

# **Human Rights Education in Kurdistan–Iraq: a means towards gender equality?**

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**MSc Thesis in Human Rights and Multiculturalism**

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<b>Name:</b> Chalank Yahya	<b>Date:</b> 09.06.2013
<b>Title and subtitle:</b> Human Rights Education in Kurdistan–Iraq: a means towards gender equality?	
<b>Abstract:</b> This thesis examines education professionals’ perceptions of the potential role of Human Rights Education (HRE) as a means towards gender equality in Iraqi Kurdistan. HRE is understood as a cosmopolitan project. The key research questions are: a) how can HRE contribute to gender equity in the post-conflict and multicultural society of Iraqi Kurdistan? and b) how do education professionals understand human rights and HRE and its potential in Kurdish society? The data was gathered during fieldwork visits in July 2011 and February 2012 to Erbil governorate by means of a range of qualitative methods including interviews with education professionals and NGO workers; classroom observations and documentary sources. Martha Nussbaum’s and Amartya Sen’s capability approach is adopted as the theoretical framework within which the data is analysed. The professionals report on recent initiatives to reform the Kurdish education system, including the introduction of HRE into the curriculum. They describe the poor status of school facilities and lack of material and human resources in meeting current education demands, meaning that children’s human rights are not necessarily guaranteed at school. When it comes to HRE, it is perceived as low-status. Human rights are taught without adequate consideration of or familiarity with children’s rights. HRE operates in a setting where there is tension between knowing rights in theory and being able to enjoy these rights in practice, including equitable gender relationships. This thesis concludes that for HRE to be effective, teaching methods need to focus on student participation and empowerment, where the focus is on facilitating the development of self-empowerment and critical thinking (capability approach) so as to enable learners to both understand and to experience human rights, including the key concepts of equality and inclusion central to positive gender relationships.	
<b>Key words:</b> Human Rights Education (HRE), capability approach, Kurdistan-Iraq, gender equality, education professionals’ perspectives, post-conflict	
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## DECLARATION

I certify that this is all my own work. Any material quoted or paraphrased from reference books, journals, www. Etc. has been identified as such and duly acknowledged in the text or foot/end notes. Such sources are also listed in the bibliography. I have read the College's policy on plagiarism and am aware of the penalties for plagiarism.

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Signed: .....Name: .....Chalank Yahya.....

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Chalank Yahya  
Lørenskog

## **List of Abbreviations**

CRC – Convention on the Rights of Child

MDG – Millennium Development Goals

FGM – Female genital mutilation

HRE – Human Rights Education

KDP – Kurdistan Democratic Party

KNA – Kurdistan National Assembly

KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government

NGO – Non-governmental Organization

NPA – Norwegian People Aid

OHCHR – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

PDA – People’s Development Association

PUK – Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

UDHR – Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UN – United Nations

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNGEI – United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 Purpose of this thesis**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) 1948 established a framework for “every individual and every organ of society” to have access in education, through which progress can be made in promoting human rights and in respecting each other’s freedoms. Article 26 of UDHR reaffirms that education is to be ‘directed to the full development of the human personality’. Based on this article, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989 specifies in Article 28 the right of education to be achieved ‘progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity’ (UN, 1989).

The purpose of this thesis is to examine education professionals' understandings of human rights education (HRE) and its potential role in promoting gender equality in multicultural society of Kurdistan-Iraq. The topic of this thesis is a complex one and it entails various themes. The core issue is the potential contribution of HRE in advancing gender equity through education. Yet, the case-study embraces multiple and complex political, cultural and social components that are relevant to put discussion in a proper context. The concept of intersectionality (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Osler, in press) will be used later (see chapters 5 and 6) in order to discuss and link various socio-cultural categories within the framework of the thesis's topic.

The reason for choosing this topic, and particularly this case-study, is that it is linked to my background of origin<sup>1</sup> and my sincere belief in the power of education to improve society’s standards towards development, equality and freedom. Moreover, recent challenges such as accommodating diversity; putting democracy into practice; and enhancing human rights standards including gender equality (which will be addressed in this chapter); all seem to call for socio-political changes in Kurdistan and elsewhere in the region. To this purpose, adequate actions, including in the education system, seem to be necessary. This thesis attempts to contribute to this by examining the current schooling context and in particular teachers’ perspectives on HRE as a tool for empowerment and a contribution towards improving social justice, including gender equality for the young generation in the region.

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<sup>1</sup> I was born in Kurdistan and came to Europe as a refugee aged 13

## **1.2 Research questions**

This thesis seeks to examine the Iraqi Kurdish educational professionals' understandings about HRE and its contribution to promote social justice, including gender equality. In light of this, I ask the following key research questions:

- How can HRE contribute to gender equity in the post-conflict and multicultural society of Kurdistan-Iraq?
- How do education professionals understand human rights and HRE and its potentials in Kurdish society?

In addressing these questions, it is important to discuss the relationship between HRE and the advancement of gender equality through education settings. This relationship will be discussed in chapter three, which sets the theoretical framework of this thesis. Finally, this thesis will address also the potential role of education to strengthen peace-building and to accommodate diversity in post-conflict society as the one of Iraqi Kurdistan.

As mentioned earlier, my primary reasons of undertaking this project are both related to my identity and personal belief in advancing gender equity through education. In chapter four, I elaborate further on this.

Finally, it is worth to mention that two papers are published that draw on this research (Osler & Yahya, 2013; Yahya, 2013). These papers are included as appendices 5 and 6. Also, another paper which draws on this thesis and was presented during World Kurdish Congress 2012 (WKC 2012) in Erbil, is now in press and will be published as a chapter in book 'Perspectives on Kurdistan's Economy and Society in Transition, Volume II' (Osler & Yahya, in press).

## **1.3 Human rights as a cosmopolitan project**

The departure point of this thesis is viewing human rights principles and HRE as a cosmopolitan project. Human rights principles support social justice and the right of every human being to have a valuable and dignified life (UDHR, 1948). These principles entail a cosmopolitan vision, which stresses equal worthiness, while taking well-being of others into account (Appiah, 1997; Held, 1995). Furthermore, cosmopolitanism celebrates human diversity. It embraces the variety of human cultures, respecting human dignity and personal

autonomy (Appiah, 1997). These are also the main principles that underpin the UDHR (1948) and other human rights instruments.

This thesis addresses the problematic gender roles within Kurdish society. It attempts to address the potential of HRE in order to improve gender equality. Gender equality does not only improve women's positions; in fact, it advances social justice for all (Okin, 1989; Sen, 1992). Moreover, the issue of gender equality is a cross-cultural concern, which in turn is a cosmopolitan concern (Nussbaum, 2000a; Nussbaum & Cohen, 1996). Hence, gender equality matters to advance societal conditions, including socio-economical progress (Sen, 1999), which seems to be needed in Kurdish society.

#### **1.4 Human rights and socio-political challenges in Kurdistan-Iraq**

Kurdistan-Iraq experienced considerable conflicts and instability in the last century and the early years of the twenty-first century. These had resulted in a severely damaged infrastructure in the region and a notable Kurdish diaspora across the globe. Conflicts such as the Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988 and the Anfal genocidal campaign against the Kurds in 1986-89, which was led by the Iraqi military under Saddam Hussein, had a severe impact on Kurdistan (Stansfield, 2003). The instability and destruction in the region increased during the Gulf War in 1991, followed by the Kurdish uprising, resulting in mass displacement and a subsequent humanitarian crisis in 1992. During that period, the region and Iraq in general suffered from the consequences of UN sanctions and international embargo against Iraq 1990-2003 (McDowall, 2004).

In addition to the above mentioned conflicts, the struggle for the Kurdish identity with different Iraqi administrations continued for decades. This struggle drew on human rights principles. For this, Kurds often appealed to the basic principles of human rights in order to gain sympathy and support at the international level. Even in the aftermath of the conflicts, the Kurdish administration claims to adhere to human rights principles and solidarity in order to live together in a multi-ethnic and diverse setting of the region (see below in this section). For instance, in the education reform document from 2009, the emphasis is on human rights and democratic principles as learning objectives (more about education reform in section 1.6).

As a turning event, the Iraqi Kurdistan region gained its *ad hoc* autonomy in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991 (Stansfield, 2003).<sup>2</sup> Since 2003, and particularly with the new Iraqi

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<sup>2</sup> As a consequence of the invasion of Kuwait by the former Iraqi regime and under the UN resolution, a so-called no-fly zone that covered the northern and southern parts in Iraq in 1991, including Iraqi Kurdistan. Due

Constitution (2005), further political developments mean that today the Kurdish region is recognised as a constitutional entity within the federal State of Iraq, enjoying internal political, socio-economic and judicial autonomy (Constitution, 2005). The federal region comprises three governorates: Erbil, Sulaimaniyah and Duhok. The region has three official governmental institutions that are recognized in the Iraqi Constitution, these are the Kurdistan Region Presidency, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA), parliament. The Constitution (2005) recognizes also *Peshmerga*<sup>3</sup> as the legitimate military force of Kurdistan region (ibid, 2005).

Whilst the political situation has improved significantly, the Kurdish community still faces various socio-political challenges. The accommodation of diversity is one of these challenges. The region is diverse in terms of its ethno-religious setting. Although the majority of region's population are Muslim Kurds, other minorities have lived there for centuries. These are Christians, Turkmenians, Shiite Kurds, Ahli Haqq, Yezidis, Shabak, Kakeys and Armenians (Begikhani, Gill, & Hague, 2010). A carefully crafted set of policies seem to be needed to include all groups in the democratic framework that the regional authority is claiming to realise. Additionally, ongoing debates about diversity in the disputed areas, including Kirkuk, increase the tensions between the regional authority and the federal government in Baghdad. Inevitably, various types of migrants to the region need to be included in these diversity debates as well, since these populations also require adequate support and legislations to protect them. The migrant groups include internally displaced persons (IDPs) that are coming mainly from the middle and the southern parts of Iraq; returned Kurdish migrants from the neighbouring countries and the Diaspora; labour migrants from various parts of the globe that have arrived after rapid economic development; and also irregular migrants (including Victims of Trafficking) that have a vulnerable position in the region (IOM, 2010).

When it comes to internal politics, the civil war (in Kurdish *Brakuzhi*: brother kills brother) that has occurred between the two dominant political parties: the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)<sup>4</sup> and the Party Democratic Kurdistan (PDK)<sup>5</sup>, has shaped contemporary Kurdish politics (Stansfield, 2003). The civil war led the region to be divided more or less under the political domination of these two powerful parties. The upcoming opposition movement

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to this, the former Iraqi regime lost its power in the region and Kurds gained a sort of *ad hoc* autonomy from Baghdad from 1991-2003.

<sup>3</sup> Peshmerga means 'ready to die'. It refers to Kurdish guerilla fighters who fought against the former regime for the recognition of Kurdish identity.

<sup>4</sup> The PUK is led by current Iraqi president Jalal Talabani

<sup>5</sup> The PDK is led by current KRG president Masoud Barzani

*Gorran* (Change) evidently challenges the power-sharing agreement since 2009, and hence the practice of substantive democracy is on the table. In addition to this, fighting against corruption, fostering social justice and enhancing human rights protection are other demanding political tasks that require the KRG's commitment. All in all, these socio-political matters make human rights relevant to be practically incorporated in various public policies, including in education.

### **1.5 Gender issues in Iraqi Kurdistan**

The female population were marginalized due to the above mentioned various forms of conflicts in the region. The political instability has impacted disproportionately on Kurdish women and on women elsewhere in Iraq.<sup>6</sup> This thesis hence deals with the position of Kurdish women and gender relationships in the region.

Traditionally, gender roles have been clearly defined in Kurdish society. Women still have a lower status in the family than men. Women's domain has been mainly in the private sphere, taking care of the family and protecting family's honour, which is linked to her body (Begikhani et al., 2010). This rigid patriarchal culture has been justified by traditions and customs, which emphasize the protection of honour (ibid, 2010).

It should be noted that women's position has improved significantly in recent years. Many women are engaged in paid employment. Women are more present in various public sectors, including in politics and in media. The quota for female representation in the Kurdistan parliament is increased to 30 per cent (ibid, 2010). Nevertheless, women are invisible in decision-making positions. In the current cabinet, for instance, there is only one female minister amongst a total of nineteen ministerial positions (KRG, 2012).

Despite these improvements, the Kurdish female population continues to be exposed to various forms of gender-based violence on a regular basis. This includes honour killings, domestic violence, sexual harassment, female genital mutilation (FGM), self-immolation (committing suicide through burning themselves), forced marriage (including early marriage) and rape (Begikhani et al., 2010; Yahya, 2009). The weak position of women and the frequent occurrence of violence against them is understood to be due to a clash between modern life demands and restricted cultural traditions (Yahya, 2009). This violence operates in

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<sup>6</sup> The position of Iraqi women is in decline due to the growing militia and the consequences of the 2003 invasion. The domination of conservative power in some parts in the country, poverty and lack of security have restricted a further advancement of women position in Iraq.

combination with and supported by the still relatively disadvantaged socio-economic position of the Kurdish female population (ibid, 2009).

The current status of Kurdish women and the prevailing gender-based harmful practices may be understood as a consequence of conflicts and patriarchy. In its post-conflict and diverse setting, one pressing issue is gender equity in Kurdistan. The struggle for gender equity and equal rights implies structural changes and hence change in the cultural mind-set. I refer here to change a mentality that stereotypes gender positions (Begikhani et al., 2010). In this context, change in culture as such is an educational project (Osler, in press). Education is hence essential to raise awareness and to improve societal conditions. Education is important to promote a mentality that is capable of developing an independent personality to stand against injustice, including gender related injustices. Therefore, this thesis looks at the potential of education and specifically human rights education to advance Kurdish gender relationships.

### **1.6 Education in Kurdistan-Iraq**

The structure of education in Iraqi Kurdistan have been shaped by the Iraqi education system, since the region was administered under the former Iraqi regime for decades. As far as the Iraqi education system is concerned, the quality of education was considered to be very good until the beginning of the 1980s (UNESCO, 2010). However, ongoing conflicts and the former authority's emphasis on the military expenditure have negatively influenced the quality of education (ibid, 2010). Consequently, the curricula have not been updated or brought in line with international standards and the maintenance of schools was neglected due to conflicts (ibid, 2010).

With the emergence of the Kurdish administration post-1991, steps have been taken to improve the education system in the region. In doing so, the regional authority has encountered various challenges (as will be discussed in chapters 5 and 6). Nevertheless, the Kurdish education system has gone through a reform process following the educational conference that took place in 2007 (Curriculum, 2009).

In the reformed system, basic education is extended from six to nine years. The general examinations in the sixth and ninth grades have been abolished. Basic education has become compulsory and the idea is that everyone should have at least nine years of basic schooling (ibid, 2009). English language classes are integrated from the first grade in the school

curriculum and the textbooks of various subjects, such as science and civic subjects have been modified (ibid, 2009). The table below demonstrates the new education system.

**Table 1: Education System in Kurdistan- Iraq**

Age	Level (grade)	Type of Education
17	12	Upper-secondary Education
16	11	
15	10	
14	9	Basic Education
13	8	
12	7	
11	6	
10	5	
9	4	
8	3	
7	2	
6	1	Pre-schooling (Kindergarten)
4-5	-	

Source: (UNESCO, 2010)

Another development in the education system is the development of new language policies, including a change in the language of instruction from Arabic to Kurdish and the opening of new schools in the region, including schools in minority languages, for example, schools in which Assyrian, Turkmenian or Arabic are the language of instruction.

Although the region still lacks adequate school buildings, more schools have been opened in recent years (People's Development Association, 2008). In his speech to mark the new schooling-year of 2011-2012, the Minister of Education revealed that 829 schools were built and 445 schools renovated since 2006. In addition to this, he stated that another 482 school projects are under way. These school projects cover the entire KRG region, including some places in the disputed areas that are partially under the KRG's administration (KRG, 2011).

In line with educational progress in the region, the role of the international and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has increased remarkably, influencing the content of school subjects. For instance, the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) has initiated in cooperation with local NGOs (mainly People's Development Association, PDA), the introduction of HRE

into the curriculum.<sup>7</sup> This process has started as a pilot project in some KRG schools (People's Development Association, 2011). The subject of HRE was officially introduced into the curriculum in 2005. Since then, HRE is taught in grades 5, 7 and 10 as a separate subject (more about HRE in curriculum see chapter 5). Whilst HRE is still a new subject and in progress, the Ministry of Education together with local and international organizations, for example NPA, continue in providing HRE training to education professionals.<sup>8</sup>

### **1.7 Outline of this thesis**

Chapter two starts with a brief overview is provided about the developments of HRE as an emergent theory in education, which entails elements for equality, inclusion and social justice. The chapter continues with contextualising the role of education in post-conflict societies and its potential to enhance gender equality.

A theoretical framework –combining the capability approach with an understanding of human rights as a cosmopolitan project- has underpinned this study. This is discussed extensively in chapter three. Based on the theoretical perspectives, I outline my understanding of HRE and the possibilities for its implementation and impact on behaviour to realise social justice and hence gender equity.

Chapter four outlines the methodological steps followed throughout the process and development of this study. I also address the processes of field work and how the specific position being a researcher influenced the data gathering and its analyses.

Data analyses are performed in chapters five and six. The fifth chapter reports on current practice of HRE and its potential in relation to gender equality. Chapter six comments on education professionals' understandings regarding HRE, education and gender. Chapter seven provides a conclusion and makes recommendations as to how HRE might be further developed within Kurdish curriculum.

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<sup>7</sup> This information is provided from the former NPA coordinator in Iraq and the HRE curriculum specialist from the Ministry of Education has confirmed this, during an informal conversation with both of them.

<sup>8</sup> This information is provided by the HRE curriculum specialist from the Ministry of Education in Kurdistan-Iraq, during an informal conversation with him.

## **2. Literature review**

This thesis is about education professionals' understandings on the potential role of HRE in enhancing gender equality in Iraqi Kurdistan. The focus here is a complex one and it requires various steps to bring together various themes of this thesis. For this purpose, this chapter commences with the developments in the field of HRE worldwide, in order to illuminate the current status of HRE. Then to contextualise the case-study, it is appropriate to discuss the role of education in post-conflict societies, since Kurdistan can be considered as both a post-conflict and is a diverse society. Then, the potential of education are discussed for the cause of gender equality. In addition, this chapter argues that HRE as an emergent theory in education entails elements for equality, inclusion and social justice, which seem to be necessary to enhance gender equality and diversity in a fragile society as the one of Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>9</sup> Through discussing various themes in this chapter, the aim is to assist in supporting and establishing a theoretical framework in the next chapter. Likewise this review informs the discussion of the data in chapters 5 and 6.

### **2.1 Development of human rights education**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948, has set up grounds for 'every individual and every organ of society' to have access to education, through which knowledge can be spread further in promoting human rights and in respecting each other's freedom (Flowers, 2004). Thus, HRE is recognized as a mechanism for promoting human rights standards in practice, effectively incorporating human rights norms into societal norms through education.

In this regard, various international human rights instruments emphasize HRE. This can be seen as an international obligation for the states to incorporate HRE in the education system (Osler & Starkey, 2010). For instance, Article 26 of UDHR (1948) and Article 29 of CRC (1989) spell out the right to human rights education.

The 1974 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization recommendation emphasizes the role of education in practicing human rights and peace globally (UNESCO, 1974). In the UNESCO Montreal Declaration on Human Rights Education 1993, attention is given to the victims of human rights violations and defenders of democracy through human rights education (Baxi, 1997). The 1997 Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action also highlights the role of education in promoting human rights principles (ibid, 1997).

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<sup>9</sup> Chapter 5 addresses fragility of Kurdish region.

Moreover, the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education 1995-2004 was proclaimed to urge all UN members to promote HRE (Flowers, 2004). The UN Decade for Human Rights Education was expanded in 2005 to become an ongoing programme. The first phase of the United Nations Decade for HRE (2005-2009) has focused on HRE in primary and secondary schooling system, whilst the second phase (2010-2014) focuses on HRE in higher education and training professionals and educators (UN, 2012).

Finally, the most recent HRE international document is the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011), which adds another layer to the international commitment towards human rights norms and putting these norms into practice through education. The mentioned Declaration reaffirms the right to know, to seek and to receive information about all human rights and fundamental freedoms (Article 1). It emphasizes the essential role of HRE for promoting universal toleration and the need to teach about HRE in various education levels (UN, 2011).

Next to the human rights movement's efforts at global level, the implementation of HRE as a theory and method in education has gained increasing attention since the 1990s (Fernekes & Tibbitts, 2011). The advocates of HRE movements have emphasised various methods in highlighting the role of education and its strong link to teach and to spread knowledge about human rights principles (ibid, 2011). An explanation for this increase in attention may be linked to globalization and the need for education for global or cosmopolitan citizenship which is based on human rights values and democracy (Osler & Starkey, 2003). Another reason may be linked to the specific history of countries in relation to human rights abuses and the emergence of civil society in response to these abuses (Kirchschlaeger & Tibbitts, 2010).

When it comes to the definition of HRE, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training suggests:

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).

This definition is not restricted only to the school sector. In contrary, the United Nations' language about HRE applies to all sectors of society (Fernekes & Tibbitts, 2011). Moreover, HRE thought as an international movement requires an ongoing process of learning to reach every individual (ibid, 2011). In other words, it is a lifelong learning process.

Flowers (2004) argues that there is a struggle in the definition. According to her, HRE has various different meanings for different actors. For state authorities, it means knowledge about rights and obligations about inter-governmental cooperation in the human rights arena. For activists in civil society and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), HRE refers to the societal changes towards human rights standards through education about core human rights principles. Whilst for the educators and the scholars, HRE is the ethical values that bring everyone onto the same level and the emphasis here is on the universality of human rights principles (Flowers, 2004). Despite these different meanings, Flowers (2004) argues that theories and definitions about HRE will evolve and further be developed as the practice of HRE moves forward.

Another understanding about HRE is that it is seen to imply not only rights *to* education, but rights *in* education and rights *through* education that can be taught and disseminated in order to produce a generation who are aware of their rights and entitlements (Osler & Starkey, 2010). From this perspective, HRE is mandated from the international human rights instruments and hence governments are obligated to implement human rights education in its educational systems (ibid, 2010). For Osler and Starkey (2010), it is not enough to only promote and to establish educational programmes that incorporate democratic values into the curricula, HRE as a policy needs to go hand-in-hand with such educational programme in order to enhance democratic values.

Moreover, HRE is not only about valuing and respecting human rights, but it is also about advocacy to guarantee these rights (Tibbitts, 2002). In this way, an effective HRE programme may produce a more critical generation that are aware of their rights and of the responsibilities that the governments have in signing international covenants (Osler & Starkey, 2010).

When it comes to operationalizing HRE, Davies argues that it can be put into practice through, for instance, service learning. This pedagogical approach encourages learners in finding ways to help others. This is where the feeling of having rights meets the duty of having obligation towards others (Davies, 2004). Although rights are not dependent on having responsibilities, it is important to realize one's own duty of respecting others' rights. The idea behind this approach is that through engaging to help others, learners will enhance trust and

caring feeling amongst themselves. This consequently may lead to effective peace education that includes respecting human rights values (ibid, 2004). This line of thought is shared by Banks (2009). He argues that students can best learn about human rights values when they are able to 'internalize' this concept and to link it to their own experiences and identities (Banks, 2009, p. 101). Hence, they need to experience these values in the school and within their communities (ibid, 2009).

Moreover, HRE as a part of curriculum needs to be enacted in a comprehensive way, by including human rights principles in the taught curriculum while other aspects in school environment are taken into consideration as well (Osler & Starkey, 2010). Schools require adequate facilities and appropriate services for students as well as for teachers in order to enjoy a fruitful learning process. Such comprehensive approach is necessary to avoid discrepancies between rights in principle/theory and rights in practice (ibid, 2010).

## **2.2 Education in post-conflict settings**

To set the context of this thesis's case-study, an examination of literature relating to the role of education in a post-conflict setting seems appropriate. Kurdistan-Iraq is often referred to as transitional or post-conflict region. The government of the region emphasizes its commitment to realizing democracy and recognition of human rights standards for its diverse groups. Here, I look at the role of education in fostering democratic values, which seem to be needed to reconstruct the region in the aftermath of various conflicts (as outlined in chapter 1).

Paradoxically, public education can be seen as a tool which often strengthens a narrowed nationalistic ideology as well one which is used for peace-building in post-conflict settings (Osler & Starkey, 2010). Education may even directly or indirectly contribute to conflicts. For example, history textbooks in curriculum may highlight the struggle of nations and the role of an enemy (Davies, 2004). Textbooks may promote hatred towards other nation(s) (e.g. the relationship between Arabs and Israel) or teaching pupils about defence or military trainings (Davies, 2005). The latter example took place in Iraqi schools during the 1980s Iraq-Iran war.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, education is also considered as a source for peace after conflicts. In this section, the focus is though on the positive impacts of education in sustaining peace and toleration. Current studies increasingly place emphasis on education as a potential strategic tool for

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<sup>10</sup> I recall this practice from childhood memories. Some of my older siblings did attend such defence training as a part of curricula.

promoting interaction in contexts of diversity, particularly in a post-conflict context (Hayes & McAllister, 2009). It is argued that textbooks can support the development of a culture of peace, through teaching and practice, if the emphasis is on the development of peaceful values such as respect, tolerance and democracy (Davies, 2004). Moreover, there are specific techniques that can be used in fostering peaceful thinking among young people, such as conflict resolution models, education for humanitarian law (Davies, 2005) and the inclusion of HRE into civic textbooks (Tibbitts, 2005).

Furthermore, education potentially functions as an important transformative institution that may play a key role in peace building and long-term development, including democratic principles within societies (Vongalis-Macrow, 2006). In this regard, the role of educators is crucial to empower themselves and their students to reflect on the past and to seek for change in the present (Ndura-Ouedraogo, 2009). Ndura-Ouedraogo (2009) argues further that transformative education functions under conditions where students' voices are listened to, as dialogue is required to reflect upon past memories and to seek changes for the future. This argument is in line with Davies's (2004) focus on peaceful values in education. In her view, education for peace cannot merely be incorporated in curriculum, but the school as an organization needs to function according to democratic values. For instance, the contribution of pupil's representatives enhances democratic-based principles of governing schools (ibid, 2004). Hence, students' contributions matters, whether it is for putting democratic values into practice within school boundaries or in seeking broader social change.

Peace education curricula have been developed and introduced in various countries in response to demands of reconciliation after conflicts and fostering tolerance and inclusion in divided societies (Bekerman, Ferreira, McGlynn, & Zembylas, 2009; Bekerman, Gallagher, McGlynn, & Zembylas, 2009; Davies, 2004, 2005; Hayes & McAllister, 2009). In line with this, education has been used as a mechanism in resolving conflicts amongst divided communities in the post-conflict phase in the Northern Ireland (Hayes & McAllister, 2009). In South Africa, education has been reformed so as to address racial inequalities after Apartheid (Bekerman, Ferreira, et al., 2009). Also, in Burundi, the focus has been on moral values to engage the young generation in reflecting upon cruelty from past (Rwantabagu, 2010). In all these examples, the challenge of inclusion must be faced; nevertheless, there is a common understanding that education can play a crucial role in addressing injustice and hence embracing ideals that would enhance peace and inclusion.

It should be noted though that it is not an easy task for the educational system and its staff to address sensitive issues in post-conflict settings. Davies (2005) addresses the difficulties in highlighting sensitive topics such as tolerating others and addressing racism in a stable society, not to mention how difficult this could be for a society that is just recovered from war. This is a challenge that educators need to bear in mind, when designing peace education curricula. Another challenge in developing peace education is the content of the textbooks. It is not sufficient to revise certain topics in the textbooks or to remove most nationalistic material with changes that occur in political arena (Davies, 2004). Often, this may lead to a shift of focus, where textbooks shift from ignoring the impact of the nationalistic propaganda into defensive nationalistic thoughts that portray the victims of the war. The latter example can be noticed in current Kurdish curricula in Iraqi Kurdistan, when reviewing particularly the civic textbooks. Under the former regime, the focus was on the justification of the regime's ideology without any recognition of the role of minorities. Paradoxically, the current civic classes put the emphasis on the cruelty of the past and stresses Kurdish identity. Although it is necessary to educate the young generation about history and about loyalty to the nation, this process requires care in order to avoid indirect hatred of the Other (non-Kurds) in this post-conflict society.

### **2.3 Education and gender equality**

The second wave of feminism has initiated certain reforms in school curricula to breakdown the patriarchal system and the social gap between female and male's roles in the United States and in Europe (Salisbury & Riddell, 2000). An emphasis on gender equality through education is based on an understanding that through knowledge equality can be achieved between diverse social groups, including the sexes (Stromquist, 2006). Within this understanding education is not only producing knowledge, but it can also function as an instrument for critical thinking and changing mentalities (Freire, 1970).

The feminist movement in general and feminist approaches within education call for social changes so as to enhance social justice for both sexes (Arnot, 2005; Luke, 1996; Martin, 2006; Okin, 1989). A feminist approach in education requires a holistic approach with regard to gender issues (Arnot, 2002). It needs to address questions of sexuality and gender identity as well as social norms that stereotype female and male roles in society (Stromquist, 2006). It calls for a transformation of gender relations not only within educational settings, but also within families, communities and society as a whole (Arnot & Fennell, 2008; Rai, 2002).

Feminists have used various international human rights-based instruments as tools to promote gender equality in education. Such instruments have reinforced pressure on nation-states to reform educational systems while taking gender issues into account. For instance, article 10 in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women refers to equal rights in education (UN, 1979). Article 7 (2) and (5) in the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), addresses equal access in education and eliminating gender disparities in education and Goal 3 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000), aims at gender equality and women's empowerment through education. Both the Dakar framework and the MDGs include two major goals for gender equality in education. The first goal is to achieve gender parity in education globally no later than 2015. This entails both formal equality and quantity, such as participation and having access to education. The second goal serves gender equality through equal treatment and equal opportunity (Subrahmanian, 2005). Subrahmanian (2005) characterizes these two goals as formal equality (gender parity in education) and substantive equality (equal opportunity through and after education). In her view, formal equality in education is just one step towards substantive equality, which is the core towards gender equity.

This thesis is mainly concerned about substantive equality. Women and girls are increasingly present in education and other public places, yet deeply-rooted gender inequalities and patriarchy exist in Kurdish society (Begikhani et al., 2010). Therefore, a critical look at education outcome and empowerment through education seem to be relevant in the case of schooling context in Kurdistan.

Another important international instrument is the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), launched in Dakar in 2000, which focuses on girls having the fundamental human right to education. The UNGEI highlights how through education girls can strengthen their other human rights, for example gaining access to labour market, accessing health care and combating gender-based violence. Moreover, the UNGEI (2000) states that education is an essential element for sustainable human development<sup>11</sup>(UNGEI, 2000).

The aim of these international instruments is thus to eliminate gender discrimination in all forms through education. This implies neither girls nor boys should have to face any form of discrimination in education, whether this be through including learning content, teaching methods, assessment modes, management of peer relationships, or learning outcomes (Chan & Cheung, 2007).

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<sup>11</sup>With regard to gender access in education and economic development, see(Fort & Tembon, 2008)

For some authors, the right *to* education is insufficient to realize gender equality, which focuses on the enrolment and completion rates between girls and boys. In addition to this, rights *in* education (performance and learning outcome) and the right *through* education (utilizing knowledge to realise rights within and beyond the schools) are essential for empowerment and hence enhancement of gender equality (Wilson, 2003). Moreover, Wilson (2003) criticizes governments of lacking effective actions in putting their international legal obligations into practice at national level. In particular she is critical of states' failure to fulfil obligations in putting in place educational policies in combating gender imparity and in enhancing gender equality.

Despite efforts at the international level, the struggle for gender parity and gender equality is still an ongoing process in various societies (Chan & Cheung, 2007). One critique of the international instruments is that they do not include multidimensional approaches to tackle issues beyond school borders that influence the gender relationships and hence girls' access to education (Subrahmanian, 2005). Gender inequality in education is influenced by inequalities between men and women in other areas and norms in society that are not necessarily reproduced in the educational system, such as poverty, gender-based harmful traditions, and safety (Tomasevski, 2005a). These arguments seems to be relevant to Kurdish women and girls as well (Begikhani et al., 2010). As mentioned in chapter one, the prevailing gender-based harmful practices indicate deeply rooted gender inequalities (ibid, 2010). Gender based inequalities seem to require a comprehensive action, including within education setting.

Thus, gender equality in education requires more than merely translating international instruments into national policies or implementing reform in education system, which seems to be thus far the case in Iraqi Kurdistan, since the gender status there is still cumbersome (Begikhani et al., 2010). It requires a holistic approach that includes gender friendly policies inside schools which will enhance gender parity and equality. Additionally, it requires space to transform knowledge into equal opportunities for girls and boys outside schools (Stromquist, 2006). Such holistic approach requires sincere commitments from policy-makers and other civil society actors in improving the quality of education towards gender equality (Wilson, 2003).

#### **2.4 HRE for equality, inclusion and social justice**

While scholars provide various understandings of HRE (Flowers, 2004; Osler & Starkey, 2010), the research field about HRE seems to have rather a young status (Valen-Sendstad,

2010), particularly when it comes to HRE's contribution to gender equity. For this reason, I have faced challenges to find studies specifically on the potential impact of HRE to advance gender equity. Having said that however, HRE seems, in practice, to entail various goals. These include among other human rights protection, personal empowerment, nation-building, democratic participation and conflict resolution (Tibbitts, 2002, p. 160). HRE is perceived as increasing critical consciousness regarding human values and ideologies that impact on humans (Wright, 2012). In this context, it can be argued that HRE as an educational theory captures the role of education in post-conflict setting and to promote gender equality as these discussed in previous sub-sections. HRE has the potential to strengthen solidarity in post-conflict and diverse settings through putting the emphasis on recognizing and respecting diversity. As a method, HRE may foster social changes towards equality and inclusion; including equality that concerns the gender relationships.

HRE in post-conflict settings needs to address several important factors. Within its content, it may address the impact of violence, social trauma, the meaning of powerlessness, discrimination and marginalization (Davies, 2004, p. 174). These factors can be addressed through a) promoting knowledge about human rights, which covers the cognitive part, b) emphasizing self-determination and trust that would have impact on learner's attitude towards human rights values and c) encouraging behavioural skills that leads to mobilization and putting human rights knowledge into practice beyond school borders (Bernath, Holland, & Martin, 1999).

Tibbitts argues that HRE as a model, is a transformative tool for social change, whether this change is required for conflict resolution or to address social injustices including gender inequality (Tibbitts, 2005). This argument is in line with transformative education that provides knowledge to raise awareness about social inequalities (Freire, 1970). Hence, the focus is on the improvement of human conditions to enable individuals to organize themselves for progressive social change.

## **2.5 Summary**

I have suggested that HRE is relevant to all societies. It is particularly vital in societies that are very diverse and fragile due to recent conflicts and ongoing unequal social norms, such appears to be the case in Iraqi Kurdistan (Begikhani et al., 2010; Stansfield, 2003). HRE may respond to the needs in enhancing equality, inclusion and social justice among its individuals. The next chapter attempts to outline the theoretical framework for this thesis, where further

explanation is provided about the role of HRE as a means towards gender equality in a post-conflict setting such as Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

This chapter provides the theoretical framework of the topic of this thesis with a view to establish the potential contribution HRE can make to gender equity in a specific post-conflict setting. This is important in order to clarify key concepts on which this thesis draws (Basit, 2010). In order to articulate the relationship between HRE and the advancement of gender equality, this chapter articulates HRE as a cosmopolitan vision of human rights. Amongst its other objectives, HRE calls for social justice, tolerance and globally-minded individuals (or cosmopolitan-minded citizens). The theoretical framework adopted here is the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1992, 1999) which enables the application of HRE to foster equality and social justice, including gender equality through education. Based on the theoretical perspectives, I outline my understanding of HRE and the possibilities for its implementation and impact on behaviour to realise social justice, including gender equity.

#### **3.1 HRE as a cosmopolitan project**

As stated in chapter one, the departure point of this thesis is that human rights are a cosmopolitan project. From this normative understanding, HRE needs to be framed within a cosmopolitan theory. In general terms, cosmopolitanism is understood as a normative orientation whereby the well-being of others is taken into account (Held, 1995; Rizvi, 2008). It stresses the equal worth and dignity of all persons, and acknowledges that HRE will be enhanced in different cultural contexts so as to enhance tolerance and mutual critical understanding (Held, 1995). The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) views HRE as a tool ‘aimed at building a universal culture of human rights’ (OHCHR, 1996). As mentioned in previous chapter, the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011) indicates also international commitment towards a culture based on human rights standards. Hence, the development in the field of HRE is in line with international standards and it embraces a cosmopolitan mind-set.

The main objectives of HRE are to disseminate the information about equal worth of human beings and preparation to apply human rights principles in daily, practical life. It is an educational instrument to foster global commitment towards equality and toleration (Banks et al., 2005; Osler & Starkey, 2010).

Recent discussions about cosmopolitanism and its link to education (civic or citizenship education) are related to shifting views on how international interactions and changes in education are understood (Nussbaum, 1998; Osanloo, 2009; Osler & Starkey, 2003;

Unterhalter, 2008). These views entail elements of cosmopolitan thoughts in education, which highlight the need to respect diversity between people, to promote solidarity and equality (including gender equality) and the recognition of others' worldviews (UNESCO, 1995).

Osler and Starkey (2003) place emphasis on cosmopolitan citizenship education to address peace and human rights principles within education. Their underlying argument is that learners will be able to understand each other's values based on common humanity and recognition of equal dignity and mutual respect. A cosmopolitan approach in education is seen as necessary to frame education as an enterprise based on our common humanity, whereby learners develop understanding of democratic values at local, national, international and global levels (Todd, 2008). A cosmopolitan education also concerns itself with raising awareness about the global issues and struggles for social justice (Osler & Zhu, 2011). Its goal is to enable learners to reflect upon a broader picture and to link global issues to the local ones for the cause of social justice (ibid, 2011).

Moreover, education of human rights entails cosmopolitan perspectives so as to increase civic responsibility and globally-minded citizens (Osanloo, 2009). In the present case, I would argue that the recent challenges and demands in Iraqi Kurdistan require educators to embrace cosmopolitan perspectives. It is important that the education professionals are able to link local challenges to the global perspectives. For instance, when it comes to accommodate diversity and to enhance gender relationships in Kurdistan. This is important in order to support learners in making connections between their immediate world view and broader national and global contexts.

Lastly, the Kurdish region is experiencing fast economic developments, while still facing socio-economical challenges (as mentioned in chapter one). Hence, a globally-minded yet localised approach in education may encourage Kurds to strengthen political relationships in the region as well as to gain more support at international level.

### **3.2 HRE through a capability lens**

This thesis is based on the assumption that through education and HRE in particular, learners can be provided with knowledge and skills to respect equality, including gender equality. In addition to this, HRE has potential to encourage behavioural skill that would lead to mobilization and putting human rights knowledge into practice beyond school borders (Bernath et al., 1999).

By putting HRE into action in response to gender relationships, the capability approach of Amartya Sen (1992, 1999, and 2009) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) serves as the basis of this thesis. I argue that the capability approach is an appropriate framework for HRE. The capability approach can both define HRE goals and contribute to an assessment of impact with regard to gender equality.

The underlying thought behind capability approach is to enhance substantive individual freedom, which in turn leads to expansion of personal development and progress in society (Sen, 1999). In my view, the core goals of HRE correlate with the capability approach. Hence, HRE has potentials to contribute to the development of substantive freedom.

Moreover, the capability approach stems from theories of social justice, as it will be further discussed below (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1992, 1999). This approach calls for inclusion and equal worthiness of all individuals for a valuable life. As it is argued above, the struggle for social justice, including gender equality, is a cosmopolitan project. This brings us to another commonality between capability approach and HRE. Both entail elements of cosmopolitan mindset (Nussbaum, 1998; Osler & Zhu, 2011).

Finally, Nussbaum adopts a feminist perspective when discussing capabilities. This makes the capability approach particularly relevant to the topic of gender equity of this thesis.

### *3.2.1 Capability approach for social justice*

Sen and Nussbaum share a broad philosophy concerning the capability approach. Their theory departs from previous theories of social justice and focuses more on how individuals engage in a process of change, enacting the substantive freedom to develop themselves as valuable human beings within their communities (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1992, 1999).

In the capability-based assessment of justice, individual claims are not to be assessed in terms of the resources or primary goods the persons respectively hold, but by the freedoms they actually enjoy to choose the lives that they have reason to value”(Sen, 1992, p. 81).

For Sen (1992), the capability approach provides a way to assess the well-being of individuals, hence to assess development and social justice. In other words, it is a framework to evaluate public policies in relation to development and inequality. Capabilities represent various abilities of human beings, reflecting on individual freedom (individual agency) to choose the type of life they want to live (Sen, 1999). Sen (1992 and 1999) is mainly concerned with substantive freedom. It is a kind of freedom through which individuals can choose from a set of alternatives or opportunities to pursue their life. In his view, substantive

freedom is necessary to enrich human life, which will lead to more development (Sen, 1992). In this regard, Sen defines elementary capabilities as the minimum criteria individuals need to enjoy, including to be free of poverty (starvation), being literate and having freedom for political participation and uncensored speech (Sen, 1999, p. 36). Thus, individuals as capable human beings are central in Sen's theory, where development and meaningful human life can be achieved when substantive freedom is granted.

For Nussbaum (2000), the capability approach helps to construct a normative conception of social justice. She has developed a list of ten capabilities which she sees as determining a decent social minimum for individuals to act as valuable human beings. These are 1. life (being able to live), 2. bodily health (having good health), 3. bodily integrity (to move freely), 4. senses, imagination and thoughts (being to use these senses through good education), 5. emotions (to express freely various emotions), 6. practical reason (entails protection for liberty of conscience), 7. affiliation (being able to engage in various forms of social interactions), 8. other species (environmental concerns), 9. play (freely practice leisure activities) and 10. control over one's environment: both political and material ones (to be able to participate in political choices and to hold property) (Nussbaum, 2000b, pp. 78-80). These capabilities need to be practiced simultaneously to live a life of dignity. Nussbaum's argument for capability is based on Aristotelian/Marxian idea of human functioning, which is about what a person is actually able to do (Nussbaum, 2000b, p. 13). She claims her list is cross-cultural and combines different human rights principles: economic, social, political and civil rights (ibid, 2000).

Thus, Sen and Nussbaum attach great importance to agency and to genuine individual reflective choice. The capability approach is about a meaningful practice of freedom, with space to learn and to progress. For both Nussbaum and Sen, individual capabilities depend on economic, social and political arrangements (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1999).

### *3.2.2 Capability approach in education*

Sen and Nussbaum both recognize the potential role of education in increasing capabilities (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1999). Sen (1999) argues that a child may have freedom in the present to study, but she also needs freedom in the future to access the goods (norms and values) that are presented through education. If such goods (for example, access to higher education) are restricted or denied, it reduces present opportunities as well as opportunities in adult life. This, in turn restricts the individual's future freedom and hence her agency (Sen,

1999). In other words, whilst education is necessary to gain knowledge about social justice, it is equally important to have access to opportunities so to enjoy substantive freedom.

As for Nussbaum, education is central in human capabilities (functioning) in order to reach, for instance, imagination, practical reasons and affiliation (Nussbaum, 2000b, pp. 78-79). For her, education is necessary for the development of other capabilities. With regard to gender equality, education is not limited to literacy and acquiring scientific knowledge. Through education, bodily integrity, practical reasoning and affiliation (these are some of the capabilities from Nussbaum's list) girls are enabled to appear without shame in public settings, such as schools and other public places, and to perform different roles (ibid, 2000, pp. 82).

Inspired by the capabilities approach, some scholars argue that good quality education implies the valuing of personal development and the opening up of economic opportunities for the individual (Walker, 2006; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Education is viewed as to promote agency (individual freedom) and empowerment (Walker, 2006). The focus is not merely on producing knowledge through education, but rather on facilitating skills to act as autonomous critical learners (Walker, 2006; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Such skills will enable individuals to gain self-confidence and capacity in pursuing a meaningful life, addressing progress and development.

### *3.2.3 HRE as capability for gender equality*

Various international actions for gender equality in education seem to focus mainly on formal equality in education, namely reducing the gender disparities in such things as enrolment rates (UN, 2000; UNESCO, 2000; UNGEI, 2000). It is a more challenging task to address wider gender issues girls and women face, both inside as well as outside the education system (Subrahmanian, 2005; Tomasevski, 2005a; Unterhalter, 2008; Unterhalter & Aikman, 2007; Wilson, 2003). In relation to education and gender equality, it is insufficient to simply translate human rights principles into educational policy. What is also required are adjustments of the educational content and actions which move beyond the formal equal access in schools (Subrahmanian, 2005; Tomasevski, 2005a; Unterhalter & Aikman, 2007). Subrahmanian (2005) argues that gender equality in education also implies substantive equality (to be able to practice one's own freedom) in addition to formal equality.

Other scholars, inspired by the capability approach, have sought to define specific capabilities for education for the purpose of either addressing social or gender justice (Robeyns, 2003;

Unterhalter, 2007; Walker, 2006, 2007). I argue that the capability approach is also an appropriate framework for HRE. The capability approach can both define HRE goals and contribute to an assessment of impact with regard to gender equality.

As argued in chapter two, HRE can contribute to social justice and gender equality. HRE is not simply concerned with valuing and respecting human rights, but it is also about enabling human actions as a transformative tool to ensure the conditions in which such rights sought to be achieved (Tibbitts, 2002, 2005). Practicing personal freedom includes also ‘developing own personality’ (OHCHR, 1996) in order to pursue a meaningful life. From this, I understand HRE goal is to promote agency (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1999).

HRE, as part of a curriculum, should create educational capabilities (autonomous and critical learners) that will enable health and bodily integrity, practical reasoning, affiliation, and so on (Nussbaum, 2000b). These educational capabilities would positively affect the empowerment of individuals and to enhance gender equity in particular. Most importantly, HRE as part of a curriculum should not function as ‘banking education’ (Freire, 1970), or only as a tool to convey knowledge about human rights. Instead, HRE should also promote skills to practice human rights, including respecting and adhering gender equality. In this way, the core philosophy behind HRE is to enable in practice a lifelong process of human rights learning (Fernekes & Tibbitts, 2011).

### **3.3 Summary**

The theoretical framework of this thesis is based on two different approaches, which are complementary to the subject matter of this research. First, HRE entails cosmopolitan theoretical concepts. It is concerned about disseminating the knowledge and practice of human rights principles for the sake of social justice. Second, this thesis addresses challenges of accommodating diversity and particularly promoting gender equality in Iraqi Kurdistan. Both of these challenges are cosmopolitan in nature, which exist in different societies and are related to the aspect of social justice. Thus, under the auspices of cosmopolitanism, the potential of HRE is reviewed in addressing gender relationships.

To assess the impact of HRE on gender relationships, the capability approach is employed to define what this thesis understands by gender equality in education. Gender equality in and through education is understood to be able to practice substantive freedom (Tomasevski, 2005b). Through education and particularly through the knowledge gained from HRE,

teachers and students should become transformative agents in order to socially reconstruct unjust, which in its turn would lead to social justice.

The above outlined theoretical framework will be used to understand the data collection. I attempt to create a dialectic between the set of theories that are demonstrated in this chapter and the data gathered through my fieldwork trips. However, before doing that, it is important to turn to the methodological steps that this thesis has followed.

## **4. Methodology**

The subjects of inquiry in the social sciences can talk and think (Seidman, 2006, p. 75).

The starting point of this thesis are the research questions presented in chapter one, which focus on the potential role of HRE as a tool to contribute to gender equality in post-conflict and multicultural society of Iraqi-Kurdistan. The teachers and education professionals' perspectives are sought concerning their understanding of the potential of HRE in the curriculum and of gender relationships within Kurdish schooling. This thesis does not claim to generalize from its findings. What it is, is an attempt to understand respondents' perspectives and their experiences within the educational context. For this reason, a small-scale qualitative research method has been chosen to gain insight into education professionals' world view (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). All participants are from Erbil governorate in Kurdistan-Iraq. The various sections below outline the research methods, the processes in collecting and analyzing data and other methodological considerations.

### **4.1 Research method**

Social abstractions like 'education' are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built (Seidman, 2006, p. 12)

The research question influences the method and design in a research (Cohen et al., 2011). This thesis examines potential of HRE as a tool in enhancing gender equality in the KRG region. For this reason, I have chosen to approach education professionals so to understand their views and lived experiences with regard to HRE within the curriculum. Also, I sought to gain insight into their views on gender relationships within schooling context. This has led me to choose a small-scale qualitative research approach in Erbil governorate. My primary reasons in choosing this location are both pragmatic and identity-related. First, is the question of access. I grew-up and spent my childhood in the city, and most of my family still lives there. Secondly, I identify with the region and wish to make a modest contribution to its development.

#### *4.1.1 Design*

This thesis draws on an interpretivist (qualitative) methodological tradition, which focuses on understanding people's subjective perceptions within their cultural context (Willis, 2007). As regards design, different qualitative techniques were applied to collect empirical data, including semi-structured interviews (in total 12), observation sessions and one focus group

discussion. These activities took place in July 2011 and in February 2012. Thanks to the scholarship that I received from the Falstad Centre in Norway, I was able to collect additional data for my research in February 2012. Additionally, various documents were collected and analyzed, including official documents related to the KRG's education system; HRE curriculum books (old versions and recent ones) for different grades; and HRE teachers' manual instruction books. I have also conducted a thorough literature review in order to gain knowledge about the research topic and to establish a theoretical framework to link the theory to the empirical data. During data collection, I have faced several challenges that I return to later in this chapter.

The primary source for this study was the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. According to Kvale (1996), the purpose of interviews is 'to obtain descriptions of the lived work of the interviewees with respect to interpretations of the meaning of the described phenomena' (Kvale, 1996, p. 30). Therefore, I chose this method in order to gain insights into the participants' lived experiences and to observe the context of their behaviour (Seidman, 2006). For the interviews, the main research question was operationalized through into sub-questions on different themes. This is in order to create an atmosphere alike to a conversation with the participants. I chose to ask open-ended questions in order to allow the participants to answer in their own words and to express own views (see appendix 2: interview questions). All the interviews were recorded after obtaining consent from the participants. An English version of the consent form is included as appendix 1.

From the interviewed participants (appendix 3: list of interviewed participants), two of them preferred to provide their feedback in writing. They preferred this way in order to take their time to think about the questions and to give me an in-depth answer. Based on their request, I have translated the interview questions into Kurdish and provided them in writing. I had the impression that they wanted to make sure that they were giving me 'correct' answers; therefore, they preferred to do that in writing. I had repeatedly indicated to all participants that the purpose of the interviews was not to test their knowledge or to judge their views but nothing more than a conversation to get insight into their work experience.

In addition to the interviews, I have made notes during two observation sessions. The first one was a meeting between two education inspectors and three school principals from three different schools in villages around Erbil. The meeting took place in one of these schools on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2011. The focus of the meeting was on redistributing grades 1 to 9 among these three schools, which each respectively was established in a separate village. On that date, I went to

interview one of the school principal. After the interview, the education professionals allowed me to join them and observe their discussion. My aim was more to understand the new school system in Kurdistan and to gain some insight of challenges that they face to rearrange the classes. In other words, it was contextual, rather than specifically for data collection. The second observation session involved an HRE class for grade 5 in a school in Erbil, which took place on 20<sup>th</sup> February 2012. Additionally, I have recorded one focus group discussion between two teachers who give HRE classes for grade 7 and one psychological assistant, who is involved in a local NGO that works with HRE training as well. The focus group discussion took place on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2012.

I have used other methods as well to understand the current schooling system in the KRG, including HRE as a subject in the curriculum. As one of my sisters works as an education inspector; I had discussions with her and her colleagues about the implementation of the new education system. Also, through a friend, I was able to meet two persons who are involved in the process of including HRE in the curriculum. So my interviewees were, at least in part, an opportunity sample (Basit, 2010). One of these persons works in curriculum development unit of the Ministry of Education and the other person works as a psychological assistant and is also involved in a local NGO that has played a role in advocating HRE in schools. Finally, throughout the research I kept a diary, which I have used to make notes during and after my fieldwork trips. This was helpful in remembering certain elements that I noticed during the fieldwork and as a personal reflexive tool.

#### *4.1.2 Sample*

To conduct research, it is impossible to study the whole population that the research is about. A sample is usually selected in order to represent a population (Cohen et al., 2011). As this study is a small-scale one and it does not aim to generalize, a non-probability sampling strategy has been chosen (Basit, 2010). The method of sampling was based on both convenience (opportunity) and snowball approaches (ibid, 2010). I have chosen the convenience method, since through personal contacts I was able to get in touch with some of my research participants. Restricted time during both fieldwork trips was another reason for using personal channels to reach some the informants. Along the way, I made use of snowball sampling method as well. This was because of difficulties in establishing contacts with informants in advance (Cohen et al., 2011).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Schools lack modern communication tools (e.g. website or public emails) in the KRG region and in Iraq.

Culturally speaking, choosing convenience and snowball sampling methods was appropriate. Generally, while Kurds show generosity in assisting a stranger, the degree of cooperation and gaining access works better, when they know the person or at least her family. This is linked to the tribal system that exists in Kurdistan. Also, once they know you, they tend to trust you and become more transparent in sharing their thoughts.

In choosing the research sample, I have tried, as far as possible, to select a diverse group that would reflect the education system. In terms of profession, I have interviewed 4 HRE teachers, 2 principals, 4 different educational inspectors and 2 other teachers. I also took into consideration diversity in sex (8 male and 4 female participants). As for ethnic and religious diversity: 9 Kurds (Muslims), 2 Christians and 1 Turkmenian (Muslima). Moreover, I had the opportunity to visit some schools in different villages around Erbil during my first field work trip. I took this opportunity to include some participants who have experience of working in the rural areas. Whilst I do not intend to make a comparison between urban and rural areas, the process of visiting schools in rural areas and talking to staff, enriched my understanding of the schooling context and of gender related perspectives in both rural and urban settings.

The research participants from the interviews are presented below. Appendix 3 provides further professional details of the research participants. I have given them pseudonyms in order to protect participants' anonymity. The table below demonstrates the participants.

**Table 1: Number of participants and their sex, religion-ethnic and professional overview**

No.	Participant	Sex	Religious tradition/ ethnic background	Professional role	Date of interview
1	Kamaran	M	Muslim/Kurd	General school inspector	12.07.2011
2	Kawthar	F	Muslima/Turkmenian	School inspector - student counselling	12.07.2011
3	Foad	M	Christian	Principal of a model school and school inspector	13.07.2011
4	Asem	M	Muslim/Kurd	Teacher (Arabic)	13.07.2011
5	Hasan	M	Muslim/Kurd	Principal in rural school	13.07.2011
6	Sarkawt	M	Muslim/Kurd	Acting principal and sport teacher in rural school	13.07.2011
7	Payman	F	Muslima/Kurd	School inspector; social studies and HRE, grades 1 - 6	14.02.2012
8	Fawzi	M	Muslim/Kurd	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades 7 - 12	14.02.2012
9	Sawsan	F	Christian	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades 7 - 9	16.02.2012

10	Azad	M	Muslim/Kurd	School inspector; social studies and HRE, grades 7 - 12	16.02.2012
11	Sherko	M	Muslim/Kurd	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades 1- 6	18.02.2012
12	Ahlam	F	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades 7 - 9	18.02.2012

## 4.2 Literature review

In order to understand the context of a research topic, it is necessary to gain an insight in what has already been discussed, discovered and to outline also the weaknesses in the area of inquiry (Basit, 2010). Whilst ideally one should start with the literature review at very early research phases, for this study such process has taken place in another order. Within a very short period, I selected the research topic and went to Erbil, combining a vacation and my first field trip. Although, I took a course in HRE before returning to Kurdistan, I encountered challenges in terms of commanding a background, especially because the research topic is to certain degree different from my previous academic background. Nevertheless, the messy start of this study allowed me to reflect upon the topics that were raised during my first field trip and based on this to conduct the literature review.

The topic of this research led me to focus on different areas while reviewing the literature. The case study here is Iraqi-Kurdistan, which may be characterized as a post-conflict setting. Therefore, literature review departs from the standard approaches to HRE within human rights discourse. Eventually, the role of education is discussed in enhancing gender equality. As for the theoretical framework, my departure point is that the main vision of HRE adopts a cosmopolitan theoretical approach (Banks et al., 2005; Osler & Starkey, 2010). When it comes to putting HRE in action in response to gender relationship, I have chosen the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1992, 1999) to underpin the main framework for this thesis. The reason for choosing capabilities is a) it has a cosmopolitan approach, raising awareness about global issues and struggles for social justice, in which education and HRE in particular can play a significant role, b) capabilities call for individual development and the practice of substantive freedom, which is essential to gender relationships and c) in capability theory, Nussbaum in particular adopts a feminist perspective, making it relevant to the central focus of this thesis.

### **4.3 Fieldwork process**

The process of conducting fieldwork is about dealing with people and society. This implies a process that is often messy and uncontrollable. Unpredicted incidents may occur, which may influence the process of the research. For instance, the appointments may be cancelled, the venues for meeting may be changed, an invited person may not show up or cannot be reached, and other unplanned activities may occur (Cohen et al., 2011). All of these, I encountered in both my fieldwork trips. This led me to improvise and to experience moments that I did not anticipate in advance.

My first fieldwork trip took place in summer 2011. Although I had a very limited time in planning the fieldwork, I managed to meet and interview six of the participants. This was less than I originally planned. Since it was summer, hence school holiday, it was not easy to find teachers even through personal networks. Also, I hoped to meet one person from a local NGO, who was involved in organizing HRE trainings for teachers. However, this person was unable to meet during the limited time that I was there. This went against my original plan of having some NGO perspectives on HRE and gender issues in the KRG.

Regardless of these changes of plan, the data from the first round trip were rich in terms of different opinions about education system and gender relationships in school and in society. This made me more curious to conduct a second round of interviews. The main aim for the second round of fieldwork was to elaborate on certain elements related to the educational reform in the KRG. I also hoped to interview teachers and other education professionals that would be involved in HRE as a subject in the curriculum.

Thanks to the scholarship that I received from the Falstad centre in Norway, I was able to realize my second field trip in February 2012. It turned out to be a very fruitful experience, where I met mainly education professionals involved in HRE. I ended up doing additional activities that I had not originally planned. For instance, I attended a seminar about the role of the pedagogical counsellors in schools. The topic was not related to my research; yet, it helped to increase my knowledge about schooling situation in Kurdistan and challenges commonly faced in schools. I also managed to have an informal conversation with two key persons (one person from Ministry of Education, one from a local NGO) with regard to the process of including HRE in the curriculum. Also, I was allowed to attend a HRE class for grade 5 and spontaneously had a focus group discussion. Although, I had a very limited time during my second fieldwork (10 days in total), it was during the schooling period, which proved easier in making contacts.

Along the way and as my fieldwork trips evolved, the design of my research altered somewhat. I ended up using different methods in the process of collecting data than those I had in mind initially. The size of my sample expanded as a consequence of conducting my second fieldwork visit. I happened to visit some schools in different villages around Erbil, whilst before my first trip I did not think of doing that. I have amended some of the interview questions during my second fieldwork as well. I have split the interview questions into two parts. The first part has focused on the role of education within the Kurdish context, the new education system and education professionals' understanding of HRE. Then, the second part of the questions focused specifically on gender and potential school's role in advancing gender relationships. By doing so, I have tried to make questions shorter and simpler to grasp. Reflecting on my both fieldwork trips, it has been a worthwhile experience to interact with people, working in a cultural context which I am at ease in and understand. Returning to my home town and specifically returning to the schooling context, I found myself exposed to certain emotions. When visiting schools, my childhood memories were exposed as a picture in front of me. Simultaneously, I encountered unpleasant realities to observe on-going educational shortages in terms of facilities, old school buildings and limited capacities (both human and resource capacities). All in all, my fieldwork trips helped me to generate a holistic picture of the schooling reality at least in Erbil and its districts, which I believe reflects the wider reality of the rest of Iraqi Kurdistan.

#### **4.4 Ethical considerations**

A major ethical dilemma is that which requires researchers to strike a balance between the demands placed on them as professional scientists in pursuit of truth, and their subject's rights and values potentially threatened by the research (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 75).

Ethical considerations have been adhered to throughout this research. Being a native, I did not face communication difficulties in explaining in detail the purpose and the process of the research to the participants. I have prepared and translated into Kurdish a consent form (see appendix one), which was given to all participants to read and sign before conducting interviews. The consent form states that participants may withdraw at any time if they wish so. None of the participants withdrew after signing the consent form, even though one teacher was reluctant and showed uncertainty whether to participate or not. I advised this person not to sign the consent form and hence to not participate, as this is a voluntary process. Research participants were guaranteed the confidentiality and anonymity in research data collection, analysis and the reporting process.

As regards gaining access to informants, I have used personal contacts to reach some of the participants. In addition, I sought verbal consent from the head of the Education Directorate in Erbil before contacting and interviewing educational staff.

During the interviews, I aimed to maintain a 'neutral' position in giving freedom to the participants and their preference as to how to answer questions. Apart from two participants who preferred to give their answers in writing, the rest of the participants had no objections in having a face-to-face interview, which for all of them was recorded as agreed. Participants were given time to think about the questions and provide answers. I also left them freedom as to the length of their answers. In some cases they asked if they might elaborate on a question, in other cases I asked an additional question depending on their responses. Finally, I attempted to formulate the interview questions with care, so as to ensure they fitted participants' professional worlds and make them at ease in answering the general questions.

Apart from above formal part of ethical consideration, I have been conscious about the informal or cultural aspects on how to approach the participants. With regard to the cultural dressing code and attitude, teachers and education staff in general dress formally in Kurdistan. Therefore, I avoided casual clothes and tried to dress up in a formal and modest manner. When greeting participants, especially the male ones, I have waited for them to take the initiative to shake hands or not. Some men would not automatically do so, therefore, I did not want to create any awkwardness or embarrassment.

Another cultural element that concerns ethical codes was the dilemma between being 'polite' versus being 'honest and direct'. Culturally speaking, I knew that being polite and adopting a specific etiquette on how to behave toward the other one is highly valued. Particularly, being polite towards strangers is a key behavioural code. This made me wonder to what extent the participants were honest in answering my questions or whether they were putting emphasis on cultural 'politeness'. Therefore, I repeatedly used terms as 'in your view' or 'from your own experience' during the interviews. I did this to assure them that I did not expect any particular answer from them, I wanted them to be honest rather than being polite with me. I found this aspect challenging though, while acknowledging the fact that when dealing with people, we can never reach the level of fully understanding them.

#### **4.5 Researching as an Insider and an Outsider**

As a female, a migrant Kurd who grew up in Diaspora, these have shaped my personality about the way how I see myself and how others perceive me. Both personal and academic

interests have led me to decide to choose this research topic and to return to my homeland to conduct fieldwork. In this context, my position as a researcher can be considered as an insider (Narayan, 1993). As an insider, I did not face language barriers to communicate. I was able to comprehend the cultural aspects with regard to behaviour code, body language and reading the underlying meanings behind the conversations. This gave me a unique access breaking down cultural barriers to certain degree. For instance, when participants were referring to some cultural habits, they would say ‘as you know from our culture’, which I knew exactly what they were referring to.

During the fieldwork experiences and as being an insider and a woman, this made me more sensitive in observing how female and male participants respectively were reacting and responding to certain questions. I tried to observe their body languages and put it into the context, while I was taking notes during and after the interviews. To my surprise, I found male participants to be more transparent in highlighting cultural practices that restrict gender equality. However, female participants seemed less straightforward to comment on addressed themes (see section 6.3.1).

I should mention though that I did notice a pattern in how I was perceived by the participants. Whilst they viewed me as fellow native, I sensed a power relationship between them and myself as a researcher. As a young Kurdish woman, who grew up in Europe and who returned to conduct fieldwork for her Master degree, it felt as if I had a special status in the view of my participants (a free woman who moves around and conducts research). Due to the fact that I returned from Europe, hence expected to be *knowledgeable*, they treated me formally and with high respect. This made me uncomfortable, since most of my participants were middle-aged. Culturally speaking, I realized that I should be the one showing respect and formality, due to age differences and the fact that they were giving their time in answering my questions. This made me to be extra careful about the way I approached them and how I was talking to them. Simultaneously, it left me with an ambivalent feeling. On the one hand, I felt myself a full insider, who knew and was practicing all cultural etiquettes, yet at the same time I felt always that I was more direct and open due to the fact of growing up in Europe. This experience left me with questions about my identity: am I more Kurd or more a westernized young female?

But at the same time, I also perceived myself as an outsider in the sense of having left Kurdistan for years, where rapid changes occurred from mid-1990s and in post-2003. During this period of time, the educational curriculum and eventually its system had been through a

reform process, particularly after a conference held in 2007. All these changes made me feel as an outsider, since I was not there to closely follow these changes. Moreover, I felt and I am still feeling an outsider with regard to my research topic. The field of this study on 'education' is a new academic field for me. My study background is linked to law and political sciences, therefore, the field of this study challenges me throughout this research process.

#### **4.6 Data analysis**

For this thesis, the interpretation of gathered data involves both a reflexive approach and has features of grounded theory. First of all, it adopts a reflexive approach due to my relationship between my personal background and my background as a researcher (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). This method of interpreting the data suits with the design of this study as an interpretivist qualitative research (Willis, 2007). As a researcher it is important to be transparent, self-aware and to reflect upon the process of collecting data in order to construct meaning of gathered material (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

As is mentioned earlier, I have kept a research diary during and after the process of collecting data. This has helped me in writing down events and the process of how my fieldwork trips turned out. Another methodological concern that led me to include reflexive approach in analyzing the data relates to the level of comprehending concepts from the participants. Whilst their experiences and views are very valuable for this study, it is important to bear in mind that the entire idea of HRE is rather a new concept for the educational system in the KRG region. The education professionals are still in process of being trained about human rights and specifically about HRE as a subject in the curriculum. Among the HRE teachers that I interviewed, no one had received any type of training. Therefore, I needed to be sensitive that some of my informants would not entirely understand the meaning of the core research concepts.

Secondly, this thesis adopts to certain degree grounded theory approach to generate the theoretical framework throughout the process of collecting and analysing the data (Basit, 2010). The theoretical framework embraces different components. The reason for doing so is related to the complex context of the research topic: a) the link between HRE and gender seems rather to be a new field within HRE research discipline and b) the case-study as such, Iraqi Kurdistan, is a complex one: it involves post-conflict and diversity (cosmopolitanism) that is relevant here.

Another methodological grounded theory feature of this thesis is that its main theory (capabilities) emerges from the collected data. The way I understood informants' feedback, it led me to choose the capability approach as the most applicable theory. The overall focus of the data addresses the potential role of education and HRE in particular in creating capable human resources, including capable and free female individuals in society. Moreover, the capability approach fits also to my own understanding of HRE, which is to foster equality and social justice, including gender equality through education.

Lastly, the concept of intersectionality contributes to link various socio-cultural themes (Brah & Phoenix, 2004) that are discussed in both chapters five and six. By doing so, an attempt is taken to depict the interrelationships of various themes when it comes to gender, specifically within education context. It should be noted that the concept of intersectionality is not used as a part of methodology here. It is rather a concept to help in understanding complex and multiple identities in education (Osler, in press), particularly, when discussing gender issues within schooling context.

#### **4.7 Validity and reliability**

One of the key elements of effective research concerns validity. This refers to the process of constructing meaning from gathered data in order to avoid undue bias (Basit, 2010). Validity is linked to the concepts, theories and the meaning of the empirical data, which implies that data needs to be analyzed in a careful way. Sources need ideally to be cross-checked before making any claims. Researchers need to be transparent to demonstrate how their data are gathered and processed for the sake of validity (Cohen et al., 2011). In qualitative research, validity concerns the role of the researcher and the process of generating meaning rather than huge claims about outcomes (ibid, 2011).

A method of ensuring validity in, and to present a holistic approach to, research is to use different means and methods in gathering the data. This so-called triangulation is a strategy used in looking at the same issue through selecting a range of different methods (Basit, 2010). For this research, I have followed this strategy in gathering and generating the data. I have conducted interviews (with different professions within the field of education), participated in observation sessions and held one focus group discussion in order to gather sources for this thesis. This was done alongside literature review and analysis of HRE curriculum books and policy documents. In this way, I have attempted to generate knowledge about the research topic in a holistic manner.

As far as external validity concerned or indeed generalizability (Basit, 2010), this study is a qualitative one. The main sources are gathered based on social and personal perceptions of the participants. This raises the question whether any researcher is able to present the truth of peoples' views. I doubt if this can be achieved, regardless of which research protocols are followed. It is impossible to understand fully another person's thoughts. For this reason, I have put the emphasis on describing the process of gathering information as it was and leave the judgement to the reader to determine whether the finding of this study can be transferred to a more general context. However, I believe the way I presented the data does reflect the reality that exists within the schooling system in Kurdistan.

Another important element in research is its reliability. A research project has a high level of reliability if the collection and treatment of the data has been carefully carried out throughout the whole research process (Basit, 2010). Hence, reliability deals with consistency and accuracy of generating knowledge from gathered data (Cohen et al., 2011). By repeating the same research procedure, it would likely to come up with the same finding. However, in qualitative research, it is very difficult to achieve this (Basit, 2010). To deal with people implies subjective interpretations, which makes it less likely in achieving the same outcome through repeating the research. Another element related to reliability is its strong relationship to validity, which implies that a research is valid when it is reliable as well (ibid, 2010).

Regarding this study, I have been conscious about reliability, therefore I maintained to be transparent towards the participants to inform them about the purpose and, as far as possible, in the way their views are presented in this study. I have been consistent in the process of conducting the interviews, after gaining the participant's consent to record the conversation, in order to avoid arbitrary interpretations of the conversations. During data analysis, I put the emphasis on comprehensiveness and in depth-explanations (Cohen et al., 2011) to be, as far as is possible, close to the reality and the context of the research topic.

#### **4.8 Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations that I have faced throughout this research project. First of all, planning the fieldwork trips was not fully under my control. It has not been easy to plan the trip before arriving in Kurdistan. I have used mainly personal contacts to get into touch with participants, which was not easy to arrange. Consequently, I had to adjust the fieldwork programme.

Another aspect that I would like to mention is the complexity of translating the cultural expressions and the cultural context during transcription process of the interviews. In this context, it is important to bear in mind that analyzing the data, including translating them, is based on my interpretation. Hence, the conclusion of this thesis is a reflection of my own interpretation rather than claiming a particular 'truth' within its context.

## **5. HRE in Kurdish curriculum and its contribution to gender equity**

As indicated in previous chapters, the topic of this thesis is rather a complex one. It involves various themes in relation to education, gender and the socio-political setting of the case-study. Therefore, the interpretation of gathered data involves various approaches (as explained in chapter 4).

I acknowledge the ambitious nature of my plan in covering wide-ranging various themes in what is necessarily a modest Masters thesis project, which may not have space to cover all below mentioned themes in depth. Yet, current gender context in Kurdistan (as briefly discussed in chapter one) makes HRE and its potential very relevant. Ultimately, the struggle for gender equity is a struggle for justice and hence it is an educational project (Osler, in press). Having set the discussion in its proper context, this chapter seeks to answer the first research question of this thesis: how can HRE contribute to gender equity in the post-conflict and multicultural society of Iraqi Kurdistan.

### **5.1 Fragility of Iraqi Kurdistan, intersectionality and education**

The socio-political challenges presented briefly in chapter one illustrate the fragility of Iraqi Kurdistan as an emerging democracy. The impact of past conflicts is still visible in terms of infrastructure (including education infrastructure) and on the mentality of its people. In addition, the ongoing security challenges inside Iraq and in neighbouring countries contribute further to the sensitive position of the region. As I discuss below, many of my research respondents also acknowledge fragility and reflect on broader socio-political issues when discussing the role and status of education.

Throughout this chapter and the next, I address some common themes that emerge from the data. This is in order to contextualise and to present education professionals' understandings about the potential of education (including HRE) for development and justice, including gender equity. As we shall see, according to the research respondents, the most visible factors that impact on the school environment include: conflicts and its aftermath, current political challenges (including corruption), diversity, religion, traditions, cultural understanding about gender roles and social classes. The concept of intersectionality helps me here to demonstrate multiple and complex identities expressed in this education setting (Osler, in press). Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix explain the concept of intersectionality as:

signifying the complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation - economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential - intersect in historically specific context. the concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands. (Brah & Phoenix, 2004, p. 76)

This explanation is applicable when discussing gender and education within Kurdish context and perhaps elsewhere in the world. The above mentioned socio-political factors form '*different dimensions of social life that cannot be separated*'. Hence, when I discuss the status of education, HRE and gender relationships, multiple socio-political factors are involved and are sometimes repeated in the discussion. All these factors '*intersect in historically specific context*' namely in the specific context of Kurdistan-Iraq in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

To introduce the discussion, I first address respondents' perceptions of the role and current status of education in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>13</sup> Education is commonly seen as necessary for progress. The education professionals mean that nation-building and the rebuilding process need resourceful individuals in various fields. As one education inspector stated:

*Schools play a main role for further developing a society, its role should be central. This is regardless of gender, religion or differences in opinion. The rebuilding process through education needs to include all layers and colours of society. (Kamaran, 12.07.2011)*

Other education professionals seem to have same line of thoughts as Kamaran's when asking about the role of education for current situation in Kurdistan. This understanding is close to the idea of viewing education as an essential transformative institution in post-conflict setting. From this perspective, the key roles of education are peace-building, inclusion and long-term development of society (Vongalis-Macrow, 2006). The issue of development through education was seen as particularly significant among my respondents.

Another commonly expressed view among respondents is that education should address equality and inclusion as a response to various types of conflicts that Kurdish society has experienced. In this regard, education is viewed as a proper public place to reflect upon injustices from the past and how to go resolving these. The power of narratives and the ability to link home situation to injustices elsewhere (Osler & Zhu, 2011), may contribute further to respondents' idea of stimulating thoughts for equality and inclusion through education.

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<sup>13</sup> The next chapter will present some of common addressed challenges related to education in the KRG region.

With regard to inclusion, most of the respondents addressed the importance of '*including all*' or '*including all layers of society*' in rebuilding process. Nevertheless, I found it interesting that only one research respondent with Turkmenian background (hence a minority group) was very specific to address the issue of diversity through education. She meant that equality and inclusion should reflect on diversity in the aftermath of conflicts in the KRG region:

*After having experienced many different conflicts, our society needs equality. We need a true meaning of equality that it includes diverse groups: ethnic groups and different political parties in order to establish equal rights to all members in society. (Kawthar, 12.07.2011)*

Nevertheless, the education professionals voiced concerns about the actual state of education<sup>14</sup> that does not correspond to their expectations of its potential in fostering development and nation-building. The data suggests that the political system impacts negatively on education. This is in combination of conflicts from past. During the interviews, informal conversations and in the group discussion, the issue of political challenges, including practice of democracy and consequences of corruption were frequently addressed. It would appear that the political challenges affect education professionals' performance in enhancing quality in education. A principal from a school in a rural area just outside Erbil had reservations about the role and quality of education in contemporary Kurdistan:

*The education staffs do not perform as they supposed to generally speaking in Kurdistan. This is due to many rapid changes that have occurred in recent years. You can sense a sort of disappointment feeling by the staff due to the political influences on everything in our society, the upcoming materialism, and also [the people] having a tired mentality after so many conflicts in past. All these factors impact on teachers and their performance. In my view and based on my own experience, our schooling system does not produce qualified pupils. (Hasan, 13.07.2011)*

There may well be a decline in education professionals' performance linked to the difficult economic context in Kurdistan. Often employers in the public sector, including teachers, have an additional job alongside the one in public sector. Some teachers work in the transport sector (mostly in taxi businesses) after school hours. This is in order to meet their daily expenses. As a consequence, it may influence their priorities and effort to focus on education as they take on additional work to cover household costs.

From the above discussion, it seems that education has much to offer in responding to injustices and making good from past conflicts. However, the consequences of these same

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<sup>14</sup> More about challenges in education see section 6.2

conflicts in combination with political struggles seem to hinder progress in and through education.

## **5.2 HRE in the Kurdish curriculum**

As is mentioned in chapter one, the Kurdish education system has gone through a reform process following the educational conference that took place in 2007 (Curriculum, 2009). Human rights values and democratic framework are acknowledged as important pillars for the new education system in Kurdistan (ibid, 2009). Due to past political abuses, schools are seen as the vehicle through which education for equality and justice can be promoted, alongside cognitive skills (ibid, 2009).

As for the rationale behind HRE in the curriculum, the human rights teaching manual states that HRE is a tool to enhance awareness about human rights values through education (Rauof, 2007). The document refers to past injustices and the need to promote equality and inclusion based on human rights principles in Kurdistan.

The subject of HRE is taught in grades five (10 years old), seven (12 years old) and ten (15 years old). In grades five and seven, HRE is taught throughout study year. While in grade ten, HRE is taught only in one semester. From reviewing the HRE textbooks of all mentioned three grades, it seems that the textbook is still in progress. For instance, HRE book for grade seven has been revised four times since 2005. The book has been revised respectively in 2007, 2009 and 2010. The broad content has remained more or less the same; however the length has been adjusted.

During my fieldwork trips, I sought to understand on one hand how HRE is perceived by the education professionals. On the other hand, I wanted also to understand how HRE has been practiced as a part of the curriculum. This is in order to depict a better picture of the status of HRE in the curriculum and its potential role in enhancing gender equality.

Overall, this thesis identifies HRE as subject as having a low status within the Kurdish curriculum. The HRE textbooks seem to focus merely on education *about* rights (UN, 2011: Article 2:2a), where human rights is taught without adequate consideration of children's everyday rights denials. The subsections below discuss particular themes raised during the fieldwork visits with regard to teaching HRE in curriculum.

### *5.2.1 Content, language and status of HRE in Kurdish curriculum*

The HRE textbooks for mentioned grades cover various human rights themes. The most common themes relate to civil and political rights (especially in the HRE books for grades seven and ten). The following civil and political rights are noticed: right to life, freedoms (freedom of speech, freedom from fear, and freedom of assembly), security of persons, prohibition of torture and cruel, right to fair trial, self-determination, right to privacy and right to own property. Some of the economic, social and cultural rights are also discussed, for example, the right to enjoy adequate living standard including regulated working standards and good health system, the right to practice own culture and the right to education.

A considerable section in both books for grades seven and ten is devoted to the history of human rights and various types of international documents. The role of international and regional NGOs is discussed as well. The presented topics of these two textbooks remain at descriptive level. The respondents confirmed my impression that the topics are rather dry and difficult to comprehend.

As for raising awareness about types of discriminations, the HRE textbooks focus on themes related to discriminations based on race and religion. A very short story in HRE book for grade five discusses the equal rights of disabled persons. However, HRE books for all three grades seem to put less emphasis on various types of discrimination. For instance, I did not noticed any reference to the status of minority groups or gender related discrimination. There is also no mention of themes related to stereotypes that may lead to different types of discrimination, e.g. ethnic, language or gender.

As for gender specific topics, HRE textbooks seem to deal lightly with gender related issues that are actual in Kurdish society (see chapter one). Only the HRE textbook for grade seven (age 12 years old) covers some gender related themes. The first one is a story that discusses the right to choose one's own partner.<sup>15</sup> In another topic the focus is on equal rights of women and men. As for topics related to violence, the HRE textbook of grade five mentions child abuse and the one of grade seven mentions prohibition of torture. There is no mention of gender-based violence. Surprisingly, none of the HRE textbooks mentions the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN, 1979). I had expected to read more about gender related topics in HRE textbook for grade ten. The age group of

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<sup>15</sup> One HRE teacher commented that pupils in grade 7 (12 years old) are too young for such topic.

grade ten (15 years old) may be considered more appropriate to reflect upon gender related problems in society.

As mentioned earlier, the education reform has taken place in a complex post-conflict context. The new curriculum document (2009) acknowledges the essential role of human rights principles and democratic values in respond to past injustices. Yet, the HRE textbooks lack to focus on several sensitive themes that are relevant to Kurdistan's post-conflict setting. The textbooks put less emphasis on the impact of violence and discrimination. Other relevant topics such as social trauma, the meaning of powerlessness and marginalization (Davies, 2004) have not mentioned at all in these HRE textbooks.

Furthermore and as indicated in chapter two, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training specifies that HRE should include education *about* rights (providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles), education *through* rights (respecting educators and learners rights) and education *for* rights (empowering learners to enjoy and practice their rights) (UN, 2011). Judging from the contents of HRE textbooks (Rauof, 2007), it seems that there is only a thin focus on education *about* rights. The Kurdish curriculum seems to focus to certain degree on education *about* rights, since HRE textbooks do not focus thoroughly on various principles of human rights. The lack of adequate considerations for education *through* rights and education *for* rights is further discussed in sections below.

Apart from the content, it is worth to mention that the HRE book for grade five seems pleasant to read. The language is simple and the text is rather short. The topics are presented through short stories with pictures to help children in visualizing the key elements. At the end of each story, there are questions to help pupils to reflect upon key elements of the stories.

Nevertheless, the HRE books for grades seven and ten are written rather in a difficult language. All interviewed HRE teachers have mentioned the difficulty that they face in conveying message of the tasks. This requires knowledge and active involvement from HRE teachers:

*In general, pupils find the topics difficult to comprehend. The language that is chosen is rather dry and it is difficult to be easily understood. However, I try to make link between the content and examples of our daily life. (Sawsan, 16.02.2012)*

Finally, the research respondents raised their concerns about a trend that HRE as a subject has not been given as much attention as it should be. One HRE teacher expressed his frustration about a practice that seems to be the case in some schools:

*Some of HRE teachers do not like the topic so much or they may consider it less important. As a consequence, they make some of HRE hours available for other classes to be taught instead. For instance, classes such as English or Mathematics would be taught instead of HRE. In such case, a few lessons of HRE would be combined and taught briefly in fewer hours than originally was allocated for HRE subject. (Fawzi, 14.02.2012)*

In this regard, the HRE evaluation report of People's Development Association (PDA) reiterates the issue of HRE as a solid course judged as less important compared to other subjects such as science or language courses (People's Development Association, 2011).

### *5.2.2 Methods of teaching HRE*

As for the method of teaching HRE classes, it seems that the pressure on teachers to cover the content necessarily promotes a traditional approach to teaching. Such approach in the Kurdish context is based on either explaining the topics as a lecture or having questions-answers (QA) sessions in the classroom. Such traditional approach of teaching is passive, where pupils take notes without necessarily being given opportunities to discuss or reflect upon the topic in hand. This way of teaching about human rights is unlikely to be very effective. HRE is about empowerment to encourage a critical thinking of learners (Meintjes, 1997). In contrast to what Friere characterised as 'banking' education, empowerment education requires an active learning process, where teachers and pupils are engaged together to grasp the issues related to human rights values (ibid, 1997). I noted the following in my research diary when attended a HRE class for grade five:

*During the lesson, the teacher stood mainly in front of the classroom. He started immediately with asking short questions related to the story of today's topic, and pupils were eager to be chosen in order to give very short answers about parts related to the story. The tempo of questioning and receiving answers was rather fast. When, a learner was struggling to provide the correct answer, the teacher was choosing quickly another one for the correct answer. It felt as if the learners were participating in a quiz to compete with the speed of the teacher. In the end of the session, the teacher concluded with what were the lessons to be learned from that story. (HRE observation class, 20.02.2012)*

As I make clear in these notes, I found the speed of asking questions and providing answers fascinating. I recall this type of speed from my elementary school period as well. However, I

doubt about the effectiveness of teaching any subject with this method. This is particularly the case when it comes to HRE. From the content and language of the HRE textbooks, it appears that pupils already struggle with comprehending themes. Such speed of teaching with merely focus on QA may complicate the subject even further.

It should be noted that the HRE manual of instruction encourages teacher to choose a participatory method, where students are involved in discussing themes. The document mentions also to make use of different activities when teaching about human rights (Rauof, 2007). However, the manual is not specific in guiding teachers of what type of activities to organize or how to introduce participatory methods in HRE.

Interestingly, all interviewed HRE teachers have suggested extra-curricular activities may add more value to HRE programme. They thought that some activities may help learners to understand better different themes of the HRE programme. Some HRE teachers have mentioned the idea of involving NGOs when teaching some HRE themes. This would enable pupils to establish a link between themes they learn in classroom and social problems in reality. One of these teachers has suggested further:

*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 is 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, 14.02.2012)*

However, another HRE teacher addressed the issue of limited school capacity, both material and human resources in order to organize such additional activities:

*It is important to have facilities to make HRE content more appealing to pupils. For example, we do not have resources or capacity to organise a theatre about a particular HRE topic. This would help learners to enjoy the topic and simultaneously understand better the message behind a particular HRE class. (Sherko, 18.02.2012)*

The data demonstrates lack of effective methods to teach HRE. Currently adopted teaching method seems not to be helpful for learners to digest dry content of the HRE textbooks. This may work against the initial plans of KRG's education reform document (Curriculum, 2009).

### 5.2.3 HRE Training

A common concern that was raised by all research respondents was lack of HRE training for the education professionals. Notably it is social studies teachers that are instructed to teach

HRE classes. From the data of this research, no one from the interviewed HRE teachers had received any HRE training. In fact, one of the teachers has been teaching HRE classes for grades seven and ten for five years without having attended any training thus far. An education inspector also addressed the issue of lack of qualified HRE teachers:

*HRE as content and as a separate subject in the curriculum has been taught for over 10 year now in Kurdistan. Yet, we lack qualified teachers to teach adequately this topic. This questions to what extend would this class have impact on pupils' mentality. (Azad, 16.02.2012)*

The HRE evaluation report of People's Development Association (PDA) shows also that 56 per cent of interviewed HRE teachers from the governorates of Erbil, Sulaimaniyah and Kirkuk, have an intermediate knowledge about human rights (People's Development Association, 2011). The report does not explain what is meant with 'intermediate knowledge'. However, it links less qualified HRE teachers to the absence of effective training programmes. This report reveals that 86 per cent of the interviewed sample did not receive any HRE training.

Lack of effective HRE training programmes for education professionals is problematic. If the HRE textbooks are not easy to comprehend and depend on teachers' interpretations, the quality of a HRE class inevitably depends heavily on the knowledge and skills of the teachers. This is problematic, when it seems that so many HRE teachers have not undergone any HRE specific training (People's Development Association, 2011).

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

One specific challenge raised by a number of research respondents was that teaching rights in contexts in which rights are denied. They made reference to denied rights both in society and in schools.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the socio-political challenges seem to have impacted education system as well. Consequently, HRE may create a gap between principles that are taught in school versus a reality that undermines these principles:

*Although I do not have very close understanding of HRE, my daughter has taken this class. I think it is very important to teach pupils such subjects. It is even more important to experience these rights in society. It is not enough only to teach our children about rights from textbooks. As individuals, we need to be able to practice these rights outside schools as well. In our reality, however, there are many rights that we are aware of; yet not able to practice (Kawthar, 12.07.2011)*

While respondents related largely to broader societal denials of rights, another challenge is responding to children who have personal experience of human rights abuse. Below provided example illustrates how HRE is relevant to children's everyday lives. HRE may empower teachers to address sensitive issues related to child abuse.

*Sometimes students give example 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 may come to say that 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, 18.02.2012)*

I asked this HRE teacher whether his school has any mechanism to involve other institutes when dealing with a case of child abuse. The teacher acknowledged that they have a weak system to follow-up in such instances. During investigations, it appears to rely heavily on the level of cooperation from parents and whether parents would admit at all a case of child abuse. Lack of an effective system to follow up and monitor children's rights contradicts with a fundamental aim of HRE.

Another discrepancy between teaching rights where rights are denied is linked to a poor physical environment in schools. As mentioned earlier, lack of adequate school services has created main frustration of all research respondents. The following concerns were raised in one school in Erbil:

*Teachers and pupils are deprived from their rights to enjoy a good learning environment. It is not easy for us to talk about rights to education, health or a clean environment, when our school lacks services. As you can see, our school building, which is very old and this dark-grey colour, does not support a good learning atmosphere in the classroom. In the winter time, it can get so dark we cannot teach properly in these classrooms. We have had occasionally to send pupils home, because the classrooms became so dark and cold that they couldn't focus or see the blackboard properly. (Focus group discussion, 22.02.2012)*

It should be noted that lack of school facilities mentioned frequently during the interviews. A few respondents commented that a poor schooling environment itself violates children's rights to an adequate and accessible education. In this context, HRE reminds us of the need for a

comprehensive whole-school approach (Osler & Starkey, 2010). This includes adequate school facilities and appropriate services for students as well as for teachers.

Having presented some of main echoed comments with regard to the status of education and HRE in particular, in the next section, I discuss the potential of HRE to respond to development and equality demands that seem to be prioritized among education professionals in Kurdistan. Through setting HRE within the capabilities' framework (Nussbaum, 2000a; Sen, 1999), I attempt to open up a discussion that HRE has potentials to contribute to development and equality, particularly gender equality. However, this requires a comprehensive educational approach. For this purpose, I will focus on the content and method of HRE that need to include empowerment elements in order to trigger educators' and learners' commitment to justice. I suggest that HRE within the capabilities framework may contribute to gender equality in a post-conflict and diverse setting as the one in this case-study.

### **5.3 HRE as a capability**

To start with, it is necessary to acknowledge lack of empirical data that is directly linking human rights education to capability approach in this thesis. However, the way I understood the underlying message from the education professionals with regard to the role of education and potentials of HRE to enhance gender equity, it fits within capabilities' framework. Furthermore, capability approach fits also to my understanding of HRE (as discussed previously in section 3.2).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a common understanding from the respondents was that education is a proper place to create capable individuals. Education does not mean merely to produce knowledge, but rather to create capable individuals for the sake of development and social justice. The fragile situation of Iraqi Kurdistan is understood to require capable individuals. This in its broad terms is in line with Sen's theory of capability (1999), where development and meaningful human life can be achieved when substantive freedom is granted. My position here is that substantive freedom can be granted through an effective HRE programme that adopts capability approach.

As mentioned earlier in chapter three, some education scholars have been inspired by the capability approach and argue that good quality of education implies the valuing of personal development (Walker, 2006; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Nevertheless, there appears to be lack of studies elaborating on HRE through capability approach (Valen-Sendstad, 2010).

Valen-Sendstad (2010) argues that capabilities, especially Nussbaum's approach is relevant to HRE. Nussbaum's theory is seen as pedagogical (ibid, 2010). It is not complicated and reflects on human experiences, which is a direct way to make sense of human rights (ibid, 2010).

Some scholars view HRE as a transformative tool for social change (Osler, in press; Osler & Starkey, 2010; Osler & Zhu, 2011; Tibbitts, 2005). In line with this thought, but with a specific aim related to gender equity, I attempted to explain HRE through the lens of capability approach in chapter three. I support the point of view about HRE's potentials for change. However, HRE through lens of capability approach may specify further its transformative tool for social change (as discussed in chapter 3).

Another aspect of making capabilities relevant to HRE is that both this theory and the whole human rights project address struggles for social justice, including the struggle for gender equity. Both Sen (1992) and Nussbaum (2000) develop capability approach from lived experiences: human experiences that involve lack of justice, which consequently impacts development and living a meaningful life. HRE promotes solidarity and equality for the sake of justice in society. For this purpose, the power of lived experiences and narratives are viewed to be valuable (Osler & Zhu, 2011) as well as ways to 'internalize' human right values (Banks, 2009, p. 101). This way of learning about human rights is understood to have potentials to contribute to social justice.

From data of this thesis, HRE is viewed in Kurdistan to be relevant as a response to past injustices (Curriculum, 2009; Rauof, 2007). Learning about human rights principles is commonly understood to have potential to foster social justice in the longer term. The first step is to start with raising awareness. The next steps would be then, to empower learners to reflect upon certain issues and to create space to practice capabilities.

From my notes during the focus group discussion, an HRE teacher confirms a belief in the potentials of HRE to raise awareness amongst learners. This example shows also the power of narratives and linking own experience to human rights values in order to empower learners in the longer term (Osler & Zhu, 2011).

*During HRE classes, very often pupils would speak up either in the classroom or privately with us. They often reflect upon certain human rights values or violations, which they link to their daily life. Some of them even mention that they recognise and value human rights norms, but observe certain norms are not practiced at home. Once a boy came to me after the class ended and said 'regarding our today's topic: violence against women, unfortunately, this is practiced in my family. My sister has been forced to marry. Now, both she and we are facing a lot of*

*problems. These problems influence my school performance. I cannot focus on study at home'.  
(Focus group discussion, 22.02.2012)*

Moreover, the nature of fragility as presented above in Iraqi Kurdistan makes education and HRE in particular with a cosmopolitan focus very relevant. Due to past injustices and marginalization of minority groups, it is important to allow educators and learners to reflect upon that. This would allow them to make more sense of human rights principles, while to raise awareness of a broader picture about the struggle for justice elsewhere (Osler & Starkey, 2003). However, as mentioned earlier, HRE textbooks seem to focus less on this aspect. This is in contradiction to the aims of the reformed education curriculum (Curriculum, 2009).

I have attempted to argue that capability approach is relevant to HRE. Both theories focus on autonomous critical individuals, who enjoy substantive freedom. In addition to this, capability-based assessment may help HRE to evaluate its potentials for the sake of just, equality and inclusion. Below, I discuss HRE's potential to contribute to gender equality.

#### **5.4 Can HRE contribute to gender equality in Kurdistan?**

The answer of this question is not easy, taking into account the socio-political factors that have impacted on gender roles in Kurdistan (more about this in next chapter). Furthermore, the technical challenges of teaching HRE in the Kurdish curriculum (as mentioned above), add another layer of complexity to the question. Finally, it should be admitted that further research and empirical studies seem to be necessary in order to a) to explore HRE through capability approach and b) to evaluate potentials of HRE on societies.

Having said that, capability approach is useful to identify HRE goals and to suggest an approach (capability-based approach) to assess its impact related to gender equality in Kurdistan. As presented above, capabilities' framework is relevant to HRE. It involves empowerment method, which seems to be important to foster particularly gender equity. HRE content and its method need to adopt empowerment approach particularly when dealing with socio-cultural topics. Next to the element of raising awareness, HRE teaching methods need to emphasize on self-determination and trust that would impact on learners' attitude towards human rights values. Ultimately, HRE need to encourage skills of creating independent and autonomous individuals (Bernath et al., 1999; Tibbitts, 2005; Tomasevski, 2005a; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

Judging from the current status of HRE in Kurdistan, the above mentioned thoughts of empowerment through HRE may be considered as unrealistic. However, the data of this study

reveals a positive attitude from educational professionals towards HRE in the curriculum. This can be seen as an initial step in viewing HRE as a transformative tool towards improving human conditions in general, and fostering gender equality in particular (Tibbitts, 2002, 2005). The latter element entails also viewing human beings as agents practicing substantive freedom (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1992, 1999), which is the type of equality (substantive equality) that this study focuses on.

For instance, in response to the question of whether HRE can contribute in improving gender equality, the data suggests it has the potential. A research respondent views HRE is relevant for all education professionals, not only those teaching HRE. This is in order to enhance gender sensitivity among the education professionals:

*I think it is important that all teachers are aware of human rights standards and are trained in this regard, regardless which subject they teach. This enhances their capacity to treat boys and girls equally. Most importantly, it should enable them to support girls in enhancing self-esteem and to participate equally as boys in various activities inside and beyond schools. (Asm, 13.07.2011).*

Furthermore, most of the respondents viewed the role of HRE as to enhance equality and enabling social empowerment:

*Schools need to continue making pupils aware of the idea of being equal. There are no differences between girls and boys to study and gain a good position in society. We need also to encourage them to educate their parents and communities based on what they learn from education. (Sawsan, 16.02.2012)*

Based on education professionals' feedback and the language of the Kurdish Curriculum Document (2009), HRE has potentials to have a positive impact on the attitude of the educators and learners. However, this requires a comprehensive educational action plan focusing on improving skills of the educators, methods of teaching HRE (Meintjes, 1997) and improving school facilities.

## **5. 5 Summary**

The role of education and its impact on Kurdish society appears to suffer from a gap between its ideals and the troubled realities of schools. The discrepancy between theory and practice in education affects the quality of education. It also hinders the new education system's stated goals of fostering human rights values and democratic framework next to cognitive skills through education. The problematic reality in education has subsequently affected the HRE

program as well. However, a closer review on HRE content and its method within framework of capability approach, alongside improvement in schooling environment suggests it still has potential. As a result, HRE as a part of curriculum may lead to the creation of educational capabilities and autonomous and critical learning stances that would positively affect the empowerment of individuals and enhance gender relationships.

## **6. Education professionals' perspectives**

This chapter reports on the education professionals' understandings of HRE and specifically their observations on the role of education and gender equality. Since teaching for human rights and democratic values are taking place within a context of education reform, the research respondents were invited to reflect on broader social issues that impacts education system in general. By doing this, this chapter seeks to answer the second research question of this thesis, which involves education professionals' perspectives regarding teaching human rights values and its potential for Kurdish society.

Next to presenting the education professionals' understandings about human rights and HRE, I find it necessary to present in depth their thoughts related to education and gender. Although, I have presented some of general thoughts about the role and status of education in previous chapter, nevertheless, it is worth to come back to various challenges that the education sector seems to face in Kurdistan. These challenges seem to prevent the realisation of progress within and through education. Moreover, the research respondents have highlighted various gender-related topics that are relevant to be addressed within the framework of thesis's discussion.

### **6.1 Understanding of human rights education**

Generally speaking, the respondents place considerable emphasis on the place of human rights in creating a just and sustainable society. A number of individuals link the need for HRE to the Kurdish struggle for human rights and political recognition. Also, HRE is viewed to be vital in societies that are very diverse and fragile due to recent conflicts and on-going unequal social norms (Begikhani et al., 2010; Stansfield, 2003). It is argued that children need to know Kurdish history and to understand the fragility of society. Here, HRE is viewed as very relevant topic in order to learn from past injustices and how to move forward.

In spite of HRE being recognised as an important course in curriculum, , the education professionals express concerns both about a general understanding of human rights in contemporary Kurdish society and elsewhere in the region.

*In general, not only in Kurdistan, but across the Middle East, we are not aware of our rights. We do not really understand what is meant by human rights. So a good awareness campaign is needed to start with. (Foad 13.07.2011)*

The political instability in Iraq and in the region is understood to be mainly due to lack of awareness about basic human rights principles. Therefore, a number of respondents suggest that HRE is relevant both for children and for adults in Kurdistan. HRE is understood as a means by which one would be in better position to claim own 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 practice these rights. There is a general impression that human rights are important but that both human rights and HRE are ill-understood.

Among the respondents I observed preference for talking about gender issues (see section 6.3) rather than ethnic or religious diversity when considering the potentials of HRE to contribute to social justice and learning to live together. As is mentioned in previous chapter and above, a number of respondents made a direct reference to past conflicts, but few elaborated on the role of HRE to address for instance conflict related traumas (Davies, 2004).

With regard to children rights, few respondents have expressed their concerns about children rights. The issue of poor child protection has been addressed. One teacher indicated her concern of teaching children on authority figures (parents, teachers and government officials), but the obligation of authority to uphold children's rights are not addressed. However, none of the respondents have referred to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The absent of referring to the CRC (1989) may be interpreted as lack of knowledge about this international document and its high relevance within HRE and education in general.

Interestingly, most research respondents made a strong link between HRE and its potential to raise awareness about individual freedom. The need of individual freedom is strongly linked to the level of enhancing human capacity. As is mentioned in previous chapter, the underlying message from the education professionals with regard to HRE and its potentials, it fits within capability approach (Nussbaum, 2000b; Sen, 1992, 1999).

*When we feel we have rights and that it is acknowledged and protected, we would be then able to develop ourselves. We would be meaningful to our community as well.  
(Asm, 13.07.2011)*

One HRE teacher spoke at length about potentials of HRE to develop independent personality:

*Many pupils in such young age are not taken seriously at home. Their rights may be neglected, denied or even violated. Some of them may have grown-up in fear and not to dare to speak up. Such atmosphere limits the space to reflect upon own development.*

*HRE as a subject in the curriculum has potentials to make pupils aware of their rights and will be an additional support to develop own personality. (Sherko, 18.02.2012)*

The cultural understanding of '*developing own personality*' means here to be an independent and resourceful human being. From this understanding, HRE seem to have potentials to create educational capabilities, hence, autonomous free individuals.

Despite the challenges that HRE seems to face in the Kurdish curriculum (as mentioned in previous chapter), the frequent references to tensions between knowing rights and practicing rights might be interpreted as a possible outcome of growing awareness among education professionals regarding (children's) human rights. Whereas being aware of social injustices is not sufficient to enjoy substantive freedom. However, the growing awareness among education professionals may work as snowball effect that impacts learners. The fact that educators are able to link certain human rights norms to their daily contexts, it gives hope that HRE may influence their way of thinking in longer term.

## **6.2 Other challenges in education sector**

As mentioned in previous chapter, the data of this thesis highlights several key challenges that the education system faces in Kurdistan. These challenges seem to create serious obstacles for education as a social institution to enhance human development and societal (Davies, 2004; Osler & Starkey, 2010; Osler & Zhu, 2011; Tibbitts, 2005; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

Lack of adequate school facilities and qualified teachers seem to form greatest challenges in education sector in Kurdistan. Despite the government's annual investment in building new schools and refurbishing existing ones, yet, there remain insufficient schools to meet the increasing number of students in the region (People's Development Association, 2008). Consequently, classrooms are overcrowded, which is impeding proper teachings. Schools often lack basic facilities, such as: electricity, clean water, cooling and heating, basic hygiene, laboratories and proper space for leisure activities. I have noticed these shortages in almost all schools that I visited both in Erbil and in the rural areas surrounding the city.

Moreover, lack of qualified teachers and lack of adequate trainings (also HRE training) to refresh teachers' skills constitutes another challenge. With regard to teachers' capacity, some education professionals addressed the system of teacher education. It was argued that teachers for Basic Education should have the same academic background and skills as teachers for the Upper-Secondary system. This is because pupils in Basic Education need equally intensive pedagogical follow-up and qualified, skilled teachers.

Another serious challenge in education is the chaos manifests around the new education system in Kurdistan. During data gathering, I have struggled to understand when the new education system commenced, since I have been given different dates. The reference was made to the educational conference in 2007 and the new Curriculum that was introduced officially in 2009. Furthermore, I struggled to understand the content and the structure of the new system, since, it is not fully implemented. From the feedback of the informants, it seems that the new system is still in progress. However, lack of school facilities, adequate teachers' capacity and the involvement of different political parties, all in all hinder a smooth implementation of reform process:

*The new education system has started in a very rushed way. It feels as if we have started in the middle of the process. There are many constraints and problems in terms of technical skills, resources, lack of capacity of teachers that complicate the implementation process of this reform. These problems are an accumulation of several years; hence, this new education system cannot yet address and solve these challenges. (Sarkawt, 13.07.2011)*

With regard to the new education system, only one teacher highlighted the need of taking students' perspectives into account, when planning educational programme. This implies a consideration of young people's experiences of schooling (Osler, 2010).

Another worrying issue from the data of this thesis is related to the emergence of various private schools in the region. In the main cities, there are a number of private schools, where the standard and quality of education is considered higher than in public schools. The school hours and programmes may differ from that of the public schools. These private schools demand different rates of school fees, which make access largely limited to wealthier families. Some research respondents have expressed their concerns about a longer term impact of these private schools on the quality of public schools.

With regard to different types of schools, it is worth noting the emergence of schools in minority languages. In post-1992, attention is given to special schools in minority languages, such as in Turkmenian and Assyrians, whereas schools with Arabic as the language of instruction have been reduced. This is understood as a response to former regime's policy of denying minorities' identity, including learning in minority languages. It is important to accommodate diversity and to offer facilities for minorities to maintain own religion, language or customs. Yet, this may influence opportunities for learning to live together in the

context of diversity. The question remains as to whether studying in one's own native language enhances toleration in a diverse society.

### **6.3 Education and gender**

Various feminist theorists and international human rights instruments have addressed the vital role of education in relation to gender equality (Arnot, 2005; Luke, 1996; Martin, 2006; Okin, 1989; UN, 1979; UNESCO, 2000; UNGEI, 2000). The broader goal is to transform gender relations not merely within education but also within families, communities and society as a whole (Arnot & Fennell, 2008; Rai, 2002). The latter point of view necessarily implies a broader cultural understanding of gender relations, which can be addressed through education.

Within the Kurdish context, as elsewhere, gender roles and cultural norms influence the education system. During my fieldwork, however, I noticed a clear tension between the ideal contributions that education may make versus the prevailing socio-cultural gender norms that exist within schooling context. These norms are attached to a deeply rooted socio-cultural understanding about the position of women in society (Begikhani et al., 2010). Hasan's view on education and its implication on gender equity is discussed thoroughly below:

*Of course, education is very important in any society, but in our society and in Middle East in general, the place of schools comes as third. The first place is for religion, the second is to follow the traditional norms, and then, school comes as a third priority, while it should be a place for learning and innovation. (Hasan, 13.07.2011)*

#### *6.3.1 Education and gender equality*

This thesis's departure point is that gender equality involves an element of substantive freedom that can be sought through education for both sexes (Subrahmanian, 2005; Unterhalter, 2008). It is equally valuable for both sexes to learn to act freely as resourceful individuals to further develop society (Unterhalter & Aikman, 2007). Here, I am concerned with education to enhance girls' capacity to become independent and capable individuals (Nussbaum, 2000b).

In this regard, the research respondents have addressed different aspects that impact the advancement of gender roles *in* and *through* education. They expressed concerns both about the power of traditional values and the influence of religious leaders. According to one education inspector 'tribalism' limits the move towards gender equality:

*We need to acknowledge the reality that tribalism as a system dominates our society. This is in combination with prevailing traditional norms and religion, which all in all are against the idea of gender equality. Women are viewed as second citizens or sometimes as a commodity to be exchanged in terms of marriage arrangements. In order to change such mentality, it requires a comprehensive action plan, where education as a part of this plan reaches families outside schools. (Kamaran, 12.07.2011)*

It should be noted that tribalism plays a large role in Kurdish society, just as much as it did many years ago (Izady, 1992). It entails loyalty to tribal leader's decisions. The collective decision making overrules the individual freedom within the tribe. The maintenance of tribe's reputation and its rank amongst other tribes is highly valued. The importance of tribal affiliation is evident even in the contemporary role of politicians, who need to consult leaders of tribes regarding certain decisions (Van Bruinessen, 1992). The power of tribalism is not only evident in the rural areas, but also in the urban areas and amongst highly educated Kurds. Even these groups may express a primary loyalty to a specific tribal background and its norms. The traditional norms, mainly the patriarchal norms dominate the structure of tribes, disadvantaging women's position in its general terms (Baghikhani, 2001).

Next to a tribal mind-set, religious values shape the Kurdish society. The research respondents often linked principles of human rights and gender equality to religious values. From their point of view, both Islam and Christianity focus on respect and equality, including gender equity. However, the issue is the interpretation of the religious values, which seem to be mixed with patriarchal values. This mixture hence prevents the realisation of gender equity in Kurdish society (Begikhani et al., 2010). One of the HRE teachers expressed concerns about the influence of religious leaders (Mullahs) in Kurdish community. Issues related to family structure and gender are often addressed and consulted with the religious personalities. However, Fawzi doubts about advanced education level of some of these Mullahs:

*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. (Fawzi, 14.02.2012)*

I should mention here that Fawzi himself seemed to be a very religious person. When I met him for the interview, he did not shake hands with me as custom of greeting. Also, the way how he talked and behaved towards me showed certain religious attitude. For instance, he looked rarely to my face. Yet, I was very surprised about his critical view on religious personalities and gender issues. He seemed very open about reform in Islam and expressed several times that there is room for practicing human rights and gender equity within the Islamic framework. This was in contrast to some other informants, who seemed more secular in their behaviour; however, they did not state clearly their position of being secular. The latter group did not elaborate on religion and its impact on Kurdish society.

Aside from traditional values and religion, the female population in general is looked upon as a weak and fragile group that needs constant guidance and protection (Ismael & Ismael, 2000). This gender stereotype view has an impact on girls' self-esteem, which affects their behaviour in public spaces, encouraging reserve and necessitating low-profile. In this respect, some education professionals expressed the opinion that through education and specific curricula activities, this mentality can be challenged, so as to enhance girls' self-esteem to enable interaction with the opposite sex:

*I think focusing on activities, such as support and other leisure classes are very vital to make boys and girls getting used to each other. They will be involved to participate together in different activities in a very entertaining way. On this way, they will get to know each other and will experience that it is very normal to interact and study together. (Sarkawt, 13.07.2011)*

Another teacher thought that enhancing girls' self-esteem through education will later benefit in marriage:

*The importance of having educated girls is beneficial to marriage. First of all, illiterate girls are less attractive today as brides in some regions. Secondly, an educated person is able to have a constructive dialogue. Until now, there are many instances where boys and girls are not open with each other or are not used to talk openly with each other. This influences the choice and the outcome of marriages in our society. (Asm, 13.07.2011)*

Having said that, I have noticed some gender related behavioural differences between male versus female informants. There is no intention to generalize my observation; however, the female informants were briefer in giving their feedback, their voice volume was lower and to

certain degree more reluctant to answer immediately the questions than the male informants. One female teacher even refused to participate, as she was uncertain whether she would be able to answer the questions. Eventually, she referred me to a male colleague, stating that he is better qualified than she is. This seemed to be linked to the degree of female self-confidence and their performance in public spaces.

With regard to female performance in public places, the research respondents (mainly male respondents) have expressed an issue of less competent female educators. The education sector seem to be very popular career choice among female population. This is linked to fewer working hours and more public holidays compared to other public sectors in Kurdistan. Female teachers seem to perform very well before starting a family. However, the judgement is made by some professionals that the moment a female colleague marries and gets children, she neglects her professional duties, and hence become less competent than male colleagues. This is mentioned without addressing the issue that female employees conduct also most household work and are required to fulfil traditional customs. For example, employed mothers and sisters are expected to conduct the greater part of household duties. This affects their career and hence their capacity to develop further.

Moreover, I noticed frequent references to some other elements related to gender stereotypes in my data. For instance, girls' attitude in schools is often understood to require 'correct' behaviour, where 'mistakes' are avoided. These notions refer to restricted female behavioural codes, for example, setting boundaries to the degree of being in contact with others (Ismael & Ismael, 2000), particularly with male friends/colleagues. This is to prevent any possible sexual relationship, which will be considered as a 'mistake' that a girl would have committed rather than a boy. In this respect, an education inspector stated:

*Gender sensitivity lacks amongst many of the teaching staff. This makes it difficult to promote the idea of gender equality amongst pupils. In many schools, female and male teachers have separated teachers' rooms. If this is a dominant practice amongst teachers, how would they be able to encourage their pupils to interact with each other without putting any gender related boundaries? (Payman, 14.02.2012)*

As is mentioned earlier, while the respondents were more comfortable discussing gender than ethnic diversity, a number of teachers insisted that any class discussion that might be constructed 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 talk about Valentine's day in class, it may lead to misunderstandings... even their families might interfere... So you consciously avoid opening any gender-related topic in the classroom. (Ahlam, 18.02.2012)*

Contrary to above mentioned educators' reservations concerning gender-related topics, the advancement of gender equity requires specific actions to address deeply rooted gender inequalities (Stromquist, 2006). The attitude of education professionals does not seem to address existing gender-based harmful practices in Kurdish society (Begikhani et al., 2010). When it comes to gender-related policies in education, they need to promote a mentality that is capable of developing independent personality to stand against injustices, including gender related injustices. The section below discusses co-education system as an example of school policy to advance gender equality. It illustrates the education professionals' attempts to reconcile tensions between private versus public dichotomy (Ismael & Ismael, 2000).

### *6.3.2 Mixed Sex Schools: a solution or a problem?*

Co-educational or mixed sex school is considered by many writers as a step towards balancing or normalizing the level of interaction between girls and boys through education (Archer, 2004; Davies, 2008). This is a dominant theme in discussion about the new education system in Kurdistan. In response to the question<sup>16</sup> of what steps schools need to take to enhance the gender relationship, most of the informants have raised the idea of co-education. However, different opinions were given with regard to existing mixed sex schools:

*From our experience of this school and through organizing extra-curriculum activities, we could notice a genuine participation from both sexes in being successful and being creative at the same time. This justifies that girls and boys should study and perform activities together as a part of further developing their personalities and to get to use to the idea of treating each other as normal as possible. (Foad, 13.07.2011)*

Mixed sex schools are fewer in numbers compared to the single sex schools in Kurdistan. Before, it was rare to have mixed sex schools. One of the informants suggested that even in the mixed sex schools, there is not really a genuine interaction between girls and boys:

*There are still many single sex schools in the region. Even in mixed-sex schools, you can see very often, where boys and girls are sitting separately. Sometimes, a girl would*

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<sup>16</sup> Appendix 2 is the list of the interview questions

*sit only next to a boy who would be her brother or a close relative. All these elements as a reality in our schools make me doubt about the role of school in enhancing gender equality. (Payman, 14.02.2012)*

I have observed the same class setting as mentioned by the above education inspector, when I attended and observed a HRE class for grade five. The class was separated in three rows. Although the school was a mixed sex school, yet, in the classroom, most of boys and girls were sitting next to the same sex.

With regard to the co-education system, not all of the respondents were in favour of this idea. One informant has made clear of being against mixed sex schools:

*In my opinion, mixing girls and boys in schools is wrong. Particularly, when they are in grades 6 to 12 (ages between 12 to 17-18 years old). I am saying this based on my own experience and having witnessed various problems in mixed sex schools. The mentality of our culture is not ready yet in mixing these two sexes at such sensitive age. (Azad, 16.02.2012)*

From information gathered during and after interviews, I was informed that mixed sex schools are reducing in number in Erbil and its districts. This is due to various problems that have occurred in mixed sex schools, for example, romantic relationships between girls and boys that are not culturally accepted. One of the schools that I visited in the rural area was mixed school; however, the principal of the school has informed me that from next school year the school will become a single sex school as it was before.

### *6.3.3 Relations between school and families*

The data from this thesis reveals a sensitive relationship between schools and pupils' families. During the interviews and informal conversations with education professionals, reference was made to the need for families' cooperation with schools. This cooperation is viewed as necessary in order to establish a comprehensive approach, particularly when dealing with gender issues. The support of families is understood to be critical to implement school policies:

*The school environment is closely linked to the culture that exists within families of pupils. The role of school is to create a bridge in sending our messages to families in order to work as a team so to educate the young generation. We cannot encourage pupils to be free and to support them in changing their mind-set in terms of gender relationships, without having established a good relationship with their families.*

*Otherwise, we would create only more problems for our pupils, which may lead to make them live in two different worlds. (Fawzi, 14.02.2012)*

Fawzi continued and 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 girl's capacities, as well as questions about home-school communications:

*To mention an unfortunate example of prevailing traditional norms that restricts girls' freedom. Yesterday, a young girl, aged between 16-17 years old, committed suicide by burning 65 percent her body. She did it because her brother did not allow her to join her classmates in an out-of-school visit. This has happened in another school than ours though... This is a classic example of lack of communication and cooperation between schools and families in grasping the role of school and various activities that may take place as a part of the curriculum. (Fawzi, 14.02.2012)*

It appears that families have a remarkable influence on the level of freedom that their daughters have at schools. Some families seem to object to school practices. For instance, the placement of their daughters next to a boy in the classroom. Consequently, this creates challenges for schools. Different educators repeatedly stated the fact that families' involvement creates obstacles for schools. One respondent expressed concerns that there is a gap between schools and families, which they are still unable to breach:

*I think that we need to start at home, within families; we need to start to treat our girls equally and to enhance their self-esteem. This is a very important factor in my view. As teaching staffs and schools, we cannot thus far break the wall between schools and families. (Hasan, 13.07.2011)*

In a patriarchal and traditional society as the one of Iraqi Kurdistan, gender-related issues are still viewed as a private matter. As the data demonstrates, schools seem to have limited influence to intervene in what is perceived as family business, when it comes to gender-related matters (Ismael & Ismael, 2000). Yet families often see involvement or intervention in school policies related to gender as their right .

## **6.4 Summary**

By drawing on the perspectives of education professionals, it would appear that the practice of HRE is not effective due to ill-equipped and inadequately trained teachers. On top of this, the education sector faces serious challenges in terms of human and material resources to work

towards implanting the various elements identified in the new curriculum document. Lastly, a prevailing social climate where considerable inequalities remain between women and men and with a the growing gap between social classes, seem to work against educational capabilities.

## **7. Concluding remarks**

As discussed above, HRE has potentials to enhance awareness of human rights and fundamental freedoms through education and training (UN, 2011). Moreover, HRE is not only about raising awareness, but it is a tool for empowerment. It is meant to enhance skills to demand and to practice fundamental human rights principles, including respecting diversity and women's human rights. Thus, education has a crucial role to convey knowledge about human rights and facilitate skills to practice these rights.

This thesis sought to examine the education professionals' understandings about HRE and its potential to promote gender equality in Iraqi Kurdistan. Claiming rights implies knowledge about rights, yet, as it has been noted, teachers appear to be ill-equipped to address this subject matter. Lacking specific training and operating in a social climate where considerable gender inequalities persist, put additional pressure on professionals to internalize human rights values (Banks, 2009).

### **7.1 Reform in gender relationships**

In general terms, Kurdish girls and women do not enjoy personal autonomy, and by this I mean substantive freedom. This has impact on the true meaning of gender equality. Increasingly, there are many girls and women that work and are visible in the public sector, yet they appear to function according to gender-defined stereotypes. They may be highly educated, yet, they are restricted by traditional norms.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to argue that education may play a crucial role in encouraging alternative ways of being and choices which are not so tightly constrained by gender. Next to that, reform in education needs to focus on creating educational capabilities: qualified and autonomous individuals that will be able to ensure own socio-economic status independently. As it has been argued above, HRE as a part of education system and through capability approach framework (Nussbaum, 2000a; Sen, 1999), has potential to foster the understanding of equality and substantive freedom in this regard.

### **7.2 Ways forward**

The professionals' feedbacks indicate potentials of HRE of having a positive impact on the attitude of the educators and learners. However, urgent attention needs to be given to textbooks, pedagogy, teaching methods (participatory), teachers training and assessment procedures in order to provide appropriate support to teachers. Education professionals need

to incorporate child rights as an essential feature of the curriculum as well. Moreover, HRE teachers need to recognize their crucial role as advocates for human rights (Flowers & Shiman, 1997). Advocacy is required to address matters related to justice and equality, including gender equity.

One critique of the current approach is that HRE in school is taking place in a vacuum, without sufficient attention to measures beyond the school. Therefore, long-term action plans may include the establishment of a system where schools are linked to other social services to provide appropriate assistance to learners in need, such as: childcare services, police, health sector, and women's shelters. Most of these services currently have their own shortcomings. However, a good quality of education requires much more than providing theoretical information from textbooks. Also, a fuller use of TV and other media may influence families and invite them to work in partnership with schools.

### **7.3 Concluding remarks**

There may be no short cuts or best practices model to present when it comes to foster gender relationships through education. This is particularly the case in a patriarchal system with rigid gender roles. Nevertheless, culture is not static and it is subject to change. If the Kurdish policy-makers and women activists are willing to implement progressive changes with regard to gender relationships, then, it is important to explore areas that reproduce inequalities. This will require genuine commitment from decision-makers to make resources available in order to explore and combat gender inequality. The education sector can contribute to provide knowledge and expertise in exploring gender inequalities and assisting with suggestions to combat these inequalities in other areas of society. However, a more comprehensive action plan is needed, where education and HRE are placed more centrally within the bigger picture.

As a final note, the research field about HRE seems to have rather a young status, particularly when it comes to HRE's contribution to gender equity. Therefore, more research in this regard deem to be necessary.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Consent Form**

#### **Consent Form for research interview**

Name of the College: School of Business and Social Sciences//Department of Teacher Education

Name of the Program: MSc Human Rights and Multiculturalism

MSc candidate: Chalank Yahya

MSc supervisor: Audrey Osler

#### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of this thesis is to develop an understanding of the role of HRE as a mechanism towards human rights standards and a human rights culture and particularly towards gender equality in Kurdistan-Iraq and in schools within the region.

#### **Specific Procedures**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

#### **Duration of Participation**

It will take about 20 minutes to answer the interview questions.

#### **Confidentiality**

Your privacy will be fully protected throughout the interview. The content of the interview will remain confidential between you the interviewee and me the researcher. I will anonymise any data I use from this interview, so that you cannot be easily identified in my research report. I will not use your name but will give you (and any school you refer to or work in) pseudonyms, so protecting their identities.

#### **Voluntary Participants**

In this research project you are totally free to participate or not. If you choose to participate, you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time you wish.

#### **Recording**

I may ask you if I may record the interview. This is not essential but it will enable me to keep a precise record of your views. Again you are free to choose. Please be assured that I will keep the recording safe and confidential.

#### **Research report**

I am writing a dissertation which is due to be completed in summer 2012. I also plan to write a short summary report which I will make available to research participants if they so wish.

#### **Contact**

If you have any questions with regard to this research, please do not hesitate to contact Chalank Yahya, on telephone number +4798621091, email: [chalank@hotmail.com](mailto:chalank@hotmail.com)

You are also free to contact my supervisor, Professor Audrey Osler, email:  
a.h.osler@leeds.ac.uk

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK  
QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PURPOSE OF THIS INTERVIEW AND I AM PREPARED TO  
PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's name                      Signature                      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Master Candidate's name                      Signature                      Date

I would like to receive a summary research report when the project is complete in summer  
2012

Please send it to email:

## **Appendix 2: Interview questions**

1. What is your profession and how long have you been working in this field?
2. Do you think the school has any particular responsibility concerning the future development of Kurdish society? If so, what?
3. What do you think of the new education system in Kurdistan? Do you think this reform meets the educational needs in the region?
4. Are you familiar with the school reforms as they relate to citizenship education and human rights education? And what do you understand by 'human rights education'?
5. What do you think human rights education can contribute to either elementary and/or secondary schools?
6. What do you think are the specific needs of Iraqi Kurdistan as a post-conflict society?
7. What do you see as the role of schools in educating for diversity/ for a multicultural society?
8. What do you see as the role of schools in relation to gender relations/ equality?
9. What are the particular steps you would like to see taken in schools in relation to addressing gender equality in Kurdish society?
10. What do you see as your own role concerning gender equality in the classroom?
11. What the limitations are of schools vis a vis work on gender equality?
12. Is there anything about your own experiences (personal or professional) / your own identity which leads you to your particular viewpoints?

### Appendix 3: List of research participants<sup>17</sup>

No.	Participant	Sex	Religious tradition/ ethnic background	Professional role	Interviewed date
1	Kamaran	M	Muslim/Kurd	General school inspector	12.07.2011
2	Kawthar	F	Muslima/Turkmenian	School inspector - student counselling	12.07.2011
3	Foad	M	Christian	Principal of a model school and school inspector	13.07.2011
4	Asem	M	Muslim/Kurd	Teacher (Arabic)	13.07.2011
5	Hasan	M	Muslim/Kurd	Principal in rural school	13.07.2011
6	Sarkawt	M	Muslim/Kurd	Acting principal and sport teacher in rural school	13.07.2011
7	Payman	F	Muslima/Kurd	School inspector; social studies and HRE, grades 1 - 6	14.02.2012
8	Fawzi	M	Muslim/Kurd	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades 7 - 12	14.02.2012
9	Sawsan	F	Christian	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades 7 - 9	16.02.2012
10	Azad	M	Muslim/Kurd	School inspector; social studies and HRE, grades 7 - 12	16.02.2012
11	Sherko	M	Muslim/Kurd	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades 1- 6	18.02.2012
12	Ahlam	F	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades	Teacher social studies and HRE, grades 7 - 9	18.02.2012

**Kamaran** is an administrative education inspector. He is a Muslim Kurd. He oversees several schools for grades 7-12 in Erbil and districts around the city. His task is to control these schools and to meet regularly with the principals in administrating the schools. He has worked as an administrative education inspector for 5 years and was a teacher and principal for 23 years before taking up his current position.

**Kawthar** is an education inspector, specializing in socio-psychological support for schools in Erbil. She is a Muslim Turkmenian. Her task is to guide principals and pedagogical

<sup>17</sup> The research participants are given pseudonyms in order to protect participants' anonymity

counselors in schools in dealing with problems related to pupils, and to support teachers and family of pupils. She has worked for 5 years in her current position and before that she worked as pedagogical counselor in schools for 15 years.

**Foad** is a principal in one of the special model schools<sup>18</sup> in Erbil. He is a Christian. He is also an administrative education inspector, even though managing this school is his main task for the time being. The school is located in Ainkawa, a Christian small town attached to Erbil. It is a mixed-sex school. In total, he has worked in the field of education for 18 years.

**Asem** is a teacher of Arabic language in a school located in a village nearby Erbil. He is a Muslim Kurd. He teaches for grades 7-12 in a mixed-sex school. He has been working as a teacher for 13 years both in urban and rural areas.

**Hasan** is a principal in a school located in a village outside Erbil. He is a Muslim Kurd. He has worked as school principal for 6 years in this school, which used to have a mixed-sex population, but now is changed into two shifts: one shift for boys and the other one for girls. Before that, he used to be a teacher for 14 years.

**Sarkawt** is a principal assistant in the same school as Hasan's and teaches sport. He is a Muslim Kurd. In total he has worked in education for 5 years.

**Payman** is a specialized education inspector of social studies for grades 1-6, including overseeing HRE subject. She is a Muslim Kurd. For 8 years, she works in her current position and before that she has worked as a teacher for 11 years.

**Fawzi** is a teacher in history, who teaches HRE for grades 7 and 10. He is a Muslim Kurd. He teaches in one of the special model schools in Erbil that is mixed-sex for grades 7-12. He has worked as a teacher for 11 years and taught HRE for the last 5-6 years.

**Sawsan** is a teacher in social sciences and teaches HRE for grade 7. She is a Christian. She works in a school in Ainkawa, which is for girls between grades 7-9. She has been working as a teacher for years and for the last 5 years she has taught HRE.

**Azad** is a specialized education inspector of social sciences, including HRE, for grades 7-12. He is a Muslim Kurd. For 17 years, he has worked as an education inspector. He gives also pedagogical and HRE training for recently graduated teachers.

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<sup>18</sup> In Erbil and other towns in the KRG region, a limited number of special model schools exist. These schools are a bit different than ordinary ones. It usually has a mixed-sex schooling system. The enrolment requirements are based on pupil's grades. Pupils who are admitted in these schools should have a minimum grading average. These schools focus on extra-curriculum activities and pupils are expected to obtain a high score in all subjects. The aim behind these schools is to gradually introduce mixed-sex schools with a good quality of education.

**Sherko** is a teacher for social studies and teaches HRE for grade 5. He is a Muslim Kurd. He works in a special model school for grades 1-9, which is a mixed-sex school. The school has thus far developed as far as until grade 7. He has worked as a teacher for 19 years.

**Ahlam** is a teacher for social studies and teaches HRE for grade 7. She is a Muslima Kurd. She works as a teacher in a small town outside Erbil, which is a mixed-sex school. She teaches for 4 years now and she has experience in giving HRE subject since 2 years.

For a qualitative case study such as this (Cohen et al., 2011), the sample is sufficiently diverse and represents the voices of staff in different roles.

## **Appendix 4: Interview example**

*Interview with Payman (14.02.12):*

*Specialized school inspector in social studies and HRE for basic schools (mainly old system's elementary schools: grades 1-6). The research participant is a female, Kurdish Muslima.*

### **1. What is your profession and how long have you been working in this field?**

A: I am a school inspector for classes in social studies and HRE for grads 1-6 (old elementary school). I have this position for 8 years now, and before that I have worked as a teacher for 11 years.

### **2. Do you think the school has any particular responsibility concerning the future development of Kurdish society? If so, what?**

A: There is no doubt that schools should play a major role to advance the quality of science and civilization in society, which both are very much needed in Kurdistan. However, the school has not been able to play such vital role thus far. Regardless the current efforts of modernizing the schooling system, we face many shortages in terms of school facilities, education experts, capacity building.

### **3. What do you think of the new education system in Kurdistan? Do you think this reform meets the educational needs in the region?**

A: As a system, it is not bad. It is good to review and renew the education system as it was very much needed. However, this reform process should have been occurred gradually and step by step. Prior to change the system, the focus should have been first on enhancing teachers's capacity and schools facilities/services. Right now, the reform process is under implementation with many shortages, which have caused chaos and confusion amongst education professionals and pupils and their families. We witness now current demonstrations performed by pupils in various towns in Kurdistan. This is due to lack of understanding about the new education system.

### **4. What do you understand by 'human rights education'?**

A: Of course, human rights and HRE as such are very important to know about and to be aware of. Especially, in our society and due to past experiences of various conflicts and violations, we need to be educated about our rights. Our society is diverse: children, women, men and so on. Each of us need own rights and also to understand own rights and how to claim them. However, HRE as a subject in our education system does not gain so much attention as it should be. We lack expertise in this field and we do not have specialized teachers to teach HRE classes. For the time being, there are teachers mainly from social studies, who are instructed to teach this subject. Their understanding of HRE may be different, as they may understand and interpret the topic differently. At this stage, the question remains as to what extend are our current teachers able to convey the HR message to pupils?

**5. *What do you think human rights education can contribute to either elementary and/or secondary schools?***

A: When we reach the level of enriching the content of HRE in our education system and having well qualified teachers to offer this class, there will be no doubt that the HRE will have a very positive impact on pupils and schooling environment. However, as I said earlier, the topic is not given so much attention as it should be for the time being.

**6. *What do you see as the role of schools in relation to gender relations/ equality?***

A: When it comes to the gender relationship, the school is strongly linked to the norms and traditions that dominate the society. The dominant values and traditions of families cannot be challenged and changed that easily in schools. Also, gender sensitivity lacks amongst many of the teaching staff, which makes advancement of gender equality difficult. There are many schools, where female and male teaching staffs have two separate teachers' rooms. If this is still a dominant understanding amongst teachers, how would they be able to approach their pupils in terms of treating each other equally and to support the idea of mixed sex interactions amongst pupils. There are still many single sex schools, even in mixed-sex schools, you can see very often, where boys and girls are sitting separately. Sometimes, a girl would sit only next to a boy who would be her brother or a close relative. All these elements as a reality in our schools, it makes me to doubt about the role of school in enhancing gender equality.

Another point that I would like to raise, although it is not directly linked to your questions, but it relates to gender relationship is lack of schools for female unaccompanied minor prisoners in Erbil. The reason for this is that the building lacks facilities to provide classes for these convicted girls. However, teaching classes are available for convicted unaccompanied minor boys, who stay in another building.

**7. *What are the particular steps you would like to see taken in schools in relation to addressing gender equality in Kurdish society?***

A: It is difficult to answer this question, as I said earlier: schools are strongly influenced by existing norms and standards within families and society. So, therefore, it is hard to see what school can do in addressing gender equality.

**8. *What do you see as your own role concerning gender equality in classroom?***

A: My role as a teacher/school inspector is to treat my colleagues equally regardless their sexes. I try to touch upon equality aspect when I give speech to pupils during my school visits. However, this is only a very modest role that I can play, without knowing if I would succeed on this matter or not.

**9. *What are limitations on schools vis a vis work on gender equality?***

A: The most obvious limitation is the deeply rooted traditional norms that control the mind-set of many teaching staff and families. It is very difficult to break these norms. Schools are strongly linked to norms that exist within families.

***10. Is there anything about your own experiences (personal or professional) /your own identity which leads you to your particular viewpoints?***

A: I may have sounded negative in providing to you my feedback, but this is based on my experience in education sector. The mind-set of our society is not ready yet for a deeply rooted reformation in relation to the role of women versus men in our society.

Theme: International perspectives

## Human rights education in Kurdistan-Iraq Can it promote gender equity?



**Chalank Yahya** reports on the potential of Human Rights Education to contribute to democracy, development and social justice – specifically gender equity – in the autonomous region of Kurdistan-Iraq.



Across the globe, education is recognised as having the potential to contribute to the processes of democratisation and development. In post-conflict societies, programmes of citizenship education and human rights education (HRE) are often introduced with the express aim of developing skills for learning to live together, enabling students to recognise and practice principles of justice and peace. Here I report on my investigation of the potential of HRE in schools to contribute to democracy, development and social justice, specifically gender equity, in the autonomous region of Kurdistan-Iraq. I sought to explore education professionals' perspectives on whether HRE can serve as a transformative tool in promoting human rights standards, specifically those relating to gender equality in the context of diversity such as exists in the region.

### The context

Kurdistan-Iraq is often referred to as transitional or post-conflict society. The region experienced considerable conflict and instability in the later twentieth century and early years of the twenty-first, resulting in severely damaged infrastructure at home and a notable Kurdish diaspora across the globe. Kurdistan-Iraq gained ad hoc autonomy in the aftermath of the Gulf War in 1991 (Stansfield, 2003). Since 2003, and particularly with the new Iraqi Constitution (2005) further political developments mean that

**We need to acknowledge the reality that tribalism plays a big role in our Kurdish society, in combination with traditions and religion... Women are viewed as second-class citizens and sometimes used as a commodity to be exchanged in marriage**

today the Kurdish region is recognised as a constitutional entity within the federal State of Iraq, enjoying internal political, socio-economic and judicial autonomy (Constitution, 2005). Despite the rapid political developments of the last two decades, the region nevertheless continues to feel the impact of instability in neighbouring jurisdictions (including the current civil war in Syria) as well as on-going tensions with Baghdad.

As well as political challenges, the Kurdish region faces on-going socio-economic and cultural challenges, including gender inequality and gender based violence. Since the 2000s, civil society networks have increased their activities and put pressure on the local authorities to address gender inequality. One key area for development is the role of formal education and specifically schooling in equipping the young generation with skills to learn to live together in a peaceful and inclusive way.

Educational structures in Kurdistan-Iraq have been shaped by the Iraqi education system, since the region was administered by the former Iraqi regime for decades. Iraqi education was considered to be very good until the beginning of the 1980s. However, on-going conflicts and the former authority's emphasis on military expenditure have negatively influenced education quality. Curricula were not updated or brought in line with international standards and the maintenance of schools was neglected (UNESCO, 2010).

With the emergence of the Kurdish administration, steps were taken to improve education in the region. In 2009, the Kurdish education system underwent a reform process (Curriculum, 2009). This reform extended the number of years of basic compulsory schooling and introduced two new subjects, citizenship education and HRE, into the curriculum.



Chisank Yahya has an MSc in Human Rights and Multiculturalism from Buskerud University College, Norway. Her research in Kurdistan-Iraq was supported by a scholarship from the Falstad Centre.



UNHCR Helene Caux renovated school in Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan-Iraq

It is difficult, for example, to encourage boys and girls to sit next to each other in school, if parents object and if male and female teachers choose to have separate staffrooms

#### Education and gender equality

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).

Gender equality initiatives are premised on the belief that education can enable equity between diverse social groups and between the sexes (Stromquist, 2006). Education is not merely knowledge production, but an instrument to enable critical thinking and the changing of mentalities (Freire, 1970). My interest is not only in *formal equality* (parity in access and participation rates), but also in *substantive equality* (equal opportunity in and through education) (Subrahmanian, 2005).

#### The right to human rights education

While the right to education is commonly understood, the concept of the right to HRE tends to be less familiar, even among education professionals and policy-makers (Osler and Starkey, 2010). 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 also the right to learn about human rights and fundamental freedoms. This is the first international official articulation of the right to HRE. This right is confirmed and explicated in subsequent human rights instruments, including the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 29). The most recent HRE instrument is the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training (2011), which strengthens the international commitment to human rights norms and to enacting these norms through education (UN, 2011).

#### Human rights education and gender equality in the Kurdish setting

I set out to investigate teachers' and educational professional's perspectives on HRE and its implementation in Kurdistan-Iraq focusing specifically on gender relationships. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 education professionals, and engaged in some classroom observations. All participants were from the Erbil governorate. My research took place in July 2011 and in February 2012. I discuss below some key findings from the project.

## Theme: International perspectives

### Human Rights Education in Kurdistan-Iraq / Chalank Yahya



**← Tensions between the understanding and the practice of human rights education**  
Generally speaking, respondents place considerable emphasis on the role of human rights in creating a just and sustainable society. They recognise the importance of human rights but express concerns both about the understanding of human rights in contemporary Kurdish society and about teachers' limited knowledge and lack of training in human rights education. "In general, not only in Kurdistan, but across the Middle East, we are not aware of our rights. We do not really understand what is meant by human rights. Therefore, a good awareness campaign is needed" (male education inspector, 2011).

Despite the new emphasis on HRE in the 2009 curriculum reform, the new subject lacks trained teachers. The HRE textbooks seem to be dry in terms of content. They contain long extracts from international instruments, such as the UDHR, but with little or no guidance or explanation as to on what they mean or how they might be made accessible and relevant to students: "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 specialized teachers. For the time being, social studies teachers are instructed to teach this subject. ... The question remains: to what extent are our current teachers able to convey the human rights message to pupils?" (female social studies teacher, 2012).

Another challenge raised by a number of respondents is 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. So many children are forced to study in poor conditions where,

**We need to start at home, within families ... we need to start to treat our girls equally and to enhance their self-esteem**

in winter, schools may have to close because of inadequate lighting or heating.

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 non-governmental organizations to help teachers make the link between human rights principles and everyday experiences.

#### *Religion, tradition and gender equality*

Perhaps the greatest challenge in realising substantive gender equality are in addressing harmful cultural practices, overcoming the influence of conservative religious leaders and tribalism in the mindset of local communities. A number of respondents expressed their frustrations in addressing gender-related issues. It is difficult, for example, to encourage boys and girls to sit next to each other in school, if parents object and if male and female teachers elect to have separate staffrooms: "We need to acknowledge the reality 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" (male education inspector, 2011).

Whilst respondents stressed the role of school in creating a bridge to reach children's families, they faced many obstacles in challenging traditional and religious norms: "I think that we need to start at home, within families. We need to start to treat our girls equally and to enhance their self-esteem. This is a very important factor in my view. As teaching staff and school, we cannot thus far break the wall between schools and families" (male teacher, 2011).



#### Mixed sex schools: a solution or a problem?

In response to the question of what steps schools need to take to enhance equality in gender relationships, most respondents raised the idea of co-education. However, different opinions were given with regard to existing mixed sex schools: "From our experience of this school and through organizing extra-curriculum activities, we notice a genuine increased participation from both sexes in being successful and being creative. This justifies that girls and boys should study and perform activities together as a part of further developing their personalities, getting used to the idea of treating each other normally" (male school principal, 2011).

Despite there being relatively few mixed sex schools, some respondents expressed reservations concerning the idea of girls and boys studying together: "Our culture is not ready yet in mixing these two sexes at this sensitive age [teenage]. I can bring you to a mixed-sex school and just look at the walls in classes; it is all 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 just friends. As a result the numbers of mixed-sex schools are decreasing day after day ... Many parents are against the idea of sending their daughters to a mixed school, even if it is close to home" (male HRE education inspector, 2012).

In a fast-moving economic and social climate, it is important that Kurdistan-Iraq is able to make best use of human resources, especially the contribution women and girls can make to strengthening democracy and development. I suggest HRE can contribute by enabling all citizens, young and old, to see how all can benefit by applying the principles of solidarity and equity. Yet the Kurdish government will need to listen to professionals and engage with their concerns if the new

HRE subject is to be successfully implemented. Gender equity is not just about women and girls, it is rather a holistic approach in addressing social justice for the benefit of all. ■

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**the Kurdish government will need to listen to professionals and engage with their concerns if the new HRE subject is to be successfully implemented**

## **Appendix 6: Challenges and complexity in human rights education, Teachers' understandings of democratic participation and gender equity in post-conflict Kurdistan Iraq, published in Education Inquiry**



*Education Inquiry*  
Vol. 4, No. 1, March 2013, pp. 189–210

# **Challenges and complexity in human rights education Teachers' understandings of democratic participation and gender equity in post-conflict Kurdistan-Iraq**

*Audrey Osler<sup>19</sup> & Chalank Yahya<sup>20</sup>*

### **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 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

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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. 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 beyond 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 schoolchildren 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. 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).

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

<b>No.</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Professional role</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Religious tradition / ethnic background</b>
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 and school Inspector	M	Christian
4 July	Asem	Teacher: Arabic, grades 7 - 12	M	Muslim/Kurd

5 July	Hasan	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	Muslima/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. (Kamaram)  
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 Kamaram 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". Kamaran 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 mixedsex 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 Yayha 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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