

# Challenges and complexity in human rights education

## Teachers' understandings of democratic participation and gender equity in post-conflict Kurdistan-Iraq

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### Abstract

This paper examines tensions in implementing human rights education (HRE) in schools in Kurdistan-Iraq, both for teachers and for policy-makers, juggling nation-building and its application through schooling and child rights. We draw on documentary sources and fieldwork in two governorates, including classroom observations and interviews with education professionals. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child confirms the right to HRE, including learning to live together, stressing gender equity. In practice, rights operate in tension and may be denied in societal contexts where conservative, patriarchal values prevail. We report on teachers' attempts to reconcile tensions while facing limited resources. HRE is often perceived as low-status and taught without adequate consideration of everyday rights denials. Nevertheless, HRE is fundamental to democratic development and social justice and can equip citizens with skills and attitudes for a cosmopolitan worldview and peaceful development. Potentially, HRE can contribute to learners' self-empowerment and gender equity.

*Keywords:* human rights education, democratic participation, gender equity, education policy, post-conflict

### Introduction

This paper examines the tensions and challenges facing schools in implementing human rights education (HRE) in the autonomous region of Kurdistan, Iraq. Across the globe, both international organisations and governments recognise the potential of education to contribute to the processes of democratisation and development. In post-conflict societies, programmes of citizenship education and HRE are often introduced with the express aim of developing skills for learning to live together and the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

The current unified Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) administration was established following the 2005 Constitution of Iraq which established Iraqi Kurdistan

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©Authors. ISSN 2000-4508, pp. 189–210

as a federal entity. After 2006 the KRG focused on developing Kurdistan's economy and infrastructure, and in 2009 turned its attention to educational reform. This reform extends the number of years of compulsory education from six to nine, introduces new learning objectives, and places greater emphasis on human rights and democratic citizenship, making a specific commitment to gender equity. In implementing the reform, we suggest the KRG is not merely recognising the potential of education to contribute to immediate and longer term economic and social development, but is also acknowledging the critical role of education in creating a just and sustainable democracy in which the rights of traditionally disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and individuals, including women, children and minorities, are protected.

We understand education policy as a dynamic process in which teachers, administrators and students are actors. These various actors can support, subvert, or undermine the original goals of policy-makers, both unintentionally and/or deliberately. Our programme of research therefore not only focuses on policy documents and text books, but extends to an examination of the perspectives of teachers, school administrators and school inspectors. In this paper, we focus on professionals' perspectives and on their understandings of democracy, development and human rights, specifically human rights education and gender equity. We argue these perspectives are critical to a proper understanding of the impact of education reform and its impact on young people, schools, families and communities. If the KRG is to be effective in realising democracy, development and equity through education, professionals' experiences, needs and understandings need to be taken seriously. Their insights enable us to identify appropriate strategies and plans to strengthen democratic dispositions among the young.

### **Education policy reforms in a post-conflict context**

Kurdistan-Iraq experienced considerable conflict and instability in the later 20th century and early years of the 21st, resulting in a severely damaged infrastructure at home and a notable Kurdish diaspora across the globe. The conflicts which have impacted on Kurdistan include: a long history of border disputes with Iran; the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988); and the Anfal genocidal campaign against the Kurds (1986–1989) led by the Iraqi military under Saddam Hussein. The year 1991 saw the Gulf War, followed by the Kurdish uprising, resulting in mass displacement and a subsequent humanitarian crisis. The uprising was followed by a brutal crackdown on the Kurdish population, the later withdrawal of the Iraqi administration and military, and an Iraqi internal economic blockade. At the same time, between 1990 and 2003 the region suffered the consequences of UN sanctions and an international embargo against Iraq (McDowall 2003; Yildiz 2004).

From 1991, the region gained *ad hoc* autonomy (Stansfield 2003) and in 1992 a regional government was established, following a closely contested and inconclusive general election. But the Kurdish leadership was responsible for further difficulties.

The rivalry between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) resulted in a *de facto* partition of the region (McDowall 2003). By 1994, power-sharing agreements between the parties had broken down, leading to civil war, referred to in Kurdish as 'brother killing brother' (*brakuzhi*). Open conflict between the KDP and the PUK was brought to an end under the 1998 Washington Agreement. Nevertheless, the civil war and conflict between the two dominant parties have shaped contemporary Iraqi-Kurdish politics (Stansfield 2003).

Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent political changes, it is the 2005 Constitution of Iraq which defines the internal political, socio-economic and judicial autonomous governance of Kurdistan. The current unified Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) operates a power-sharing agreement that was introduced in 2009. The federal region, comprising three governorates, Erbil, Sulaimaniyah and Duhok, borders Iran to the east, Turkey to the north, Syria to the west and the rest of Iraq to the south. The region continues to feel the impact of instability in neighbouring jurisdictions as well as on-going tensions with the Baghdad government, fuelled by concerns over disputed areas, including Kirkuk. An opposition movement *Gorran* (Change) challenges the power-sharing arrangements, placing substantive democracy on the political agenda.

It is within this complex post-conflict context that education reforms are being implemented. In the immediate pre-conflict era, Iraq had a leading regional position in school enrolment and completion rates (UNESCO 2010). But Kurdistan-Iraq's infrastructure, including educational infrastructure, was adversely affected by the conflicts. Some 14 years after the civil war, there remains considerable pressure on the system, with insufficient school buildings and continuing and notable disparities in basic facilities between urban and rural areas. There are still huge challenges in providing appropriate facilities to meet students' needs in a fast-changing socio-economic and political context.

The challenge for education policy-makers is not only to make good the damaged educational infrastructure and ensure that schools are staffed with effectively trained teachers. It is also to ensure appropriate educational measures to support other societal priorities, such as anti-corruption measures and guarantees for the rights of women and minorities. Education needs not only to prepare young people for successful economic integration but also to play a full and active part in shaping society in accordance with democratic ideals that embody equity and social justice. In other words, the education system, and schools in particular, have a key role to play in strengthening democratic development and human rights.

The conflict had a disproportionate impact on women and children and on educational opportunities and facilities in Kurdistan-Iraq. Before the conflict, girls across Iraq already had lower school enrolment and attendance rates than boys (UNESCO 2003). Following the conflict, the majority of internally displaced persons were women and children, with some 50 percent of the most vulnerable children unable to access

schooling according to UN reports (UN-HABITAT 2001; UNDG/World Bank 2005). In this respect, Iraq, including the autonomous region of Kurdistan, reflects a wider regional and global picture of discrimination and disadvantage faced by women and girls. Security problems may place girls at a greater risk of gender-based violence (Harber 2004), for example, in travelling to school, further impacting on school attendance.

In 2000 the world's nations made a promise to free people from extreme poverty and multiple deprivations. This pledge was formulated into eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Two goals aim specifically to address gender equity in education, recognising that challenges remain at different points throughout the system. MDG 2 is to promote universal primary education and MDG 3 is to promote gender equality and empower women (MDG 2000). Girls from the poorest households face the highest barriers to education with subsequent impacts on their ability to access the labour market.

The UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) is a specific project to operationalise MDGs 2 and 3.<sup>1</sup> Effectively, education is recognised as a prerequisite for sustainable human development (UNGEI 2000; WEF 2000). These initiatives are concerned with enacting international human rights standards on gender equality, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (Article 10) (UN 1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Articles 2 and 28) (UN 1989), which confirm the equal rights of girls and women in education.

The MDGs seek to realise both gender parity in education through *formal equality* (parity in access and participation rates) and *substantive equality* (equal opportunity *in* and *through* education) (Subrahmanian 2005). In Kurdistan-Iraq, some steps have been taken to guarantee formal equality in access and participation rates. Since 2006, the KRG has put arrangements in place to enable young women who were not enrolled at the standard age, or who had their education disrupted, to continue or restart schooling. The education reform states:

schools or classes will be opened for accelerated learning programmes. Students should not be younger than 9 for boys starting at grade 1 and not older than 20 whilst the girls should not be younger than 9 starting at grade 1 and not older than 24 (KRG 2009, 13, Article 15).

This provision recognises the traditional disadvantage that girls experience in Kurdistan-Iraq (Griffiths 2010; UNICEF 2010, UNESCO 2011) and thus creates some flexibility by extending the age range within which women can complete schooling.

We are interested in exploring the contribution that HRE might play in realising *substantive equality*, in education and through education, by examining professionals' understandings of human rights and HRE. The right *to* education is insufficient in realising gender equality since here we are concerned largely with equivalence in enrolment and completion rates between girls and boys. By focusing on rights *in* education (guaranteeing achievement and learning outcomes) and rights *through* education (the ability to utilise knowledge and skills to claim rights within and be-

yond the school) we can focus on girls' empowerment (Wilson 2003). This means recognising and overcoming inequalities and instances of discrimination via an examination of learning content, teaching methods, assessment modes, management of peer relationships, and learning outcomes (Chan and Cheung 2007). The realisation of substantive equality requires us to re-think how both girls and boys are educated.

### **Diversity and gender in Iraq Kurdistan**

It is widely recognised that schools both produce and reflect broader social norms and inequalities, related, for example, to poverty, structural inequalities, historical disadvantage, institutional discrimination of women and minorities, gender-based violence and traditional practices which harm or impact unjustly on women and girls (Tomaševski 2005). We present here a brief outline of Kurdistan-Iraq's demographic features, contextualising the struggle for human rights for both women and minorities. This struggle is taking place within a multicultural setting and within communities characterised by gender inequalities and growing economic disparities.

One significant challenge is the successful accommodation of diversity. Although the majority of the region's population is Kurdish, it is also characterised by long-standing religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity. The Kurdish majority has lived for many centuries alongside smaller numbers of Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turkmenians, Armenians, and Arabs. According to the KRG, the region has a population of around 5 million, of whom more than 50 percent are younger than 20. There has been no census so we do not know what proportion of the KRG-administered population considers themselves to be Kurdish, but estimates suggest Iraqi Kurds may comprise as much as 25 percent of the total Iraqi population (Yildiz 2004). A carefully crafted set of policies is needed to ensure all groups can claim their rights within the democratic framework.

There is also considerable religious and linguistic diversity in Kurdistan-Iraq. The majority of inhabitants, including Kurds, Iraqi Turkmenians, and Arabs, are from the Sunni Muslim tradition. Within this grouping, there is further diversity with some individuals being observant and others adopting more sceptical or secular positions. The region also has populations of Assyrian Christian, Shiite Muslim, Yezidi, Yarsan, Mandaean and Sahbak faiths (Begilkhani, Gill and Hague 2010). Official KRG languages are Kurdish and Arabic. The two most widely spoken Kurdish dialects are Sorani and Kurmanji.<sup>2</sup>

Diversity is a highly politicised issue since territorial disputes between the federal Baghdad and Erbil regional governments, including Kirkuk, require political solutions which guarantee the protection of minority rights and interests. This diversity demands pragmatic solutions in the public sphere, including schools, where learners' rights and societal outcomes may be weighed against each other. For example, choices made to guarantee linguistic rights through separate schooling for specific language communities impact on the ways in which young people of the next generation are prepared (or not) for living together in a multicultural society.

The region's diversity has also increased as a consequence of inward migration, with the protection of migrant rights adding to the complexity of the picture. Many are new populations drawn to Kurdistan because of instability elsewhere in Iraq, while others are former inhabitants who fled past conflicts. They include internally displaced persons (IDPs) drawn from other parts of Iraq, refugees and migrants from neighbouring countries, and returnees, including highly educated elites, from the wider diaspora. In 2012 the KRG appealed to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) for more help in dealing with the needs of refugees fleeing war in Syria.<sup>3</sup> While some Syrian refugees are accommodated in a camp near Duhok, others are spread across the region, supported by families and communities (IOM 2012). Child refugees may lack appropriate papers to access schooling. Kurdistan-Iraq's rapid economic development also attracts labour migrants from around the globe and irregular migrants (including victims of trafficking) whose undocumented status leaves them vulnerable (IOM 2010).

In a society characterised both by patriarchy and post-conflict dislocation, one pressing issue is gender equity (al-Ali and Pratt 2011). Three inter-related challenges to realising gender equity and the human rights of women and girls are: violence against women; traditional inheritance laws (Sharia law and traditional inheritance practices across faith communities which favour men); and low female school attendance rates.

Efforts to tackle violence against women, an issue highlighted both by local women's organisations and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), have resulted in the establishment of women's shelters to support victims of domestic violence (Begilkhani, Gill and Hague 2010). Since 2003 there has been some discussion in local media of a societal failure to support such women who, although protected by law, remain vulnerable.<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally, married women are expected to receive support from their husbands. For this reason, many families, particularly in rural areas, consider it shameful to allow daughters to inherit property. While courts may rule in their favour, it is still difficult for women to claim their inheritance. Under Islamic (Sharia) law women are entitled to one-third, while their brothers receive two-thirds. But, in practice, even this unbalanced division is unlikely to occur.

Female school attendance is rising, with the Duhok governorate recording one of the highest levels of attendance and lowest differentials between boys and girls, both in Kurdistan and across Iraq (Griffiths 2010, UNICEF 2010). Local women's rights NGO Harikar (2011) reports that rural parents are more prepared to send their daughters to school where there is a woman teacher. Harikar quotes an education supervisor as confirming that the number of female teachers now exceeds the number of males in the Duhok governorate.

In Kurdistan, where deeply-rooted inequalities persist between children, it is critical that the type of human rights education (HRE) offered at school is appropriate to their needs and supports them in claiming their rights. Acknowledging and addressing the

roots of inequalities, within and beyond school is essential, whether they arise from gender-based discrimination or that related to ethnicity, religion or other differences. Thus, equalities in education require more than merely translating international instruments into national policies or implementing educational reforms. They imply a holistic approach that includes policies and practices inside schools to empower students. In addition, they imply opportunities to transform knowledge into the application of rights both in and beyond the school (Stromquist 2006). Such a holistic approach to quality education requires a sincere commitment from policy-makers and civil society (Wilson 2003).

Above we have identified some pressing human rights concerns which impact on schooling and to which schools might be expected to respond. It is not difficult to make the case for human rights education (HRE). But, in this paper, we argue that there is not just a pressing *need* for HRE, there is also a *right* to HRE. We turn now to this right, focusing specifically on its meanings within a multicultural context.

### **The right to human rights education**

While the right to education is commonly understood, the concept of the right to HRE (Osler and Starkey 1996) tends to be less familiar, even among education professionals and policy-makers. The right to HRE is set out in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which underlines “the dignity and worth of the human person” and “the equal rights of men and women”. Article 26 of the UDHR specifies the aims of education, which include “the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”; the promotion of “understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations, racial or religious groups”; and “the maintenance of peace”. This is the first international official articulation of the right to HRE. It is confirmed and explicated in subsequent human rights instruments, including the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (Article 29) (Osler 2012). The right to HRE was reiterated and further strengthened by the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, adopted in December 2011 (UN 2011).

Article 29 of the CRC confirms the right to an education which promotes human rights, intercultural understanding and learning to live together, an education which promotes gender equity, and conditions which guarantee certain cultural and linguistic rights of parents and children. It stresses the obligation of the nation-state, as the ratifying authority,<sup>5</sup> to promote education for peaceful co-existence in their communities, the nation and the wider world:

States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to ... The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms ...[and] preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin (UN 1989).

This implies children have some level of engagement with learners from different backgrounds to their own and educational structures which enable a degree of integration for children from different ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds. It recognises, albeit indirectly, that all children have the right to an intercultural education which recognises difference at the level of the community and the nation (Osler 2010). Yet education cannot focus exclusively on children's immediate communities or home nations since it also needs to address global identifications and our common humanity. This type of learning, where young people are enabled to learn to live together with difference at different scales, is what has been termed "education for cosmopolitan citizenship" (Osler and Vincent 2002; Osler and Starkey, 2003, 2005).

As Article 29 also notes, each child also has the right to an education that promotes:

respect for ... his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own (UN 1989, Article 29).

Thus, all children in Iraq-Kurdistan not only have the right to be educated for tolerance and diversity, but also the right to an education that supports their own cultural heritage and that of their families, as well as Kurdish cultural heritage and values. This education must be consistent with human rights principles. This is not a culturally relativist position where anything goes, but a critical examination of cultural norms within a broad human rights framework. So, for example, harmful cultural practices which impact on girls and women would be challenged as failing to conform to human rights standards, as would cultural norms which give another cultural group enemy or inferior status.

Education for tolerance and social justice, in line with the provisions of the CRC, cannot be fostered where there is complete educational segregation: "educating for peace will require states to mandate some kind of educational integration of school-children from diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and language groups" (Grover 2007, 60). Currently, the child's right to education is frequently interpreted, legislatively and judicially, as a parental liberty right (to have a child educated according to parental wishes). Grover (2007, 61) argues that this tends to work against children's rights and that "the notion of minority education is frequently erroneously translated into *completely segregated school systems*" (our emphasis). She suggests (2007, 61) that "the minority and non-minority child's legal right to free association (each with the other) in the educational context is frequently disregarded both by the legislature and the courts" in nation-states across the globe. The international community has agreed a definition of HRE in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training. This suggests that:

Human rights education and training comprises all educational, training, information, awareness-raising and learning activities aimed at promoting universal respect for and



observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and thus contributing, inter alia, to the prevention of human rights violations and abuses by providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviours, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights (UN 2011: Article 2:2).

The Declaration specifies that this should include education *about* rights; education *through* rights and education *for* rights. Education about rights includes knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, implying that this education is both founded on and makes reference to international standards. Education through human rights includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners and within schools, operating within education policy frameworks which guarantee rights. It addresses educational structures (as discussed above) and young people's experiences of schooling. It has methodological implications related to the teaching and learning processes in which young people's participation rights are respected. Finally, education for human rights includes empowering learners to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others. This implies a transformatory education in which learners' own contexts and struggles for justice are considered and addressed and in which learners are empowered (Osler and Zhu 2011).

Clearly, realising social justice in education, including gender equity and the rights of minorities, means more than simply translating international instruments into national policies or implementing educational reforms. It means designing a curriculum in which learners are provided with knowledge about their rights, and equipped with the skills to claim them.

## **Our methods and fieldwork**

In assessing the potential of HRE to contribute to social justice, democracy and development in the multicultural context of post-conflict Kurdistan-Iraq, we draw principally on fieldwork visits to two Kurdistan-Iraq governorates – Erbil and Duhok – between 2010 and 2012. In Duhok we engaged in classroom observations in two schools and later conducted interviews with teachers whose classes we observed.<sup>6</sup> In Erbil we interviewed a range of education professionals, including teachers, a school principal and education inspectors. We also participated in a focus group discussion (Yahya 2012).<sup>7</sup>

In total, 15 professionals agreed to act as research respondents, with interviews taking place in July 2011 and January and February 2012.<sup>8</sup> Of the 15 respondents (seven female and eight male), five elected to answer the questions in writing rather than through a face-to-face interview. Although we stressed we wanted professionals' own opinions, and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, feedback from three of these five suggests they were, to a greater or lesser extent, ill-at-ease with an interview format, preferring to give considered answers. Interviews were conducted in either Arabic or Kurdish, transcribed and then translated into English.

The Duhok teachers were working in two schools as part of a two-year study and contact was established through a mix of official channels and personal contacts (Ahmad et al. 2012). The Erbil respondents were a convenience sample, identified through personal contacts and snowballing methods, with interviewees suggesting colleagues or friends to interview. This method proved appropriate since it was difficult to make personal contact until in Kurdistan.<sup>9</sup> We do not claim the small sample represents all teachers or all school inspectors, but our analysis identifies some common emergent themes from a range of individuals and across two different geographical locations. This, we suggest, gives authenticity to the perspectives presented here.

All interviews were conducted by a researcher familiar with local cultural norms and practices. In Duhok our respondents were approached by colleagues from the University of Duhok with whom they had been working for some months and whom we characterise as having insider positions. In the Erbil district interviewees were interviewed by one of the authors (Chalank) who is familiar with local cultural norms having grown up in the city, but whose secondary and higher education has been in Europe.<sup>10</sup>

Our fieldwork is informed by our study of documentary sources, notably the reform of the basic and secondary schools (KRG, 2009) and the human rights text books (Rauof 2007), for which we had professional (non-official) translations made.

### **Professionals' perspectives**

Here we report on respondents' understandings of HRE and specifically their observations on diversity and gender equality. Since teaching for gender equality and diversity are taking place within a context of education reform, we also invited our respondents to reflect on this, with some focusing on broader social issues, and some on the relationship between active student-centred teaching methods and education for human rights, citizenship and democracy. Table 1 lists the professionals interviewed. All names are pseudonyms to protect the respondents' anonymity.

#### ***Understandings of human rights education***

A number of individuals link the need for HRE to the Kurdish struggle for human rights and political recognition. They focus on the need for children to know Kurdish history and to understand the fragility of society when the rights of minorities are overlooked:

Of course, human rights and HRE are very important to know about and be aware of. Especially in our society and due to past experiences of conflicts and violations, we need to be educated about our rights. ...Each of us needs rights and also to understand our rights and how to claim them. However, HRE as a subject in our education system does not have as much emphasis as it should. We lack expertise in this discipline and we do not have specialised teachers ... For the time being, social studies teachers are required to teach this subject. (Payman)

**Table 1:** Research respondents: Professional roles and characteristics

No.	Participant	Professional role	Gender	Religious tradition/ethnic background
1 July	Kamaran	General school inspector	M	Muslim/Kurd
2 July	Kawthar	School inspector: student counselling	F	Muslim/Turkmenian
3 July	Foad	Principal – urban model school – and school inspector	M	Christian
4 July	Asem	Teacher: Arabic, grades 7-12	M	Muslim/ Kurd
5 July	Hassan	Principal rural school*	M	Muslim/ Kurd
6 July	Sarkawt	Acting principal rural school	M	Muslim/ Kurd
7 Feb	Payman	School inspector: social studies and HRE, grades 1–6	F	Muslim/ Kurd
8 Feb	Fawzi	Teacher: social studies and HRE, grades 7–10	M	Muslim/ Kurd
9 Feb	Sawsan	Teacher: social studies and HRE	F	Christian
10 Feb	Azad	School inspector: social studies and HRE	M	Muslim/ Kurd
11 Feb	Sherko	Teacher: social studies and HRE (grade 5)	M	Muslim/ Kurd
12 Feb	Ahlam	Teacher: social studies and HRE, grades 7–9	F	Muslim/ Kurd
13 Duhok	Halat	Teacher : social studies and HRE, grades 7–9	F	Muslim/ Kurd
14 Duhok	Tara	Teacher: English, up to grade 6	F	Muslim/ Kurd
15 Duhok	Loreen	Teacher: civic education and HRE (grade 5)	F	Muslim/ Kurd

\* This is the only school in which our teacher respondents worked where boys and girls are taught separately, attending different shifts.

Thus, despite the new emphasis on HRE in the 2009 curriculum reform, the subject lacks trained teachers. The respondents confirmed our impression that the textbooks (particularly for older students) are dry and uninteresting, containing long extracts from international instruments, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but with little or no guidance as to what they mean or how they might be made accessible to teachers and relevant to students. The respondents suggest the emphasis is on knowledge not on developing human rights dispositions or values:

The content is very dry and very limited. It would have been better if HRE was not simply regarded as just another curriculum subject, examined to test students' knowledge. (Ahlam)

This subject should be designed and taught in all grades, according to the students' age and needs. For example, as a child in grades 1–6, you have specific rights/needs that need to be provided by school and society. If they don't learn about human rights and entitlements at a specific age, then they will not understand or be aware they have these rights. ... It's important for them to be ... able to demand them. (Kawthar)

Generally speaking, the respondents place considerable emphasis on the place of human rights in creating a just and sustainable society. They recognise the importance of human rights but express concerns both about a general understanding of human rights in contemporary Kurdish society and about teachers' lack of training in human rights education.

When it comes to the subjects of human rights education and democracy, I do not have very close knowledge of them. Only that my daughter has taken these subjects and, from my perspective, it's important to teach these subjects to school students. (Kamaran)

In general, not only in Kurdistan, but across the Middle East, we're not aware of our rights. We don't really understand what is meant by human rights. So a good awareness campaign is needed. (Kawthar)

I don't think the subject [HRE] is given the attention and development it deserves. ... It should be included in all grades ... as it's very important for our teachers and students to behave according to human rights standards. ...Most importantly, it's insufficient to learn about human rights as a paper exercise, there should be genuine opportunities to practise them. (Asem)

Although Kamaran is a general school inspector, responsible for nine schools, he admits he knows relatively little about HRE and citizenship as taught in those schools, even though he acknowledges their importance. This viewpoint is echoed by others who criticise the minimal coverage of human rights in the curriculum and stress the limited societal knowledge of human rights.

A number of respondents suggest that for HRE to seem relevant both children and adults in Kurdistan need to be in a position to *claim* their rights. Among several respondents, there is an implied criticism of the Kurdish administration for not fully securing the rights of citizens and enabling them to practise these rights. There is a general impression that human rights are important but that both human rights and HRE are ill-understood.

Children learn about authority, but the obligations of authority figures (parents, teachers, government officials) to uphold children's rights are not addressed. Kawthar observes:

It is not enough just to teach our children about rights in books, as individuals, we also need to be able to practice these rights outside schools. However, in reality, there are many rights that we know of and yet cannot claim. It would be better that these subjects are taken up to the political level and enacted through laws.

In some institutions HRE was so low-status that schools might adopt corrupt practices to hide the fact they were neglecting the subject.

Some HRE teachers ... make the lesson available for other subjects, such as English or mathematics ... In such cases, HRE topics will be limited to a few classes before the exams and all students will be graded as if they have mastered their rights very well! (Fawzi)

### ***Practising HRE***

In order to bring the subject alive, a number of respondents suggested more active learning methods, including group work, the use of stories and the involvement of NGOs to bring the subject to life for the students:

[With active methods] ... the student will understand the topic and s/he will never forget it because s/he takes part in explaining, presenting and discussing. (Tara)  
When I use role play, the student takes over the role of the teacher and explains the topic. This makes them feel responsible and will improve performance. (Loreen)

Foad, who works as a school principal and school inspector, observed how some teachers feel HRE should not be examined because a student should not fail in something as fundamental as human rights. He strongly opposed this argument, pointing out the importance of the subject matter in learning about responsibilities and rights.

### ***Teaching rights where rights are denied***

One specific challenge raised by a number of respondents was that of teaching rights in contexts in which rights are denied, both in society and in school. Efforts to reform the education system have occurred rapidly, and in many places school building programmes and the provision of basic facilities have not kept pace with demand.

Right now, the [education reform] process is being implemented with many shortages, which has caused chaos and confusion amongst professionals, students and their families. ... You hear now of the current student demonstrations that are going on in various towns/regions in Kurdistan. This is because lack of understanding and [failings in] the system. ... As a consequence we have been witnessing school children demonstrating on the streets for some years. (Payman)

One school principal spoke of being instructed by his superiors to drop an investigation into a teacher's professional behaviour, and to turn a blind eye to equality and justice:

Human rights norms should apply to staff as well as students. Very often, you are forced to drop taking it to the next level because someone on a higher level instructs you to do so. This contradicts genuine implementation of human rights rules and equality. (Sarkawt)

Equally, professionals felt it important that HRE was not restricted to children but extended into communities. One suggested that HRE has been introduced merely to conform to international standards, rather than with commitment and clearly articulated educational and social justice aims:

I don't think HRE fits with our reality. Our society is still based on a tribal/ agricultural system, which is not ready to digest the message behind human rights norms ... including in the curriculum. I think it has more of a political benefit than a genuine social one. It's more to show to the West that we adhere to human rights norms and have included that in our schooling, without first focusing and addressing real societal problems and injustices. (Sawsan)

In order to make HRE content more meaningful, we need to add more practical activities. For instance, bring pupils to universities, visit different NGOs, and show documentary films ... and stories about human rights. ... It's important to make a link between HRE and the existence of [human rights] organisations so students are aware of the need to address human rights issues in our region. (Fawzi)

HRE teachers need to be continuously trained ... It would be good to have HRE professionals from local universities and even abroad to provide teacher training. (Azad)

While the examples discussed above relate largely to broader societal denials of rights, another challenge is responding to children who have personal experience of human rights abuses. The example below illustrates how making HRE relevant to children's everyday lives may empower teachers to address sensitive questions of child abuse. It also illustrates how giving the child the right of expression in class (participation rights) may serve to guarantee children's protection rights:

Sometimes, students give examples of human rights violations they themselves are ... experiencing at home, such as parents beating them or verbally undermining their personality. ... I give my students freedom to participate, including time to reflect upon the topic and discuss examples. ... Sometimes, a student will come to say they have understood the content, but this is not practised at home. In such situations, we inform the principal and school board, investigating the home situation and inviting parents to school to talk ... HRE can contribute in building up the student's personality. Many young learners are not taken seriously at home. Their rights may be neglected, denied or even violated. Some may grow up in fear, not daring to speak up. (Sherko)

### ***HRE, gender and diversity***

Among our respondents we observe a preference for talking about gender issues rather than ethnic or religious diversity when considering the potential of HRE to contribute to social justice and learning to live together. Although a number of respondents made direct reference to past conflict, few elaborated on it. One teacher adopted what we have termed a "paradise narrative" (Ahmad et al. 2012) whereby she denied past conflict within Kurdistan:

In our society co-existence stretches from time immemorial. There's no discrimination between nations, races and religions and history testifies to this... We have always been brothers who love and tolerate each other, in class, in the neighbourhood, in the village and in the city. (Tara)

Such claims form part of a wide political discourse in Kurdistan-Iraq in which the recent conflict among Kurds is denied. We would argue that this discourse, while

undoubtedly part of the rhetoric of Kurdish nationalism and shared political destiny, remains deeply problematic within the context of schooling since it denies the realities to which children will be exposed, namely past conflict and ongoing inequalities.

By contrast, other teachers responded pragmatically to diversity. Halat proposed asking children questions to find out what they knew about their multicultural, multi-faith society and about different religions and cultures “because the more information a person has the stronger their personality and ability to express themselves”.

Kamran spoke at length about his understandings of schooling and gender equity and teachers’ responsibilities within this:

There is no doubt that our society is a closed society, strongly based on customs and traditions, where religion also plays a vital role. The only way, in my view, to bring these two sexes closer to each other and enhance gender equality is via school. Our society is a male-dominated society. Men have the power and women are looked down on to a certain degree. ... Schools play an important role in enhancing general knowledge about gender equality and its advantages in society. ... I try to encourage a sense of responsibility in every teacher and stress each individual’s role in changing cultural norms to incorporate gender equality awareness.

Nevertheless, like a number of other professionals, he did not underestimate the scale of the challenge or the conservative forces undermining equality initiatives, recognising that schooling needs to be complemented by a comprehensive awareness raising strategy and legal reform:

We need to acknowledge the fact that tribalism plays a big role in our Kurdish society, in combination with traditions and religion, which all work against the idea of gender equality. Women are viewed as second-class citizens and sometimes used as a commodity to be exchanged in marriage.

Most respondents felt that schools had a key part to play in realising gender equity, although few were able to articulate the precise contribution of HRE. However, many were aware of how the move towards mixed-sex schools had led to a loss of community confidence, and some themselves had reservations about girls and boys being educated together:

School has a major role in establishing positive gender relationships because if from very early stage children get used to studying and playing together ... it will become normal for girls and boys to interact, communicate and study together. (Kawthar)

Sherko suggested:

Gender equality has to start at home. Parents need to treat their boys and girls equally without any differences. ... But parents interfere in school business. ... Very often we hear parents’ complain about the fact that their daughter is placed next to a boy in class.

Our culture isn’t ready yet to mixing the two sexes at this sensitive age [teenage]. I can bring you to a mixed-sex school and just look at the classroom walls! There’re filled up with love messages

between boys and girls. ... They do not understand yet how to treat each other respectfully as a sister-brother or as friends. Consequently, the number of mixed-sex schools is decreasing day-by-day. Teachers are sometimes unable to control the situation and many parents are against the idea of sending their daughters to a mixed school, even if's close to home. (Azad)

Mixed-sex schooling should begin in pre-school. In the secondary school or college, it is already too late. ... Ours, the only mixed-sex school in this district, will close next year and boys and girls will be separated. ... There are no big differences in gender relationships between rural and urban areas. On the contrary, in some rural areas, girls and boys are freer to interact. For example, in the Spring, it's normal for a group of girls and boys to have a picnic together. Agricultural work has made interaction a regular habit. Although we find more educated people in urban areas, gender relations there are not as free as one might imagine. (Hassan)

Hassan was not alone in noting anomalies in gender relations, whereby in certain contexts, boys and girls are free to mix:

We still have many families that are against the idea of sending their children to a mixed-sex school. ... this is a matter of getting used to the idea. In our Kurdish culture, it is not acceptable for a girl to look at a boy ... yet it's normal at a wedding to dance hand-in-hand with a strange boy. The latter practice is common and culturally acceptable. (Fawzi)

Yet it appears that adult professionals were in some cases perpetuating problems by their own reluctance to engage on the basis of equality with their opposite-sex colleagues, preferring the familiarity of same-sex social relationships:

There are many schools, where the female and male teaching staff have two separate teachers' rooms. If this is still the dominant mode of thinking amongst teachers, how can they address gender equality with their students or support interaction between the sexes? (Payman)

### ***Religion, values and gender***

Fawzi told a shocking story of a student who committed suicide after her brother prevented her from joining her classmates on a school visit. He suggested that the case raised fundamental questions about societal recognition of girls' capabilities, as well as questions about home-school communications:

Yesterday, a young female student, aged between 16–17 years, committed suicide by burning 65 percent of her body. She did it because her brother didn't allow her to join her class in an out-of-school visit. ... This is ... a classic example of a lack of communication and cooperation between schools and families in grasping curricula activities. ... Gender equality is tied to cultural understandings of girls' and boys' roles, and this is not based either on religion or science. ... It's an example of false perceptions of girls' potential and behaviour.

Fawzi also expressed concerns both about the power of tribalism and the influence of mullahs in preventing the realisation of gender equity:

The biggest limitation is the tribal mind-set controlling society. Society isn't open to the modernisation we so strongly need. ... Another important concern is the lack of well-educated religious personalities ... We have many mullahs that play an important role in society, but



very few that are sufficiently well-educated to understand the real meaning of the Qur'an. Our religion allows equal rights for women and men, but this isn't properly understood. To be honest, we need a mind-set ready for religious reformation, according to societal needs. This is allowed in Islam. I'm not talking about reducing prayer from five times a day to three, but we need to understand that time when our Prophet was living is very different from today's age.

Sawsan, herself a Christian, agreed:

[We need to] link gender equality to our religious ideals, which stress equal treatment. Even Islam highlights the need for gender equality. I was just now teaching history and our topic is the history of Islam, where the Prophet Mohammad highlights gender equality.

Finally, we observe that few, if any, of our respondents appeared familiar with the CRC and that child rights were absent from the text books reviewed. Although it appears that the respondents were more comfortable discussing gender than ethnic diversity, a number insisted that any class discussion that might be construed as political, religious or gender-related remained problematic:

Misunderstandings happen very easily in our community ... if we talk about political, religious or gender-related issues. Class discussion may be counterproductive. For example, if we talked about Valentine's day in class, it may lead to misunderstanding ... even their families might interfere. ... So you consciously avoid opening any gender-related topic in the classroom. (Ahlam)

### **Ways forward: Principles and strategies**

We have sought to illuminate the practices of HRE in Iraq-Kurdistan by drawing on the perspectives of teachers and school inspectors responsible for enabling and monitoring quality education. Claiming rights implies knowledge about rights yet, as we have noted, teachers appear to be ill-equipped to address this subject matter, lacking specific training and operating in a prevailing social climate where considerable inequalities remain between women and men and in which fast-changing economic development is widening the gap between rich and poor.

Teachers' professional education needs to incorporate child rights as an essential feature of the curriculum. The focus within the current school curriculum is knowledge *about* rights, yet there is a gap between the ideals expressed in international instruments and reiterated in the political rhetoric of KRG leaders, and the everyday realities of both teachers and children. Teaching about human rights in school (including efforts to teach students about gender equity) takes place in contexts where children's rights (and particularly those of the girl child) are denied, and in family and societal contexts where powerful conservative and patriarchal values prevail. Urgent attention needs to be given to textbook development and to the assessment of human rights learning so that books, pedagogy and assessment procedures support, rather than undermine, stated policy goals relating to human rights and gender equity.

The limitations of the current HRE approaches are not a reason to abandon HRE but to ensure that teachers have appropriate support, including training in active methods, and opportunities to discuss how to support children in claiming their rights and the tensions between rights and cultural norms. There also needs to be awareness-raising and opportunities for learning for parents and other members of the local community, focusing particularly on child rights and basic human rights standards relating to children's daily lives.

Students are likely to feel disempowered if, despite the human rights they learn about, societal conditions undermine these rights. HRE is a right and part of quality education. Students not only need knowledge about rights but also education *in* human rights. Such education, as characterised by the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011: Article 2.2) as: "Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners" implies a consideration of educational structures and young people's experiences of schooling (Osler 2010), as well as the more student-centred methodological approaches which a number of our respondents noted. In other words, learners need to be given opportunities to experience rights within the community of the school. These issues are not yet addressed within the HRE framework for Kurdistan.

Finally, HRE within a post-conflict society such as Kurdistan-Iraq needs a particular focus on "Education *for* human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others" (UN 2011: Article 2:2). This implies skills training and creating a sense of solidarity between the genders and across ethnic and religious groups so that learners are encouraged to show responsibility towards and defend the rights of others, particularly those who are different from themselves or with whom they may disagree. This is what Osler and Starkey (2005) characterised as "education for cosmopolitan citizenship". Learners will only realise their rights if they are equipped and ready to struggle for them.

Powerful conservative forces, including religious leaders and tribal authority, combine to undermine efforts to promote gender equity. While gender is a sensitive area for discussion, religious and ethnic diversity is often off-limits. Thus, HRE requires much more than merely translating international instruments into national policies or implementing educational reforms. It implies an approach that includes school policies and practices which empower students and provide them with a language to discuss sensitive issues.

It is the responsibility of government to uphold human rights, but this can best be done in cooperation with civil society. Programmes of teacher education and training are best implemented in cooperation with local and international NGOs and specialist trainers. This should support Kurdistan's development and enable the best use of human resources, especially the contribution women and girls can make to strengthening democracy and development.

One critique of the current approaches taken by professionals is that HRE in school is taking place in a vacuum, without sufficient attention to measures beyond the school to raise awareness about the rights of girls (and minorities). Such a multidimensional approach might make fuller use of TV and other media to influence families and invite them to work in partnership with schools. It might also indirectly counter conservative religious forces who suggest that women's human rights are counter to religious teaching.

We conclude, from the complex and occasionally divergent perspectives of the educational professionals in Kurdistan who took part in our study that education *about, in and for* human rights has the potential to strengthen education quality and gender equity, challenging patriarchal values and tribalism from the grassroots. It is only one tool and will not be effective, as a number of education professionals noted, without effective political leadership and legal provisions across a range of policy areas. In a society which is multi-faith but which also includes secular perspectives, and particularly in a post-conflict context, recognition of the universal nature of rights and the obligations which this places not only on governments but also on all actors within civil society has the potential to promote solidarity and cohesion across cultural and religious boundaries. It is this solidarity which is critical for a just and peaceful future.

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## Notes

- 1 Launched in Dakar in 2000, UNGEI aims to support the realisation of girls' fundamental human right to education, emphasising its role in realising other human rights such as labour market access, health care and freedom from gender-based violence.
- 2 Kurmanji is spoken in Duhok, while Sorani is used in Erbil.
- 3 While some Syrian refugees are accommodated in a camp near Duhok, others are spread across the region, supported by families and communities (IOM, 2012).
- 4 Women may lack access to shelters, which in any case may close for lack of support. Some claim that shelters have allowed women at risk to be returned to their families.
- 5 In the case of Kurdistan-Iraq, responsibility for guaranteeing children's rights in education lies with the KRG since education is a devolved responsibility within the autonomous region.
- 6 The data were collected as part of a small-scale research and development initiative funded by the British Council's Del-PHE programme (British Council, 2010). A paper from this project, INTERDEMOCRATE (intercultural and democratic learning in teacher education), is published as Ahmad et al. (2012). The project builds on a long-standing partnership between Buskerud University College, Norway and Duhok University, Iraq. We are grateful for the support of the principal investigator, Dr Lena Lybaek, and project members Niroj Ahmad, Adnam Ismail and Nadia Zako for the data collection.
- 7 Chalank Yahya would like to thank the Falstad Centre, Norway, for the award of a scholarship which enabled her to complete a second round of data collection for her MSc thesis in February 2012.
- 8 Of the 15 respondents (seven female and eight male), five elected to answer the questions in writing, rather than through a face-to-face interview. Although we stressed we wanted professionals' own opinions, and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality, it appeared that these five were, to a greater or lesser extent, ill-at-ease with an interview format, preferring to give considered answers. In Duhok all three teacher respondents gave us written answers. In the Erbil governorate two of our 12 respondents, both education inspectors, chose to respond in writing. This was the case for the Duhok teachers who had each been experimenting with introducing student-centred methods in their own classrooms as a central feature of the INTERDEMOCRATE project.
- 9 Most schools lack modern communication tools, such as websites and public e-mail.
- 10 This gave Chalank both insider and outsider status, with research participants frequently making reference to shared cultural reference points, but also accorded her, as a young woman educated abroad, particular respect and courtesies which cut across commonly observed standards between the generations, where such courtesies are generally shown to those older than oneself.

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