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Human Rights Education for Bengali Women:  
Agency and empowerment

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# HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION FOR BENGALI WOMEN

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## Abstract

Over the last decade, most educational indicators have shown positive trends in Bangladesh. Despite the progress, the education system in Bangladesh is still failing its adolescent girls. Many of these girls come from impoverished backgrounds, and thus reaching secondary schools presents a myriad of challenges for them. Their educational trajectories are frequently interrupted by child marriage, corruption, abuse, and neglect. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that Human Rights Education (HRE) is central to defining the content and method of the education that women/girls need to function effectively in modern Bangladesh society. The theoretical framework focuses on transformative agency, the empowerment process (social and economic), and the concept of capabilities. The study examines the links between human rights education and transformation by focusing on the long-term effects on young girls who participated in non-formal education programs in Bangladesh. The literature review explores key concepts of HRE, critical pedagogy, and the capabilities approach. The study then makes an assessment of Bangladesh's record in implementing the right to education in light of the commitments made by the State. The article concludes by offering a set of recommendations for the government of Bangladesh to integrate human rights education as part of the formal school curriculum.

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### CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My school was very far from my home, and we were poor so we could not afford the fees. That's why I could not complete my education, and my parents married me off at 11. I thought if I go to school, I could become an intellectual and have a career. I want to be free – Sifola, 13 (HRW, 2015).

There is a growing consensus amongst the international community that human rights education can contribute to reducing human rights violations and to the creation of a more peaceful and just society. However, right to education itself is a major concern for developing countries, especially when it comes to educating girls and young women. They face the added challenge of overcoming complex social, economic, and cultural barriers that prevent them from receiving an education. Education is important for the full development of human personality, therefore governments around the world have committed to ensuring its proper delivery through programs and initiatives. Right to education is articulated through several United Nations human rights documents: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976). Violations of any of these rights are denying children their fundamental human right. Scholars have argued that education is an enabling factor in ensuring that children lead a life full of dignity and respect. Human Rights Education is a necessary component of the right to education; Human rights education is defined as “providing persons with knowledge, skills and understanding and by developing their attitudes and behaviors, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights (United Nations General Assembly, 2011, Art. 2, para. 1).

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As a signatory to the various international human rights treaties, Bangladesh has an obligation to provide its' girls with a proper education, and denying them access to basic primary and secondary education deprives them of their universal right to education and equality. There are estimated 14 million adolescent girls (aged 10-19) currently living in Bangladesh (UNICEF Bangladesh, n.d., "Adolescence" section). 48% of those girls drop out of school when they reach secondary level. If more than half of them follow the too common trajectory of becoming school drop outs, being subjected to early marriage, and early pregnancy, then the cycle of abuse and exploitation will continue. Most of these girls do not get to experience their teenage years as they move straight from childhood to marriage. Unless there is a strategic intervention, Bangladesh will lose generations of its' girls in the years to come.

### **Need for the Study**

In Bangladesh, girls are often discouraged from attending schools. Key human development indicators depict that women in Bangladesh are far worse off than men. By looking at UNDP's Gender Inequality Index (GII) — which reflects gender-based inequalities in three dimensions – reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity—the trend seems promising. Bangladesh has a GII value of 0.503, ranking 111 out of 155 countries in the 2014 index (United Nations, 2015). In Bangladesh, 34.1 percent of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education compared to 41.3 percent of their male counterparts. Despite the progress, 65% of Bangladeshi girls get married before the age of 18, and Bangladesh has the highest rate of marriage in the world for girls under 15 (HRW, 2015). The numbers tell a compelling story, but this study goes beyond the number, to tell a more holistic story and argue that now is the time to reach adolescent girls in Bangladesh, whose educational outcomes are being affected by the their social realities.

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- *Reservation to CEDAW Article 2*

Bangladesh ratified the Convention of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984, with a reservation to Article 2 on the basis of religious sentiments. Article 2 states, “States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms, agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end, undertake...”(United Nations General Assembly, 1981). The Bangladeshi government entered the reservation stating that the provisions of Article 2 conflict with Sharia law based on Holy Quran and Sunna. The unequal treatment of women is embedded into the Bangladeshi Constitution and that illustrates the norms that women are not equal in the eyes of the law. This provision affects all facets of women’s’ lives including their right to marriage, and divorce. While Bangladesh is not ruled by Islamic laws, the presence of a Muslim majority population certainly influences the traditions and cultures.

- *Child marriage*

A staggering 29% of Bangladeshi girls get married before they reach the age of 15, and 65% before they reach 18. The government failed to take adequate measures to prevent child marriage. In 2014, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina pledged to end marriage of children under the age of 15 by 2021 and under 18 by 2041, but subsequently her government proposed measure to lower the age of marriage for girls to 16 if their parents wish to get them married earlier (HRW, 2015). In Bangladesh, about 50 percent of pregnancies occur by the age of 18. Early marriage is a critical issue for adolescent girls.

In a traditional and patriarchal society like Bangladesh, this new legislation will increase the rate of child marriage. A Boston based photo journalist Alison Joyce documented the marriage of a 15-year-old Bangladeshi girl Nasoin Akther to a 32-year-old man. This is a

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common phenomenon in the rural parts of Bangladesh. In her photo series, she highlighted how families view marriage as a sign of respect and protection for women. Even though child marriage is often cited as a result of poverty, in Akther's case, her family was wealthy (Kirkpatrick, 2015). Joyce noted how Akther's mother also came from a family that internalized the deeply rooted views around marriage and family. Eliminating child marriage will require substantive efforts on part of the schools such as eliminating associated school costs that lead to drop-outs, reduced costs of textbooks, waving examination fees, etc.

- *Child labor*

In addition to child marriage, child labor is a concern for Bangladesh because labor conditions in Bangladesh continue to remain poor despite various factory fires in the recent past. Girls are often seen working under terrible conditions that jeopardizes their health and safety. Often times, boys and girls are seen working in harsh conditions in brick-making factories. Majority of the girls working are between the ages of 10-12 because these factories have no regulation in place. Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries, so brick-making is a never ending business and it provides better income than agriculture (Gayle, 2013). According to the UN, Bangladesh produces 12 million bricks a year under harsh and uncertain conditions.

- *Prostitution*

Bangladesh is only one of the few Muslim countries where prostitution is legal. This past month, German based photo journalist Sandra Hoyn visited the district of Kandapara in Bangladesh, where a legal brothel has been operating for over 200 years (Washington Post, 2016). The photos she produced were shocking – girls as young as 12-14 years old have been born and raised inside the brothel. They never experience life outside the walled city. The

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photographer said, “the brothel is like its own microcosm, it is a city in a city” (Washington Post, 2016). Sex workers in Bangladesh are not treated like citizens, they are not granted any forms of human rights. Girls often come from poverty and are usually victims of trafficking. Girls are not afforded any educational opportunities. They’re “owned” by madams, whom they must pay their debts to. Kandapara’s sex workers earn between 1000-2000 Taka (\$11 – 22) daily, which is around 300 Taka (\$3) per customer. Even after the debts are paid, they continue to stay in the brothels, as they’re stigmatized outside their “homes,” which they consider to be the brothels (Washington Post, 2016).

In illustrating the work of the non-governmental organization BRAC, this study considers how innovative programs can start to address some of these barriers faced by girls in Bangladesh. It’s important to keep in mind that schools are often the logical sites for girls and boys to receive a proper education; however, schools can also act as sites of violence where inequalities are enacted and reinforced. In order for an education to be empowering, children need to be taught the tools necessary for them to realize their full potential. Education is a way in which girls in Bangladesh can respond to opportunities and challenges encountered in life. By investing in human rights education, Bangladesh will be able to overcome some of the hurdles that marginalize girls by fostering attitudes and actions consistent with the values of non-discrimination, equality, and respect for human dignity. It encourages girls to stay beyond primary school because they realize that they also have the potential to succeed like their male counterparts. Therefore, there is a need to explore the relationship between girls’ education, social change, and empowerment – for Bangladesh’s own social, economic, and political advancement.



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### **Purpose of This Study**

While the available literature investigates how HRE influences students; no studies have focused on human rights education in the context of Bangladesh. By examining the empirical state of women's/girls' education in Bangladesh, this study will demonstrate that Bangladesh has not been most effective in meeting the standards set by domestic and international law and this is detrimental to the future of the country. By drawing on four methodologies, this thesis will argue that Human Rights Education (HRE) is central to defining the content and method of the education that women/girls need to function effectively in modern Bangladesh society. Human rights based approach to education is not only beneficial to the women and girls in Bangladesh; it will also improve the economic, social, and political development of the country.

### **Research Question**

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. To what extent does the government of Bangladesh meet the international standards in providing education to its adolescent girls?
2. To what extent does Human Rights Education in Bangladesh promote agency and empowerment for women/girls in Bangladesh?
3. How can attitudes and actions consistent with the values of non-discrimination, equality, and respect for human dignity be fostered through non-formal human rights education programs?

### **Theoretical Framework**

There are four frameworks chosen to address how Human Rights Education can promote empowerment by looking at the link between education and agency in the literature review: Tibbitts (2014) model of HRE; Bajaj's (2008) transformative agency; Sen's (1999) capabilities

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approach; and Meintjes' (1997) conceptualization of empowerment as dynamic vs static. These principle and features are woven into the two BRAC programs selected for this study to highlight how human rights education promote girls' agency in a marginalized environment. Importantly, these frameworks will be expanded in the literature review to better understand the link between education and empowerment. Additionally, there are contributions from other theories/frameworks that inform and extend the theoretical understandings of the human right education and its' transformative impact.

Tibbitts (2002) introduced three models for categorizing human rights education practice in the formal and non-formal education sectors: 1) Values and Awareness, 2) Accountability and 3) Transformation. In the values and awareness Model, there is no specific theory of change in place in relation to social change. This model reinforces the existing human rights discourse and provides learners with knowledge of human rights. However, the agency of the learner is not encouraged nor empowered to reduce human rights violations. In the accountability model, the theory of change was linked with the individual and his or her professional role. In the transformation model, the HRE methodologies are associated with transformative and emancipatory learning. HRE methodologies incorporate critical pedagogy and involve a critical reflection on society and conditions that result in injustice. In 2016, Tibbitts proposed amendments to the models including a stronger association of the transformation model with activism.

The HRE for transformation model has its roots in Bajaj's (2009) transformative agency. In it, she introduces the concept of critical pedagogy, where she uses student agency as a central framework. Agency is defined as "belief in one's present or future ability to improve individual social mobility and transform elements of one's society" (Bajaj, 2009, p. 554). Transformative

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agency was an essential feature in the school structure in Umutende School in Zambia. Bajaj (2009) notes that students' "agency is a complex phenomenon, may be a situational characteristic and is limited and informed by both temporal and ideological factors" (p. 552). In her research, she finds that students' agency was enabled by a different form of schooling to "disrupt the reproductive tendencies of state schooling" (p. 552).

The literature on HRE has gravitated towards empowerment as a key feature of successful programming and is associated most closely with the transformative model. Like transformative agency, HRE is a tool for empowerment that deals with relationships between individuals with varying degrees of control. In this conceptualization, empowerment is treated as bestowing power to those who are less in control, resulting in the sharing of authority.

Empowerment depends on the social and education conditions of individuals, and therefore in recent years HRE has been associated with Sen's (1999) capabilities approach. By employing a capabilities approach, one can examine the process and practices of how education can foster well being. Sen's (1999) approach depends on individual freedom and that capabilities have to be defined within the individual's social condition. Sen (1999) emphasized the role of people as the agents to contextualize those capabilities. If education is a key to achieving equality, students should be viewed as agents of change, having the freedom to choose their life trajectories, and engage in self-expression.

The transformation model links the concepts of empowerment, agency, and capabilities. Critical pedagogy is also associated with the HRE for transformation model, which is typically used with marginalized groups and in order to promote activism (Tibbitts, 2002). Therefore, transformative methodologies are significant in the context of Bangladesh because 1) "the agency of the learner is cultivated with the explicit aim of social transformation through human

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rights activism” (Tibbitts, 2016, p. 77), and 2) they can also explicitly foster personal transformation, aligned with the concept of “intrinsic empowerment” (Ross et al, 2011). This model requires learner to think critically about their life situations, and encourage them to take actions against oppression. These frameworks will be expanded in the literature review and through the programs selected to show girls’ empowerment and agency in a non-formal educational setting.

### **Methodology**

The majority of the literature from this study stems from peer reviewed academic journals and books. The first section of this study presents a literature review on key concepts in human rights education, critical pedagogy, and capabilities approach including feminist theory. Reports from the United Nations agencies, Human Rights Watch, and BRAC International were surveyed for the purposes of this study. Because the purpose of this paper is to examine the effects of students on non-formal HRE programs, the focus has been placed on the most vulnerable and marginalized women in Bangladesh.

For the two programs chosen for the study, relevant websites, press releases, and report were surveyed, and additional information were gathered from personal communication via skype, email, and phone. The study examines two BRAC’s programs located in the rural parts of Bangladesh with one goal: socially and financially empowering adolescent girls through a human rights based education and leadership. BRAC’s Empowerment and Livelihood (ELA) Program and Aflatoun were chosen to illustrate how effective a non-formal educational setting can be through its network of adolescent girls’ clubs. Focusing on life skills training, microfinance, and mentorship, the education programs have become instrumental in their learning processes.

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As stated earlier, the purpose of this study is to understand the content and method of teaching that women and girls need to effectively participate in social, economic and political life of Bangladesh. Throughout this study, the focus will be on approaches that will contribute to the dialogues of educational programs specifically targeted toward marginalized adolescent girls in Bangladesh. Each chapter is guided by the question, “how is human rights based education programs promote leadership and empowerment for women/girls in Bangladesh? The two programs chosen illustrate the possibilities presently available to young girls and women in Bangladesh.

### **Significance of the Study**

The goal of this study is to contribute to the literature about Human Rights Education in Bangladesh while highlighting the link between education and empowerment. Despite the progress that has been made in enrolling girls and boys in non-formal and formal schools, the majority of the students are not receiving HRE in formal schooling. In 2004, the UNDP completed a study to include human rights component in primary and secondary textbooks in Bangladesh (Absar, n.d.). The study concludes that the textbooks do not refer to any international human rights treaties, and there’s a tendency to explain issues without referring to real life examples. Teachers found it difficult to talk about or teach issues of human rights, some teachers expressed frustration because of government interventions whenever they were teaching about pro-minority issues. Since then, there has not been any real attempt to incorporate HRE in formal education. Given that we are now past the MDG’s and moving towards achieving the SDGs by 2020, the Government of Bangladesh needs to move beyond just securing primary schooling and place an emphasis on examining the underlying social inequalities that prevent girls from living quality lives. The focus needs to be on transformative impacts of education and how it can serve

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as a mechanism by which to enhance youth's opportunities and capabilities. The programs chosen for this study have the real potential to become transforming force in the lives of girls.

### **CHAPTER 2: DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION**

Right to education is a fundamental human right. Scholars have interpreted the right to be a both positive and empowerment right. States are obligated to provide the necessary conditions for the enjoyment of the right to education, and the violation of the right to education jeopardizes other right. If an individual does not have access to basic education, they are less likely to advance in their life, therefore unable to enjoy other rights to the fullest. Right to education “provides the individual with control over the course of his or her life, and in particular, control over (not merely protection against) the state” (Donnelly & Howard, 1988, p. 215). International laws and treaties have mandated primary and to some extent secondary education compulsory and free. If possible by means, states must also provide access to post-secondary education without discrimination. Below are the relevant international human rights treaties that define the concept and scope of the right to education:

- *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*

The right to education has been enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) starting with Article 26, which states that, “Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.” Even though the UDHR is not a binding document, it is the foundation of all internationally recognized human rights standards. Article 26 mandates states to positively realize the right to education. If reading in conjunction with Article 22, it entitles everyone to the “realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights

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indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.” It is evident that states have a positive obligation to obtain the necessary resources to meet this right.

- *International Covenant on Economic, Social, Cultural Rights (ICESCR)*

Unlike the UDHR, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) is a legally binding document. It was adopted by the United Nations in 1966. There have been numerous debates among the international community regarding the protection of ESC rights as it left the implementation power to individual states. Because the CESCR is influenced by the UDHR, this document is one of the only internationally binding documents making states obligated to provide education to its citizens. Article 13 (2) of the ICESCR describes that

The State Parties to the present Covenant recognize that, with a view to achieving the full realization of [the right to education], primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all; secondary education shall be made generally available and accessible to all and higher education shall be made equally accessible to all, on the basis of capacity (United Nations, 1966).

This demands an effort on part of the state to make education available and accessible. Because it implies positive state obligation, this is the social aspect of the right to education. The two important terms in this article in regards to education is “accessibility” and “availability” which refers to the positive obligation of individuals states in carrying out the right to education. Availability means that it’s the state’s positive duty to provide the means such as schools, teachers and materials necessary to achieve education, whereas “accessibility” refers to ensuring that there are no barriers in achieving the availability of an individual’s right to education.

Article 13 should be read in conjunction with Article 2 and 3 of the covenant. Article 2 (1) states that “Each State Party to the present Covenant undertakes to take steps, individually and

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through international assistance and co-operation, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, with a view to achieving progressively the full realization of the rights recognized in the present Covenant by all appropriate means, including particularly the adoption of legislative measures.” This is crucial in the context of non-discrimination as Article 2 states that “The State Parties to the present Covenant undertake to guarantee that the rights enunciated in the present Covenant will be exercised without discrimination of any kind as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” The concept of progressive realization is introduced here which allows member states a number of years toward ensuring various ESR rights; however, the Committee on ESC has clarified that education is not one of those rights (UN Committee on ESC, 1999). States must immediately take steps to achieving the accessibility and availability principles outlined in Article 13 in conjunction with Article 2; furthermore, “such steps should be deliberate, concrete, and targeted as clearly as possible” (United Nations, 1966, Art.2).

- *Right to Human Rights Education (HRE)*

Human Rights Education is an essential aspect of the right to education. However, questions are raised as to how right to human rights can be just be justified need to be addressed. The UN declaration on Human Rights Education and Training emphasizes the right to HRE by stating, “everyone has the right to know, seek and receive information about all human rights and fundamental freedoms and should have access to human rights education and training” (Kirchschlaeger, 2016, p. 97). This text must be read in conjunction with the UDHR, which first defines the right to education. Scholars have noted that the primary responsibility to implement right to HRE lies at the hands of nation states, but at the same times, civil society organizations must also assist by consulting, and monitoring the implement of the right to HRE by national



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governments. Both civil society and national governments can use the UNDHRET as an instrument to make progress towards human rights education practice, leading to the full enjoyment of human rights by all human beings.

States are obligated, as stipulated in the UDHR, ICESCR, and other human rights instruments, to strengthen respect and dignity for all through right to education. Therefore, HRE has become a movement that is associated with the values and attitudes of human rights, it is the connective tissue that allows individuals to realize their right to education. The United Nations defines Human Rights Education as

1. ... 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 behaviors, to empower them to contribute to the building and promotion of a universal culture of human rights (UNGA, 2011, Art. 2).
2. Human rights education and training encompasses:
  - (a) Education about human rights, which includes providing knowledge and understanding of human rights norms and principles, the values that underpin them and the mechanisms for their protection;
  - (b) Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners;
  - (c) Education for human rights, which includes empowering persons to

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enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others. (United Nations General Assembly 2011)

This definition has been approved by the UN general assembly in 2011, and is now the most widely accepted definition. HRE *about, through, and for*, human rights is intended to attempt to reduce human rights violations. Therefore, it is supposed to influence the short-term behavior of governments as duty bearers as well as mobilize to realize longer term educational objectives in changing beliefs, attitudes, behavior of individuals in ways consistent with the values and human rights as outline in the standards.

### **CHAPTER 3: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Themes of this literature review will encompass transformative education, empowerment, capabilities, and the empowerment-capabilities link. These will be expanded through the educational initiatives in the next chapters that highlight the differences and similarities for each program-specific context as mentioned in the methodology section. While the United Nations definition of HRE is a top down statement of what HRE is and should be and largely directed towards national policy makers, various models for understanding the types of HRE have been put forth by education scholars to understand how HRE mobilizes constituencies to expand social movements.

#### **Various Models of Human Rights Education**

Human Rights Education has been adopted and elaborated by many countries over the past 20 years. It responds to a perceived need in a community, and the methods of teaching human rights may differ depending on the context. For example, teaching HRE in a private school will certainly differ in its approaches from teaching HRE in a government school. Bajaj (2011) argues that despite the differences, the ideological orientations of most HRE initiatives are

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generally rooted in one of the following three categories: (1) HRE for Global Citizenship; (2) HRE for Coexistence; or (3) HRE for Transformative Action (p. 489).

HRE for global citizenship is concerned with providing learners with access to an international community through fostering of knowledge, values, and attitudes related to universal standards of human rights (Bajaj, 2011, p.489). This brand of HRE seeks to cultivate a strong global citizenship and places an emphasis on learners to counter injustice wherever it may take place. Bajaj (2011) further argues that the content of teaching may include learning about treaties, conventions; in this model, learners are more akin to developing compassion and empathy. As such, resultant actions may include letter writing, fundraising, addressing basic needs of those less fortunate, model UNs, etc. (p. 490). HRE for coexistence is geared towards post-conflict situations, generally to mitigate ethnic tension. It focuses on inter-personal and inter-group aspects of right. This model emphasizes on minority rights in the human rights framework. Information is generally taught about opposing groups in order to create general empathy towards each other. Values and skills may be related to mutual understanding, respect for differences, and effective dialogue (Bajaj, 2011 p. 492). Actions may include learning about others groups or participating in camps and activities that bring about greater understanding. Initiatives toward coexistence are often labeled as peace education.

HRE for transformative action reflects a very politically radical approach that analyzes historical and recent conditions of learners (Bajaj, 2011, p. 493). This approach is a call to action and often looking at the wide gap between current realities and human right guarantees of learners. This is rooted in the concept of agency and solidarity; in this model, learners may be more akin to fostering a sense of transformation, and they themselves become a critique of their own social realities and determined to act upon them. Most importantly, this model fosters

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collaboration amongst groups who may not be directly affected with those who are directly affected (for example, boys vs girls in highly patriarchal and traditional societies). This model has been widely recognized and interpreted by other human right education scholars.

In 2002, HRE scholar Tibbitts has identified a similar approach “HRE for Transformation Model”. In her original definition, this model was mostly concerned with transformative and emancipatory learning. This allows learners to have a critical reflection on their social realities and they may act in the face of injustice. She notes that this process can be transformative for those who have internalized oppression. Combining emancipatory and transformative learning can bring immense change for the learners. The theory of change is leading to personal transformation and taking action to eliminate human rights violations. Therefore, the result is not only the cultivation of agency but “specifically its application to reforming relationships and structures so that they are more equal, non-discriminating, participatory and consistent with human rights norms” (Tibbitts, 2017, p. 75).

In 2017, Tibbitts revised the definition of transformation model to include the word “activism”. HRE initiatives that fall under this category are explicitly aimed at bringing human rights activism and social change. She notes that the rationale behind adding the word “activism” to this model is primarily to place an emphasis on internalizations of human rights values and critical perspectives. In this revised model, learners may demonstrate new behavior in their personal domain such as addressing unequal relations in the family, and/or participating in campaigns and affiliating with human rights NGOs. Different kinds of HRE programs may fall under this Transformation-Activism model, such as those focusing solely on training on human rights workers. Another type of HRE that can be under this category is focusing on marginalized group, such as women that have experienced systematic discrimination. Using both Bajaj (2011)

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and Tibbitts (2012, 2017) ideological approaches to HRE, BRAC's human rights education programs that fit within the transformative model have been selected for this study.

### **Human Rights Education & Transformation Model**

As stated, HRE for transformative model is directly linked with agency and solidarity. Transformative agency was integral to the curriculum and the school structure in Umutende School in Zambia (Bajaj, 2009). Unlike the government schools, where uniforms and local languages were prohibited, at Umutende, students wore clothing from their own cultures and greeted their teachers in their local languages. At Umutende, students were exposed to leadership and career development workshops. They were often addressed as future leaders, and future presidents of Zambia. For example, when asked where the students see themselves in 20 years, one student notes:

In about 15 years, I will enter government and be a minister or a member of parliament. In 20 years, I aspire to be the president of Zambia. I believe ... I'll set foot in the State House of Zambia and bring about oneness and unity in Zambia. (Bajaj, 2009, p. 558).

The experiences of Umutende students stood in sharp contrast with those of students in government schools. Bajaj's (2009) research indicates that students in government schools believed that there were less opportunities to pursue further education in Zambia, and that they would travel abroad to further their studies or career. Many shared the notion that there was no point in coming back to Zambia, "a country they saw as flawed" (Bajaj, 2009, p. 559). Some of the data collected by Bajaj was astounding: among the 11 siblings in government schools only one sought to go into public service in contrast with the 11/9 Umutende students who aspired to be elected officials in Zambia. This study shows that the students developed a sense of agency and a vision for their future unlike the students in government schools. When compared to

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government schools, the students had a different future vision with regards to their role in the community:

I have many plans for my future but the exam results will determine what I'll do...without money, one cannot further his education. Looking at the current situation, things are no good...Zambia in 25 years can be developed or get poorer. In my community people only come together when there is a funeral or... distribution of free rice. I play no active role in my community (Bajaj, 2009, p. 559-561).

Certain aspects of the Umutedne School can be adapted into government schools despite the lack of resources or other constraints. Elements such as emphasis on community service, smaller class sizes may enhance students' ability to transform their surroundings (Bajaj, 2009).

Tibbitts (2017) argues that the HRE literature has gravitated towards empowerment as an essential feature of successful programming. Empowerment can easily be linked with having the opportunity to develop concrete skills, such as developing organizational or leadership skills; which is considered a form of "instrumental empowerment" (Ross et al, 2011). However, transformation extends beyond instrumental empowerment in two ways. First, transformative education cultivates agency with explicit aim of social transformation. Zambian students' ability to improve their own societal elements is how Bajaj defines student agency. The second way transformative education is different than empowerment is that it fosters personal transformation. This specific methodology is associated with Freire's (2000) concept of critical pedagogy that helps students develop a critical consciousness to "respond to schooling in ways that express individual and collective action toward positive social change" (Bajaj, 2009, p. 552).

Critical pedagogy was influence by the works of Freire, who encouraged learners to think critically on their situation, recognize connections between their individual problems and the

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social contexts in which they live and to take action against oppression (Tibbitts, 2015, n.p).

Critical pedagogy was and continues to be associated with the HRE Transformation Model, as this model is explicitly oriented towards a form of empowerment related to overcoming internalized oppression (Tibbitts, 2017). The process of developing a critical consciousness was termed by Meintjes as “critical human rights consciousness.” This concept is also akin to empowerment, which is what I now turn to.

### **Human Rights Education & Empowerment**

Much of the academic literature in defining empowerment has faced challenges because it can best be best understood when operationalized within a particular context. What this study adds is information on the human right education-empowerment link and how it is oriented towards the cultivation of agency in learners (Tibbitts, 2017). The road to empowerment is directly linked with the interest of learners. Empowerment is an essential process of transformation because this allows the individuals to see the learning process as instrumental and having the ability to influence their own environment. The mere fact of recognizing one’s own personal experiences of discrimination as shared by other, is empowering, which is how the concept was first introduced starting with the US civil right movement, and the adaptation to the women’s movement.

Empowerment is a multifaceted and nuanced concept, and therefore it is difficult to define. In the context of HRE, empowerment is both implicitly and explicitly concerned with relationships of power and how they’re structured. Meintjes (1997) notes that “human rights are inherently about relationships; and whatever their nature, whether they concern the power relations between individuals, groups, society, and/or the state, they are inevitably always dynamic and relative” (Meintjes, 1997, p. 74). As such, it is an expression of confidence and recognition of

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responsibility and influence in both the decision and its impact (p. 68). This type of HRE programs may include examples of discrimination that learners recollect from their memories, or materials from their homes and communities. Additionally, their values and skills might include solidarity with the victims, and actions may include collective protests or intervening in situations of abuse at global or local level. Lastly, they can join NGOs or social movements to advance greater participation and inclusion (Bajaj, 2011, p. 494).

Multiple efforts towards HRE exist in present day India. The Dalit community in India has been using human rights education as a tool of empowerment to challenge the caste-based discrimination that is still prominent in many states of India (Bruno, 2010). Through human rights education trainings, facilitated by People's Watch, the community is challenging the social and economic exploitation they experience as a result of the caste-based system. They are creating a vision that's based on promoting self-respect and freedom for all. These values challenge the structural violence in India, and ensure that the community does not continue to feel marginalized due to their status as Dalits. Students are taught how to apply these principles to their lives; and they learn to critically analyze their social realities and become active in the life of their communities. People's Watch encourages students' meeting outside of the classroom to facilitate interactions, which in turn dispel the notion that the Dalit children are less than their peers.

This closely resembles Freire's (2000) concept of oppression, who argues that "they [the oppressed] must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (p. 49). The programs selected for this study are illustrative of this as they are challenging the system and the environment in which the adolescent girls live and function so they can lead more fulfilling and dignified lives.



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Empowerment is more than decision-making; it's the process and practices that involved in making the choices, and her agency and freedom to choose alternatives within her ability and context (Sen, 2009). This is known as the capabilities approach that emphasizes a person's capacity to lead the kind of life she values.

### **Human Rights Education & Capabilities**

The concept of capabilities was first introduced by Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen, who argues that human dignity can only be realized by individuals' own capabilities – asking what it means to be a human. Capabilities, however, are not the same as abilities. The term refers not simply to what people are able to do but their freedom to lead the kind of lives they value, and have reason to value. Education is inherently a capability for wellbeing. Sen's definition of capabilities however does not take us very far in thinking about the role of justice. Feminist scholar, Martha Nussbaum (2002) has been critical of Sen's approach and believes that capabilities are founded on respecting human dignity. Nussbaum believed that one thing that was lacking in Sen's capabilities approach was a well-defined list of capabilities. Things human beings are capable of doing but is that enough for those fighting for gender justice? Nussbaum proposes a list of 10 fundamental human capabilities, which she provides a general sense of what societies ought to be striving to achieve. Nussbaum's account is motivated by the belief that social relations are gendered and shaped by our personal experiences through gender. Nussbaum suggests that her list should be incorporated into national constitutional guarantees, international human rights legislation and international development policy. Access to these capabilities is required by human dignity.

Women for far too long have been treated as the supporters of the ends of others, rather than as ends in their own rights (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 49). Nussbaum's approach may be ambitious and

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over-optimistic about what constitutions and governments are like and are capable of. But her narrative always comes back to individual women in a society whose constitution guarantees their equal rights and whose societal realities restrict their capabilities at every turn. Education can help in realizing those capabilities. In a study conducted by Dejaeghere & Kyoung (2015) on marginalized youth in Bangladesh found that majority of the students knew about their human rights, but did not act on them. Knowing the rights and being aware for them are important conditions that enable empowerment. From a capabilities perspective, education in general is necessary for the development of internal capabilities, and education is the basic social good that influences internal capabilities (p. 32).

From a capabilities approach, obtaining an education is not enough, it is how the social and political conditions affect the girls' educational wellbeing. Considerable attention has been given to the distinction between capabilities and functioning (Robeyns, 2005; Nussbaum, 2002) but very few scholarships discuss how girls are able to combine their capabilities into well being that they value. In Human Rights Education programs, teachers are focusing on the lived realities of the girls. Critical to the capabilities approach is how certain members of a society value their wellbeing. Sen (2009) accentuates that the value a girl has about her wellbeing is contingent on the knowledge she has about the opportunities at a given time. The following chapter employs a capabilities approach to understand girls' educational wellbeing.

On the basis of scholarships, I define and explore three essential features of human rights education. These categories will be used in Chapter 5 to reflect upon the HRE for transformation model, in conjunction with additional information about HRE practices. Throughout this literature review, one thing has been evident is that there's no one solution to promoting girls' empowerment and leadership. Growing up in a highly traditional and patriarchal society, girls in

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Bangladesh face myriad of challenges in their lives, and while there are different methods of human rights education, empowerment and leadership can be transformative for them. These various models of HRE are not mutually exclusive, and as stated, the personal and social transformation is a long strenuous process, but it's needed. The following will highlight that through thoughtful programming and giving voices to the girls, BRAC is proving access to opportunities for adolescent girls in Bangladesh to realize their full potential and have the opportunity to learn and flourish. Providing access to this is the first step to empowering girls, and HRE programs have been instrumental in installing the values and attitude of human rights leading to a personal transformation.

### **CHAPTER 4: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION**

Since gaining independence in 1971, it has not been possible for Bangladesh to implement any Education Policy within the last four decades. Although the first Education Policy was introduced by the founder of independent Bangladesh and Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his assassination has put a halt at any attempts to formulate an educational policy. During the subsequent years, six more education policy/reports were prepared but they also remained unimplemented (Bangladesh Education Act, Foreword, 2010). In 2010, the Ministry of Education has implemented an education policy that describes the principles and foundations of state policy in education and reflects the priorities that the Bangladeshi government set out in education. The primary objectives of this policy are directed toward the cultivation of human values. It seeks to “prescribe ways through which citizens can be groomed to become leaders in pro-people development programs and progress of the society” (Bangladesh National Education Act, 2010). This was a huge step toward achieving the right to education, even though it only articulated the importance of government and what ideological

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stance government of Bangladesh takes when it comes to education (Khaled, 2013). The law does not define the right to free and compulsory education because there's no indication that there will be no charges, direct or indirect, for pre-school and primary education (Khaled, 2013).

The right to education is not recognized as a fundamental human right under the Constitution of Bangladesh. This right is articulated as a Fundamental Principle of State Policy (FPSP), which means that the state will formulate its laws and policies based upon these principles (Badruzzaman & Mian, 2015). Article 17 of the Bangladeshi Constitution pledges that

the State shall adopt effective measures for the purposes: (a) Establishing a uniform, mass oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law; (b) Providing the appropriate type of education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs and (c) Removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law.

This allowed the government to implement various measures to make education free and accessible. In Bangladesh, students have access to free textbooks, and it has been made possible by creating a "re-use" policy that allows underprivileged children to receive free textbooks. Additionally, the government provides stipends to ensure that children who come from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds have access to education. Supplies such as exercise books, pencils, erasers and learning kits are provided at free of charge in selected areas of the country. These measures have been very successful, allowing Bangladesh to achieve nearly a 97% gross enrollment ratio in primary education in 2005, compared with a rate of less than 60% in 1972, 65% in 1980, 73% in 1990 and 95% in 2000 (UNESCO, 2010).

It is evident that Bangladesh has made significant progress towards achieving universal primary education and gender parity in schools (UNICEF, 2008); however, gender

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discrimination remains deeply entrenched in families and in society. There are policy conditions that continue to perpetuate marginalization and gender inequalities, despite statistics that indicate gender parity. For instance, the high enrollment rate does not cover all of the children in the country, as currently it's estimated that 3.3 million children in Bangladesh are out-of-school (UNICEF, 2008). Access to schooling is also very limited for students who live in rural areas, as well as special needs and Dalit children. The UNICEF 2006 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey reports that

... only about half of the children living in urban slums attend school compared to a national average of 81% net attendance ratio, and about 24% of slum girls never enroll in any form of formal or non-formal school. Even for those who are enrolled, completion of the primary education cycle is an issue: only 55% of children eventually reach Grade 5 (UNICEF, 2006).

Bangladesh currently ranks 10 out of 14 Asian countries with respect to overall equity (Dejaeghere & Lee, 2011). In an attempt to close the gender gap in secondary school enrolment, the Government has provided a stipend and eliminated tuition fees for girls in rural areas. This has had a huge impact on girls' enrollment ratio at the secondary level: in 2012, secondary school attendance ratio for boys to girls was 40:52 (UNICEF, 2012). Many girls in rural areas drop out even before finishing their first year of secondary schooling. In 2015, 40 percent of secondary students (45.92 percent girls, 33.72 percent boys) dropped out, of whom 19 percent left school when they were in grade 8. Schuler (2007) argues that even though gender norms in education are changing, these changes are precarious at best and have increase concerns for parents that their girls may not get married.

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Literacy is also a concern for the women and girls in Bangladesh. Amongst those who attend primary school, just over half young women are literate among the poorest (56.9 per cent), whereas among the richest, nearly all are literate (93.4 per cent) (UNICEF, 2012). This suggests that the overall literacy is good in Bangladesh; however, this is not true for the north-eastern regions of the country, mostly the hill districts of Bangladesh. This region has the highest number of Dalit children. A shadow report to the Committee on CRC submitted by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) estimates that most Dalit children in Bangladesh do not complete formal education:

...64% of Hindu Dalits and 61% of Muslim Dalits have no education at all, and school enrolment rates are as low as 10%, with dropout rates of those that did attend school at around 95% compared to national enrolment rates of 85% (70<sup>th</sup> Session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2015).

Contrary to the overall and general trend of girls' enrollment in schools being more favorable than boys, the enrollment of girls with special needs is significantly lower than boys. There are many children who are not going to school but who could attend if schools were more inclusive and child- friendly. Additionally, IDSN's report notes that none of the government initiatives to achieve 'universal' access to primary education have had a specific focus on improving the literacy and educational levels of Dalits.

Bangladesh recognizes that poverty is a deterrent to educational opportunities, therefore a Food for Education Programme (FFE) was introduced to increase primary school enrollment. The idea was to provide a free monthly ration of rice or wheat to poor families in the hill districts if their children attend primary school. This program was, however implemented in only 27% of the country (UNESCO, 2010). This program was not effective, because it led to overcrowding

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classrooms. For example, classrooms in FEE schools had 22 percent more students than classrooms in non-FEE schools. It's worth noting that FEE enrollment rate for girls were higher, yet boys consistently outperformed girls on the achievement tests (Ahmed & Arends-Kuenning, 2003).

Furthermore, in order to attract higher enrollment and retention for girls, the government has taken measures to hire more female teachers. In fact, 60% of teaching posts are reserved for women (UNESCO, 2010). However, the quality of the teacher has not been improved. For example, approximately 24% of government school teachers are untrained (UNICEF, 2008). Teachers are also not trained to identify at-risk youth and to allocate more time and energy towards those students to motivate them. In Bangladesh, teachers place an emphasis in memorizing facts. There is little to no emphasis on developing critical analysis skills. This results in several issues such as low achievement rate, high drop out and high repetition rate. Additionally, the teacher student ratio is 1:49 that negatively affects contact hours even though it is an essential component of learning. Unfortunately, contact hours in Bangladesh average about half of the international standard of 900-1000 per year. Coupled with high student absenteeism rates of 19%, the actual average contact hours could even be lower (UNICEF, 2008).

In light of the pressure from the international community and criticisms from various non-governmental organizations, this past year Bangladeshi officials have drafted a National Education Act of 2016 that lays out the vision and ideals for what the education state would look like (Imran, 2016). This new draft law has brought in many significant changes in the education sector such as introduction of pre-primary education in all the government primary schools, banning of admission exam in class one, penalty for applying corporal punishment, reducing influence of Islamic teachings, etc. (National Education Act, 2016). Most notably, this draft law

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has proposed to establish a permanent commission to monitor the implementation of Education Policy 2010 and other education-related issues (Chandan, 2016; Imran, 2016). Its proper implementation may be effective in reaching ‘universal’ access to education.

Despite the many achievements that have been made by the Government of Bangladesh, there are major improvements that are needed in order for all children to realize the right to education. The major challenges include: poor quality of education; high dropout rates; lack of promotion of equity and access in education; and special needs and Dalit children’s’ education. Bangladesh has not invested in addressing the issues of education from an equity lens. Because some groups of children have been dropping out of school increasingly when reaching secondary level, there needs to be a coordinated effort to increase incentives for higher enrollment and retention of girls who identify as special needs and Dalit. There needs to be more intentional investment in teacher training, and the quality of education for girls, examining the kinds of skills they can utilize to break the cycle of poverty and discrimination they face in all facets of their lives.

### **CHAPTER 5: ASSESSMENT OF BRAC’S NON-FORMAL HRE PROGRAMS**

Often times, non-formal education programs are the only opportunity available for young girls and women to pursue education. BRAC has taken human rights based approach to education, and demonstrates how empowerment and a rights-based approach to education can be fostered through the non-formal education system. The two programs illustrate that empowerment can undo negative social constructions, so that “young girls come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decisions” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14). The following non-formal education programs embody the three essential features of Human Rights Education: transformation, empowerment, and capabilities. From BRAC’s



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teaching leadership and livelihood skills in Bangladesh, to their non-formal educational program, Aflatoun, one can see the potential of these young girls as they experience the empowerment process throughout the cycle of the program.

BRAC Bangladesh is a non-profit organization dedicated to ending poverty by empowering vulnerable populations, especially women and girls (BRAC, 2014a). In 2014, the organization pledged to reach 2.7 million girls through primary, pre-primary, and adolescent scholarship programs (BRAC, 2014). BRAC is unique in its approach because they realize that getting girls into school is not enough. There needs to be necessary conditions in place for them to succeed. For example, since the inception of the organization, BRAC enrolled more than 10 million girls into primary school, and they have made substantive efforts to support girls through secondary education (BRAC, 2014a). They introduced scholarship programs for students in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Uganda to support higher education. One of the core concept of BRAC's program is improving the quality of learning. For BRAC, enrollment numbers do not equate success. By using various human rights education methods, they teach students about microfinance, health care, and other tools necessary for them to transition into the workforce (BRAC, 2014a). BRAC employs a human-rights based approach to girls' education. Because the BRAC programs are both voluntary and non-formal, and have an explicit aim of promoting social change and human rights activism, they fit bot Bajaj (2011) and Tibbitts (2017) definition of the kind of programs that fall under the transformation model.

### **BRAC: Empowerment and Livelihood Program for Adolescent Girls**

BRAC has developed an Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA) Program for both in - and out-of-school adolescent girls operating in six countries: Uganda, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Bangladesh, Liberia and South Sudan (BRAC, 2014b). This program serves as the

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impetus for this study. It focuses on two areas: the provision of life skills education (personal and social competencies) and the provision of livelihood skills/vocational training. ELA began in Bangladesh in 1993 and was later scaled up and tailored to countries in Africa (more emphasis on financial literacy, livelihoods and microfinance). ELA now operates in five sub-Saharan countries: Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. As of November 2015, there were almost “350,000 girl members and close to 11,000 clubs in all six countries” (BRAC USA, n.d., What We Do section, Empowering Adolescents). The programs are not school based but rather operate in the girls’ communities where they can reach girls who have dropped out of school. The program started as “safe spaces,” close to home, where girls can discuss with their peers in small groups, away from the family pressure and a male-centered society. These safe spaces gradually help dismantle the institutions of patriarchy from which so many girls come from. This illustrates Tibbitts’ (2017) frameworks of transformative methodologies that explicitly foster personal transformation.

The ELA program consists of 25-30 students, between the ages of 16-24 (Shahriar Sadat, personal communication, August 13, 2016). The program runs outside of normal school hours, and the girls meet five days per week with a female mentor. In addition to the hard skills, the program offers activities such as dancing, singing, and drama clubs. These sort of activities encourage positive behavioral changes amongst the girls (Bandiera et al., 2012, p. 7). Within this approach, HRE concentrates on the internationalization of human rights values and critical perspectives (Tibbitts, 2017). Thus in applying the human rights lens meaningfully in their own lives, the girls demonstrate new behavior in their personal domain (addressing unequal relations in the family). Among the girls who drop out of school, they first receive training on income-generating skills and some become mentors to the younger girls. The ELA clubs are able to

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socially and financially empower vulnerable adolescent girls (BRAC, 2014b). For younger girls, there's a lot of emphasis on basic financial literacy and beliefs around money and savings. By mid-teens, girls become more empowered to learn about financial skills building, including acquiring micro credit loans to start their own businesses.

Furthermore, social empowerment is a key aspect of the transformation model, because it gives girls the confidence they need to develop a critical consciousness regarding their surrounding; it makes them aware of their rights and take action in their personal sphere by engaging in long-term social change efforts. Through training on gender issues, health, reproductive rights, girls learn the importance of staying in school and avoiding early marriage and pregnancy (BRAC, 2014b). Through learning how to earn and save, business planning, and budget management, girls in Bangladesh experience intrinsic empowerment, through increased self-confidence and capacity for taking action to reduce their internalized oppression. Loans are offered to girls in terms of micro-finance that is inherently empowering. Social empowerment cannot take place without financial empowerment, because without it, young girls in Bangladesh do not exercise control over their own lives (BRAC, 2014b). Both financial and social empowerment provides girls with agency and capabilities – both of which are an essential component of the transformation process (Sen, 1999; Bajaj, 2009).

The ELA program offers girls in Bangladesh an opportunity to discover their full potential through mentorship, health education, and financial literacy. Because of the program's success it has been introduced in many other countries. According to BRAC (2014a), the country models are pretty similar, as girls in these developing countries face similar life trajectories. In Uganda, for example, girls are struggling with labor force constraints coupled with challenges of early marriage and early pregnancy that make it harder for them to seek financial empowerment

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(Bandiera et al., 2012). Teen age pregnancy is estimated at 30 % (BRAC, 2014b), and exposure to STDs and HIV infection are at all times high. These are barriers for girls to access school. Lack of job opportunities push girls to get married early and have children, increasing their dependency on men. This can be reduced by proving that girls can be financially empowered and influence their own life decisions (Bandiera et al., 2012). This will also have a ripple effects on younger girls who are facing the same constraints.

For example, a randomized evaluation of BRAC's ELA program in Uganda have shown that over a two-year period, among a cohort where teen pregnancy rates are in the range of 10 to 12 percent, pregnancy rates were 20 to 25 percent lower in Ugandan villages with an ELA program versus a control sample from similarly situated villages without an ELA program (Bardiera et al., 2012). The intervention sample included girls in the village who did not even take part in the program, suggesting a significant spillover effect of family planning knowledge imparted in the ELA training (BRAC, 2014b). Bandiera et al. (2012) concluded that the program had a very strong positive impacts on economic, health and agency outcomes for the girls: increased participation in income-producing activities by 35%; self-reported condom use by those who were sexually active increased by 50%, pregnancy rates dropped by 26%; and there was a 76% reduction in adolescent girls reporting having had sex against their will during the past year (Bandiera et al., 2012). Most importantly, the ELA program demonstrates using proxies of wealth, self-confidence, and empowerment as ways to transform the lives of adolescent girls.

Within this ELA program, the concept of capabilities was prominent. For example, in Uganda, gender empowerment is higher amongst girls who have been a part of the ELA program. The girls who have gone through the program in Uganda believe that women should be

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given the opportunity to realize their potential, and their attitudes were neutral in terms of gender related tasks. Through training in livelihood skills, vocational skills, and microfinance, the ELA program illustrates that if given the tools, adolescent girls in Bangladesh can improve the quality of their life.

### **BRAC: Aflatoun**

Similar to ELA, BRAC's Aflatoun program has had a huge impact in the lives of adolescent girls in Bangladesh. The word 'Aflatoun' has an Arabic origin and means 'explorer' (BRAC, 2016). The concept of Aflatoun was initiated in India. Currently, the concept is put in place in several countries across the globe after establishing its secretariat in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Aflatoun international's vision is to "socially and economically empower children who act as agents of change in their own lives for a more equitable world" (Aflatoun International, 2015).

In 2008, BRAC embedded the concept of Aflatoun in its non-formal primary education. The main objective of Aflatoun is to teach the children about social values and their rights and responsibilities coupled with basic financial education to empower them to become agents of change (BRAC, 2016). The core objective is to facilitate the inclusion of Child Social and Financial Education into formal and informal education systems and recognition of children's rights. In the context of Bangladesh, the curriculum is centered around rights to financial literacy. The class consists of children between the ages of 6 to 14 (Nishat Chowdhury, personal communication, August 2016). The curriculum is taught in Bangla and geared toward the teachings of local culture, an essential component of Bajaj's (2008) critical pedagogy. One of the core components of the program is to ensure that children are passing the messages along to children in their own communities. In this program, the focus is on five core components: 1)

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Personal understanding and exploration, 2) Rights and responsibilities, 3) Savings and spending, 3) Planning and budgeting, 5) Child social entrepreneurship. For the purpose of this study, the first two concepts have been selected for further study.

Personal understanding and exploration mainly focuses on children's ability to understand the kinds of rights they each have as human beings. This is critical to children who come from marginalized and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The workbooks for the program are written by keeping in mind the concept of uniqueness and differences, respect for others, and self-exploration through understanding feelings (BRAC, 2016). Using various instruction methods, the program has had a significant increase in children being more aware of their rights, responsibilities, and social issues. This program places an emphasis on building a community that includes parents, community members, and their teachers and mentors. This is important because parents need to feel that they are a part of the process, and by involving them, they too become aware of human rights.

With regards to rights and responsibilities, the program places an emphasis on local understanding of the content that are being taught using financial concepts. This idea of using local context is critical to Bajaj (2008) where the goal is "the transformation of educational content, structure, and pedagogy to address direct and structural forms of violence at all levels" (Bajaj, 2008, p. 135). This program serves as a response to various forms of structural violence that takes place in Bangladeshi societies, specifically in the most rural areas. If we are teaching students in a rural village in Bangladesh about children's rights and obligations where their basic rights may not be guaranteed by a State like Bangladesh, then we immediately fail to create "the transformative agency" that critical education seeks to achieve. A more context dependent approach would introduce the Bangladeshi students to issues of structural violence within the

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country, such as corruption, political instability, climate change, etc. In Aflatoun, the concept of advocacy is prominent from a very early stage. Students go out in the field and talk to their communities about the importance of voting and understanding where they have allies and leaders who care about girls' empowerment and prioritize education for both girls and boys (Nishat Chowdhury, personal communication, August 2016). This alternative approach uses the human rights values to inform the students about the larger systematic issues at play, and how they can become an active member of their community to combat those issues using social empowerment.

This is a process that development practitioners often skip – informing students in third world countries about rights does not necessarily mean that they will become activists within a day and would immediately hold the Bangladeshi government accountable for the rights enshrined in the various Covenants. Therefore, the impact of the Aflatoun program in Bangladeshi girls was very significant, particularly where it promotes child rights and increased self-esteem. The program provides girls with the opportunity to understand their local context and see past their existing social realities.

Through both of these programs, BRAC is reaching more and more marginalized girls, who otherwise would not have an opportunity to receive an education that would be beneficial for them. BRAC is one of those organizations that is carrying out the transformation-activism model through a wider strategy of leadership and capacity building. These programs share a common goal to encourage learners to take action to reduce human rights violations. Through the HRE framework, the programs are organizing to review local conditions and to self-organize for change. The ELA clubs serve this purpose by fostering an analysis of human rights issues, and

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the Aflatoun program by encouraging youth to mobilize and raise awareness human rights and social issues that are close to home.

Education alone cannot change the larger structure that fail so many of these girls, but education is an end in itself. Non-formal HRE is usually carried out by civil society organizations that are explicitly oriented toward the framework of human rights. The voluntary participation of these girls in both of these non-formal programs create an ideal circumstance for fostering activism – one that’s fueled by their own personal interests. The self-selection of persons into HRE also suggests that the human rights messages are being internalized by the learners, and the potential for them to apply the values in ways that are personally meaningful to them (Tibbitts, 2017). Both the BRAC’s programs embody the transformative education proposed by Bajaj (2009) and Tibbitts (2002). Tibbitts (2017) points out that programs that are geared toward marginalized groups, such as women embody the HRE transformation model. Advocacy for girls’ education, leadership, and empowerment are the key components of these two programs. Through its’ non-formal programs, BRAC is helping girls realize their human right to full development. It’s also proving to them that even if they’re not in schools; they’re able to start the process of personal transformation by challenging how society views the traditional roles of girls, and that in and of itself is empowering.

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECCOMMENDATIONS**

### **Discussion**

A human rights based approach to education can be a truly transformative experience for women and girls in Bangladesh. A case for human rights education extends beyond individual to the nations and society. The most visible impact is the return of investment on girls education, in fact a 2009 CARE report shows that “in the developing world, the rate of return on education



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investments for girls is greater than any other investments” (p. 7). The two BRAC programs demonstrate that through their methods of teaching and empowering young girls in a non-formal education setting, they’re reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized population. UNESCO’s (2010) Education for All Global Monitoring Report highlights that governments are failing to address the root causes of marginalization in education because they fail to link poverty with gender inequity, language discrimination, location, and other barriers to education. Human rights education starts to address some of those root causes by encouraging participants to be critical of the status quo.

However, in the context of Bangladesh, such critical reflections may come with a high price for questioning patriarchal norms that subjugate women and girls. These kinds of reflections are necessary and can be done in safe spaces and in communities there’s an environment to support girls’ expectation and imaginations to see the change they can make in their communities (CARE, 2009, p. 12). The two programs highlighted in this study provide the enabling environment for girls to reflect on their social realities. BRAC’s make the educational experiences of these girls most impactful in two ways: 1) it reaffirms to the girls that they have the capabilities to accomplish their future goals despite their socioeconomic constraints; and 2) it allows them to examine their social conditions and experience personal transformation through activism and empowerment. Because most of these girls are born into traditional and patriarchal societies, the ideas of empowerment and capabilities are not woven into them as they move from childhood to adolescent. Education, formal or non-formal, provides them with opportunities that they may not have been exposed to otherwise.

Education cannot transform girls without transforming their context, which is often a gradual process. At BRAC ELA clubs, young girls are given the tools to actualize leadership and

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empowerment which speaks to Bajaj's (2009) transformative agency, "allowing them to "respond to schooling in ways that express individual and collective action toward positive social change" (p. 552). BRAC's does this by combining life skills and vocational skills training to adolescent girls, so they can break out of the cycle of poverty and examine the traditional gender roles that have systematically kept them out of owning a business or working to provide for themselves and their families. Through economic and financial empowerment, adolescent girls are developing their capabilities (Sen, 1999) and are being part of the wider social movement to promote the equality of women.

At Aflatoun, young women learn the value of leadership and act as agents of change for a more equitable future. The program is right-based and learner-centered and offers a unique blend of soft skills and financial literacy and enterprise education. The program allows young girls to explore their own identities and talents as a first step to building their own self-confidence, emotional awareness, and empathy. The important aspect of this program is that they place an emphasis on local context. The program allows young girls to start their own social enterprises, and that is key to the empowerment process.

These non-formal educational programs have a transformational impact in communities. They start to present solutions to challenge the social and cultural norms that deter girls from social, political, and economic advancement. Using human rights based approach to education, both of the programs demonstrate that if we can intervene in this critical phase of a girls' life, then it can have a huge impact in the decisions they make. It is crucial for girls to be making informed decisions. Through human rights education, a young girl starts to understand that her decisions matter in her own life and believes that by acting on her decisions she can influence both her destiny and that of the others.

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### **Conclusion**

What the two programs have in common is simple – using human rights based approach education, both of these programs assure that girls embody the values and attitude associated with human right education. BRAC is reaching the marginalized population of Bangladesh. Marginalization in education matters at so many levels in education because it puts people at a disadvantage and “these disadvantages are rooted in deeply ingrained social, economic and political processes, and unequal power relationships – and they are sustained by political indifference” (UNESCO, 2010). Despite signing onto the international human right treaties, the government of Bangladesh is marginalizing a large section of its’ society.

As highlighted elsewhere, adolescence is a time of heightened vulnerability for girls, especially if their lives can easily be disrupted by social, economic, and political conditions in which they live and function in. The literature review reveals that while there are various models of human rights education that speak to women’s empowerment in general and ways to achieve them, much of the discussion defines it from a conceptual perspective. Empowerment can not take place without understanding the social realities of the girls we are trying to “save.” Girls’ development and empowerment are integral to the success of the two programs highlighted in the study. BRAC’s programs are able to provide the girls with their own voices, and allow them to demonstrate a strong sense of self.

The key to achieving true transformation starts with agency. This points to the relationship between student agency and empowerment:

Attention to student agency and the ways that innovative educational initiatives enable such resistance can greatly inform scholars and practitioners of international and comparative education who seek to understand the increasingly

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complex interplay between school and society (Bajaj, 2009, p. 255)

Both Bajaj (2009) & Tibbitts (2002) research suggest that the role of civil society organizations in promoting non-formal education as alternatives to government schools are beneficial for the most vulnerable population. These programs fall under the activism-transformation model because they're oriented towards marginalize groups, and youth.

In Bangladesh, the institution of patriarchy has been protected for far too long – mainly because of a traditional political system that reinforces the notion of girls being less equal than men. Secondary/post-secondary education is critical for young girls in Bangladesh because at this age, they make many decisions that affect their career and livelihoods. These programs have the potential to empower girls and give them leadership opportunities. Girls can not begin to experience greater leadership in their communities without being empowered. Both of these must take place in parallel, and therefore successful programming should have all components of empowerment that includes agency, structure, and relationships. Human rights education programs begin to address all three components of this frameworks, and therefore in the following section, I have listed a set of recommendations for the government of Bangladesh to consider as they take steps to achieving the right to education.

### **Recommendations**

Many civil society and non-profit organization have yet to use the language of human rights education in order to describe their policies and programs. Transformative education as a key aspect of HRE is still at its' early stages. Very few programs have been thoroughly implemented and evaluated to show the potential of empowerment and transformation. The following are a set of recommendations that are beneficial to both the nonprofit organizations

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and the Bangladesh ministry of education to see the values and impact of a transformative approach to girls' education:

### a. Starting from the top

This may not be a popular approach, but in developing-country context, in order to see real change take place, the process needs to start from the top. Women have seats at the table, meaning that they hold positions of power. Since 1971, Bangladesh has had two women Prime ministers. However, very little progress has been made because the women have internalized the deeply entrenched views around gender equity. Ministers, and education secretaries need to believe and see the value of a girls' education. The non-formal sector is doing important work, but they need to engage with government schools. Government schools are where they can reach the parents and the community in which these girls live and function. Buy-in from the community is also important because it makes them feel like they are also a part of the process. Receiving input and feedback in the educational model is also key because it will have emphasis from a local context. This also allows the community to share responsibility and accountability in making sure that their children are receiving a quality education. This was evident in BRAC's ELA program that invited parents and the community members to participate in clubs. There needs to be a concerted effort in real mindset change amongst all the players involved (including government, families, and communities). Traditions can change and must change in order to adapt to the changing modern society. However, it is a gradual process and it will take commitment of the learners and their families.

### b. Teacher training

Teacher training is an important aspect of human rights education and I believe this is a starting point. As Tibbitts (2017) states that in order for transformation-activism to take place,

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teachers need to demonstrate gender equity in their classrooms. This is important because it helps dismantle damaging stereotypes and myths about girls. Girls should not be taught to select an educational path because its more convenient or simply because they're girls. Teachers need to treat girls and boys equally and demonstrate human rights values and norms in the classrooms. Tibbitts (2015) conducted research in Turkey to show the transformative impacts of carrying out human rights education on the trainers themselves: in their identity; knowledge, skills, and attitudes; and behaviors in their family and in the workplace.

In order to promote more teacher training in the field of HRE, BRAC university in Bangladesh has put together a Masters program to train professionals in human rights education. This initiative was influenced by the latest set of SDGs. The Sustainable Development Goals, approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2015, outlines the broad global development objectives to be achieved over the next fifteen years. The objective BRAC's MA Program is to encapsulate the essence of the qualified targets of the Goal 16 from South Asian perspective and promote its core objectives, which is to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels' (Shahriar Sadat, Personal Communication, February 2017). The program has been designed to reflect the targets of the Goal 16 and thereby prepare professionals who would give effect to those specific targets in an attempt to create a sustainable society.

### c. Role models

Almost all of BRAC programs recruit female to be teachers and mentors for their programs. This is important because more female role models and mentors are needed to help boys and girls to dismantle the gender stereotypes. This study highlights the value of women role

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models and the concept of leading by examples. BRAC hired and trained teaching staff of more than 70% female. Another critical component of their programming was to ensure that the teachers were from the community who understand the culture and are aware and familiar with the conditions of the girls who go through BRAC programs. This is helpful because teachers also act as mentors, guardian, peers and friends. Many of these girls are afraid to talk to their families, so they're able to build a rapport with their teachers.

Through an evaluation of BRAC's program, researchers found that BRAC female teachers gave priority to social concerns, followed by financial, intellectual, and prestige. It was important to have teachers who instill values in girls that help to dismantle the negative stereotypes about what a woman is and capable of doing. Many of them became BRAC teachers, simply because they wanted to break this stereotype (Sweetser, 1997).

### d. Parents

An important stakeholder in promoting education for girls are parents because "at the end of the day, it is the mother and father who decide to keep girls in schools, at least secondary school" (Van Oranje, 2015). As it's already been shown that in traditional societies, role of girls are dictated by the patriarchal structure of the society. Both mother and father play a unique role with regards to girls' empowerment. As stated in the introduction, a mother agreed to get her 14 year-old married because she simply believed that her daughter should lead the kind of life she had. Through BRAC's ELA programs, parents are invited prior to the clubs, so they are informed on club activities and feel like they're a part of the whole process. Additionally, it gives them a piece of mind knowing that their girls are safe. Fathers also play a very different role in a highly patriarchal society, where they tend to control major decisions for their families. In human rights education, role of father and men in general have been understudied.

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## e. Role of Men

Men and boys often hold both formal and informal leadership positions – as religious leaders, clan heads, head of households, among others. They can and should act as agents of change and can help shape gender perceptions of their peers. It is imperative to work with men because often time boys and men are barriers to girls’ empowerment and emancipatory learning. Engaging with them will help them recognize their power and influence, as well as make them aware of gender marginalization. We must also keep in mind them that man and boys can also play a role in resisting change when it comes to gender equality. By creating a space for them to reflect on those issues, can help them confront harmful gender practices.

When boys begin to see the relationships and equality, these will automatically be woven into them. For example, in Tamil Nadu, the HRI institute found that when boys were taking human rights courses, they stood up for their sisters at home. They questioned why their sisters were not allowed to go to school or play outside or do all the kind of things that the boys themselves can do. The boys started to realize that the existing gender norms negatively affected them by forcing them to conform to particular societal standards. They started rejecting the traditional gender roles that place women and girls below men in social status.

One thing I hope that this paper has added to the field is that there are no simple solutions to promoting girls’ empowerment and agency. This study has described some of the key concepts of HRE and ways in which we can begin to start addressing the issues and the systems that fail so many girls in Bangladesh and around the world. With more attention to their lives and social conditions, Human Rights Education can truly be a transforming force for 14 million adolescent girls in Bangladesh.



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