

CHAPTER EIGHT

## HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: EXPERIENCES FROM SOUTH ASIA<sup>1</sup>

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*Human rights education (HRE) has created a lot of change in the school itself. Earlier, there was this big tree behind my school and if you take a stick from that tree, and hit someone on the hand or anywhere, the place will swell up a lot. We used to get beaten black and blue with those sticks before human rights education. Once we got the book and HRE started, our teachers came and told us, “hereafter, we are not going to touch the stick.” That really took us aback and we were shocked, in fact. That increased our interest and curiosity about the entire [HRE] book because they became so different.... The teachers became so friendly that we could go and even stand close to them, which we couldn’t do earlier because you would not know what kind of mood they are in, and if they were just going to hit you and take it out on you. Now we even go into the staff room and ask any questions we have.... So we really like school now.*

—Madhu, eighth-grade student respondent from India, as cited in Bajaj, 2012, p. 116

*Mukul Jaan completed the HRLE [human rights and legal education] course successfully...and became inspired by the idea of upholding human rights and dignity of destitute people. After she became equipped with theoretical human rights and legal awareness from the HRLE course, nothing could stand in her path from applying this intelligence in vital real life situations.... On 31 October 2012, Mukul and her fellow [community Rights Implementation Committee] members, Monwara and Afela, demonstrated their ingenuity in preventing a child marriage from*

*taking place in their community. A student of Class 5 named Rizwana was being forced by her family to marry. On hearing this startling news, these [committee] members...reached Rizwana's house. During their visit, Mukul Jaan spoke out about child marriage being a punishable offense. She explained how this crime had dangerous consequences on a girl child in terms of health risks, she spoke of the pitfalls of stopping Rizwana's education, and how [it would] inflict grave psychological trauma on Rizwana....In the end, this collaborative attempt proved to be successful. [Rizwana] has resumed her formal education due to her family's newly acquired social awareness against this injustice.*

—Story from BRAC's HRLE program, Bangladesh,  
as cited in BRAC, 2013, pp. 58–59

## INTRODUCTION

Since World War II, increasing commitment to global human rights frameworks has advanced the vision of respect for the basic rights and dignity of all people. Correspondingly, human rights have greatly influenced the field of education in a variety of areas, including in discussions of access, equity, quality, curriculum, pedagogy, and accountability. Human rights have been differentially incorporated in educational policy discussions, textbook revisions, teacher education, and the everyday life of schools. This chapter addresses the question, “How are educators and community-based organizations in South Asia utilizing human rights education in seeking to transform the unequal social conditions faced by marginalized groups?”

The South Asian region, comprised of the diverse nations of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, is home to one-fifth of the world's population. Educational realities differ widely across the region: for example, 65 percent of girls in Bangladesh are married before age 18 (HRW, 2015), while, at the same time, each year approximately two hundred thousand students from affluent Indian families pursue higher education in North America, Europe, and Australia (Clark, 2013). Widening social inequalities within and across nations further distinguish the educational experiences of youth throughout the region (World Bank, 2014), including their ability to enjoy the rights enshrined in international documents.

There is a long history of commitment to human rights in the South Asian region, although gaps exist between human rights policies and

actual practices on the ground. Anti-colonial movements espoused (at that time, radical) goals of equality, non-discrimination, and dignity—pillars of international human rights. The adoption in 1948 of the United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), arguably the cornerstone document of the global rights framework, occurred around the same time as the independence of many South Asian nations from British rule (Bajaj & Kidwai, 2016). Indeed, three of South Asia's eight nations (Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan) were among the original 48 votes in favour of the UDHR, and were among the few independent nations at that time in the global South.

From 1948 to the present day, there has been a rise in attention to education as a core component of human development, dignity, and basic rights. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees a right to education, and one that “strengthens respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” Children's right to education was further codified through the Education for All conferences (1990 and 2000), the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals (2000 and 2015, respectively, and other global commitments, as is further discussed by Mundy and Read in Chapter Eleven of this book. Among other evidence of global support for education, in 2014, two advocates for the right to education—both from South Asia—were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize: Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani adolescent shot for advocating for girls' right to go to school, and Indian activist Kailash Satyarthi, who has long campaigned for an end to child labour and is the co-founder of the Global Campaign for Education.

Less than a century ago, education was seen in many places as a privilege rather than a right. For instance, at India and Pakistan's independence in 1947, a mere 16 percent of the populace was literate (Rana & Sugden, 2013). The 2014 Nobel Peace Prize signalled the ongoing evolution within global consciousness that the right to education is an aspect of comprehensive and sustainable peace, and its denial a grave social injustice. This chapter focuses on a less-discussed component of the international human rights framework: the right to an education that fosters and promotes human rights and that prepares active participants for democratic life; in other words, “human rights education.”

This chapter explores how human rights education (HRE) as a global educational movement is taken up locally by educators, activists, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in South Asia. Human rights education assumes various forms, depending on context, ideologies,

and location (Bajaj, 2012; Tibbitts, 2002; Tsolakis, 2013). Transformative human rights education—rooted in critical analyses of power and social inequalities—has been developed by non-state actors more than by government school systems, specifically by NGOs, social movements, and community-based educators. As a result, this chapter zooms in on two examples of transformative human rights education in the South Asian context that seek—in different locally contextualized ways—to interrogate power asymmetries and offer members of marginalized groups the opportunity to envision and demand equal rights. The first example is a school-based program designed by a human rights organization (People’s Watch) that trains teachers to offer a weekly human rights course in Grades 6 through 8 across India. The second example is a human rights education and legal empowerment program for poor women in Bangladesh, offered by the world’s largest non-governmental organization, BRAC (formerly the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee). The two cases presented in this chapter differ in approach, population, and context, but—as will be seen—both programs rely on well-trained teachers/facilitators who use innovative curriculum, effective participatory pedagogies, and strong relationships with learners to assist them in recognizing and confronting the injustices that surround their lives.

Human rights education has been discussed by some international and comparative education scholars as a product of growing educational convergence (Ramirez et al., 2007; Meyer et al., 2010; Suarez, 2007): a process through which systems look “strikingly similar” when looking downward from North to South (as cited in Krücken & Drori, 2010, p. 125). This, indeed, proves true at the level of global discourse, national policies, and textbook revisions (Meyer et al., 2010). Research on HRE in South Asia and elsewhere, however, has shown that examining grassroots human rights education closely offers a more dynamic glimpse into how such global discourses and policies are strategically utilized and galvanized in securing support and legitimacy for radical educational projects that seek to empower marginalized communities (Bajaj, 2012).

Thus, this chapter provides a window into the complex ways in which NGOs localize human rights, based on the population and context, to cultivate a critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) among learners and to equip them with a globally recognizable language—that of human rights. While convergence (world culture) theorists bring distinct, overlapping

realities into focus through the singular gaze of a telescope, my approach starts with a kaleidoscopic examination of local activists and educators that brings into view how constellations of actors in diverse settings connect human rights education to locally meaningful traditions of critical education to enhance the pursuit of equity and justice.

## HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

While human rights education had mention in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there was little corresponding global action by governments or NGOs to address and encourage HRE. In 1993, soon after the end of the Cold War, the UN held a World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. The conference marked a turning point for HRE, since it created the post of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, an office charged with education and public information related to human rights (Bajaj, 2014). Further, the Vienna Conference Declaration and Program of Action (adopted by consensus by the representatives of the 171 countries present) exhorted “all States and institutions to include human rights, humanitarian law, democracy and rule of law as subjects in the curricula of all learning institutions in formal and non-formal settings” (United Nations, 2013, para 1).

Given growing momentum for realizing the vision of the Vienna Conference, the United Nations declared 1995 to 2004 the UN Decade for Human Rights Education, resulting in various publications and initiatives, and the opportunity for nation-states to develop plans of action to implement HRE. In 2005, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva created the (still ongoing) World Programme for Human Rights Education to “promote a common understanding of basic principles and methodologies of human rights education, to provide a concrete framework for action and to strengthen partnerships and cooperation from the international level down to the grass roots” (OHCHR, n.d.). International advocacy also led to the adoption of the 2011 Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training by the UN General Assembly. The declaration highlights the need for HRE at all educational levels—primary, secondary, vocational, tertiary—as well as in the professional training of teachers, law enforcement, state officials, et cetera.

Over the past three decades, various definitions have emerged for what human rights education is; most HRE scholars, however, would

argue that words in a policy document or textbook revisions, absent of any other components, are a superficial form of HRE (Bajaj, 2012; Tibbitts, forthcoming). While there are many versions of HRE, there is general agreement about certain core pieces. First, most scholars and practitioners agree that HRE should include both *content* and *process* related to human rights (Flowers, 2003; Tibbitts, 2002). Further, scholars often include three components for a program or initiative to qualify as HRE: (1) cognitive components and content related to human rights and struggles to achieve them; (2) affective dimensions that foster attitudes and behaviours in line with respect for rights and dignity; and (3) action-oriented strategies to have learners connect the classroom with the community (Flowers, 2003; Tibbitts, 2005).

Scholars have increasingly advocated for “critical” (Keet, 2007) and “transformative” (Bajaj, 2011, 2012; Bajaj et al., 2016; Tibbitts, 2005) forms of human rights education that take into consideration the distinct social locations and forms of marginalization faced by different groups in order for educational strategies to be more relevant and effective. The two cases presented in this chapter highlight two examples of transformative HRE from South Asia for marginalized groups whose rights have been trampled and denied, often for centuries with long-standing forms of caste, ethnic, and gender exclusion.

## **TRANSFORMATIVE HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN SOUTH ASIA**

*Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.*

—Paulo Freire, 1970, p. 34

In South Asian educational systems, set up under British colonial rule, rote learning and what educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1970) referred to as “banking education” dominate; in this approach, children are seen as (passive) empty vessels to be filled with content by authoritarian teachers. Formal education was set up in colonial India (which then included the majority of the countries that now make up the South Asian subcontinent) to produce small cadres of “Anglicized

Indians...[meaning] a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Lord Macaulay, as cited in Evans, 2002, p. 271), as intermediaries between the colonialists and the masses. Thus, Western education in South Asia was designed to reach a small proportion of the population: mostly young men of the (small) middle class. Unsurprisingly, in 1900, less than 6 percent of the population of colonial India and less than 1 percent of women and girls were literate (Chaudhary, 2007). Despite independence from the British and the creation of various new nation-states in the mid-1900s, certain legacies lingered: the higher status afforded to English education, the predominance of rote learning, and a distinction between elite and mass education. In contrast, non-formal education has been conceived of as a site for resistance to unequal social conditions in South Asia. For example, independence leader Mahatma Gandhi’s vision for education was to reorient education toward village life and the realities of the rural majority in order to “spearhead a silent revolution” (as cited in Bajaj, 2010, p. 47).

Paulo Freire’s theories of individual and collective empowerment through education for critical consciousness have travelled far and wide from South America (Freire was Brazilian and wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* while in exile in Chile), to find resonance on the South Asian subcontinent. In South Asia, where Freire’s work has been translated into multiple regional languages, progressive educators have been engaged with ideas of education for critical consciousness for many decades, preceding the recent rise of human rights education. For example, the adult literacy campaign in the Indian state of Kerala in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in the state’s near-universal literacy rates for men and women—far exceeding national levels—drew from Paulo Freire’s ideas about literacy and popular education (Mayfield, 2012). Both the Indian and Bangladeshi NGOs profiled in this chapter were also heavily influenced by Paulo Freire’s writings.

Human rights education scholars and practitioners globally have drawn on Paulo Freire’s seminal writings (though he was not a human rights education scholar *per se*) to inform *how* the field approaches the teaching and learning of material related to human rights. By raising the “critical human rights consciousness” of learners (Meintjes, 1997, p. 78) with analyses of social inequalities and historical forms of oppression, South Asian educators, such as those working for organizations like People’s Watch and BRAC (profiled in this chapter), seek to offer learners

the ability to transform their own realities. It is important to note the specific influence Freire had on the founders of each of the organizations discussed in this chapter, though their specific approaches will be discussed in the following section. One of the founders of People's Watch (India), who oversaw the writing of the human rights education textbooks, taught (and helped translate into Tamil) Paulo Freire's works for decades. Further, posters with Freire's image and quotes written in local languages hang in the thousands of schools where the organization operates its HRE program.

Many of Freire's books can also be found in BRAC's offices in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the founders of the organization have noted the influence of his theory on their establishment of the organization. According to one of BRAC's early staff members, "In 1973, [BRAC's founder, Fazle Hasan] Abed started reading Freire. His reading was quite revolutionary, and he made me read *Wretched of the Earth* and Ivan Illich. And then we all got hooked on Freire, and we thought about how to use Freire's methods in our literacy work" (as cited in Smillie, 2009, p. 154). Fazle Hasan Abed has further stated that poverty is a result of powerlessness and that BRAC's work is to enable poor people to "organise themselves so that they may change their lives" (BRAC, 2014). Freire's ideas and theories undergird these transformative human rights education efforts in South Asia and beyond as BRAC has expanded globally (Bajaj, 2012; Tsolakis, 2013; Flowers, 2003).

The two cases of human rights education initiatives presented in this chapter have been selected for a variety of reasons in two domains: national context and organizational strategies. In terms of the national contexts of their work, the two nations occupy different sizes and locations in South Asia: India is the largest regional economy (yet still classified as a lower-middle-income country) with a population of 1.2 billion, and an average literacy rate of 74 percent; Bangladesh is a low-income nation plagued by natural disasters, with 150 million residents and an average literacy rate of 58 percent (UNICEF, 2013; World Bank, 2015). Further, while both countries have constitutional guarantees for the right to primary education, there is little in government policy requiring human rights education per the vision of the UDHR and subsequent international agreements.

In terms of organizational strategies and the scope of their operations, People's Watch and BRAC offer points of similarity and difference that make putting their human rights education efforts in conversation



fruitful. First, both People's Watch (India) and BRAC (Bangladesh) have a national scope of operations that transcends one particular region. Second, both have been the subject of scholarly attention to examine their approaches (Bajaj, 2012; Smillie, 2009). Third, each case offers a different glimpse into transformative human rights education—People's Watch is a three-year-long course in human rights for middle school-level children, developed by an NGO that works in formal government-run schools; BRAC is a non-formal education program that utilizes “barefoot lawyers” to educate women through clear and accessible curriculum on their rights and how to access justice. Lastly, while there are over two million non-governmental organizations in South Asia, and countless programs and movements using education to raise awareness about and transform social conditions, the two presented here explicitly call what they do “human rights education.” While this nomenclature is certainly not a measure of success or legitimacy, these two organizations were chosen because they provide insights into how those deliberately using the framework of human rights education are localizing it, making it contextually relevant, and reimagining its purpose and function in distinct locales.

#### **FROM STICKS TO STUDENTS' RIGHTS: SCHOOL-BASED HRE IN INDIA**

*After attending the HRE training, I could understand the students from their point of view. For example, when I go to class, if I see a boy sleeping on the desk, I used to have the tendency to beat him or be harsh on him, without knowing if he may be hungry, without knowing anything about his family background. Maybe he is sleeping because he is having some problems in the family; maybe his father was drunk at night and beating his mother. So after attending this training, I have come to ask the children their problems instead of beating them; I try to understand the children, be friendly, and respect them. The students have started moving more freely and talking to me more also, so the distance [between us] is much reduced. If anything happens in their homes, if they have any family problems, they are sharing them with us. Even the District Education Officer has noticed these changes...because a lot of teachers have attended the training in human rights.*

—HRE teacher focus group, as cited in Bajaj, 2012, p. 123

People’s Watch is a human rights organization founded in 1995 in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The organization has pioneered HRE in India nationwide through its Institute for Human Rights Education (IHRE), which has complemented the organization’s legal and advocacy work. Starting as an experiment in a handful of schools, HRE now operates in four thousand schools in more than 18 states of India (Bajaj, 2012). The organization has developed textbooks, delivered trainings for teachers, and expanded their human rights work (initially primarily on caste discrimination and police abuse) into a broad-based educational program. As connections were made with the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (1995–2004), IHRE was able to gain support by aligning with international efforts to promote human rights education and translating these interests into funding for their work.

**Table 8.1: Content and Pedagogy of the IHRE Textbooks**

<b>Topics</b> ( <i>In order of frequency, from highest to lowest</i> )	<b>Methods</b> ( <i>In order of frequency, from highest to lowest</i> )
1. Poverty/ underdevelopment/ class inequalities	1. Reflective/ participatory in-class exercise
2. Gender discrimination/ need for equal treatment	2. Illustrated dialogue or story
3. Child labor/ children’s rights	3. Community interviews and/ or investigation and research
4. Caste discrimination/ untouchability/ need for equality	4. Small group work and discussion
5. Social movements/ examples of leaders and activists	5. Creative artistic expression (drawing, poetry, etc.)
6. Religious intolerance/ need for harmony and pluralism	6. Class presentation
7. Rights of indigenous/Adivasi communities	7. Inquiry questions & essay writing
8. Rights of the disabled and mentally ill	8. Role play, dramatization, song-writing
9. Democracy	9. Letter writing to officials
10. Environmental rights	10. School or community campaign

*Source:* Bajaj, 2012, p. 79. Used by permission of Bloomsbury Publishing Inc.

Cooperation and collaboration with government officials has also been essential since most of the four thousand schools IHRE operates in are government-run (Bajaj, 2012). Textbooks have been developed in multiple regional languages, and an estimated five hundred thousand Indian students have participated thus far in a three-year course in human rights. Year one introduces students to human rights; year two focuses on children's rights; and year three addresses discrimination and inequality. The data from this chapter come from 13 months of data collection in India (2009–10) as well as follow-up interviews and communications with the organization (for more information on the larger study, see Bajaj, 2012).

IHRE's model aims to introduce students in primarily government schools and those from marginalized communities (those from the lowest castes, Indigenous groups, and others) to human rights concepts and principles. The course is taught by teachers from these schools who attend trainings to offer two human rights classes per week for three school years (Grades 6, 7, and 8). Teachers either volunteer to be their school's representative for this program or are assigned by their headmasters; in practice, those attending the trainings tended to be teachers with a pre-existing interest in the subject or younger teachers who were "volunteered" by their administrators.<sup>2</sup> Both men and women teachers were active human rights teachers in the IHRE program.

Officials from the Institute of Human Rights Education maintained contact with teachers over the phone and through in-person visits; there were also refresher trainings and opportunities for human rights educators to get together throughout the school year, sponsored by the organization. The textbooks developed by IHRE and trainings included concepts related to general human rights guarantees; corporal punishment and other forms of violence; children's rights; and issues of discrimination based on caste, gender, religion, ability, skin colour, and ethnicity, among others.

After the HRE lessons began, many students reported (as in the quote at the beginning of this section) that teachers were more attentive to students' rights, particularly with regard to the illegal but commonly utilized practice of corporal punishment. While students discussed attempting to intervene in social injustices they found in their communities (as I have discussed extensively elsewhere; see Bajaj, 2012), what are equally interesting are the responses that teachers had to learning about and teaching human rights.

While teachers are often discussed in human rights education literature as messengers who simply transmit human rights instruction, IHRE focuses on teachers as correspondingly important *agents* of human rights education who can go through transformative processes as well as take action, rooted in knowledge and skills, in their own lives as well as those of students and community members. Many human rights abuses that take place in Indian government schools (which primarily serve relatively poor children)—including gender discrimination, caste discrimination, and corporal punishment—are often perpetuated by teachers or allowed to occur among students without any intervention. For example, during my research, respondents discussed multiple cases of teachers who verbally and physically abused students based on their caste backgrounds or poor academic performance, and mentioned several examples of sexual abuse. Given teachers' relatively respected status in rural areas as part of a minority of literate professionals, their potential transformation through human rights education to become allies and advocates of human rights can result in effective interventions on behalf of victims, whether the victims are their students or not (Bajaj, 2012).

HRE created an opportunity for teachers to exert their agency in a large bureaucracy that often dehumanized both educators and students. Most teachers (nearly all of the 118 interviewed in this study) sent their children to private, English-medium schools that their middle-class salaries permitted; many reported that prior to HRE, they regarded the low-caste, Indigenous, and poor students that comprised their government school classrooms as “other people’s children,” to borrow US educational scholar Lisa Delpit’s term for the mismatch between students and teachers (Delpit, 2006). A core part of the training on the HRE textbooks developed by People’s Watch included participatory activities for students to identify and analyze human rights and social inequalities in their own communities. When teachers learned more about their students, and as students shared more with teachers, perhaps with less fear of getting beaten, it allowed for close relationships to form. One teacher, Mr. Kumar, discussed buying prizes with his own money for students to speak publicly and sing songs about human rights at a local festival. He also talked about how the HRE program helped foster relationships in his classroom so that he began to see his students like his own son who attended a nearby private school.

As teachers and students formed close-knit and reciprocal bonds, many came to see challenges in the community as a collective project

for them to address. Numerous teachers I interviewed discussed taking some form of action to address problems they saw in their lives, their communities, or those of the children and families. These examples ranged from trying to convince family members not to pull children out of school to work or to marry off girls at a young age, to reporting abuse they learned about in schools and homes. Mr. Gopal, a teacher from the state of Tamil Nadu, related the following incident, emblematic of several other instances wherein teachers had reported an abuse:

In the first year of human rights education, my student, Kuruvamma, overheard from a neighbour that if their child was born a girl, they would kill it since they already had three female children. The child was born a girl and what they planned to do was make the baby lie down on the ground without...any bed sheets, and put the pedestal fan on high speed in front of her. The baby...would not be able to breathe and then she would automatically die. Kuruvamma told me and together we gave a complaint in the police station. The family got scared and didn't kill the baby. Now that girl is even studying in first standard. My student Kuruvamma is now in high school. (as cited in Bajaj, 2012, p. 127)

In many communities where the HRE program was offered, female infanticide was a common practice, although it is illegal in India. It is estimated that three million girls have gone missing in India through sex-selective abortions (after a fetus is determined to be a girl) and infanticide, in poor and rich communities alike ("The Hindu," 2012). Students and teachers reported encountering evidence of infanticide, including young students happening upon dead (female) babies or over-hearing stories such as the one above.

Of course, the introduction of HRE overlays existing socio-economic realities, like those that drive practices like infanticide. Even amidst adverse material conditions, students identifying abuses—and having teachers willing to help report or intervene—were noted by both students and teachers as critical components of making human rights come alive. A key by-product of the transformative education offered by IHRE is that it gave meaning to the educational process by deeply engaging the educators (Bajaj, 2012). Mrs. Mohanta, a retired teacher from Orissa who taught human rights education for many years, continued going to the trainings and visiting her former school to help with classes

even after her retirement because of the satisfaction she derived from being involved.

While the IHRE program in India has been operating for two decades, more than 30 years ago, a Bangladeshi NGO began offering non-formal education through trainers, also known as “barefoot lawyers,” seeking to empower poor women who were unable to access justice.

### **“BAREFOOT LAWYERS” AS HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATORS IN BANGLADESH**

*BRAC’s human rights and legal aid services programme is dedicated to protecting and promoting human rights of the poor and marginalized through legal empowerment. The blend of legal literacy initiatives with comprehensive legal aid services throughout the country helps spread awareness needed to mobilize communities to raise their voices against injustices, discrimination and exploitation—whether at the individual or collective level....Our “Barefoot Lawyers” impart legal literacy and spur sustainable social change by raising awareness and informing people of their rights. They operate on a 3P model of “Prevent-Protest-Protect” and are usually the initial contact points in their communities when human rights violations occur.*

—BRAC, *n.d.*

BRAC is the largest NGO focused on development in the world. It emerged just after Bangladesh’s war for independence from Pakistan in 1972. The organization was founded by Fazle Hasan Abed as a relief organization, but now, in its fifth decade of operation, BRAC has programs in education, health, economic development, and women’s empowerment across Bangladesh and internationally in various countries such as Afghanistan, South Sudan, the Philippines, and Uganda. In order to mitigate reliance on donor funding, BRAC—unlike most NGOs—also operates various income-generating enterprises such as a dairy business, handicraft stores, and a university (Smillie, 2009). BRAC is referred to as the largest NGO because it has a staff of more than a hundred thousand people (mostly women) and serves over a hundred million people. Its non-formal education program has received commendation for its tremendous efficacy in providing culturally relevant and locally tailored education for marginalized children who lack access to government schools due to poverty (see also Chapter Three in this

volume, by Farrell, Manion, and Rincón-Gallardo); over three million children have been enrolled, and the program boasts an extremely low dropout rate as compared to government education (Smillie, 2009). While children are one recipient of BRAC's educational efforts, youth and women also receive education in their rights through the women's empowerment program.

BRAC's Human Rights and Legal Services (HRLS) program<sup>3</sup>, started in 1985, has multiple components, of which human rights education is just one. In the school-based HRE example from India (above), students were taught about human rights, and action often ensued of their own accord or with teachers' help. In BRAC's program, action and redress for violations are central to the human rights and legal services program. According to BRAC, HRLS (1) provides "legal and human rights education and awareness to rural poor[,] in particular women, and to local community leaders"; (2) provides "legal services, in particular alternative dispute resolution and court oriented legal aid"; and (3) "creates and activates social catalysts drawn from among the village elite to respond to human rights violations" (Islam et al., 2012, p. 6). Core to BRAC's approach is human rights education as the foundation for the legal, advocacy, and community mobilization approaches that build on top of this awareness for marginalized women.

Through the HRLS program, non-formal educators provide adolescent girls and women with a foundational 14-day human rights and legal education (HRLE) course as the first step in the program. The HRLE course draws from the approaches in BRAC's other educational initiatives as well as the organization's original grounding in participatory approaches to development. For example, a report profiling the HRLS program noted that methodological approaches included "workshops, committees, popular theater shows, and courtyard sessions to bring local leaders together and effectively engage the entire community in preventing and addressing human rights violations" (Kolisetty, 2014, p. 41). A BRAC senior staff member noted that the pedagogical approach and curriculum are tailored to the realities of poor rural women in Bangladesh: "This might be the only time we have access to this household or to this woman, so we would like to have a sustainable impact on this person's life. One of the ways I believe we do that is by making the methodologies interactive in such a way that it becomes a personal journey rather than just a class" (interview, July 12, 2015). As a result, the HRLE course starts with situating learners in an analysis of their

own lives the first few days, and further offers basic knowledge about the legal system and human rights more broadly.

The HRLE course—taught by *shebikas*, or “barefoot lawyers,”—emphasizes laws related to common problems encountered by women, namely: dowry, mistreatment and abuse from spouses, child marriage, divorce, and right to land and inheritance, among other topics (see Table 8.2). Since there are different laws in Bangladesh for individuals of different religions, these trainings also elucidate distinct rules and norms under the customary laws that apply to particular women related to the issues they face.

All of the training materials for the courses are pictorial given that many rural women are illiterate (women’s literacy in Bangladesh is 55 percent, and largely skewed toward urban women) (World Bank, 2015). Many of the materials interrogate common gender stereotypes, utilizing drawings of real-life situations as a starting point (akin to Paulo Freire’s approach of using a generative theme to spark discussion of broader injustices) (Freire, 1970).

**Table 8.2: Content of HRLE 14-Day Course**

Day	Topics
1	Myself and My Community
2	Family and Social Analysis
3	Social Discrimination and Gender
4	Abuse
5	Basic Rights and Entitlements
6	International Rights Mechanisms (CEDAW, UNCRC, CAT, etc.)
7	Marriage
8	Dowry
9	Divorce, separation, guardianship and custody, post-nuptial rights
10	Police Duties and Jurisdiction
11	Hindu, Muslim, and Christian women’s right to land
12	Opportunities for women to own and control land
13	Land mutation, tax, and state-owned land
14	Closing

Sources: BRAC, 2013; and from interview with a BRAC staff member



After each 14-day course, the three most vocal and participatory women are selected to participate in the training to become *shebikas*, or “barefoot lawyers,” who help women access justice and who also facilitate future trainings and courses. Ongoing training is provided both to participants in the 14-day courses and to trainers, who undergo longer trainings and “refreshers” for professional development. BRAC notes, “The refreshers are an effective way of standardizing the quality of the shebikas’ performance and of keeping them updated on current laws” (BRAC, 2013, p. 55).

The HRLE course, as embedded as one piece of the larger HRLS program that includes education, legal aid services, and community mobilization, offers a holistic approach to addressing the challenges faced by poor rural women in Bangladesh. Many of them, unaware of their rights, are subject to abuses by husbands, and by corrupt officials who may accept bribes rather than enforce laws that are meant to protect poor women. In reflecting on the overall vision of the HRLS program, a senior staff member of BRAC noted:

We try to bring about a level of conscientization [related to] the inter-linkages between oneself and one’s community and then the larger political structure. So instead of going into the law and the rights first, we start with a bit of a social analysis; understanding and asking questions and getting towards knowing one’s own self and one’s environment...What is very important is to understand the *agency* of the person. Most people are not aware of their own agency in their own lives. They feel like there’s a predestined karma, like I was born to be poor or I was meant to die poor. But if one can understand, *who am I* really, apart from being the wife of so-and-so, or the mother of so-and-so, [one can ask oneself,] “What do I want to do with my day, if not my life?” (interview, July 12, 2015)

Agency and empowerment for poor rural women is at the core of the human rights and legal education courses offered by BRAC. The entire design of the courses vis-à-vis structure, content, and pedagogy, coupled with the mechanisms to allow women to seek justice, offers a way to combat marginalization in a highly stratified social context. Transformative human rights education in this case includes knowledge of oneself and one’s role in society in order to counter internalized forms of oppression that limit poor women from even believing they have rights; once

this social analysis is sparked, information about domestic and international rights that apply to all and about one's own inherent dignity can serve as meaningful for the women in BRAC's programs.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

In a region known for rote learning in schools and strict hierarchies—based on age, gender, class, and/or caste—transformative human rights education occurs in countless classrooms and community centres, spearheaded by innovative non-governmental organizations. Policy-makers in India and Bangladesh, while perhaps engaging in international discussions about the right to education and human rights education, are not, by and large, drawing on Freire's notions of empowering the marginalized through learning about social inequalities and ways to redress them. Transformative human rights education espouses a "globalization from below" ethic where global ideas, such as Freire's, that offer techniques and methods for inculcating a critical consciousness about processes of exclusion can offer learners the chance to question unequal social relations. Both People's Watch and BRAC draw on these legacies in order to infuse their human rights education programs with meaning and relevance for the marginalized children, youth, and women that participate in them.

Facilitators and teachers in these programs, whether community- or school-based, are essential to the efficacy of teaching about rights because they are the primary catalysts for participants' transformation. Educators worldwide seek to offer students knowledge and skills to permit them to effectively respond to their current and future realities. In the case of the two examples from South Asia offered above, trainers and teachers draw from their own personal understandings of human rights to offer learners a chance to analyze and take action based on the social conditions that surround them: gender violence, caste inequalities, discriminatory laws, child labour, and corruption.

Transformative human rights education in South Asia offers a way to draw upon the visions of Paulo Freire (1970) and leaders like Mahatma Gandhi (Bajaj, 2010) that learning spaces not just be laboratories for future citizenship, but be integrally embedded in the formation of active participants in democratic life. Learning about human rights guarantees—along with observations of the gap between promises and actual realities, paired with information about effective forms of activism—can

provide learners important analyses and lenses with which to understand and engage with the world.

For teachers in classrooms across the globe, integrating human rights and examples of organizations like People's Watch and BRAC that seek to empower marginalized communities by spreading human rights literacy can be a way to connect across borders, building empathy and solidarity. The role of the educator and facilitator in transformative human rights education efforts is not only to impart information, but also to build the capacity for learners to believe that they are worthy of rights when their communities may have been marginalized for generations, as well as to nurture the social action that may result from learning about deep-seated inequalities. Ultimately, human rights education, if locally tailored and well designed, has the potential to foster teaching and learning for individual and social transformation, as the cases in this chapter have demonstrated.

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### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. Consider a transformative educational experience you have had inside or outside of a school context. What factors made that experience meaningful?
2. What kind of content, pedagogy, and approach would facilitate transformative education in the context in which you work or plan to work in the future?
3. How can transformative education be incorporated into schools in your context? What role could policy play to support such an integration?
4. What skills do teachers need to foster meaningful education for students?

### **SUGGESTED AUDIO-VISUAL RESOURCES**

*Path to Dignity: The Power of Human Rights Education*, directed by Ellen Bruno (2012). Available at: [www.path-to-dignity.org](http://www.path-to-dignity.org)

This open-access film offers a global picture of human rights education and offers three case studies, one of which is on the Institute of Human Rights Education/People's Watch.

*The Revolutionary Optimists*, directed by Nicole Newnham and Maren Grainger-Monsen (2013). Available at: [revolutionaryoptimists.org](http://revolutionaryoptimists.org)

Learn about non-formal education efforts that seek to empower young people as agents of change in Kolkata's slums.

*He Named Me Malala*, directed by Davis Guggenheim (2015). Available at: [www.henamedmemalalamovie.com/](http://www.henamedmemalalamovie.com/)

This film profiles the courageous young Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai, who was shot by the Taliban for advocating for girls' right to education in Pakistan.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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## NOTES

1. Thank you to Lydia Evans and Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi for their assistance with this chapter.
2. While the requirements differ by state in India, teachers have generally completed a multi-year teacher training course on top of their high school diplomas.
3. Data for this section were gathered from an extensive review of documents written about the HRLS program as well as an hour-long interview and email correspondence with a senior staff member at BRAC.

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