

Periodical Profile

Human Rights and Cultural Heritage Awareness in the Field of Human Rights

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Egyptian society has witnessed, similar to other societies, great efforts in the field of awareness and education of human rights since the end of the 1980s. Non-governmental organizations in the field of human rights and development have played a key role in this regard. However, despite the tremendous efforts made through the execution of training and capacity-building activities, in addition to the production of educational and promotional materials, and other creative and artistic products as well, the return was not as hoped for many reasons, the most important of which is the cultural resistance to human rights under the pretext of cultural peculiarities. Conservative trends and their allies have consistently attacked human rights so as to delegitimize these rights alleging that they are alien Western ideas that are not useful for the local context.

In contrast, those concerned with human rights awareness and education process have sought to develop appropriate methodologies and means to address cultural constraints, but have been systematically flawed. This is due to the ignorance of the local cultural components as a baseline for the development and strengthening of human rights, despite the fact that the Egyptian cultural heritage is rich in models of supporting and promoting human values, especially in the fields of arts and literature of the modern era those present creative masterpieces whose influence go beyond the local sphere to the whole world.

This Study rests upon the fundamental premise that the local intellectual and artistic heritage is a rich material for the promotion of human rights in a way that does not contradict with its international nature. It also elaborates the relationship between education in the field of human rights and the local cultural environment. From Egyptian and Arab perspective, there are two main problems, the first is related to the confusion of the concept of “universality and peculiarity of culture” which constitutes the main drive for the rejection of human rights, and the second is about the definition of human rights: does it stand for culture, values, principles or standards?

Local Culture and the Promotion of the Universality of Human Rights



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In Egypt and the Arab region, there have been several human rights education and awareness activities since the 1980s and heretofore. In addition to the general activities focusing on human rights charters and mechanisms, which have the largest share, the Egyptian arena witnessed specialized activities related to certain rights such as of women, children and persons with disabilities, as well as those focused on the relationship between religions and human rights. While a great number of those activities were of an informational nature, there were innovative efforts that employed arts and creative activities as means to conveying human rights messages, especially for children and young people. However, it is remarkable that the interaction with local cultural components has been less than desirable. The focus of the larger sector of training and education activities was on technical skills of training, rather than on cognitive aspects.

The word heritage may indicate that we are talking about the past, but this word has many implications. There is a heritage that dies and there is a living heritage that is passed down through generations. There is a heritage that reminds us of human tragedies and another that recalls human glory, and a heritage that may return to long times ago and another may be new. Each society has its own heritage rich in diversity and contradictions. Besides, human tragedies could be a benefit to recall that what had happened should not have been. In short, cultural and intellectual heritage is fertile, if we like to consider it a free source for learning.

Heritage can be a source of enrichment in the field of human rights education. This can be illustrated in two main areas, namely the cultural diversity and women's rights. With regard to cultural diversity, it is an undeniable fact in history and societies. It includes ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity as well as diversity in lifestyles. Historically, diversity has been a source of richness on both the cultural and tangible levels, although, it has also been the cause of discriminatory and racist practices. By any mean, whether it is the bright or the dark side of diversity, it can be a starting point for spreading ideas about non-discrimination, anti-racism, stereotyping and acceptance of differences. If we look at the Egyptian society, we will find it rich in diversity. Egypt has the heritage of pharaohs, Copts, Islam, Nubia, Bedouin and Amazigh in the west of the country as well. This culture richness, which is reflected in literature, fashion, lifestyles and architecture, is a fertile material for learning human rights.

With regard to women's rights, discrimination against women has undoubtedly been rooted in cultures in general, including the Egyptian culture. However, heritage can provide us with various models to break this deeply ingrained idea that makes discrimination against women as an inherited nature. For example, the intellectual production in the field of folk literature, including the writings of Ahmed Roushdy Saleh, can serve this issue in two ways, first, to unveil acts of discrimination against women in the local popular culture and to



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promote the value of equality between men and women; and second, the important information contained in this literature derived from history and heritage targeting to disintegrate the mental image that women are less than men by nature. For example, when Roushdy Saleh says that the status of women in history and local heritage was not as many imagine, he says: "When the Pharaonic history began, women were still in a high position, they were almost equal to men, so that Decugis says that the status of the Pharaonic woman was superior to that of the Romans and Greeks. Herodot also testified that when he visited Egypt, men did household chores while women went out to the market and fields".

The intellectual heritage of the modern era is full of models and works of literature and art that win for the rights of women. There are figures of women who have succeeded in many areas, such Huda Shaarawy in politics and Mai Ziadah in literature, Layla Dos in the field of social service and Fatma Moussa in academics, Engy Aflatoun in the field of art and Lotfya El Nady in the field of aviation. These are some of the female models in our modern history, whose works and struggles in all fields are considered a rich material to overcome the negative perception towards women.

At another level, intellectual and artistic contributions aimed at improving the status of women in the face of outdated customs and traditions. They constitute important local artistic heritage for the development of the awareness of human rights. This includes some of the important works that have been transformed from fiction into great creative masterpieces, such as the work of Naguib Mahfouz, especially the 'Trilogy' and 'the Beginning and the End'; the works of Yahya Hakki, particularly 'Qandil Om Hashim' and 'Al-Bustagy'; and the masterpiece of Taha Hussein, 'Du'aa Al-Karwan'. In addition to many other literary and artistic works that contributed to raise the nation's awareness in the face of outdated ideas that undermine the dignity of women.

We shall add to the abovementioned the practical and enlightenment heritage in our societies such as the works of Imam Muhammad Abdo and other renewers, who enrich the field of human rights education with materials and resources that have rarely been circulated in the activities of human rights education. Of course, addressing such issues requires educational and methodological insights and empowerment of audience to own skills of analysis and critical thinking. Consequently, human rights educators must be familiar with these sources rather than the common models based on the limited knowledge of international charters and applied activities. The main objective remains the creation of an adequate educational and upbringing environment in which the audiences do not feel that human rights are alien to their identity and culture.

To sum up, our intellectual heritage provides us with a rich material to promote the universal principles of human rights, but this objective will not be met without the availability of certain material and systematic conditions.



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Firstly, there is a need to provide the necessary resources to make this information available and classifiable so that they can be accessed and used by those involved in human rights education. This does not only include research and studies, but also other artistic, literary and creative resources. Secondly, the need to encourage educators to learn more about the wide range of physical heritage in museums and local communities. In addition to the development of educational and cultural materials and resources based on the local intellectual heritage so as to find the link between the local culture and the human rights principles.

Conclusions

The involvement of Arab and Islamic thought in the debate on universality and peculiarity is evident in human rights trends that have moved globally since the 1980s. However, this involvement is, in essence, an extension of a previous trend that began early with the accession of these societies into modern times when the clash between originality and contemporary, past and present has began to emerge. This clash continues in the era of the "universality of human rights" with the emergence of fundamental variables stemmed from cultural and political movements and interactions at both international and local levels in the past decades. These movements were topped by two basic discourses: the human rights discourse and the Islamic one. On the one hand, there were attempts to "localize" the discourse on human rights; on the other hand, the Islamic religious discourse was "internationalized" as it became an international issue in the cultural and political levels. These two-way movements were not harmonized, however the conflict between the two is, still, stormy and edgy, especially as it is often accompanied by wars and violence that inflame and intensify polarization.

This Study has attempted to highlight some of the points of weaknesses that hinders the establishment of a societal awareness of human rights resting upon local cultural components and causes cultural resistance to human rights under the allegation of "peculiarity" and the preservation of identity. We have showed that this confusion is due to the absence of the thorough and objective understanding of the relationship between the concepts of universality and peculiarity of human rights and the distinction between peculiarity and culture relativity. The second dilemma is represented in deeming human rights as a cultural and values system, while they are only principles and criteria that derive their legitimacy from international consensus. Describing human rights as a culture and value system has a negative impact, especially on the supporters of "cultural peculiarities" who reject these rights calling them one of the tools of globalization that aim to impose alternative culture and values. Finally, we have pointed to the importance of integrating local intellectual and cultural heritage into human rights education and awareness processes and how these local cultural components can be an important resource for enriching the universal principles of human rights.