

Mapping the Human Rights Issues from the Perspective of Students in a Private Religious-based University: A Case Study

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Abstract- Human rights education had been a prominent matter in human rights. However, when it comes to religious institution, the topic remains underexplored. This study explores the topics of human rights among college level participants who are currently studying in a religious-based higher institution. The aim of the study is to measure the depth of knowledge of students in the religious based higher educational institution. Twelve participants joined the study in a form of focus group discussion exchanging ideas on human rights through ten semi-structured questions. The result indicates that while most participants possess a substantial level of knowledge, the religious belief of the institution conflicts with certain individual rights that they believe in. This result may be used as a baseline to help religious-based educational body especially in higher education to relook on how human rights education being taught in their respective institution including expanding the research beyond students' perspective.

Keywords: Human Rights, Religious Studies, Education, Curriculum, Focus Group Discussion.

I. INTRODUCTION

The topic of human rights has become increasingly prominent in society worldwide. In the past, human rights issue was isolated to the world of academia, policy makers, and legal professionals. However, nowadays the conversation about human rights is discussed by the common public. Phrases like equality, inclusiveness, justice, and fairness are spoken in many parts of society. The rise of awareness in human rights not only elevated the importance of human rights in society but also introduced different points of view that shows how complex the topic of human rights is. Historically, religion and human rights are perceived as complementary forces that strive to promote the dignity and wellbeing of individuals. Most, if not all religious teachings emphasize the idea of compassion, justice, and the value of human being as a being. These principles inherently are the core of human rights.

However, in a closer examination, religion and human rights may not always be in perfect harmony with each other. Especially in the recent geopolitical situation across the world, the tension between human rights and religious beliefs seems to be becoming more prominent. The issue of Christian nationalism in United States for example, is the most recent example of how religious belief combined with political power had deprived the rights of other groups of society (Smidt, 2024).

One of the areas that caught the interest of researchers is in Human Rights Education (HRE). Particularly, on how human rights are being taught in religious institutions. Present knowledge indicates that education is effective for expanding the knowledge of human rights (Kingston, 2014). Education is instrumental in helping individuals to gain a deeper understanding of their fundamental rights and the mechanism available to protect them. As a result, HRE has been integrated into curricula at different levels of educational stage.

In the study of Saikia and Padmavathy (2022), it showed that the level of human rights awareness in university students is influenced by a variety of factors, including how the institution perceived their priorities, the design of the curriculum, and culture. Human rights topics are indeed discussed in higher education. However, the coverage is uneven and fragmented. At its present state, HRE tends to be isolated into the disciplines such as law, philosophy, history, and political science (Lagoutte & Soskin, 2018); with law being the most prominent field in discussing human rights (Leyh, 2021). As a result, research on human rights remains predominant in the field of social science (Melanie, 2024), leaving other disciplines underrepresented.

Therefore, when it comes to the context of HRE in higher education, the need for examination of it in the religious institution is critical in which this research seeks to address some of the gap in the area, by exploring the knowledge and perspectives of university students in a Christian-based institution. First, the study would like to investigate in depth the knowledge of human rights among students studying in such institutions. Second, how do these students perceive human rights, and what worldview informs their understanding. Third, what role does their institution play in shaping their views on human rights.

By exploring these questions, the research is aiming to shed light on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by religious-based institutions in promoting HRE. By doing so, the research is also hoping to contribute to the broader field on the intersection of religion and human rights and the dynamic relationship of the two.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Human Rights Education (HRE) has been defined as the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, and values needed to claim and exercise rights and respect for the rights of others (Vogelfanger, 2021). This definition pictures education as a transformative tool for fostering equality and addressing disparities across social classes, gender, disabilities, and other forms of discrimination (Hantzopoulos & Bajaj, 2021). Therefore, HRE aims to instill not only understanding and knowledge but also a change in attitudes and the development of practical skills

to advocate for and protect human rights (Smith, 2013). In short, the present knowledge on HRE perceives education as the bridge for human rights change and growth. However, religion, especially religious education, remains lacking to be addressed in current available literature. Since, while scholars like Smith (2013) discuss the global impact of HRE in instilling change in attitude beyond understanding and knowledge, religion seems to have little place in these discussions.

On the empirical level, studies in regards with HRE have shown both success and further challenges that remain unresolved. Evidence from Europe indicates that HRE continues to evolve with many areas that continue to need to grow. For example, in Georgia, HRE had been a challenging matter to be implemented due to the lack in organic understanding of human rights in popular culture (Gugeshashvili, 2021). This finding is in contrast with findings from Greece that show HRE improves school participation and empathy among students, even though long term effect still requires long term studies (Stavrou et al., 2023). From a different perspective, De Kort (2017) examines social science textbooks in the Netherlands and finds a lack of basic human rights content, underscoring the need for better integration of HRE into standard curricula. When it comes to the continent of the Americas, study from United States had indicated that teaching HRE alone, doesn't lead to transformative social change (Salmon-Letelier & Russell, 2020). Conversely, research from Costa Rica identify that the methods in teaching HRE is the predictor for positive response to HRE (Washburn-Madrigal & Chaves-Salas, 2022). As it comes to Asia, studies by Devonald et al., (2021) indicates that humanitarian efforts among refugee populations, such as the Mekanis in Jordan and Rohingyas in Bangladesh, demonstrate the critical role of HRE in shaping adolescents' understanding of their individual rights.

To synthesize these literatures, three main point can be drawn as a conclusion. First, HRE is complex and context-dependent, requiring deeper study. Second, current understanding in higher education is practical, focusing on applying human rights principles. Third, integration faces barriers like cultural relevance and sustaining long-term impact is critical. To advance as a tool for social responsibility and human rights respect, HRE must embed itself in diverse social structures, including religious communities. This research explores integrating HRE into religious-based higher education institutions.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. **Focus Group Discussion:** The focus group discussion (FGD) methodology was selected as the primary data collection tools for this study as Breen (2008) argues, FGD often utilized in capturing complex topics that cannot be adequately covered in one-on-one interviews.
2. **Participants:** Volunteer sampling of twelve senior students from a religious-based university in their final semester was recruited for the FGD. As a senior, it is assumed that each of the participants are well informed on the dynamics of the school, including how the topic of human rights is dealt in the classroom. The participant consisted of eight female and four male students,

representing a diverse range of nationalities: six participants were from Thailand, two from Myanmar, and one each from Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and China. These participants represent various religious beliefs, include Buddhism, Agnostics, and different denominations of Christianity.

3. **Research Locale:** This study was conducted at a private Christian higher education institution owned and operated by a specific Christian denomination. The university maintains a strong religious orientation, with most faculty members subscribed faithfully to the denomination's doctrines. The institution maintains a strong religious practice on campus, including requiring all students to attend the religious activities of the campus. Attendance at these services is recorded and becoming part of graduation requirement, with minimum attendance percentages affecting both degree completion and academic honours.
4. **Data Collection Process:** The study received ethical approval from the university's IRB before data collection, and participants were informed of the research objectives, procedures, and their rights, providing written consent two weeks prior. On the scheduled date, all participants attended the focus group, arranged in a semi-circle to foster engagement, with a moderator guiding the discussion using ten semi-structured questions on human rights, a second moderator observing body language, and two voice recorders ensuring data accuracy. Participants were reminded of confidentiality and their freedom to express opinions without judgment. The hour-long session concluded with a debriefing, where no concerns were raised.
5. **Analysis Techniques:** The audio recordings from the focus group discussion were transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were analyzed using Atlas.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, to identify recurring patterns and overarching themes. The analysis was conducted independently by two researchers to ensure rigor and reliability.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discussion Dynamics

The focus group discussion began slowly, with participants initially hesitant to share their thoughts. Constant probing from the moderator was often needed to stimulate a livelier discussion since participants responses were relatively passive. Throughout the entire group discussion session, the moderator frequently probed and encouraged participants to express their views, which gradually led to increased engagement as the session progressed.

Furthermore, what is quite noticeable among the participants is the lack of contrasting views among them. All participants avoid any form of disagreement view from one another, and instead the discussion was built up to support each other's point of view.

In terms of participation, students from Myanmar contributed the least to the discussion, displaying noticeable reluctance. Both moderators noticed that they are more careful in expressing their answers and waiting for the rest of the group to put out their opinion before providing a

contribution to the discussion. An obvious gesture of scanning the room for safety can be seen from them, even though no verbal clarification was given on the reason for the behavior. The discussion lasted 60 minutes and generated 6,339 words of transcribed data. While the volume of data was lower than anticipated, several meaningful themes emerged from the analysis.

Theme 1: Knowledge of Human Rights

The findings revealed that participants possessed substantial understanding of human rights principles, demonstrating the ability to critically analyze rights issues across individual, institutional, and structural levels even though not optimum. Most participants were able to define what human rights are, beyond textbook ideas.

When the moderator probes into details of human rights, participants elaborated several more details that expressed specific principles in human rights that participants are familiar with. As researchers examined the transcribed manuscript, these sub-theme on the concept of human rights emerged consistently from many of the participants.

Sub-Theme 1: Freedom

One of the most prominent sub-themes of human rights that is discussed by the participants is the concept of freedom. Participants uniformly defined it as the absence of oppression and the undisturbed space from restrictions. Furthermore, participants continue to show the depth of their understanding of human rights that also carries practical relevance.

Sub-Theme 2: Individuality

Another overarching sub-theme emerging from the discussion is individuality. While participants expressed this concept concisely, it remained a consistent thread throughout. However, several participant statements revealed how societal norms, particularly religious beliefs, often constrain these individual differences.

Sub Theme 3: Equality

Another prominent theme emerging from the focus group discussions was equality. Participants identified multiple forms of inequality prevalent in contemporary society, including wealth disparities, educational inequities, gender discrimination, and political imbalances.

Theme 2: Multiple Areas of Human Rights

Throughout the discussion, a robust expression of participants was able to be obtained in different areas of human rights. Most participants were able to identify, express, and elaborate certain aspects of society from the perspective of human rights. The details of these expressions are described below:

Sub Theme 1: Educational Rights

The first aspect of human rights discussed by most participants concerned educational rights. Most of the discussion focused on every individual's opportunity to access education. Equality was briefly mentioned as part of the educational rights discussion as well. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of non-discriminatory treatment for specific groups - particularly refugees and LGBTQ communities - who, in their perspective, often face unfair treatment in education.

Sub Theme 2: Rights to Work

The second sub- theme emerging from discussions was the universal right to livelihood. Participants focused on several key aspects of employment rights: equitable access to jobs, gender-equal opportunities, and fair treatment of workers. These discussions emphasized non-discriminatory practices across all dimensions of work.

Sub Theme 3: Religious Freedom

The discussion also addressed religious freedom, presenting unique dynamics within this study's context. Conducted in a religious-based institution, participants shared perspectives on religious practice within the campus environment. Most noted that religious organizations often interpret freedom solely through their own doctrinal lens, frequently overlooking individuals' rights to differing religious expressions. This view is enhanced by the fact that participants are students in the religious-based institution.

Sub Theme 4: Freedom of Speech

Similarly, when discussing the issue of freedom of speech, participants shared their perspectives based on their experiences within their educational institutions and their home countries. Some described how freedom of speech had been restricted or suppressed in these environments. On a personal level, several participants expressed that, even within their institutions, their right to voice their opinions was not always granted without facing backlash or consequences.

Sub Theme 5: Children Rights

In discussing children, most participants were passionate about sharing about how important the rights of children are to be protected. The discussion was focused on the fact that many children's rights are being neglected by their own caretaker, in this context, their family. Such negligence has caused unnecessary harm to children and makes them feel unsafe.

Sub Theme 6: Gender Rights

When it comes to gender rights, participants in the discussion expressed that there is an issue with gender but a substantial detail on the exact problem of the matter was not expressed explicitly. The only expression that was captured in the discussion focused on the fact that male and female are treated different in the society.

It is worth notice that during the discussion on gender, none of the male participants expressed any disagreement on any thoughts that was shared by their female counterparts. It is not known whether

the agreeableness of the male counterpart is due to approval to the idea, or reluctance on expressing their opinion on the matters.

Sub Theme 7: Government

Additionally, the discussion was able to bring up current problems in the issue of human rights that is committed by the official representation of the government. Some form of power abuse was expressed by the participant, in acknowledging that their government was not effective and fair enough in implementing a fairer form of policy towards their citizens.

A summary of the result is visualized in figure 1 shown below:

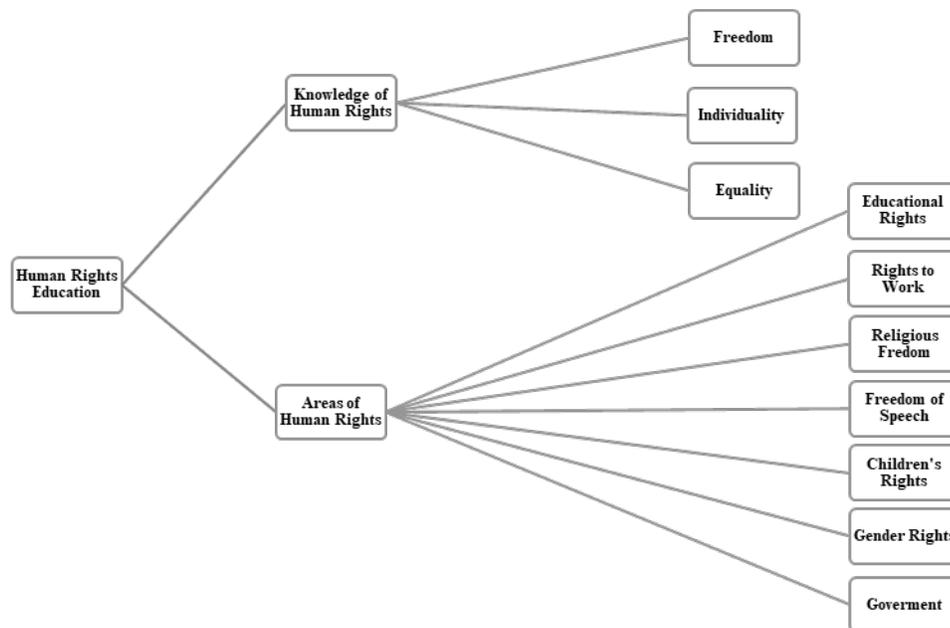


Figure 1: Summary of Themes of the FGD in Human Rights

The findings of this study offer a critical examination of human rights awareness among students in a religious-based higher educational institutions, presenting a dataset that reveals both the strengths and limitations of their understanding. The participants, being senior students, occupy a unique position within their academic journey, having undergone years of structured learning that should theoretically equip them with a sophisticated grasp of human rights issues. However, the results indicate a troubling paradox: while these students exhibit a general awareness of human

rights principles, their comprehension remains shallow and lacks the depth necessary for meaningful engagement with complex human rights dilemmas.

This study indicates that the intersection of religious doctrine and human rights presents a complex and often contentious dynamic, one that requires careful navigation in educational settings. Furthermore, the study's findings highlight the inherent challenges of promoting human rights awareness in institutions where religious orthodoxy may conflict with progressive human rights ideals. This tension is not unique to the institution under study but reflects a broader global debate about the compatibility of religious values and universal human rights. In many religiously conservative environments, human rights discourse is perceived as a secular imposition that undermines traditional values. This perception creates a barrier to meaningful HRE, as students and educators alike may view human rights principles with suspicion or outright hostility. Addressing this barrier necessitates a pedagogical approach that respects religious identity while simultaneously fostering an appreciation for human rights as non-negotiable ethical standards.

The absence of robust HRE in the participants' academic experience raises concerns about their preparedness to engage with human rights issues beyond the university setting. Human rights education is not merely an academic exercise; it is a foundational component of democratic citizenship, equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills to advocate for justice and hold power to account. Without this foundation, students risk graduating with a fragmented understanding of their rights and responsibilities, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation by authoritarian narratives or passive acceptance of injustice. This deficiency is particularly concerning in an era marked by rising authoritarianism, religious extremism, and systemic inequality, where an informed and active citizenry is essential to safeguarding democratic values. The findings resonate with existing scholarship on human rights education, particularly the work of Cargas and Mitoma (2019), who argue that the primary objective of HRE in higher education is to facilitate critical dialogue about the structural and systemic dimensions of human rights violations. The participants in this study demonstrated a superficial awareness of human rights issues but lacked the analytical framework to interrogate the power dynamics that sustain inequality and oppression. This limitation reflects a broader shortcoming in HRE pedagogy, which often prioritizes abstract principles over concrete applications.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study underscores the urgent need for religious higher educational institutions to prioritize human rights education as a core component of their curricula. The findings reveal a troubling disconnect between students' potential for critical engagement and the institutional barriers that hinder their development as informed advocates for justice. Addressing this gap requires a fundamental rethinking of pedagogical approaches, one that embraces human rights as both an academic discipline and a moral imperative. Future research should explore comparative models of HRE implementation in non-religious institutions, providing a broader framework for understanding best practices in diverse educational settings. Ultimately, the integration of HRE in

religious universities is not merely about compliance with global standards but about fostering a culture of empathy, critical inquiry, and ethical responsibility. By equipping students with a robust understanding of human rights, these institutions can empower them to challenge injustice, advocate for marginalized communities, and contribute to the creation of a more equitable world. The stakes could not be higher, for the failure to act today will reverberate through generations, shaping the future of human rights in ways we can scarcely afford to ignore.

Despite its sensitivity, religious-based institutions need to take a stronger action plan in tackling human rights issues in their educational plan and curriculum. This study manages to cover the perspective of students in a specific location upon their view and knowledge of human rights. Further research needs to explore the perspective of a larger view, that is to include the view of lecturers, administrators, and institutional stakeholders. Convergence of all the perspective will provide stronger empirical evidence on how human rights education need to be addressed in religious based institution.

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