

Human Rights in the Iranian Education System*

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There is a worldwide consensus about the unique role of education in the enhancement of international human rights standards. As a result, attention was drawn to the education systems of the countries of the world as the most rudimentary educational channel for this purpose.¹

This article probes the Iranian education system and the extent of its support or denial of human rights education in terms educational objectives, curriculums, extracurricular activities, and in-service teacher training.

There are several important matters that should be clarified at this point.

First, Iran has a centralized education system. Educational objectives, policies, curriculums, teaching and learning materials (teachers' guides and students' textbooks) are all decided by the central government. A centralized education system has its own merits and demerits as far as education reform that supports human rights education is concerned.

On the one hand, any decision made in the capital concerning human rights education² will be under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, which covers all units of the education system. On the other hand, however, a centralized education system provides difficulties to local initiatives and makes them dependent upon approval or decision-making process at the national level.

Second, in 1975 the then ruling regime in Iran ratified two international human rights instruments, namely, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran ratified a few more instru-

ments, namely, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) with a general reservation that they are not contradictory to Islamic principles. Becoming party to these human rights instruments legally paves the way for the amendment of laws and policies or the drawing up and implementation of new initiatives on various fields (such as education) aimed at the implementation of the provisions of these agreements.

Third, the Iranian education system is religious not secular in character. The system has explicitly set Islamic education as its objective, intending to familiarize the students with the Islamic beliefs and values as well as religious rules in different fields. The system also intends to make the students obtain the spirit of observing religious teachings. Due to its religious characteristic, the education system is contingent both in form and content upon certain religious views. For instance, boys are separated from girls at three levels of education - primary, secondary, and pre-university - except in remote villages where sparse population makes it not possible to separate boys from girls. Thus also all students (even religious minorities) are obliged to study Arabic, the language of the holy Qur'an.

For this reason, in order for human rights

principles to be considered in the different aspects of the education system such as the structure, policy, or curriculum content, they must already be either in conformity with the religious teachings, or at least not opposing them. Whenever, however, the international human rights standards are not in conformity with Islam, or better to say, with its dominant interpretation, then it must be eliminated from the education system, as what happens in such fields as law and economics, and the like. As an example for the former, one can point to the illegality of marriage of a Moslem woman with a non-Moslem man in Iranian legal system. And usury is an example of forbidden economic activity. Taking into consideration the fact that there are different interpretations of Islam, it can be maintained that embedding human rights into the Iranian education system is highly affected by the competition between and among proponents of different Islamic interpretations.

Human rights and the objectives of Iranian formal education

A brief look at the general and specific objectives set for every education level in Iran indicates that teaching human rights has not been taken into consideration. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the education objectives were decided in disregard of human rights concerns. In fact, the teaching of a number of human rights principles, attitudes, and skills have been mentioned among the education objectives. For instance, the general objectives consider the following:

1. Reinforcement of moral integrity and self-esteem
2. Nurturing peaceful coexistence
3. Nurturing the spirit of self-confidence (to fulfil moral objectives)
4. Promoting the spirit of wisdom, thinking, contemplation, criticism, and initiative
5. Reinforcing the spirit of collaboration,

cooperation in group activities

6. Promoting the spirit of respecting human traits and observing the material and spiritual rights of others
7. Reinforcing the spirit accountability and collaboration in the religious, social, and cultural activities.

Taking them all into consideration, the aim is to educate the human being into one who, very much like the one defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has morals, integrity, and autonomy, and active rather than passive towards others.

Moreover, concepts such as tolerance of others' viewpoints, observance of the law and the right to property, and protecting the environment are explicitly focused upon both in general and specific objectives at each education level. Also, the importance of developing human rights skills which plays an effective role in the promotion as well as observance of human rights are taken into consideration and incorporated in such objectives as "promote a liking for cooperation with others" (objective for social studies at the primary level), "use friendly and affectionate language in his/her communication with others" (objective for moral education at the primary level), "consider important, and as the basis of progress, the tolerance of constructive criticism" (objective for moral education at the junior secondary level).

It seems, however, that in determining these objectives a number of major international human rights principles have perhaps been ignored, or not taken into consideration as they should have been. And on certain occasions, ideas contrary to the international human rights have been promoted.

Human rights constitute an approach focusing on the individual, and first and foremost concerned with the rights of each and every human being. However, it appears that in the determination of the objectives of the education system, greater emphasis is attached

to responsibility rather than the enjoyment of rights. For instance, one social objective set for the primary level begins with “the student knows his/her duty [and not his/her duties and rights] with regard to his/her family, friends, and neighbors.” (clause 1). It further continues, “... the student is committed to his/her duties and responsibilities”. Yet, in clause 4, it reads, “... the student is content with his/her right, and observes the rights of others.” This in fact means that the individual does not demand more than his/her own right and that he/she performs his/her duties in relation to others. The same concept can be seen in clause 5 where it reads, “in order to fulfil his/her rights, the individual chooses lawful practices.”

This duty-oriented approach is still dominant in the objectives set for both junior and senior secondary curriculums. For instance, an objective set for both curriculums provides that “... the student considers obeying parents as a duty for himself/herself” (clause 5 of the moral objectives set for junior secondary curriculum, and clause 5 of social objectives set for senior secondary school curriculum) with neither any obligation placed on nor any mention made of his/her rights as a child. Though one social objective says, “...the student makes an effort to realize his/her own rights as well as those of others” (clause 3), the same social objective also provides that the student “is aware of his/her responsibilities, and commits him/herself to performing the duties.” (clause 8). There is no mention of “the individual being conscious of his/her own rights”.

One of the social objectives for the senior secondary school curriculum reads: “the student is committed to observing the rights of others” (clause 5). In fact, the emphasis here is on the performance of one’s duty towards others, and not practicing one’s right. At the same time, students are expected to give priority to social interests over those of the individuals (clause 7 of the social objectives). Such unconditional preferences are inconsistent with the modern human rights concerns regarding

support for the individual’s legitimate rights against all threats including those from society (of which the government is sometimes the manifestation).

Two main concerns of the international human rights standards, namely freedom and equality, have not been taken into consideration in the determination of the objectives of the education system, as they should. Throughout the texts containing the general and specific objectives of each education level, the term “equality” has not been employed, and even in one case the term inequality has been implicitly accepted and encouraged; but in one section it reads, “... a chaste and virtuous girl, and a zealous, brave boy” (from the moral objectives set for the junior secondary school). In fact this statement is indicative of the view that such features as virtue and chastity are expected of girls (and not boys), while bravery and zeal are features attributed to boys (and not girls).

Moreover, unlike concepts such as discipline, patriotism, campaign against colonialism and arrogance and the like, freedom is not taken into consideration in the educational objectives as it should be. It is only used twice. First, clause 3 of general political objectives, “the student understands the significance of independence and freedom in social progress.” However, here freedom is not considered as a right of the individual towards full development. Second, in the political objectives set for the junior high school, it reads, “the individual is steadfast and staunch in the preservation of independence, freedom, and non-alignment”(clause 5). Here, it is not clear to whom and in what areas freedom is granted.

The international human rights standards call on the states to be tolerant of customs, traditions, and beliefs of other states, urging them to avoid prejudging foreign nations, cultures, and instead pay attention to the problems and show sympathy for other nations’ griefs and sorrows alongside sympathy with national issues. In the objectives set for the

education system the development of the spirit of fellowship, cooperation, love and affection for the human race focuses on Moslems in the first place (clause 5 of political objectives set for the primary school curriculum, and clause 4 of political objectives set for junior secondary school curriculum), and secondly on the world's oppressed (clause 11 of political objective set for the senior secondary school curriculum).

In these objectives, emphasis is placed on recognition of the pagan leaders both at the very inception of the Islamic era and at the present day (clauses 8 and 9 of the political objectives set for the primary school curriculum). However, familiarity with those who have had an effective role in campaigning against injustice, racism, violence, and colonization as well as in promoting peace and friendship between and among nations, is not seen among the objectives.

Regarding other religions, while familiarity with the ways and lives of prophets and imams of Islam is also among the objectives there is no mention of truths, causes, and concerns shared among religions, or even fellowship among the followers of religions.

In relation to other nations, the necessity for being acquainted with other cultures and civilizations (clause 8 of the cultural-artistic objectives determined in the general objectives and clause 6 of cultural-artistic objectives set for senior secondary school curriculum) as well as enjoying the experience of others (clause 5 of cultural-artistic objectives set for the junior secondary school curriculum) are all considered educational objectives. At the same time, however, students are expected to have a strong attachment to their own culture, civilization and political system, without the development of critical viewpoint towards them. There is no reasoning provided for supporting own culture and civilization and being critical of other cultures and civilizations.

All in all, it seems that in the definitions set for the educational system there are subtle bor-

ders between "us" and "others" which can be followed by violation of "others'" human rights.

Learning about human rights and the Iranian students

There are questions to be faced in this section:

First: Are there syllabuses specifically focusing on teaching of human rights?

Second: How are the concepts and principles related to human rights mooted in other syllabuses?

Third: Do the textbooks promote human rights/non-human rights attitudes?

In the end, we will be dealing with mechanisms and processes which focus on the reinforcement of human rights skills of the students.

Human rights in educational programs

During the past few years the attention of the Iranian education policymakers and planners has been drawn to the teaching of human rights and the various categories such as political and civil rights. Approval of syllabuses such as "educating juveniles on human rights", "familiarity with major social rules and regulations", "dialogue among civilizations", "educating girls on human rights", and the teaching of these syllabuses in the form of elective courses are all outcomes of the emergence of such a tendency.

Before dealing with the contents of these syllabuses, it is necessary to point out that there are no textbooks or written examination requirements in the curriculums for the first three levels. Students are continuously evaluated throughout the courses and on the basis of their activities in the classrooms. Thus, these curriculums not only focus on enhancing students' knowledge of human rights, but also help reinforce their knowledge of human rights by relying on active learning methods

such as question-and-answer, group discussion, brain storming, report writing, and the like.

From among these syllabuses, “dialogue among civilizations” syllabus is a distinctive one.³ Although this syllabus does not specifically focus on the enhancement of knowledge of human rights, taking into consideration its approach to other nations, cultures, civilizations, and religions, it is deeply affected by such human rights attitudes as respecting other cultures and civilizations, tolerance of others’ viewpoints, avoidance of violence, and working to promote peace. Moreover, the syllabus is also intended to enhance such skills as rational debate and criticism.

In the teachers’ guidebook for this syllabus, lasting multiplicity of cultures is identified not only as a reality, but also as a truth. This identification with and the belief in cultural pluralism are closely related. Also, Iran’s ratification of international instruments with regard to human rights, women’s rights and the like are recommended in this book.

The syllabus “educating juvenile on human rights”, and its substitute “an introduction to major social rules and regulations”, introduce international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), CRC, and Islamic Human Rights Declaration (adopted by governments from Islamic countries in Cairo in 1990). These documents are part of the annexes in the syllabus.

Although these syllabuses have not been designed and written based on the idea of teaching the human rights documents, they are deeply inspired by their contents. That is to say, there are segments allocated to such concepts as rights, personal rights, social rights, rights of the minority, human rights, the United Nations Organization and its functions, and the like. However, in the teachers’ guide, “an introduction to/acquaintance with the social rules and regulations” discussions concerning rights mainly refer to rights under domestic laws; for instance, rights of the religious, eth-

nic, or linguistic minorities are referred to in accordance with Iranian laws, or in order to acquaint the individual with his/her civil rights, the constitution and customary laws are placed as basis. The international human rights instruments are not cited.

In the discussion on rights, Islamic sources have been referred to frequently in order to indicate conformity of these rights with Islamic teachings. At the same time, inconsistencies between the international human rights standards with those of Iranian laws have shrewdly been ignored and/or evaded. For instance, in the introduction of human rights instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, or the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, or CRC, it is emphasized that many of the rights mentioned in these documents have been put forth centuries ago in religions, particularly in Islam.

Another example is the discussion on the family and the rights and duties of each family member as introduced in civil law and regulations, incorporated in the customs and traditions prevailing over the society, and derived from Islamic jurisprudence, but not as officially recognized by the international human rights instruments. As in the above, in introducing international documents such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, or the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, or the CRC it is emphasized that most of the rights found in these documents have been introduced by religions, Islam in particular.

In the discussion on family, it is pointed out that in the relationship between married couple the responsibility of heading the family lies on the man; at the same time, it is pointed out that this responsibility is considered as a kind of duty rather than a right or authority, and the man is not authorized to use it against the interest of the family.

Teaching the students about the rights of citizens, as written in the domestic laws, should

not be taken as similar to the teaching of human rights. But the positive impact of the former on the regulation of interpersonal relations as well as the relations between individual and the government cannot be denied. However, human rights are the rights granted to a human being merely because he/she is human. These rights are not determined by law; they are prior to the law and should be taken as standards based on which human rights systems can be evaluated.

Human rights concepts in the textbooks

Perhaps the terms human rights or international human rights instruments are not used in any of the textbooks in the different education levels. This does not lead, however, to the conclusion that these textbooks are devoid of beliefs, causes, and values related to human rights, or disregard them. Thus, in order to avoid such conclusion, the textbooks are examined in terms of the manner and sense the textbooks include a select number of major human rights concepts.

Human dignity

Human rights are meant to safeguard human dignity. The human being needs human rights not merely to stay alive, but to lead a better life. For this reason, textbooks discuss different interpretations of human dignity and honor, as well as the paramount position of the human being in the universe. Using religious teachings, honoring this human characteristic is highly emphasized. However, there is no mention of the modern concept of human rights based on intrinsic human dignity - all human beings deserve to enjoy basic rights or international human rights standards equally.

Equality

Regardless of the difference of race, ethnicity, sex, social status, or social role,

all human beings enjoy human rights. In the textbooks, relying also on Islamic teachings which in fact are the dominant interpretation of the Islamic sources, various criteria of equality with different degrees are emphasized.

Social justice is an aspect of equality, and pointed out in the textbooks much more than other aspects. Based on the behavior of the prophet (peace be upon him) and Imams, the rulers' equal treatment of the people, or in today's interpretation "equality before the law", is supported. Moreover, racial discrimination is explicitly condemned. The emphasis is mainly placed upon equality and fellowship of all Moslems, while equality of all human beings is not taken much into consideration. In this context, the term equality does not mean equal legal rights. In fact, believing in equality is not considered inconsistent with unequal rights of people (men vs. women, and Moslems vs. non-Moslems). Equality indeed means that each group of individuals must be treated equally in accordance with the laws specific to that group. For instance, in relation to the rights of men and women, the main idea is that they are considered equal in nature by Islam, though they do not legally have equal rights.

Freedom

Freedom is one of the basic concepts of human rights, without it a number of rights written in the international instruments would not be realized. But how and to what extent have textbooks dealt with freedom?

In textbooks the term freedom is referred to as "a cause", "an endowment", "a desire", and "an objective", indicating that depriving individuals of freedom is against human dignity. From among the indexes of freedom, freedom of thought and opinion in particular is given attention. Based on Islamic teachings, imposi-

tion of ideas is rejected, and political systems that deprive their people of freedom of opinion and expression are harshly condemned.

In this way, students become familiar with freedom of thought and freedom of expression as values confirmed by Islam. However, they are not informed of the scope and boundary of “acceptable” freedom. In real life situation, they are confronted with a number of constraints to freedom of opinion, freedom of religion, and freedom of expression, which the textbooks do not explain.

Freedom in general is discussed in the textbooks in relation to constant active participation in the general social affairs such as those of the government. From the early years of study, students are encouraged to take part in and supervise such affairs.

Rule of law

Rule of law is another key concept under the international human rights standards. In the textbooks, the necessity of obeying the law in general or specific rules and regulations such as driving regulations, the right to seek remedy from competent court, and the right to impartial judgment have all been introduced. While pointing out that law regulates the relations between and among people, it is at the same time emphasized that law constrains the decisions and conduct of the rulers. Laws are also made by the people, and for the people, and that law as means to defend people’s rights must further be taken into consideration.

Peace

The international human rights instruments expect the Ministry of Education to facilitate learning about mutual understanding, forgiveness, respect for opposite ideas, friendship among all nations, ethnic and religious groups with the aim of main-

taining peace. The textbooks for all education levels mention as the foundation of peace mainly religious teachings such as kindness to “youngsters”, “weak ones”, “all the children of the world”, “respecting the rights of others” specially “prisoners and the oppressed”, “reconciliation among the nations” particularly the Moslems, mercy on people, attachment to the destiny of all human race, making efforts for the prosperity of all human beings, fair relations among nations. However, it appears that some of the ideas pointed out in the form of stories, poems, or historical events may promote peace while encouraging the spirit of violence, hatred, and vengeance in the students. For instance, history necessarily states historical events such as wars and combats; but these events can be stated in a manner that encourages the spirit of patience and tolerance of the opposition. In the same way, epics can be taught to encourage thinking. Furthermore, in the preparation of textbooks, in the discussion of the wars against pagans at the inception of Islam, it is advisable to allocate a segment introducing the prophet’s forgiveness toward his adversaries. At the same time, it is possible to pave the way for the establishment of friendship and congeniality among the followers of different religions by pointing out values shared by religions.⁴

In addition, a number of other rights such as the right of property ownership, enjoying healthy living environment, are stated in the textbooks. For the children, for instance, the child’s right to education as well as the government’s obligation under the law to provide proper educational conditions for children are pointed out. However, there is no mention of children with disabilities or refugee children, or of such human rights instruments such as the CRC, or children’s day.

Messages of the textbooks regarding human rights

In addition to what are explicitly stated in favor of or against beliefs, values, or standards of international human rights, textbooks indirectly convey certain attitudes to the students. In order to decipher these attitudes, one has to read between the lines. Exact judgment of the implicit messages of textbooks on fundamental attitudes toward human rights such as equality between men and women, priority of negotiations over belligerence, and the like, requires specific research on each case. Here below are some research results regarding sexual status in textbooks.

Studies concerning sex discrimination indicate that pictures, names, and roles used in textbooks, normally bear traits of discrimination between men and women. Based on these researches, all textbooks for all three education levels (primary, junior, and senior secondary schools) contain pictures that favor men. For example, pictures of men in the textbooks of primary level curriculum are three times as many as those of women. The highest percentage of difference between pictures of men and women can be seen in the textbook on religious teachings (100%); that is, all the pictures in this book are of men.⁵ The discrimination not only exists in the number of pictures, but also in the type of pictures. In all textbooks women are mostly shown at home. In this way, children are implicitly taught that women are people who stay indoor, while men are those who go outdoor.

As for the number of names used in the textbooks, there is discrimination against women. For instance, in the series of textbooks for the primary level for every four male names, there is only one female name mentioned. This ratio decreases in such a way that in textbooks prepared for fifth graders in the school year 1989, there are 9 male names mentioned for every female name. This kind of discrimination continues in the upper levels.⁶ The dis-

crimatory approach to women is also seen in the roles of men and women portrayed in the textbooks.

Except for rare occasions, women are introduced as indoor beings, whereas a large number of different roles for men are introduced. For example, none of the textbooks for the four primary grades mention any female scientist, literary figure, or researcher, whether Iranian or foreigner. Yet, pictures and names of male Iranian and foreign scientists, however small in number, can be seen in the Persian language books. Such an image is inconsistent with the existing reality about women's responsibilities and roles in the society.⁷ Research shows that the ratio of women's presence in the Persian literature textbooks for the three junior secondary years in relation to 21 vocational activities (such as teachers, writers, lawyers, farmers, workers, etc.) is inconsistent with those officially reported. Official statistics show that there are no professions in which women are not involved. But the textbooks for this three-year junior secondary level say that the women's share in 18 vocational activities out of 21 is zero. But the reality is that 21% of the artists, 19% of the biologists, 25% of statisticians, and 21% of professionals in sports are women.⁸ The response to such discriminatory and unrealistic images regarding the abilities of women can be seen in dissatisfaction expressed by the girls for being female.⁹

It is clear that incorporating human rights instruments or their provisions in the textbooks, or even more, allocating a number of syllabuses to specifically teach such instruments would be problematic. They may actually eliminate human rights or their principles due to the existence of attitudes that are inconsistent with human relations such as the advantage given to men over women in the textbooks, and the hidden messages conveyed to the students. Therefore, the unavoidable part of every human rights education program should be the dissemination of human rights ideas and principles by the education system, the identi-

fication of attitudes contrary to human rights being promoted by the textbooks, and their removal and/or revision.

Organizations and students activities

Though conveying human rights information through educational channels promotes students' knowledge about human rights, it does not necessarily increase their ability to practice their own rights. Such ability is dependent upon the development of students' human rights skills. Naturally, skills cannot be obtained overnight, rather they require constant exercise during the educational years. Effective decision-making on one's future as well as that of the group members, accepting equal rights of others, listening to others, ability to express one's opinion, peaceful settlement of problems, and relational/communicative ability/competence are among the skills needed to learn in order to practice their own rights, as well as respect the rights of others.

Organizing students' institutions such as student councils, student assembly, school municipality during the recent years are indicative of Iranian education policymakers' attention to the significant role the learning of such skills can play in the personal development of students. With the formation of student councils at Iranian schools, students have undertaken the responsibility of running some of the schools' administrative and disciplinary affairs. Through these councils, students exercise accountability and participation in general affairs in a small community like school.

Members of the student assembly are elected from among student members of high school councils in proportion to students' population in the province. This assembly encourages participation, cooperation, and accountability among students; and makes use of their views in advocating for the amendment of the law and revision of regulations on education. It also seeks to pave the way for intellectual and practical participation of

students in various educational dialogues and consultation. The Ministry of Education views the student assembly as qualified entity to be consulted as well as a newly developed mechanism that can convey to its officials the students' viewpoints regarding human relations management in schools, course contents, bills proposed to the Islamic consultative assembly with respect to the education system and the like. It is worth mentioning that discussion on the bill drawn up by the students' organization for the codification of students' rights is one of the first items included in the agenda of the student assembly.

The school municipal plan was among the initiatives proposed by the city of Tehran fifteen years ago to encourage accountability among students. And it was welcomed by the Ministry of Education. Based on this initiative, some students were elected as "school municipal leaders" for one year in a number of junior and senior secondary schools supported financially by the city of Tehran. These school municipal leaders, in return, selected their deputies from among the students who received fewer votes in the elections. Thus, a small scale municipality was formed to perform activities based on the circumstances, needs, and budget in each school. The school municipal leaders attend the district municipal government meetings to become familiar with the opportunities and restrictions of the government system.

Iranian teachers' education about human rights

In an education system where education authorities have no attachment to human rights, or have accepted attitudes inconsistent with human rights, or perhaps do not have sufficient familiarity with the manner of promoting human rights skills such as cooperation, deliberation, settlement of dispute, it is natural not to expect them to educate students with human rights attitudes and skills.

In fact, any project encouraging the spread

and promotion of international human rights standards through the education system will inevitably be faced with the question, “to what extent are the teachers, and basically the human resources of the education system, familiar with modern human rights, the attitudes consistent with them, and the skills of defending or realizing them?”

In order to answer this question, the two educational stages, namely pre- and in-service training must be differentiated. For pre-service training, studies made on the general and specialized courses of teacher training universities, at associate diploma and Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) levels, show that there are no courses with such titles as “Introduction to Human Rights”, or “Introduction to Child Rights”, whether elective, or required. Although the students are not taught human rights, this does not necessarily mean that they do not learn anything regarding human rights attitudes during their years of study. Some courses and curriculums of the teacher training courses of universities are appropriate for discussions on human rights.¹⁰ In this case, taking advantage of such possibilities depends on the knowledge and inclination of the instructor.

Recent concerns about human rights have been more effective in in-service training. For instance, during the past few years several courses have been offered for teachers, principals, advisors, and even school staff members (officials), all of which somehow relate to human rights issues. Among these were courses on women’s human rights, introduction to individual and social rights of the young generation, and introduction to child rights. The scope of such training and education activities still remains very limited. Therefore, taking into consideration the number of such training activities as well as the number of participants, we may come to the conclusion that the majority of the teachers and academic staff are not yet much familiar with human rights skills and attitudes.

Such deficiencies with respect to teachers’ educational resources are felt too. The results

of the review of one of the important educational aids, the *Roshd* periodical, are relevant.¹¹ A glance at the different issues covered by the magazine indicates that of all the articles published so far, at best only 11 articles are somehow related to human rights and related topics. In fact, only one article, “I have the Right”, explicitly deals with the CRC.¹²

Civil institutions and the teaching of human rights in schools

The role of civil society organizations in the promotion of and safeguarding citizens’ rights, as the experience of other countries indicates, cannot be denied. Information disseminated to institutions affiliated with the government through bureaucratic formalities and time-consuming processes of legislation at the national level are swiftly publicized among all walks of life directly by the civil society organizations, thanks to their close connections with social groups and classes. Thus, civil society organizations act much faster than their government counterparts.

During the past decade, Iran has experienced a flourishing era of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A considerable number of the NGOs with different interests have actively appeared in public. NGOs involved in human rights activities have played a significant role in the teaching of human rights in schools. Due to their plurality, these institutions have taken active part in the education of different groups such as students, authorities in charge of education, and even parents.

To provide a general picture of the scope and subjects, and the manner by which Iranian NGOs teach human rights and related issues in secondary schools, a discussion of the activities of a number of such NGOs is helpful.

One of the NGOs that aim at teaching CRC is the Association for Defending Children Rights. During the 2001-2004 period, it organized about forty three-day workshops in Tehran and other cities with the participation

of school advisors on the invitation of Regional Education Departments.

The World Children's Research Institute is another NGO which has so far held more than thirty workshops for school principals, teachers, parents, and young adults on sex discrimination. This organization aimed at eliminating sex discrimination in the curriculums of secondary schools. Promoting peace is another major objective of this NGO. It has several activities, namely, collection of educational resources (books, movies, etc.) with themes on peace of children; recognition and promotion of rites, beliefs, and rituals which encourage such notions as patience, coexistence, and arbitration, and codification of peace proclamations; organizing workshops on peace, and values of life; participation in the activities of a number of schools; and finally conducting a one-year course in peace promotion with forty adolescent participants.

Mothers of Today is another Iranian NGO that has run several workshops concerning such issues as peace, the environment, life skills, and teaching the CRC. The target groups of these workshops have primarily been parents, and then instructors and students.

Finally, the Iranian Green Party whose major objective is to preserve the biosphere has run several workshops aimed at altering bio-environment attitudes of schools in Iran. This organization is credited for its versatile activities like the preparation of educational packages with topics such as bio-environment specifically prepared for the school children, as well as reviewing textbooks for science courses at the elementary level aiming to present proposals to the Ministry of Education for the enhancement of the course's quality. Finally, the organization has proposed a course regarding "waste recycling" for the students of junior secondary schools.

All in all, it can be said that although the NGOs have not much succeeded in attracting the cooperation of the high ranking officials of the Ministry of Education, they have been

quite successful in playing effective roles in teaching issues related to human rights through personal connections with local authorities.

Conclusion

Teaching human rights stems from the old saying "prevention is better than cure." Attempts made to introduce international human rights principles as well as cases of human rights violations, rely on the belief that the more people know human rights, the more that they will be respected, and the more is heard about violation of the human rights and the violators, the less will be heard about its abuse. As was mentioned earlier, the education system of any country is one of the major channels of not only promoting human rights principles but also enhancing the international standards of human rights.

This paper probes into the Iranian education system regarding the opportunities and support for, the deficiencies, and the resistance against further promotion of the international human rights standards. As was pointed out in the first section, a review of the objectives of the education system indicates that irrespective of minor contradictions the main issue in the fields of legislation, policymaking, and planning is the lack of sufficiently powerful support for human rights education rather than resistance to it. In other words, since human rights have not yet turned into pre-occupations of legislators, policymakers, and planners, teaching them has not yet attracted the attention of the government authorities.

Taking into consideration the human rights principles strongly suggested in the Constitution, Iran's ratification of a number of human rights instruments, amendment of the law aimed at promoting human rights, and the plan for the teaching of these laws, many indications point out the fact that the Islamic government of Iran has undertaken to fulfill the international and domestic commitments in advance.

However, the introduction of human rights principles into the education system requires clarification of the concepts on the one hand, and promotion of these concepts in a religious-oriented education system (which focuses mainly on the teaching of religious concepts) on the other. Religious considerations cannot be disregarded.

Thus, the inevitable part of any national project aiming to promote the international human rights principles through the Iranian education system relies on several factors, namely:

- academic efforts that emphasize concerns shared by religion and human rights
- defense of human rights based on religious arguments
- efforts to decrease inconsistencies between the international human rights principles and religious teachings in the beliefs, values, and religious precepts using modern Islamic jurisprudence (which takes into consideration the requirements of time and place).

Part two of the paper discusses that the incorporation of international human rights principles into the school curriculums, the approval and implementation of a number of these curriculums as well as the inclusion of some of the human rights instruments such as CRC in their guidebooks can be taken as the result of the emergence of tendency towards human rights promotion. It should be noted, however, that although human rights instruments are a significant part of the human rights knowledge, teaching human rights requires dealing with such topics as individual and collective attempts of the human race to realize their rights, significant and prevalent instances of human rights violations, national and global campaigns and attempts to decrease or possibly eliminate human rights violations, and discussion of significant events as well as influential figures. All these are aimed at raising and reinforcing con-

cern and sentiment against human rights violations by all human races in all member-countries of the world community, regardless of their sex, religion, ethnicity and language. In addition, textbooks must be reviewed with respect to the attitudes they convey to their users, and be rectified if need be.

Finally, the paper deals with positive initiatives aimed at promotion of self-confidence and accountability, and also encouraging students to participate in different activities that prepare them to undertake their roles and responsibilities as citizens.

Teaching human rights is in fact a process which cannot be restricted to education programs, which mainly cover content and method. That is why not only should the educational methods be studied, but also human relations in an educational environment must be closely observed with respect to reinforcement, undermining, or even suppression of such human rights skills as cooperation, dialogue, peaceful settlement of disputes and the like.

Part three deals with the extent and manner of teachers' familiarity with the international human rights standards. It maintains that teachers do not learn about human rights and related topics before starting their profession, but also do not receive much help in learning them during their in-service training.

Finally, the concluding section in pointing out the significance of the NGOs reveals that these civil institutions in Iran have more often than not cooperated with the education system through individual contact with schools, and that their personal relations with the school authorities have played a fundamental role in this respect. Increased opportunities for cooperation between schools and the NGOs, and creating the necessary facilities for this purpose, would further help these civil institutions devote their capabilities to human rights education processes.

From what has been stated so far, we may arrive at this conclusion: the promotion of

human rights causes through the education system with the aim of promoting international human rights standards in Iran depends on certain revisions and amendments of objectives, rules, and legislation on education.

There is a need to review, with human rights concerns in mind, the objectives of the education system, and the education programs meant for students and teachers such as designing and implementing curriculums with the aim of teaching human rights. Such rectifications which constitute the fundamentals of a national project on teaching human rights can be accomplished and implemented within a long-term (ten years for instance) period, and also with short-run schemes (three years for instance). For example, promotion of the knowledge of human rights through incorporation of courses such as “Introduction to Human Rights”, or “Introduction to Child Rights” in the curriculums of teacher training universities, are among the objectives that can be achieved within a few years time. Whereas, designing and implementing a comprehensive project on teaching human rights to all teachers, require a longer period of time. Expansion of cooperation between the local authorities of the Ministry of Education and the NGOs in the field of human rights education is among the objectives which can be achieved in a short period of time. However, designing and implementing a joint project on teaching human rights with the collaboration of mass media, including the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), requires long-term planning.

In the same way, there is a need to revise all textbooks, teaching aids and teachers’ guidebooks with respect to human rights concepts; introduce approaches on how textbooks should treat principles concerning equality of human beings, the truth not being the monopoly of certain groups, the recognition of other cultures; implement changes in textbooks aimed at eliminating contents inconsistent with human rights; emphasize human rights concepts which have not been taken into consideration

as they should be. All these require specialized research, which results can be put into practice. And this naturally requires a long period of time.

The development of two plans (short-term and long-term) for human rights education can be undertaken by a human rights education committee composed of representatives of religious authorities, the Ministry of Education, the NGOs, and human rights experts. In the meanwhile learning from the experiences of countries that have the same challenges in teaching human rights would be very fruitful and regional cooperation is specially recommended.

Endnotes

* This article is basically an extract from an unpublished research report with the same title. The research was carried out in 2004 upon the request of the Organization for Development of Textbooks affiliated to the Center for Human Rights Studies of the Tehran University. However, the author made certain changes whenever necessary. Thus, it is clear that the author is responsible for the content of this article.

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¹ This is presently seen in the United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education, whose first phase plan of action focuses on the formal education system.

² All throughout the article the term “human rights” bears the standard meaning set by the international human rights documents. It should be admitted that human rights have different interpretations based on different worldviews.

³ This syllabus was developed in the wake of the then President Mohammad Khatami’s proposal to designate the year 2001 as the year of dialogue among civilizations.

⁴ See Resalat, M., “Research plan for ‘concept of peace’ in textbooks”, Puya Educational Research Association (ordered by The Council for Development of Culture of Peace), September 2003.

⁵ See Maleki, H., 1994, *Introducing women in textbooks of elementary program, before and after the Islamic revolution* (thesis). Advisor: Taleghani, H., Research Center for Social Sciences, Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies.

⁶ For more examples see the textbooks prepared for

the junior high school level. See Mohammadi Asl, A., "A survey of the historical texts and course books with regard to the extent of women's political cooperation in Iran following the Islamic revolution", *Proceedings of the Conference on "Empowerment of Women"*, Presidential Center for Women's Participation Affairs (Tehran: 2001), page 338.

⁷ See Afshari Nader, A., *An Analysis of the Content of Primary Course Books; A Survey of the Role of Pictures in the Formation of Sex-oriented Self-image of Female Students, Girls' Image in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Presidential Office for Women's Affairs (Tehran: 1995). In another research which deals with the manner of introducing women in the textbooks of the junior high schools, the women's professions constitute a minor percentage (from 0.8% of vocational text book, up to 1.9% of the religious teachings textbooks) of the professions, and these professions are all of low-paid type, such as nanny, maid, and the like. Medical professions have been assigned to women only in four instances, and only men have been introduced as author, physicist, scientist, etc. See Shahrara, M., "An analysis of the attitudes of girls of today, and tomorrow's women" in Nader's *Girls' Self image in the Islamic Republic of Iran* under note number 5.

⁸ See Mohammadi Asl, *ibid.*, page 339.

⁹ In one experiment, a hundred boys and girls, 14-18 years old, were asked whether they were satisfied with their own sex, or they preferred the other sex/they wished they were of the other sex. 86% of the girls were not satisfied with their own sex; 93% of the boys were satisfied with their own sex, and among those dissatisfied they didn't wish to be girls either. See Ghasemzadeh, F., "The roots of the pessimistic attitude among boy and girl adolescents" in *Healthy Society*, fourth year, volume 19, 1994.

¹⁰ For example in Associate Degree for Social Sciences subject, 'Introduction to the Constitution' syllabus bears a chapter entitled Nation's Rights under which human rights can be discussed, or in Educational Affairs subject in Bachelor of Arts level the instructor can deal with some viewpoints on human rights skills under the Humane Relations syllabus.

¹¹ *Roshd* magazine is published monthly with a version (different content) for each of the 9 education levels. It is produced by the Research and Educational Planning Organization of the Ministry of Education.

¹² *Teacher Roshd*, vol. 22, no. 5, winter, 2004 (1382).