

The Human Rights Education Situation in Sri Lanka

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In Sri Lanka as in other parts of Asia, human rights education is undertaken by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in both the nonformal (community-based) and formal (school-based) sectors. It is a response to the political and social turmoil that has enveloped the country since 1971.

The increase in the cost of living, unemployment, and the use of political patronage to get jobs were among the causes of the youth unrest that precipitated the 1971 Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, or People's Liberation Front) insurrection. In the 1980s, the State, the Sinhalese nationalist forces, and Tamil nationalist groups came to regard armed confrontation as the only way to resolve ethnic antagonisms. 1987 saw the second JVP insurrection. The democratic institutional environment came under pressure as the government cracked down on all opposition. Civil society found its negotiating space severely restricted. Even at the beginning of the 1990s, it was unsafe to talk in public about democratic principles of governance and human rights. The involuntary disappearance and killing of persons suspected of antigovernment activities became an ordinary occurrence, pushing NGOs to raise public awareness of human rights.

NGO Movement Dynamics

The 1980s witnessed the growth of NGOs, which may be divided into two major communities:

- development NGOs, whose work focuses on justice and equity issues; and

- human rights NGOs, which emphasize issues related to liberty.

NGOs working on women, children, peace, and ethnic issues are the emerging third bloc, although they move between the two sides of the continuum depending on their programs' emphasis.

Development groups include community-based organizations (CBOs), cooperatives, credit groups, fisherfolk groups, farmers' groups, and other sectoral groups working at the village level. Both professionals and non-professionals run these groups. The NGO National Action Front (NNAF) is one of the biggest networks of development groups. It has consortiums of CBOs and NGOs in 16 of 25 districts in Sri Lanka. Member organizations in these consortiums implement programs at the community level. Other networks of development NGOs are the Central Council of Social Services, Grassroots Development Support Service Center, among others. Based in villages and communities, they boast community-based and nonformal education programs. However, because they are traditionally viewed as development NGOs, their education programs are not always construed as human rights education.

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Human rights NGOs emerged in the early 1980s and multiplied in the early 1990s in response to the massive violation of civil and political rights by government forces. They started as providers of legal aid to victims of government repression and later also provided legal clinics and conducted legal education for the general public. The legal education programs began what later on was called human rights education. The groups are the Movement for the Defense of Democratic Rights (MDDR), Lawyers for Human Rights and Development (LHRD), the Center for the Study of Human Rights—University of Colombo (CSHR), Institute for Human Rights (IHR), Center for Society and Religion (CSR), Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE), Home for Human Rights (HHR), among others.

Human rights NGOs are different from development NGOs in the sense that they usually operate at the national level and within the State's judicial structure. Most human rights NGOs are located in Colombo and other cities. Consciously or not, they emphasize civil and political rights. Lawyers dominate them, making the human rights approach legalistic and litigation oriented. It cannot be denied that legalism has its merits in pressuring the courts to lay down legal parameters for State action with respect to fundamental and human rights. However, the limits to this approach became apparent when the groups started to embark on massive human rights education programs for the formal and nonformal sectors.

Forms and Format of Human Rights Education

Described below is the human rights education program of human rights NGOs as distinguished from that of development NGOs.

Human rights education defined

In-depth interviews with human rights education practitioners and activists reveal that they

see their activities as a process of teaching human rights concepts and values to the general public to arm it against violations.

Purpose of teaching human rights

The objective of teaching human rights is to raise people's awareness of their rights, with the hope that they will act upon their knowledge.

Target audience

Human rights education programs in Sri Lanka may be characterized as formal, non-formal, and informal.

- Formal human rights education programs are found in school, either integrated into ordinary-level (O-level) classes, particularly in social studies and history, or offered as a choice for individual projects required of advanced-level (A-level) students. Human rights education also takes the form of extracurricular activities such as the celebration of Human Rights Day, human rights quizzes, field visits, formation of human rights student organizations, and the like.
- Informal human rights education is usually unstructured and ad hoc. It is directed at a much larger audience through the use of theater, public campaigns, radio programs, or informal conversations. This method is not yet fully used.
- Nonformal human rights education is usually undertaken by NGOs to reach grassroots communities. Target groups are more diverse and often sectoral. Workshops and trainings are usually organized for diverse audiences.

Human rights education programs have thus targeted two groups—students and the general public.

Human rights education in schools

Sri Lanka initiated its human rights education in schools as early as 1983 through the efforts of the Sri Lanka Foundation (SLF). The National Institute of Education (NIE) of the Ministry of Education, mandated to implement national education policies, trains teachers to teach human rights. As the SLF is no longer actively involved in human rights education, the NIE has taken on the enormous task of coordinating and cooperating with NGOs, particularly the CSHR, in training teachers.

The target group is students from ages 6 to 11 or grades 5 to 10. Human rights teaching was introduced before the students were separated into streams—i.e., science, arts, and commerce—at grade 11.

Almost all human rights NGOs have human rights education programs in schools, with identified school centers. They have penetrated schools in cooperation with either the Ministry of Education or its respective provincial offices. The ministry itself identified the participating school centers, the principals, and teachers who will coordinate the project.

The student and teacher project members undergo training. It is not surprising that most of the student-members are the cream of the crop. There is a yearly turnover of students, and even teacher coordinators are sometimes replaced after transfer to another school or when they lose interest in the project. Such turnover demands that the NGO must continuously conduct human rights lectures and activities for the new members.

Nonformal human rights education

Nonformal human rights education began as legal education in the aftermath of massive human rights violations in the 1980s and early 1990s. Recipients of human rights education vary from human rights activists or professionals (who have gone through the diploma course of the IHR, for example) to community lead-

ers (who trained under the CSHR and LHRD, for example). Other target groups include government officials, public servants, and *gramaniladharis*—the elected village leaders. While human rights NGOs with education programs claim that they have reached grassroots communities by creating community centers and coordinating with CBOs, I suspect that nonformal human rights education is basically for community leaders and not the village folk, although occasional lectures for the latter are also held upon invitation of their leaders. But the lectures are not at all like the long-term community needs-based education programs of developmental NGOs. It is also worth noting that human rights NGOs are criticized for not reaching the interior because most of them are situated in Colombo and other cities. Thus, they do not adequately address the needs of the most vulnerable sectors. Could the reason be that animators, facilitators, and community workers are not among the usual staff of human rights NGOs?

Methodology

Human rights education in schools is of two types—training and lectures, and non-curricular and open activities. Human rights NGOs such as the CSHR and MIRJE either train teachers to train their students, or directly train the students. The MIRJE, CSHR, and MDDR also conduct some non-curricular human rights activities such as the Human Rights Day celebration, a human rights quiz bee, human rights poster-making contest, human rights parade, field visits, etc., which are usually directed at the public. Human rights NGOs with school programs visit their school centers thrice a year at most or at least once per term.

Almost all human rights NGOs have a nonformal human rights education program. The LHRD, CSHR, MIRJE, MDDR, even women's groups such as WIN and peace groups such as NPC regularly organize training workshops for activists, government offi-

cials, public servants, *gramaniladharis*, community and religious leaders, and professionals.

Training workshops usually run from half a day to a week depending on the availability of the participants and/or objectives of the workshop. Lectures and discussions are usually employed. However, as the lecture method is often ineffective, human rights NGOs include field visits or observations and occasional role playing as part of their “learner-centered” methodology. For field visits, participants are usually divided into groups that are assigned a community or issue to work on. A group may visit a prison, street children, plantation or farming sites, factories, etc. and then document human rights violations, enhancing the members’ internalization of human rights concepts.

The use of radio and theater to raise people’s awareness of human rights is not yet used exhaustively by NGOs. The Theater Action Group of Jaffna is the only popularly known troupe that uses theater to teach.

The Family Rehabilitation Center (FRC) uses psychotherapy to rehabilitate victims of extreme trauma, such as those tortured or raped, and the families of the disappeared and those killed by armed groups or government forces. The FRC also educates health workers and providers on how to deal with the victims. Psychotherapy and counseling are just beginning to gain recognition as ways of conducting human rights education and human rights work. Humanitarian groups such as the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies call for more specialized methodology and knowledge to deal with victims of extreme emergency situations. Accordingly, human rights education should go beyond mere human rights concepts and include knowledge on how to deal with the psychological trauma experienced not only by the victims but by the general population as well.

In summary, both the nonformal and formal human rights education programs use lectures and discussions to teach human rights. Lectures and discussions are enhanced by field visits and role playing. The schools also use

informal methods such as campaigns, quiz bees, Human Rights Day celebrations, and the like. Nonformal human rights education uses other strategies such as radio and theater. A small portion of the human rights NGO community is calling for more specialized human rights education to address the psychosocial trauma of those whose rights have been directly violated.

Content

Human rights NGOs have already developed a highly structured human rights curriculum, from the philosophy of human rights, its historical evolution both in the world and in Sri Lanka, to international human rights instruments and detailed discussions of human rights, the Constitution, and the legal system. It also includes discussions of child rights, women’s rights, environmental rights, consumers’ rights, the right to development, etc. There is no dearth of experts on human rights and its subfields.

Trainings range from paralegal work to basic human rights to more complex human rights laws. Educators or lecturers give high-caliber lectures that are then reinforced by role play or field visits. Lectures are usually interspersed with actual cases or events to show how human rights concepts and laws are applied. Trainings usually end with discussions on legal mechanisms and recourse available to promote human rights. Participants are usually encouraged to ask questions to stimulate discussion. Some lecturers ask questions to encourage the participants to share their experiences and ideas.

In schools, apart from the non-curricular NGO human rights education activities, the teaching of human rights is integrated into history and social studies subjects:

- Year 6 Duties and Rights
- Ancient Civilization
- Agriculture and Irrigation
- Diversity and Unity

- Year 7 Spread of Civilization (India)
Spread of Civilization (Greek/
Chinese)
Agricultural Production
Natural Resources (Water)
Natural Resources (Wild Life)
- Year 8 Types of Government (Modern
World)
Basic Human Needs (Food)
Economic Systems (Capitalist)
Arts and Crafts, Language, Social
Living
Social Organization and Social
Living
- Year 9 Hydraulic Civilization (Sri Lanka)
Fundamental Rights
Basic Economic Problems (Sri
Lanka)
Social Systems
Industries
- Year 10 Arrival of the Portuguese
Medieval Europe
Social Living and Human Rights
Democratic Government
Preservation of Human Rights
- Year 11 French Revolution
Resources
Safeguarding of Human Rights
Transport and Communication

Textbooks have been revised to enlarge human rights content. However, most of the chapters on human rights appear at the end, and teachers often fail to cover them.

In 1995, the SLF sponsored and supported the preparation of the *Teachers Manual for Human Rights Teaching*, which is made up of 29 teaching modules for grades 5 to 10. While the SLF conducted several workshops to train teachers on how to use the modules and the NIE continues the SLF's work by organizing in-service training for teachers, teaching hu-

man rights is not yet part of the regular curricular programs of teacher training colleges.

Rethinking Human Rights Education

Human rights education defined

The definition of human rights education as merely a process of teaching human rights concepts and values to enable the general public to become aware of human rights is flawed. It presupposes that human rights violations happen because the public is ignorant of its rights. While this may be true, however, knowledge of human rights does not automatically push a person to take a stand for human rights, nor does knowledge of human rights restrain one from violating others' rights. Violations occur because a network of belief systems, cultural frames, and institutional environments breeds them. Psychological, cultural, and systemic factors contribute to human rights violations, implying that human rights education must go beyond raising awareness to fostering values and skills that will change both individual beliefs and organizational systems that infringe on human rights. Human rights education is not, therefore, merely the teaching of human rights concepts and values but rather a life-long process of reflection and critical analysis of personal and social experiences using the ideals and concepts of human rights as standards to evaluate them.

The concept of teaching human rights also suggests that there is a defined body of esoteric knowledge that must be imparted to people. Those trained to know and understand human rights often think about the language of rights rather than that of their own experiences. Human rights education proceeds from the fact that people have experiences that wound their dignity, not because human rights texts tell them they have rights. Why, then, does human rights education proceed from the texts and instruments rather than people's experiences?

One unfortunate result of the limited definition of human rights education is that it is reduced to the question of curricular and non-curricular programs. Should there be a separate human rights subject? Or should the infusion technique be used? Should it be integrated into the curriculum or offered as an extracurricular activity? What this approach to human rights education failed to realize is that human rights education is not only a question of inclusion or exclusion in the curriculum. It is not only another subject to be learned, as is now the case. It is a philosophy and orientation that must pervade the school system, campus culture, teachers' educational philosophy and methodology, and, yes, the curriculum. Human rights education should also serve as a critique of the existing educational practices and school setup.

Human rights education can then be defined as education for life—a life-long continuous reflection and evaluation of one's experiences using human rights standards and philosophies in order to attain individual and societal well-being.

Purpose

The objective of human rights education as defined by the groups surveyed is to raise people's awareness. There is nothing wrong with the objective per se, but the question is: After raising one's consciousness, what next? Shouldn't human rights education in itself be a call to action? I believe that NGOs with human rights education programs hesitate to encourage people to address human rights situations affecting their lives, especially in schools. While not all students may be expected to become activists, training programs do not even let them systematically think of problem-solving options. Human rights education should help solve problems rather than merely describe and document them.

Target audience

Human rights education in schools

Sustainable and regular human rights training programs for teachers are generally lacking. Previous human rights trainings were basically general human rights orientation programs that did little to train teachers to systematically integrate human rights into identified entry points of the school curriculum. Of the programs' shortcomings, the most glaring are

- not including teacher training colleges in activities to institutionalize human rights in the schools and
- not treating teachers' unions, parents and teachers' associations, and school administrators as strategic partners.

Making human rights part of teacher training both in pre- and in-service will accelerate the institutionalization of human rights in the school system. University faculties of education and social sciences may be strategic partners in developing appropriate methodologies in massive human rights training for teachers.

NGOs may also concentrate on providing extracurricular human rights activities for students, such as UNESCO clubs, peace groups, and environment clubs. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. There are enough school organizations that can be encouraged to join human rights NGO projects.

It is also important to note here that human rights programs in schools are best introduced at the ordinary-level rather than the advanced-level, considering that only 26% of those who take the advanced-level exam actually hurdle it.

Nonformal human rights education

Human rights NGOs are criticized for failing to reach the most marginalized sectors because they operate mainly from cities and are dominated by lawyers. Their human rights

education programs are often construed as legalistic and academic, and understood only by the educated. Development groups, on the other hand, are able to develop community education programs, which are essentially human rights education programs but often not traditionally considered as such. The MIRJE, which has a network of CBOs, reaches the grass-roots communities.

CBOs should be approached by human rights NGOs for help in reaching the communities. It is probably about time that human rights NGOs employ non-lawyers such as educators, community development practitioners, social workers, and the like, and train them as animators, community developers, or organizers.

Human rights NGOs often reach only the educated. Some NGOs such as the LHRD have extended their programs to the *ghramaniladharis*, municipal and provincial officials, and middle-level government officers. There is a gap between the uppermost echelon of government structure and the lowest stratum of Sri Lankan society.

Since NGOs are usually suspected by government officials of being cohorts of foreign interests, the Human Rights Commission should train members of the bureaucracy and the armed forces.

Methodology

Using lectures and discussions to deliver human rights education is not bad per se, but the assumptions of human rights education practitioners should be reexamined.

Let us first discuss human rights education in schools. The educational system in Sri Lanka, as in many countries in Asia, is exam driven, with a premium put by parents, teachers, and society in general on good education.

Being well educated means being able to pass the ordinary-level and the advanced-level exams and being qualified to enter university. Inevitably, teachers teach to enable students to pass the exams and, likewise, students study to

pass the exam. As a consequence, teachers are under tremendous pressure to teach well. Education authorities train them to teach well, emphasizing how and what to teach. Thus, teachers are expected to be the fountain of knowledge, and giving lectures is the most efficient way to ferret out of teachers what they know. They “deposit” knowledge into students’ heads and “withdraw” it during examinations. Students, in turn, are under extreme pressure to “know” everything that is taught them; thus, they have to listen intently, and passively receive the “knowledge” given them.

Inevitably, they use mainly rote learning, which is often called the teacher-centered approach. It has a number of flaws:

- The students become passive recipients of knowledge and the object of the educative process. Their brain is seen as a receptacle that must be filled with data, information packaged as knowledge. What is glaringly missing in this approach is the understanding of how students learn. Students learn when they are engaged and the subject matter is relevant to them. They learn things according to their own schema of things, which means that they actively interpret and reinterpret data and information.
- How relevant is the predetermined knowledge taught them? The curriculum designers are the educational planners themselves. More often than not, knowledge refers to esoteric and scientific knowledge held usually by experts, and such esoteric knowledge is broken down into subunits called competencies. Thus, knowledge is fragmented into the disciplines of science, mathematics, history, etc. The object of education then is for students to know what experts know, which may not always be relevant to the students’ existence but putatively held to be important to society’s survival.
- Some believe that students possessing such knowledge can manifest it behaviorally,

much like Pavlov's famous rats and dogs. By operation of punishment and reward, people can learn the desired behavior. Translated into educational terms, giving the students the right subject matter and teaching them in the right way will inevitably lead to desired behavior.

Integrating human rights into the curriculum without changing the basic philosophical and theoretical assumptions of the whole educational system would reduce human rights to another subject matter to be "learned."

If NGO workers enter the school system armed only with their "expertise" in human rights as a body of knowledge but without an appreciation of the dynamics, science, and theory that underlie the school system, human rights education itself will be engulfed by the malaise that plagues the school system.

Enhancing the school curriculum with human rights concepts and values without enriching educational and learning processes will have limited effect down the road.

Some NGOs do experiment with "learner-centered" methodologies such as field visits, and activities such as games, role play, and case studies. However, using these strategies per se is not the answer. Even if teachers use learner-centered methodologies, they may still alienate (or bore) students if the subject matter is still exam driven. Field visits, for example, may be seen as a way to help them better understand human rights concepts. And this is where the problem lies: field visits should help students understand their own lives and immediate experience.

In nonformal human rights education, educators have more room to maneuver because there is no curriculum to follow. However, lawyers often adopt a very structured lecture-and-discussion method, and the banking method discussed above is often replicated in nonformal human rights education. Training usually starts with understanding the basic concepts of human rights, immediately defining the dis-

cussion as legalistic. It is thus not surprising that the training is not followed by in-depth discussion on Sri Lankan society and social analysis.

The replication of a structured, formal method of teaching human rights in conducting nonformal human rights education is best explained by the lack of training of the practitioners themselves (usually lawyers) in popular-education methods, and the historical beginning of human rights education as purely legal education. The use of theater, radio, and more creative methods other than training is not fully developed.

Human rights education service providers did not attempt to systematically study the psychosocial make-up of their target groups. Such research could have helped them develop an appropriate methodology informed by a multiple of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education, adult education, anthropology, and political science.

Content

It is disheartening that transformative educational programs are fragmented. For instance, women's rights may be included in human rights education but not necessarily gender issues. Human rights education practitioners acknowledge that human rights education is weak in the areas of peace and ethnic issues. While the right to development may be included in human rights trainings, development issues may not always be discussed. Such fragmentation also happens in the conduct of gender and peace education. I can only conjecture that such fragmentation may be traced to weak coordination among peace, environmental, development and human rights, and women's NGOs themselves. Strikingly absent is some semblance of systematic analysis of Sri Lankan society. Why are there human rights violations? Why is there conflict? Why is there underdevelopment? Why are there gender inequality and a long list of other whys? What is

the thread that links all these issues together?
Perhaps it is the absence of a theory.

Recommendations

<i>Gaps and problem areas</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>
<p>1. General framework and orientation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The definition of human rights education is limited. • Human rights education objectives are ambiguous. • The approach to human rights education is legalistic. • Educators are absent in human rights education. • The approach is fragmented. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote human rights education as education for and about life. • Orient human rights education toward problem solving. • Use an interdisciplinary approach to human rights education. • Include educationists, social scientists, adult educators, and community development specialists in human rights education programs. • Conduct dialogue among transformative educators and NGO workers.
<p>2. Target group/Audience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social scientists, teacher training colleges, parent-teacher associations, teachers' unions, and mass-media people are not involved. • Grass-roots communities are not effectively reached. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate activities with identified groups. • Identify CBOs and train community educators. • Have NGOs employ community educators and field workers. • Draw up a national human rights education plan of action where the work is divided up among groups. • Create consortiums of NGOs, CBOs, and funding agencies at the district level to implement human rights education at the district level.
<p>3. Content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content is structured so that training proceeds from abstract concepts rather than people's lived experiences. • Content is based on human rights texts rather than human and social issues. • No social analysis is involved. • Content does not include the self and personal experiences. • Legalistic rather than ordinary everyday language is used. • The action component of content is not well developed. • Content is not about Sri Lankan society but about rights language. • Content does not make use of inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches. • Content is segmented. • Content is oriented toward violations of human rights. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine content first from people's view of society and community. • Emphasize human rights violations and why they occur. • Use people's language, social concepts, indigenous ways of resolving conflict, and human rights concepts that are ingrained in Sri Lankan culture. • Take a sociological rather than legalistic approach although legal concepts may also be used. • Relate human rights with other concepts such as peace, gender, children's issues, development, etc. • Include experiences of hope or little successes.