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Muslim clerics and leadership in human rights education in Muslim societies

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Abstract

Several human rights instruments have declared that human rights education is a fundamental right for all. However, human rights education in Muslim societies is still facing serious challenges most of which arise from lack of effective educational methods. Our research shows that Muslim clerics can be considered as leaders of human rights education in Muslim societies, playing an important role in addressing and dealing with most of the challenges and enhancing universal culture of human rights. The findings indicate that in an effective human rights education method resulting in flexible, accessible, acceptable and sustainable human rights, Muslim clerics can be considered to play an active role. In addition, the results highlight that this educational method can promote, localize and institutionalize human rights in such societies and can help prevent and resolve the possible conflicts between religious and human rights discourses.

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1. Introduction

The international community has increasingly expressed consensus on the fundamental contribution of human rights education to the realization of human rights (OHCHR & UNESCO, 2006, p. 11). Everybody, women, men, youth and children, need to know and understand their human rights as relevant to their concerns and aspirations (Benedek, 2006). However, human rights education in Muslim societies has not been more effective and has not been able to meet the criteria of satisfaction because there have been some challenges in previous educational methods most of which arise from lack of appropriate educational leadership.

The aim of the present research is to introduce and recommend an effective method for human rights education in Muslim societies in which Muslim clerics are considered as educational leaders. This effective and collaborative method enjoys flexibility, accessibility, acceptability and sustainability without the current challenges. Our studies show that this method is effectual and fruitful to educate, promote, localize and institutionalize human rights in these societies. It also can prevent and resolve the possible conflict between religion and human rights.

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2. Leadership in human rights education

Human rights education and training comprises all educational, training, information and learning activities aimed at promoting a universal culture of human rights (Draft UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, 2010; Amnesty International, 2005; Tibbitts, 1996 & Reardon, 1995). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights states that human rights education encompasses:

a) Knowledge and skills — learning about human rights and mechanisms for their protection, as well as acquiring skills to apply them in daily life;

b) Values, attitudes and behavior — developing values and reinforcing attitudes and behavior which uphold human rights;


Since there is a natural nexus between legal training and leadership (Rivers-James, 2010) and legal education lags behind the curve in leadership development (Rubenstein, 2008), the best educational leadership of human rights is to consider these three educational levels well. Our studies show that Muslim clerics can be successful leaders of human rights education in these three parts.

3. Methodology

To have successful educational leaders of human rights in Muslim societies, this educational method should step in two ways: first, educating Muslim clerics about human rights and second, educating human rights by Muslim clerics.

3.1. Educating Muslim clerics about human rights

To increase Muslim clerics’ desire for knowledge of human rights and to educate them about human rights, there are two successful experienced techniques that are described below:

a) Holding conferences and workshops on human rights subjects; our studies show that these conferences and workshops are more effective when human rights teachers and human rights activists make a link between human rights concepts and Islamic teachings on human rights. After holding a workshop entitled “legal and Islamic jurisprudential perspectives on freedom of speech and belief” at International Center for Jurisprudence of Purified Imams (ICJPI), more than 60 percent of 90 clerics who participated in it stated that they get acquainted with the topic and wanted to know more about it. They said that this type of education was useful for them. We found out that teaching human rights in these workshops by the clerics studying international human rights law is more effective.

b) Case studies; an integral part of practical law education is the case-study technique. Case studies require learners to analyze problem situations and reach their own conclusions concerning the outcome (McQuoid-Mason, 2006, p. 5). Case studies motivate the clerics to act for promoting human rights in their societies. Our experience in Mofid University’s Legal Clinic (MULC) show that more than 80 percent of the clerics who took part in clinical programs as legal advisors or trainees and face real human rights cases have become human rights activists in the society.

3.2. Educating human rights by Muslim clerics

Muslim clerics, after learning human rights, are engaged in human rights education as leaders in this educational method which is an active, participatory, comprehensive and multi-layers method. It, as I mentioned above, embraces: (a) Knowledge and skills; (b) Values, attitudes and behavior and (c) Action.

3.2.1. Knowledge and skills

This field of the method covers students, professional groups, and the people.
a) Students: The focus of the method is on both law and Islamic studies students to make them familiar with Islamic teachings on human rights and encourage them to face poor people and marginal groups in Muslim societies so that they take responsibility for human rights knowledge of the people and take part in ‘street law’ and pro bono services.

‘Street law’ recognizes that the law affects people in their daily lives and it is therefore necessary for everyone to understand the law. ‘Street law’ refers to the fact that the program is designed for the average person in the street. Learners will be shown how the law, including the Constitution, affects people's lives on the street (McQuoid-Mason, 2006, p. 3 & Grimes, 2004). Pro bono services offer multiple educational benefits in such areas as professional responsibility, problem solving, law skills, and leadership skills. They are ethical training for law and Islamic studies students (See Edwards, 1992 & Strossen, 1993). The Association of American Law Schools (AALS) Commission on Pro Bono and Public Service Opportunities marked the first systematic effort by the AALS to address the role of pro bono and public service in legal education. In Learning to Serve, the Commission recognized that pro bono programs serve two central objectives. “One is to provide positive experiences to students that will encourage their future involvement as practitioners. . . Second, law school pro bono programs have independent educational value, whatever their effects on lawyers’ future involvement”. The Commission also identified practical benefits of pro bono programs for law students, including learning legal skills, exploring alternative career paths, developing professional contacts, and becoming involved in their communities.

These forms of engaged, experiential learning permit the students to use creative, self-determined solutions to problem (Andreopoulos & Claude, 1997) and increase students’ ability to think critically and problem-solve (Parker-Gwin & Mabry, 1998), therefore, the students learn human rights by a practical method and at the same time, they freely promote human rights in the society.

b) Professional groups: Muslim clerics can improve the knowledge of professional groups such as school teachers, employers and judges concerning human rights issues based on their needs and talents (See Pekari & Schmiedl, 2006) so each group requires its special instruments of human rights education. Our research shows that it would be successful to teach rights of each class to the opposite class such as educating employee’s rights to employers and children rights to teachers and rights of accused to judges. For example, we, in MULC, held a workshop entitled “corporal punishment of children” for the principals of high schools in Qom. 45 persons attended the workshop; more than 60 percent of them agreed with corporal punishment of children in some cases. A Muslim cleric who is a human rights activist explained Islamic attitude on children rights and introduced real cases to them and got their experiences. Afterwards, in a poll, all of them became against corporal punishment of children in all cases (Meghdadi & Erfani Nasab, 2011).

c) The people: Muslim clerics increase the people’s knowledge on human rights in their societies through making speech on Islamic human rights, motivating Islamic studies students to do pro bono works and holding Street Law by law students to highlight Islamic teachings on human rights. Masques, in this way, play an important role. They are low-cost places for educating human rights and reliable for Muslims around the world which are managed by Muslim clerics.

3.2.2. Values, attitudes and behavior

Many educational problems can only be understood in relation to the broad social, political and cultural context of which education is a part (Angus, 2005). Some challenges of human rights education in Muslim societies arise from existed wrong values, attitudes and behavior towards human rights. Muslim clerics can deal with the challenges in two ways. First, they can make some revisions to some interpretations of Islamic teachings that are at odds with human rights. Second, they can highlight Islamic teachings on human rights such as the respect for human dignity and children rights etc for Muslims. As the teachings come from a religious source, they will be effective, sustainable and acceptable teachings of human rights in Muslim societies so that they’ll become a part of Muslim culture and will be localized and institutionalized in such societies. Therefore, Muslim clerics can help prevent and resolve the conflict between some interpretations of Islamic teachings and human rights which is one of the main obstacles in the way of promoting human rights in Muslim societies.

3.2.3. Action

Muslim clerics can do two actions to promote human rights in Muslim societies:
a) They can persuade Muslim statesmen in the countries with Islamic government to promote human rights in their societies and consider them in their legislations. Muslim clerics in Muslim societies with non-Islamic governments can use their ability to put the governments under the pressure of public opinion for access to justice in their societies.

b) Muslim clerics can do planned follow-up for human rights education. Human rights training program should include structured follow-up plans from the formulation stage (United Nations, 2000). The plans may include periodic return visits by Muslim clerics for quality control, review and reinforcement purposes, or a system of review and reporting to be carried out by Islamic studies students and law students.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the considerable efforts for educating human rights around the world and declaring the years 1995-2004 as the decade of education, the teachings of human rights still have not been completely and correctly entered into Muslim societies. One of the most important problems is the lack of appropriate leadership in human rights education in these societies. Based on our research, Muslim clerics have an active role in localizing and institutionalizing human rights in such societies and can prevent and resolve the possible conflict between religion and human rights. In the light of this investigation human rights activists, law teachers and social workers can recognize the clerics as leaders of human rights education in Muslim societies after educating them about concepts of human rights. They can take advantage of abilities and skills of Muslim clerics in the process of human rights education and can make cooperation among law schools, human rights institutions and Islamic seminars.

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