

# HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

## 1. Introduction

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) declared that '[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights' (Article 1), 'human dignity' has been recognised as a foundational human rights concept. It has appeared in a range of international human rights documents and has been recognised as central to the United Nation's (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Yet, what 'human dignity' means in practice is frequently contested and can be understood in diverse ways in different socio-cultural, linguistic, legal, and political settings (Düwell et al 2014; McCrudden 2013; Tann & Killean 2021).

This research brief forms part of the 'Locating "Human Dignity" in Cambodia' project - a collaboration between Queen's University Belfast and CSHL which explores how 'human dignity' is understood in Cambodia and the implications for human rights education and policy. One of the key themes of our research is the role that human dignity can and could play in human rights education in Cambodia. In fact, connections already exist between 'dignity' and education in Cambodia: the 2007 Education Law explicitly mentions 'the right to dignity' in the context of 'learner's rights concerning education' (Article 36).

In this research brief, we draw on literature from diverse jurisdictions to explore the role that 'human dignity' currently plays in human rights education discourse. We also consider what the concept's contested nature means for human rights educators and students and reflect on directions for future research on 'human dignity' in human rights education.

## 2. Human Rights Education and 'Human Dignity'

The last thirty years have seen increased attention given to the place of human rights in the realm of education. This has been exemplified by a growing emphasis on both a human rights-based approach to education

(Craissati et al 2007), and the benefits of educating students about human rights in schools, universities, and wider society (Ramírez et al 2007). The 2012 UN Declaration on Human Rights Education defines human rights education as: 'all educational, training, information, awareness, raising and learning activities aimed at promoting universal respect for and observance of all human rights and fundamental freedoms' (Article 2). Human rights education is delivered across diverse contexts and cultures. It often gains momentum following periods of authoritarianism and/or atrocity and has been framed as a means of preventing a return to violence (Bajaj 2012).

Given the centrality of 'human dignity' to the international human rights framework, it is unsurprising that this emphasis is also observable in the human rights education discourse. Drawing from formal and informal educational initiatives around the world, in this brief we demonstrate how 'human dignity' has emerged as a principle, goal, and tool of human rights education.

### 2.a. Principle

'Human dignity' has been identified as an underpinning principle of human rights education. This is evidenced in academic literature and in international policy documents. In the literature, early examples include Betty Reardon's book *Educating for Human Dignity*, which identifies 'human dignity' as the 'central, generative principle' of human rights education (Reardon 1995:2). At an international policy level, notable examples include the UN Declaration on 'Human Rights Education and Training' (2012), which states that human rights education 'should be based on the principles of equality...human dignity, inclusion and non-discrimination' (Article 5), and the Council of Europe's 'Manual for Human Rights Education with Young People' which notes that human rights education activities 'have to be such that dignity and equality are an inherent part of the practice' (CoE 2020: 19).

Human rights education has also been identified as ‘one of several means proffered by the international community to protect human dignity’ (Olakotun and Garahan 2018). In other words, the promotion of ‘human dignity’ has been identified as a goal of human rights education. Policy examples include the Council of Europe’s definition of human rights education as ‘educational programmes and activities that focus on promoting equality in human dignity’ (CoE 2020). In the literature, human rights education has been identified as a means of cultivating the ‘abilities of individuals to make their daily decisions on principles that value human decency and human dignity’ (Sandhu 1997), of fully developing ‘the human personality and sense of dignity’ (Tibbitts 1996) and of teaching students ‘to treat a person with dignity and participate in making the community of dignified persons’ (Jang 2021:41).

Finally, educational activities that centre ‘human dignity’ have been identified as a tool for fostering understandings of human rights. This is evidenced in the range of curricula that use ‘human dignity’ to explore human rights, for example the UN’s ‘ABC: Teaching Human Rights’ guide, the Zurich University of Teacher Education’s ‘Living Democracy’ project, and the World Youth Alliance’s ‘Human Dignity Curriculum’. These curricula have been adopted around the world, while at a domestic level further examples can be found in China (Liang 2017), Thailand (Limpabandu 2014), and South Africa (Becker et al 2015), amongst others.

### 3. ‘Localising’ ‘Human Dignity’ in Human Rights Education

Alongside growing international recognition of the importance of human rights education, increasing attention has been directed towards how ‘universal concepts of rights’ can be taught in diverse educational contexts around the world (Tibbitts et al 2020:53). Those who are in favour of a context-specific approach argue that individuals will be ‘more likely to understand and appreciate the meaning of human rights’ when human rights relate to familiar ideas and concepts, and call for attention to be paid to the content of human rights education, the teaching methods, and student understanding (Tibbitts et al 2020:52).

This growing area of research can be referred to as the ‘localisation’ of human rights education. It sits within a broader body of research which explores how human rights concepts can be ‘localised’ i.e., translated and understood in local contexts around the world (Merry 2006; see also Coysh 2014). As Merry notes, ‘intermediaries’ such as NGO workers, lawyers, and academics can play an important role in this process, helping to ‘refashion global rights agendas for local contexts and reframe local grievances in terms of global human rights principles’ (Merry 2006: 39).

Some examples of ‘localisation’ exist in human rights education practice. In India, the Institute of Human Rights Education varies its human rights programmes across the different states in the country. It also uses classroom scenarios based on the Indian caste system to raise questions around discrimination, respect, and dignity (Bajaj 2012). In Namibia, the concept of ‘ubuntu’ is used in the country’s Namibian Religious and Moral Education curriculum (Sporre 2020). As Tim Mutithi explains, ‘ubuntu’ is a concept used on parts of the African continent that relates to ‘good relationships between human beings and nature’ and ‘the very essence of being human’. He argues that it offers ‘a framework of human dignity or “humanness” that resonates with the notion of human rights’ (Mutithi 2007: 282). This can also be understood as an example of ‘indigenization’, where a concept is ‘framed in terms of local symbols and terminology’ (Merry 2006: 41).

Examples of human rights localisation can be found in Cambodia’s own history. In the 1990s, efforts by the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) and the former Cambodian Institute for Human Rights (CIHR) sought to explain human rights using Khmer and Buddhist concepts. For example, rural settings and everyday relatable problems were used to explain human rights in practice, while the Buddhist five precepts were used in a 1996 training manual to explain core human rights (e.g., not killing living things is to respect the human right to life) (Ledgerwood and Un 2003). Ledgerwood and Un argue that ‘as Buddhist concepts overlap with the universal notion of human rights, it is not only appropriate but also

necessary to portray human rights within the context of Buddhism' (Ledgerwood and Un 2003: 542).

The UNTAC and CIHR example also highlights the challenges that can emerge when seeking to 'localise' human rights. The 1996 manual explained in 'human dignity' in the following terms: 'not to lie or to defame is to respect the right of human dignity' (Ledgerwood and Un 2003). Such a framing represents only a partial explanation of what 'human dignity' can mean in human rights terms. The choice to refer to 'defamation' as a violation of human dignity frames the concept as one related to public reputation. This framing potentially precludes a broader understanding of 'human dignity' as the 'intrinsic value' of human beings (Barosso 2012), limiting 'human dignity' to those with social status instead.

The risks that come with an unreflective approach to 'localisation' have been observed in other contexts too. As Merry and Levitt argue, 'framing human rights claims in local terms' can fundamentally alter their meaning, even excluding the language and ethos of human rights entirely. This may result in 'hijacking these concepts for quite different purposes.' (Merry and Levitt 2009:448). In northern Nigeria, for example, women's human rights have, at times, been framed in the context of Shari'a law rather than international human rights law. While this helps to localise global concepts within familiar frameworks, Merry cautions that those using Shari'a in this context, 'envision a different set of human rights from those articulated in international human rights conventions' (Merry 2006: 41).

These examples do not mean that 'localisation' is necessarily going to lead to restrictive interpretations of human rights. Rather, they speak to the tensions and complexities that exist within the pursuit of localisation, highlighting the need for careful engagement with the local context and cultural norms.

## 4. Conclusion

The concept of 'human dignity' is firmly rooted in the international human rights law framework, and has been explicitly identified as a principle, a goal, and a tool of human rights education. In some cases, human rights

educators have taken steps to translate 'human dignity' in ways that make sense in different contexts. The examples we have highlighted demonstrate that the 'localisation' of human rights concepts can play an important positive role in human rights education. However, it can also risk potentially restrictive interpretations of human rights.

Given the centrality of 'human dignity' to human rights discourse and education, we would argue that careful attention should be paid to the ways that it is translated and 'localised' in diverse socio-cultural and political contexts. Yet, our review of relevant literature revealed only limited reflection on the meaning of 'human dignity' in the context of human rights education. As highlighted in a previous CSHL research brief (Tann and Killean 2021), there is a growing body of scholarship documenting the diversity of understandings and conceptions of 'human dignity' within international human rights law and across different contexts. Bringing this literature into dialogue with human rights education discourse might be an important step in furthering a context-sensitive approach to human rights education.

To conclude, we agree with Tibbitts and others that further research into the localisation of human rights concepts 'needs to take into account multiple dimensions of the political and educational context in which learning is taking place' (Tibbitts et al 2020: 69). We hope that this project will make a contribution to this debate by engaging with 'human dignity' and its diverse meanings in Cambodia.

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*Note: This project was funded by the British Academy Humanities and Social Sciences Tackling Global Challenges Fund, grant number: TGC\200177. For further information contact the Principal Investigator at [Rachel.killean@qub.ac.uk](mailto:Rachel.killean@qub.ac.uk). For more information about the project, visit: <https://law.qub.ac.uk/schools/SchoolofLaw/research/research-news/LocatingHumanDignityinCambodia%20ProjectCommenc es.html>*

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