

Human Rights Education for Empowerment of Marginalized Communities

Human Rights Development Centre

HUMAN RIGHTS DEVELOPMENT CENTRE (HRDC) is a non-profit, non-political, non-religious, non-governmental human rights and democracy institution in Bangladesh. It is also a research organization in the field of human rights, education, student placement for internship education, entrepreneurship development, democracy, peace, climate change resilience, water sanitation, adaptation and mitigation in partnership with networking organizations and community-based organizations (CBOs). HRDC is registered with the Department of Social Services, Ministry of Social Welfare with registration No. Dha-02853, Date: 22/12/1992 and also with the NGO Affairs Bureau under the Prime Minister Office with Registration number 1103 dated on 28 November 1996.

Role of HRDC

We should protect and promote human rights with respect, without any bias and discrimination.

—Mahbul Haque, Secretary General, HRDC

HRDC is playing a role in making people become aware of child and women's rights issues in support of the concept of participation of "every human person and all peoples" in the full development of the country. Article 1 of the United Nations (UN) Declaration on the Right to Development states:¹

The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized.

It is an independent, autonomous, non-governmental and non-profit institution for the promotion of human rights and for the legal education of the poor and oppressed sectoral groups.

Vision-Mission-Strategy

HRDC has the following vision, mission and strategy:

Vision: A Bangladeshi society where human rights are protected and promoted, and where democracy, good governance, peace, freedom of religion or belief, social harmony, peaceful coexistence, social democracy and religious tolerance are valued and realized.

Mission: To realize the human rights of marginalized, disadvantaged, and vulnerable groups particularly young women and children from across society by establishing social democratic principles, rule of law and justice through good governance and to enhance the power of youth in participating in democracy.

Objective and Goals

The main objective of the HRDC is to promote and protect human rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the fundamental rights provided for in the Constitution of Bangladesh.

Its goals are the elimination of discrimination and the establishment of torture-free Bangladesh.

HRDC focuses on the rehabilitation of victims of trauma and torture with a combination of treatment and rehabilitation support in order to allow full integration back into their communities and previous lives. It also focuses on the prevention of human rights abuses, human rights awareness-raising, human rights education, human rights advocacy or legal aid to victims of human rights violations/abuses.

Programs

HRDC implements the following main human rights violations/abuses prevention activities:

1. Capacity-building on human rights, women's rights, refugee rights;

2. Advocacy, campaigns and lobbying to ensure justice, human rights and democracy;
3. Fact-finding and urgent action on human rights violation incidents;
4. Trauma Recovery Centre for rehabilitation of torture and trauma victims;
5. Voter education and election monitoring;
6. Policy and legal reform lobby initiatives with the government;
7. Youth Parliament for Democracy;
8. Shelter for street children and youth;
9. Research and documentation;
10. National Politics Study including research on Sustainable Development Goals and National Development Plan.

Human Rights Education Program

HRDC successfully implements its Human Rights Education Program (HREP) focusing on national human rights laws, advocacy and security issues in cooperation and coordinated with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Dhaka and district level. It generates a unified effort in raising the awareness level of the people of Bangladesh on the rights of marginalized groups, and works at all levels to ensure the protection of fundamental human rights for the citizens of Bangladesh.

HREP covers the following topics: Human rights laws/treaty, national and international lobbying and advocacy, media advocacy, minority rights under national/international law, General Diary (GD), first information report (FIR), human rights monitoring of field situation, human rights prevention approach, and security for the human rights defenders.

The HREP trainings provide participants with theoretical and practical knowledge of international human rights and minority rights laws and norms, with a focus on human rights, women's rights, refugee rights, voter education and election monitoring, freedom of religion or belief. The trainings aim to equip participants with skills and knowledge in clearly identifying types of violations and frame them in a way that can be more effectively used for national and international advocacy.

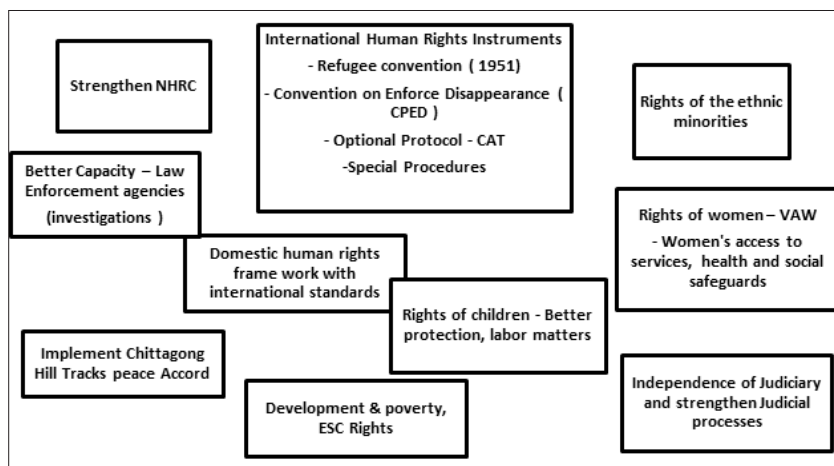
HREP is specifically designed to:

- Build technical capacity, skills and knowledge of human rights, women's rights, refugee rights, voter education and election moni-

toring of religious minority community representatives and/or activists working on freedom of religion or belief;

- Orient and train participants by enhancing knowledge on national and international human and minority rights laws and norms;
- Provide trainees with the knowledge and skills to clearly identify types of minority rights violations and frame them in a way that can be more effectively used for national and international lobbying;
- Provide participants (through sequential workshops) with theoretical and practical knowledge of the Human Rights Council, the special procedures, the UN treaty bodies and the Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review (UPR), formation of Bangladesh UPR Coalition with a focus on national minority and the human rights report preparation mechanism for the UPR.

Trends/repeated recommendations 3rd Cycle UPR 2018



The HREP was held for ninety days in March, June, July, September, November, and December 2022 in Dhaka, Natore and Savar respectively. It was attended by human rights defenders, social workers, youth, representatives of CBOs, staff members of NGOs and journalists.

The HREP-2022 discussed child rights, women's rights, human rights, refugee rights, indigenous peoples' rights, United Nations (UN) human rights treaties, role of CBOs for promoting human rights, UN human rights mechanism, role of human rights defenders in monitoring the preparation of human rights periodic report, role of Human Rights Council (HRC), and

Universal Periodic Review (UPR). HREP aimed at ensuring that the CBOs and other relevant stakeholders would have the capacity to engage in the UPR mechanism through consultations with the HRC on UPR process, and on how to make the UPR reports.



HREP session, Savar Dhaka, 2 November 2022.



HREP session, Savar Dhaka, 21-22 September 2022.

HRDC also has several programs that address the social and educational needs of marginalized communities:

- a. Afruza Lailah Rest House (ALRH) – this is a free shelter service initiative that aims to cultivate a more compassionate and resilient humani-

tarian system by providing high quality treatment and rehabilitation of the survivors of torture in collaboration with government and private institutions. The ultimate goal of ALRH is to provide patients and survivors with a multidisciplinary treatment and rehabilitation in order to allow full integration back into their homes and communities. As part of the emergency service, a core group of staff is always in the premises, even during “crisis” or COVID-19 lockdowns.

b. Once the survivors, especially from rural areas, return to their communities, they often form or join a team of fellow survivors. HRDC initiates the formation of such a team in the community as a way for victims to continue rehabilitation at home by actively participating in a program that supports them, and to prevent future torture occurrences from happening by spreading awareness of the problem;

c. Social assistance - this includes vocational training, material assistance for basic needs such as accommodation, food, clothing and utilities, etc., on the basis of needs and vulnerability;

d. Legal assistance - this includes litigation of torture cases, filing of complaints against alleged perpetrators in order to seek prosecution and/or obtain redress, including compensation for torture victims. Indirect legal assistance includes referrals to pro-bono lawyers and documentation of torture cases for future prosecution of perpetrators. The financial support received by HRDC for legal assistance is used for, inter alia, lawyers’ fees, transportation of lawyers, victims and expert, fees for forensic and ballistic experts service, interpretation, printing of documents, investigation costs, court and legal fees and prison visits;

e. Education Program – this includes a Student International Internship Program in collaboration with the Department of Politics, College of Social Science and International Studies, University of Exeter in the United Kingdom in collaboration with HRDC. This also includes student counseling for higher education in Bangladesh and abroad.

The implementation of programs and projects is based on the following principles:

a. Participatory approach is followed throughout the project period. Proper and conducive environment is created to facilitate active participa-

tion of the parties/stakeholders involved particularly the beneficiaries. This ultimately helps the sustainability of the project activities;

b. Linkage and networking, as one of the main strategies for the successful implementation of the project activities, are established with the local administration, relevant government organizations (GOs), NGOs, civil society organizations (CSOs), community leaders, religious leaders and CBOs such as local clubs, trade unions, local market associations, local park and spot field associations, which can play an important role in making the program successful by providing needed support in the field regarding work on human rights of minorities, training, staff development and other technical assistance;

c. Proper use of mass media, local media, and community media including print, electronic and broadcast (community radio) that can play a very vital role for successful implementation of programs that require awareness build-up. This can help mold and build favorable public opinion and awareness particularly among the associated community where the program is being implemented;

d. Promotion of advocacy, campaigns and lobbying is also a very important strategy for successful implementation of the programs. This can be done through advocacy meetings involving local administration, members of the police, lawyers, community leaders, teachers of different levels, religious teachers and the stakeholders;

e. Provision of motivation and counseling services to ameliorate the stressful situation of beneficiaries. This strategy has worked effectively in cases of socially disadvantaged women, street children and adolescent girls. The victims of violence are given counselling services to overcome their problems;

f. Community-based approach is a priority strategy that requires people in the community to be oriented and trained in such a way that they can appreciate the project as belonging to the community. This sense of ownership of the project by the community helps in the effective implementation of the project as well as its sustainability;

g. Mobilization of local resource is ensured as one of the major strategies towards attaining project sustainability after the project period. This can be in the form of cash, kind, technical assistance, support services and direct involvement and participation of the community people;

h. Monitoring and evaluation are also part of the strategic planning for the implementation of any program. Different tools are developed for the purpose. Project activities are regularly monitored and evaluated to provide necessary feedback towards strengthening the project activities.

The different activities of HRDC either receive support from development partner organizations or are held in partnership with other organizations.

Promoting Peace, Human Rights and Democracy in Bangladesh

A binding component of democracy education to victims of election violence is the Door-to-Door Campaign on Democracy (DDCOD). This is a ritual that begins with an initial empowerment exercise for victims of election violence in Dhaka and continues in the communities. It consists of initial self-disclosure, education, chanting and slogans, and a focus on group support towards the goal of eradicating torture and promoting democracy in Bangladesh. This includes enhancing the knowledge on election exercises and developing the capacity of local level rights defenders to document election-related incidents at the local level.



Door-to-door campaign on democracy, Savar Dhaka, 10 May 2022.

Advocacy and Campaigns

HRDC engages in advocacy and campaign activities to highlight human rights issues affecting marginalized communities such as persons with disabilities, minority communities, human rights defenders, linguistic minorities, displaced peoples, and indigenous communities in Bangladesh.

HRDC organizes rallies and cultural programs on the occasion of International Women's Rights Day, International Human Rights Day, National Child Rights Day and International Day of World Indigenous Peoples. These international United Nations days are observed every year globally. The United Nations has been celebrating this day worldwide since 1994. For the 2022 celebration, the United Nations adopted the theme "The Role of Indigenous Women in the Preservation and Transmission of Traditional Knowledge."

Dozens of indigenous languages in the country are gradually disappearing despite efforts to preserve them. With a short supply of people who can write and speak in many of the languages, recording them is exceedingly difficult.

The loss of the languages is aggravated by members of indigenous communities neglecting their native tongue as they learned Bangla and English to thrive in mainstream society.



International Indigenous Day 2022 celebration, Natore, 9 August 2022.



International Indigenous Day 2022 celebration, Natore, 9 August 2022.

Food security in indigenous community is also threatened by several factors including displacement caused by climate crisis and environmental pollution. HRDC has supported the indigenous women associations at the grassroots level in the northern part of Bangladesh in their socio-economic development. Indigenous women associations have been developing their livelihood through indigenous knowledge.



Indigenous women working in the field, Baraigram, Bonpara, 5 December 2022.

Bangladeshis celebrated two holidays on 17 March 2022 – Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s Birthday and National Children Day.

As a heavily populated nation, the majority of the people live in poverty. Severe poverty makes most youngsters in Bangladesh unable to de-



Indigenous girls participating in a cultural program, Bonpara Natore, 9 August 2022.

velop themselves and fail to receive respect for their basic rights from society. Majority of parents assign tasks to their children to earn money for the family.

HRDC held a program to commemorate the National Child Rights Day 2022 in Dhaka. HRDC and Pother Ishkul jointly observed the National Child Rights Day on 17 March 2022 in solidarity with the Bangladesh government. More than one hundred participants attended the event. The government of Bangladesh pays much attention to the well-being of children and it annually organizes special cultural events to celebrate National Child Rights Day, which annually falls on March 17th.

Every year the Prime Minister of Bangladesh addresses children and their parents in a solemn speech, emphasizing the importance of children for the future of the nation. Currently the government of Bangladesh pays much attention to children's life and improves its level. Apart from national programs, children enjoy special events that are organized for them only. These events may include food fairs, sports competitions, cultural shows and special essay/poem/painting competitions.

HRDC organized the children's art competition and discussion program on 17 March 2022 at Motijheel Kabadi Stadium Dhaka for the celebration of National Child Rights Day 2022.



National Child Rights Day 2022, Motijheel Kabadi Stadium, Dhaka, 17 March 2022.



Mahbul Haque speaking about the child rights situation in Bangladesh during the National Child Rights Day 2022.



International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, Dhaka, 26 June 2022.



Public campaign against rape, Dhaka, 10 June 2021.



Public campaign against rape, Dhaka in 2021.



Global 16 Days Campaign, Dhaka, 2021.



Global 16 Days Campaign, Dhaka, 2021.



Observation of the International Human Rights Day 2021, at National Press in Dhaka City on 10 December 2021.



Observation of the International Human Rights day 2022, Bonpara, 10 December 2022.

HRDC also celebrates the National Child Rights Day. On 17 April 2022, it organized a cultural program to celebrate the National Child Rights Day at Arapara Savar, Dhaka.

HRDC organizes courtyard meetings with indigenous women at grass-roots level regarding the issue of indigenous people's access to social safety net programs. In one of these meetings in Dinajpur held on 10 June 2022, they discussed the social safety net program of the government like allowance for persons with disabilities and the elderly. They also discussed how to develop an indigenous women association for their empowerment.



Courtyard meeting in Dinajpur, 10 June 2022.

Specialized Services for Street Children

Thousands of children have been living on the street in the cities of Bangladesh. They suffer from torture and trauma. They have been facing the multiple problems from state and non-state actors.

They are continuously neglected and mentally and physically abused by members of the law enforcement agency and non-state actors from different classes of Bangladeshi society. They suffer rape and torture by members of the law enforcement agency. They are also used as drug handlers.

A survey conducted by Grambangla Development Committee in 2020-2022 with the support of Commonwealth Foundation and Consortium for 600 Street Children, revealed the following data:

- 31 percent of children live alone on the street
- 12 percent stay with friends
- 44 percent of children sleep at night in slums with neighbors and in public places, vehicles, footbridges, parks or sidewalks
- 11 percent of children do not know if their parents are alive or dead.

Most of the street children are involved in various types of work for their livelihood or survival. The survey results show that

- 35 percent of children meet their daily expenses by begging
- 42 percent children earn their livelihood by traveling around and selling various items.

The education of street children is very poor. 98.5 percent of street children are deprived of formal or non-formal education opportunities.

The survey results reveal that

- 76 percent of street children are victims of mental abuse
- 62 percent of children are victims of physical abuse
- 5 percent of children are reported to be victims of sexual abuse.
- However, the real picture is more dire.

The condition of street children has reached a more deplorable level during the COVID-19 epidemic. According to the survey, in 2020,

- 72 percent of children suffered from food shortages due to the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 epidemic
- 65 percent of children lost their jobs on which their livelihood depended

- 53 percent of children lost their place of residence or shelter
- 61 percent children were not aware about hygiene.

The 2021 annual report of the Directorate of Narcotics Control of the Government of Bangladesh states:

58 percent of street children take some kind of drug. And 21 percent of these children work as drug carriers. 14 percent of street children say they have been taking drugs before they turn 10.

Torture and trauma deprive street children of their rights.

But each one of them could be a star, if they are given care and assistance to find their true potential. This is a necessary step for their development and should be part of an integrated rehabilitation approach that includes access to education, health, shelter, treatment, mental health services, social services and livelihood training. Special arrangements for them and promotion of their rights have been called for by prominent people working for street connected children, and representatives of various organizations and children.

HRDC and LEEDO have been working tirelessly to protect the rights of these street children and their overall development for a long time. As a result, Leedo School Under the Sky has been providing street children with support including medical treatment, psychological support and nutritious food.² LEEDO has been working at the grassroots level for a long time and has realized that long-term rehabilitation programs are necessary to solve the problem of street children. Although a small number of organizations have long-term rehabilitation processes, engaging children in long-term rehabilitation processes from the grassroots level is difficult. Positive change in the current life of street children can happen in a concerted initiative to solve the problems. Street children will be able to join the mainstream of society and live a respectable life after undergoing long-term rehabilitation process.

On 28 December 2022, LEEDO and HRDC organized an advocacy program in Bishwo Shahitto Kendro, Dhaka named National Dialogue on the Street Child Situation: Social Context and Action. HRDC emphasized the torture experience and traumatic background of children. It identified more than twenty children who were tortured by members of the law enforcement agency, and the girls who were raped by members of the police. In this

national dialogue, representatives of different organizations and eminent persons discussed the rights and activities of children living on the street. They said street children remain socially neglected due to which they are also deprived of state opportunities.



Mahbul Haque, HRDC Secretary General, speaking at National Dialogue on the Street Child Situation, Dhaka, 28 December 2022.

The participants emphasized the need for social awareness about human rights. Speakers also said that these children would become a burden of the society if they were not given proper social status and secured life. Though they live on the street, they urged everyone in the society to be aware that the street children should grow up with a minimum sense of dignity or self-identity. A cultural program by the street-connected children followed the discussion. A drama was also played by these children that highlighted the condition of street children. Children who participated in the Qatar football from LEEDO peace home were greeted during the program.³



HRDC and Leedo Cultural Team performance on child rights issue, Dhaka, 28 December 2022.

After the cultural program, speakers in the expert panel highlighted the child rights situation emerging from their own experience and research. They stated that

Government should emphasize on specialized services for these marginalized street children. For them to grow in self-identity, the process of obtaining birth registration should be made easy and smooth. Focus should be on developing them not as a social burden but as an asset.

The children present at the dialogue called on the government and all peoples to pay special attention to their rights by considering them separately. They said,

Street children are also deprived of their basic human rights. Why can't we move forward the way the country is moving forward?

Experts in the dialogue offer several suggestions to the government, professionals and stakeholders for the development of these children. Notable among them are:

1. Ensure and invest in quality specialized services for children in street situations;
2. Ensure the specialized services that recognize the rights and needs of these children;
3. Strengthen existing laws and policies and ensure their proper implementation;
4. Increase the effective participation of street children in various public and private forums or task forces;
5. Create a cross-sector body or public-private inter-agency coalition at the national level for children in street situations involving government, law enforcement and civil society;
6. Facilitate access to birth certificates for children in vulnerable situations;
7. Promote the rights of children in vulnerable situations by highlighting the importance of specialized solutions to governments and other actors;
8. Work in inter-agency coordination rather than operate in isolation;

9. Emphasize the necessary research activities to produce accurate statistics on street children and adopt timely measures to bring them under protection.

The expert panel was attended by Professor Dr. Indiana (University School of Social Science), Hasan Reza (Executive Director of Grambangla Development Committee), A.K.M., Moniruzzaman Mukul (General Secretary, Jot Scan Bangladesh, a coalition of various organizations working with Maksud and street children). Apart from this, among the special guests present were Masuda Farooq Ratona (Executive Director of Gram Development Support Organization), Hafizur Rahman Mayna (President of Civil Rights Protection Forum), Mahbul Haque (Secretary General of Human Rights Development Center, HRDC) and development researcher and activist Mr. Aminur Rasul.

Challenges

HRDC has been facing financial challenges in carrying out the planned activities of its programs. At the same time, the space for advocating human rights has been shrinking due to political issues.

Some Reflections

The core aspiration of HRDC is to create a discrimination-free Bangladesh and to protect and promote minority rights, human rights and democracy based on the Bangladesh Constitution, UDHR, anti-torture laws, United Nations convention against torture and its optional protocol⁴ by strengthening the capacity of human rights defenders in advocating the welfare of the marginalized and minority communities as epitomized by the powerful principle of “Leave no one behind” in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This principle provides a good guide to human rights defenders, policymakers, CSOs, marginalized communities and minority groups in taking action towards mainstreaming it in society through promulgation of new legal and regulatory measures, allocation of necessary financial support for safety and security programs that are more efficiently targeted to the marginalized and minority communities, and creation of space for the participation and the voice of minority and marginalized people. Such

mainstreaming effort also requires change of norms, values and mind-set in society. In that sense, addressing the vulnerability of those left behind in the traditional socio-economic growth process is a political-economic task which entails change in the balance of social forces.

HRDC offers its humble contribution towards taking everybody along in the journey towards inclusive transformation and human well-being in Bangladesh. HRDC's programs obtained the following results and achievements: a group of new generation of human rights defenders against discrimination has been trained at district level among the members of CSOs, CBOs, and social workers. A strong cross networking has developed under the networking programs with NGOs and INGOs.

A new generation of human rights defenders was trained. More than four hundred human rights defenders have been doing their activism all over Bangladesh in relation to human rights violation prevention and development of a human rights culture. Creating mass awareness is ensured by advocacy and campaign activities as much as government implementation of the United Nations' Universal Periodic Review recommendations.⁵

Concluding Statement

HRDC is a grassroots-level, non-political, non-religious, non-profit non-governmental organization (NGO) with a focus on minority rights and collaborating with social democracy movement-oriented organizations working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. It works with youth organizations (Youth Clubs, Youth Alliance) at the community level, Girls Forums and CBOs.

This article recognizes the significant contribution of a number of people and institutions to the work of HRDC. Human rights defenders and activists provided valuable support in the capacity-building and intensive training programs of HRDC.

HRDC aims to continue its work by promoting human rights-based city governance and legislative process in the Parliament of Bangladesh by which the policymakers make laws and rules to protect the human rights of all everywhere.

Endnotes

1 See full text of the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development, United Nations General Assembly resolution 41/128, 4 December 1986, available at www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-right-development.

2 For more information on School Under the Sky, visit Street Children Leedo, https://leedobd.org/?page_id=51. Watch the video on Schools Under the Sky on YouTube, www.youtube.com/watch?v=doAi-CHFg1c&t=37s.

3 See Girls Street Child World Cup Football Tournament, Street Children Leedo, https://leedobd.org/?page_id=2306.

4 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment and the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, see www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel.

5 The most recent UPR recommendations was issued on 14 May 2018 for the third cycle review at the 39th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, see Universal Periodic Review - Bangladesh, Human Rights Council, www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/bd-index.