. At the start and finish of SKIN we witness Sandra taking part in the first democratic elections in South African history. It is 1994 and as a 'coloured' woman Sandra was denied a vote under the Apartheid system. Government and power during that time lay entirely in the hands of the white minority, with the vast majority lacking any sort of say in the running of their country.
26. It was only in the 1990s that Sandra manages to establish a stable home living with Johannes. It is then she acquires a TV for the first time in her life and becomes addicted to soap operas and (more disastrously) shopping channels. Such pleasures highlight the complete absence from her life of cultural activity we might take for granted. As a 'coloured' woman she would not have been allowed to go to places of entertainment that white people could attend, even if she had had the money or lived in an area where such facilities existed.

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Re-read the twenty-six examples of injustice taken from the life of Sandra Laing and try to decide which of the human rights are being infringed in each case by referring back to the Human Rights table in the first part of this section. It is quite likely that in some cases several human rights are being abuse at the same time. Place the number of the incident against the appropriate Article in the right hand column of the Human Rights table

Declaration of Human Rights (Articles)	SKIN incident (1-23)
Article 1: <i>All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.</i>	
Article 3: <i>Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.</i>	
Article 4: <i>No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.</i>	
Article 5: <i>No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.</i>	
Article 7: <i>All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.</i>	
Article 9: <i>No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.</i>	
Article 11(1): <i>Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defence.</i>	
Article 12: <i>No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.</i>	
Article 13:(1) <i>Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.</i> (2) <i>Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.</i>	
Article 16:(3) <i>The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.</i>	
Article 19: <i>Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.</i>	

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<p>Article 20 (1): Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.</p>	
<p>Article 23. (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.</p>	
<p>Article 24: Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.</p>	
<p>Article 25: 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. (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.</p>	
<p>Article 26:(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.</p>	
<p>Article 27(1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.</p>	