

# **In our hands: human right as a way of life**

Human Rights Cities – a personal view

**Shulamith Koenig**

## **Chapter 10**

# **Our Freedoms**

*A Decade's Reflection*

*On The Advancement*

*Of Human Rights*

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Shulamith Koenig - is the recipient of the 2003 United Nations Award for Outstanding Achievements in the Field of Human Rights.

She is the Founding President of PDHRE, the People's Movement for Human Rights Learning –formerly known as- People's Decade for Human Rights Education- which she had founded in 1988 with the goal of generating --in the words of Nelson Mandela --a new political culture based on human rights— to enable women and men alike to participate as equals in the decision that determine their lives...--people belonging in community in dignity with others...--people moving from charity to dignity.

To that end, Shula had promoted the understanding of human rights learning at the community level as a strategy for human, social, economic and societal development. For that purpose she advocated, organized, and facilitated, in more the 60 countries, dialogue, and training to effect societal change through learning about human rights as a way of life...-- to enhance critical thinking and systemic analysis within a holistic human rights framework that leads to action for social justice...--for all to break through the vicious cycle of humiliation.

Shula worked successfully to have the UN declare a Decade for Human rights educations and develop international public policy to enhance these learning worldwide.

To demonstrate the practical values of the vision and mission of human rights she has initiated and facilitated the “Human Rights Cities” program, of which 18 are already in development. With her colleagues she is working to develop 30 human rights cities and create a new vocation: human rights learning at the community level, starting with 500 young community leaders to strengthen democracy as a delivery system for human rights.

With her colleagues she is developing a world wide campaign on transforming the patriarchal order to a human rights system through human rights learning.

For more then 20 years she worked as an industrial engineer. With her husband Jerry they manufactured water saving products for irrigation and water saving systems. She published numerous articles, training videos and manuals, and supervised the publication of Passport to Dignity –a comprehensive volume about the human rights of women. The recent 400 page Peoples' Report, argues the case for all people to know and claim human rights as a way of life.

She is married a, has three sons and four grandchildren and an award winning sculptor.

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### **Chapter 10**

#### **OUR FREEDOMS**

#### **A DECADE'S REFLECTION ON THE ADVANCEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

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Around the world a new phenomenon has begun to take form, spreading through the traditional villages of Latin America to the desert communities of Africa. Here, formally sheltered towns have discarded generations of custom in an effort to educate their citizens on the values of human rights. Human rights cities, as these areas have come to be known, have quickly grown in the past decade to become centers for human rights knowledge where citizens work together to build communities based on economic and social justice, equality and non-discrimination.

Maria Suarez is a human rights educator from Costa Rica who has spent countless years teaching women that rights are a realization of people's hopes and expectations. Recently, Suarez led a workshop made up of women from various Central American communities where she stressed the value of human dignity and the tools needed for women to achieve equality and overcome discrimination. During the session, an elderly woman was asked when her rights were initially violated. She replied that she was only thirteen years old when she was forced to marry the man who raped her. Certain Latin American custom allowed men who raped women to escape punishment if they married their victim. Later that day the same woman was asked when she first became aware of her human rights. She beamed with pride as she told the story of her return to school at age fifty-two to finish her education.

The successes of Maria Suarez's workshop have become increasingly recognised throughout African and Latin American communities and have led to a revolution among women demanding equal rights from men. In one village, women said to their husbands, 'Land is a human right.' The women received land. If communities across the world continue to embrace workshops of this nature, the culture of human rights can begin to reach even those who have previously been most sheltered.



# In our hands: human rights as a way of life

**Shulamith Koenig**

I find it difficult to take this journey, not being a lawyer or a human rights expert but, as some people call me, an ‘evangelist’ –hoping to communicate learning about human rights, the promise of human rights, to all women, men, youth and children around the world. I hope that, at least while you read these pages, you will agree with me that human rights provide a way of life, that guides us morally and politically, protected by law – a powerful tool for action. More than that, Irwin Cotler, the former Minister of Justice of Canada, says that human rights are a secular religion. Indeed, I will go further and call human rights ‘a political ideology’. Thus, education and learning about this ideology is ‘political education and learning’ a strategy for meaningful and lasting change.

To overcome social and economic disintegration around the world we need to promote, organise and implement human rights learning for social and economic transformation at all levels of society. We have no other option. And, to be allegorical: human rights are the banks of the river in which life flows freely – and when the floods come the knowledge about human rights empowers people to strengthen the banks of the river and be protected from harm.

Let me go back to my origins in Israel where much of my world view was formed, based on the idea of the sanctity of life. My parents, Polish Jews who came as teenagers to Israel, met and got married in what was recognised at the time as Palestine

In the early 1930s my father was working as an x-ray technician in the tuberculosis hospital in Safad – the city of the Kabala. The place from where the call for ‘Tikun Olam’ was launched, speaking of the responsibility of each one of us to mend the world. And mending the world it was for my parents. At that hospital where my father worked, labour unions were being organised. My father, a young man in his twenties, knew of Arab women who were poorly paid, sitting in the basement of the hospital washing dirty linen. Being a true socialist and speaking Arabic he started organising these women to join the union. But soon after the union organisers called him to face a small tribunal that proclaimed: ‘Daniel, you must know that this is a Jewish labour movement, Arabs cannot join’. This story which I heard again and again as I was growing up became my metaphor of the promise we made to the world and missed. It shaped the narrative of my life.

My father never joined the labour union. And for years to come he told those he employed the ‘story of the union in Safad’. He paid his workers well, but kept them from joining. Both he and my mother, who also worked with Arab women, taught me that morality is more important than ethnicity or nationality. In later years this and other similar ‘stories’ walked along with me as I was learning to understand human rights as a way of life – a vision and mission that enables us to break through the vicious cycle of humiliation. It is here where I take great pride in quoting my friend and mentor Professor Upendra Baxi from his book ‘Inhuman Wrongs and Human Rights’:

‘No single phrase in recent human history has been more privileged to bear the mission and burden of human destiny than [the phrase] “human rights” – the greatest gift of classical and contemporary human thought is the notion of human rights. Indeed, more than any other moral language available to us at this time in history, the language of human rights is able to expose the immorality and barbarism of the modern face of power.’

As the gap of dignity between Arabs and Jews grew into an abyss and deep into the consciousness of Jews in Israel, accepting this gap as an unavoidable reality, I worked with Arab men and women calling on Jews to acknowledge Arabs as full human beings and to whom we owe a debt of human rights – the same as the debt of human rights the world owes to Jews.

These were the first steps I took as a human rights educator.

As I embark daily on this road I remind myself that a true human rights educator is a person, a woman or a man, who is capable of evoking systemic analysis, critical thinking and a dialogue about political, civil, economic, social and cultural concerns with a fully comprehensive gender perspective, at the community level, guided by the human rights framework that leads to action. This is a tall order both for the educator and the learner. Yet, several communities around the world are developing human rights cities where the call of Nelson Mandela to develop a new political culture based on human rights is being investigated and implemented by, for and with the people, with everyone becoming a mentor and a monitor.

The assumptions being made in developing human rights cities are:

- every woman, man, youth and child knows when injustice and/or justice are present;
- every human being expects to live in dignity and away from humiliation;
- the holistic human rights framework provides a viable guideline for economic, social and human development;
- millions of people will be born and die and will never know that they are owners of human rights which they can claim as their own to break through the vicious cycle of humiliation;
- human rights represent not only a litany of violation but a strategy for societal development;
- people belong in dignity in community with others, women and men alike;
- if we are to achieve economic and social justice no one human right can violate another and all conflicts must be solved within the human rights framework;
- democracy, to be true to its mission, must be a delivery system of human rights to all, in full equality and without discrimination;
- people can move power to human rights – moving from patriarchal verticality to human rights horizontality.

Analysis carried out by the World Bank, the Human Development Report and various United Nations documents calls attention to the ongoing abusive social disintegration around the world; and the absence of support systems in a world where people are searching for some meaning and secure forms of belonging. We all recall with much apprehension how communism destroyed the vision and mission of socialism and how now global capitalism is eroding democracy. Yet a miracle has happened in the last six decades: the careful articulation of human rights declaration, covenants, conventions and the many documents which drew their energy and social thoughts from both socialism and democracy and from thousands of years of human expectations and hopes. Together, they have endowed the people of the world and the future generations with an ideology removed from humiliation and towards dignity. This ideology is called human rights.

Against the background of these divergent pessimistic and optimistic historic memories, lost and found promises, premises and assumptions, human rights cities are being developed. Human rights cities are being conceived as a practical way for all people to learn the meaning of human rights to their lives and implement human rights as a way of life. As people in human rights cities are joining to chart the future of humanity, guided by the holistic vision of the human rights framework, they are effectively changing the world.

What is a human rights city? Imagine living in a society where all citizens learn about human rights and make a pledge to build a community based on economic and social justice, on equality and non-discrimination; where all women and men actively participate in the decisions that affect their daily lives guided by the human rights framework; where people have consciously internalised and socialised the holistic vision of human rights to overcome fear and impoverishment; a society that provides human security, access to food, housing, education, health care and work at liveable wages, sharing these resources with all citizens, not as a gift, but as the realisation of human rights. A human rights city is a practical, viable model that demonstrates that developing and living in such a society is possible.

As a message of hope, here are some voices from the human rights cities:

- ‘When I learned that education is a human right I learned that I must claim my human rights, so that in dignity I can support myself and my parents when they are older.’ (Child from human rights city – Nagpur, India)
- ‘If you know human rights, you know that health and food are included, and it makes me feel good for my family and all the people that this is not charity.’ (Women from human rights city – Thies, Senegal)
- ‘What we learned about human rights allowed us to reduce misunderstandings among ourselves. Before we married, women were looked at as slaves. Now we understand, we each have roles in the family. Women now understand they are equal, and men agree with it.’ (Man, human rights city – Kati, Mali)
- ‘We want human rights to be discussed in the newspapers, radio and television to motivate people to take actions for human rights for all the people in the city.’ (Women from human rights city Rosario – Argentina)

Two billion people live in cities today. Cities are a microcosm of a state with all its promises and troubles. Four billion people will live in cities within 15 to 20 years. With the multitudes of people and issues interacting and interrelating there are no inherent knowledge, support systems, or guidance as to how to live with one another in dignity and how practically to abide by moral values in today’s fast-changing and harsh world. The multi-plural realities of people within the information society and the growing number of people of which 50% are under 25 years old need urgently to be attended to, morally and politically. This is not about a Utopia. This is about hope!

In the human rights cities – often joined by the local authorities –inhabitants of the city, a wide array of organisations, stakeholders and law enforcement agencies, work together to devise and design a dialogue and learning programmes in the neighbourhoods. The purpose of these is to instil a sense of ownership of human rights as a way of life as relevant to people’s concerns. The city, its institutions, and its residents, as a complex social economic and political entity, become a model for citizens’ participation in their development. This process leads to the mapping and analysis of causes and symptoms of violations such as poverty and patriarchy and work to design ways and means to achieve well being in their city – human rights realisation.

Appropriate conflict resolution is an inevitable consequence of the learning process as women and men work to secure the sustainability of their community as a viable, creative, caring society.

Steering committees in the human rights cities representing public sector employees, religious groups, NGOs and community groups, those working on the issues of women, children, workers, indigenous peoples, poverty, education, food, housing, healthcare, environment and conflict resolution, and all other non-affiliated inhabitants, are joined by educators to design the process of learning and reflecting about the ownership of human rights as significant to the decision-making process.

In the human rights cities, communities enabled by learning about human rights as a way of life join to enhance, step-by-step, sustainable development, peace, economic and social justice and human security. Together they design actions that ensure that democracy is abiding by human rights principles, norms and standards, and that these are integrated in the policies that guide the life of the city. They work to strengthen activities that ensure community development and accountability. Individuals and groups take part in the action – every citizen a creative partner of sustainable change. And, as they identify needs, they adopt this inclusive framework, giving momentum to attain a better life for future generations.

After learning about the various human rights treaties that their government have ratified, an analysis with a gender perspective takes place to examine:

- The laws of the city. Do these abide by human rights?
- The policies that guide the life of the city. Are they guided by the obligations undertaken and commitments made?
- The relationships in the city, in the community and with the authorities. Are they developing a community guided by these principles?

To achieve these goals they create a vertical and horizontal progressive learning process. Step by step, neighbourhoods, schools, political, economic and social institutions, and NGOs, examine the human-rights framework relating it to their traditional beliefs, collective memory and aspirations with regard to environmental, economic and social justice issues and concerns. As agents of change, they learn to identify, mentor, monitor and document their needs and engage in one of the most important actions in the city: developing alternative participatory budgets progressively to realise the human rights needs of the community, thus moving power to human rights.

It is important to note that human rights learning and socialisation highlight the normative and empirical power of human rights as a tool in individual and collective efforts to address inequalities, injustices and abuses at home, in the workplace, in the streets, prisons, courts, and more. Even in well-recognised democratic societies, citizens and policy makers must learn to understand human rights and the obligations and the responsibilities they represent in a holistic and comprehensive way. In human rights cities people learn to enforce human rights effectively. They understand, as stated above, that this is the promise and responsibility that their governments have undertaken when ratifying various human rights covenants and conventions, thus making a commitment to scrutinise domestic laws, policies, resources and relationships.

It must be noted that the human rights cities are not an urban agenda. Cities are microcosms of states. And as with the state, the city and its institutions are complex social, economic and political entities. All the usual day-to-day economic problems, societal dilemmas and stressful issues of inequality, discrimination, violence and poverty that are present in a state are present in cities, on a smaller scale but often with greater intensity. In summary, it is evident that all political, civil, economic, social, and cultural human rights concerns are present in the life of the city.

The human rights city stands to become a transformative model for the state. Engaging in the city governing bodies, national and local organisation, religious, labour, and women's NGOs, all those who carry the burdens of social, economic and human development, meet in the city and identify with local struggles and human rights needs. The prevailing efforts of mainstreaming human rights in a city can then radiate throughout the surrounding country. Through learning and dialogue in more contained communities civil society can work to attain a life free from fear and free from want, for women and men alike. If we agree that people yearn to belong in dignity in their community with others, activities in the human rights cities empower people freely to express their expectations and aspirations. As they learn about the promise of human rights for food, education, housing, healthcare, and work at liveable wages, they also learn about budgetary constraints and the need for progressive realisation of economic and social human rights. Therefore, social responsibility is a major result of these activities where people own and claim their human rights and those of others, within their social and economic realities.

To become a human rights city is to develop a model for citizens' participation in the development of their community. In human rights cities, cadres of human rights educators for social and economic transformation are being trained. These newly trained educators will further support the development of more human rights cities and join the ongoing development of written and visual learning materials, strategies and methodologies. These will have a gender perspective and will be culturally relevant. Activities in the human rights cities will be publicised throughout the country, and should radiate knowledge and serve as a model for stabilising democracy and building good governance.

And most importantly, people will experience the power that grows from the knowledge that each individual can make a difference.

The development of human rights cities is creating a space for active civic engagement at local, national and global level and is guided by the human rights framework.

Human rights cities are about people giving us solutions for the future and possibly a new political culture based on human rights. It is from human rights cities that meaningful analysis of human rights as a way of life can emerge and real sustained change can come. As of January 2006, the human rights cities are:

- Rosario, Argentina
  - Thies, Senegal
  - Nagpur, India
  - Kati, Kayes and Timbuktu, Mali
  - Nimamobi, Walewale, Bongo, Ghana
  - Graz, Austria
  - Edmonton, Canada
  - Bucuy-Municipality, Philippines
  - Mogale, South Africa
  - Porto Alegre, Brazil
- (New human rights cities Bihac-Bosnia ; Musha-Rwanda ; Korogocho-Kenya)

Now that I have articulated the dream, I will share the stories of some of the people from the human rights cities:

*Rosario, Argentina:* An interactive training/learning session was held with the new cadets at the police academy by Susana Chiarotti. Susana is a trained lawyer, a human rights expert and a very effective community activist. She is a well-known women's human rights leader in Latin America. Having been in exile in Bolivia for seven years, she was determined to work first with the police in the human rights city of Rosario. As the first session progressed she asked the cadets to ask their questions and make their comments. An energetic young man rose to his feet to complain about the lack of human rights considerations in the academy. In attendance, alongside the group was the chief of police of the region of Santa Fe, where Rosario is located. He called out angrily at this cadet: 'Sit down and stop talking!' 'No, I will not sit down', the young man answered. 'With full respect to you, sir, I have just learned here that human rights allow me to speak freely, claim them openly, and that they belong to all!' He continued to present his complaint.

Susana was distressed, thinking that this would be the first and last opportunity she would have to work with the police. When she arrived at her office a call from the very same chief of the police was waiting for her. He told her how impressed he was with the session asking her to introduce human rights to the police force in the region of Santa Fe.

A programme was then devised to overcome major issues of police discrimination in the community. Once the specifics of these discriminatory actions were identified by the steering committee, police training was developed and facilitated by local educators and community leaders.

I visited Rosario again a year later. Susana wanted me to meet the director of the regional police academy. He does not speak English and I do not speak Spanish, but in preparing to meet me he learned to say the following in English: 'Madam Koenig, there is no other option but human rights!' Since that day I have appropriated this statement as the motto of our work.

Rosario, the first human rights city, was initiated out of humiliation and pain so intensely experienced in this country. As a result of ongoing training, the police are now engaged in a dialogue about human rights with vulnerable groups and individuals in the city and are collaborating in human rights education and learning activities in the neighbourhoods. It is a rewarding experience, which is reflected in the human rights training that has taken place in the city continuously since 1997. Furthermore, this has also become a mainstay training programme for the police in the region of Santa Fe, of which Rosario is the capital.

The activities of the steering committee in Rosario included: a report on the ill-treatment and persecution of transvestites and prostitutes. It designed a children's contest in 50 schools to paraphrase the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The steering committee brought together women from the neighbourhoods to write a chapter of the Shadow Report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee. Furthermore, in the neighbourhoods, people are learning about the MDGs and the development of a participatory budget to be presented to the city council. A community learning project with the participation of the 100,000-strong Toba, indigenous community, has resulted in the drafting of their own 'passport to citizenship'. The first article of this passport calls on the people of Rosario not to treat the Toba People as thieves when they go to the shopping mall. And recently, poor women ill treated in hospitals, called on doctors and nurses to join them in viewing the 'theatre of the oppressed' where they demonstrated how badly they

were treated. This resulted in the immediate issue of directives to change the situation and further courses about human rights directed at all medical students.

All the above and more are leading to the *mapping of human rights violation* and *human rights realisation* in the city. These eventually lead to specific action, guided by the human rights knowledge that the people in the neighbourhoods have internalised as a way of life.

One of the most heart-rending stories comes from the village of Malikunda, outside the human rights city of Thies in Senegal:

The practice of FGC – female genital cutting – is a gross human rights violation. Many tried to stop this practice, but without any significant result. However, TOSTAN, a Senegalese grassroots organisation, has worked for many years with women in the villages introducing them to democracy, literacy, health and participation, as a way of fulfilling their human rights. In 1997, a breakthrough occurred as a result of human rights education.

I met Molly Melching, the Director of TOSTAN in Germany, at a UNESCO conference on adult education where she participated in a PDHRE workshop on human rights education for social transformation and the development of human rights cities. She was very excited about our approach and shared with me the following amazing story, clearly affirming that when people develop a sense of ownership of human rights significant change can come about.

This is her story:

In July 1997, the women of Malicounda, Bambara, made up their minds. They would no longer practice FGC on the young girls of the village! How did a group of African women from an ethnic group, which has practiced FGC for thousands of years, have the courage to stand up and say ‘no more’ to such an ingrained tradition? How did they convince other members of their community, particularly the men and the older women who fight to preserve Bambara traditions? The women of Malicounda had begun to change as a result of their participation in the TOSTAN/UNICEF/Government of Senegal Basic Education Programme in national language. They started thinking and talking about things they had never discussed before, things that had always been ‘taboo’. In Module 1, the women worked on problem solving. In Module 2 they learned about germs and the spread of disease. They studied human rights in the module on women's health and particularly the right to health. The programme gave them confidence that they could change things if they wanted to. They learned that human rights implies the freedom of each woman to decide for herself what she does with her body – the right to preserve her body without mutilation or change. They talked with their husbands who understood their concerns. Encouraged by their husbands' support they created a theatrical performance about human rights that included messages on the dangers of female circumcision. They went to all the local neighbourhoods and also invited the village midwife to these sessions. She was also convinced. After only several months, the women of Malicounda, had agreed to stop the ceremonies for this year and indeed to stop them forever. An older woman said at one of the meetings: ‘We old women were the ones who insisted that all the girls be circumcised! But in the class I learned about universal human rights. Did you know that every man and woman have the right to marry and live their lives according to their own beliefs? I realised I could no longer impose my will on my children and grandchildren.’ The village chief present at the discussion said: ‘I'm not a member of the class, but I support the women's decision’. The women said: ‘We've made our decision! We're going to stop female circumcision in Malicounda. We became aware that we could make a difference in the world. If our culture violates our human rights, we want a human rights culture.’

I also learned from Molly that French television came to interview the people of the village. A little girl was running in front of the cameras. Her mother called out to her: 'Sensen, Sensen. Come here!' 'What does Sensen mean?' the Cameraman asked. 'Human rights' answered the mother with pride. 'Why do you call her human rights?' the cameraman asked again. 'Because she is the first girl in the village that was not circumcised', the mother answered. Men and women alike declared an end to FGC in front of the camera, quoting the language of human rights. Pride accompanied their recognition that the international community had also acknowledged what they believed to be decent and correct. These are norms and standards that they now accepted as their own. These very same women in the village of Malikunda came several weeks later to their husbands, requesting parcels of land to grow vegetables. They said to their husbands, 'land is a human right' and they got the land.

Listening to Molly I was convinced again that men must fully understand: to protect their own human rights they must protect the human rights of women. I believe, when people internalise the notion that human rights belong to all, they provides them with *safe ground for negotiation* – the only way they can comfortably relate to one another.

In the human rights city of Thies, the second largest city in Senegal, children asked, after learning that education is a human right: 'If education is a human right that belongs to all, why is it that my next door neighbours do not go to school?' They were told by their teachers, 'Their parents did not register them when they were born'. Within a few days, and for three years, teams of children between the ages of nine and 18, went from house to house to locate unregistered children. They identified 4,312 such children, whose information was collected by the teams, brought to the governor's office and registered. To expand the capacity of the school to accommodate these children, the teams lobbied for more rooms and teachers.

Also in Thies, women and men in several neighbourhoods who had learned about health as a human right, joined to clean up mountains of garbage and established norms for garbage disposal and informed the community accordingly. They also called on the mayor's office to assume responsibility for garbage collection. A full plan to clean the city was presented by working groups to the people of Thies and to the governor.

Such stories of actions and meaningful change could fill a book – from the human rights city of Kati in Mali, where they are now planting trees and discussing the effects of polygamy on women, to poor women asking to be treated with dignity in the hospitals of Rosario, leading to reform and the teaching of human rights at local medical schools.

The human and humane responsibility of a human rights educator is often quite overwhelming. This is not because I do not take this responsibility very seriously but because I believe that we still do not know what is human rights education and learning at the community level. What are the pedagogies and methodologies that lead to meaningful and sustained social and economic transformation? What does it mean to develop a new political culture based on human rights? As I have travelled around the world learning, teaching, and listening to the insights women and men had about their lives, as they were introduced to human rights as a way of life, it has become very clear to me that it is of critical importance that we examine the patriarchal order of which we are all a part. I realised that we need to investigate how, through the learning about human rights, women and men can move to embrace a new way of life – a life of equality, without discrimination.

As part of this exciting and rewarding process, we are working in the human rights cities to 'discover', and analyse how the universal oppression of patriarchy works – patriarchy as the system at the core of most human rights violations. We are trying to examine how it is interconnected to other forms of discrimination, particularly racism, nationalism and xenophobia. We are attempting to study patriarchy as the system that triggers forms of supremacy, hierarchy and exploitation. Most importantly, we are discussing how human rights education can transform and transcend the patriarchal system to form a human rights way of life for all. Women, men, youths and children can know and claim their human rights.

Breaking through the vicious cycle of humiliation means that the oppressed must confront their oppressors to uphold dignity, justice and freedom for all in relation to our struggles, or else, we run the risk of perpetuating humiliations, where we become the new 'oppressor'. In other words we become victimised violators: as we move away from humiliation, we often humiliate others.

Each one of us, women and men alike, are born into a world of privileged and underprivileged, of the powerful and the powerless – a system where injustice is justice – where we exchange equality for survival...--a Patriarchal order. In these prevailing structures of society we are socialized to dominate and exclude others: women/men, minorities/majorities, children/adults, poor/rich. Thus, to move towards change we are contemplating the development of a campaign to "--transform the patriarchal order to a human rights culture through human rights learning.."--challenging white supremacy, patriarchy, inequality and discrimination in all its forms. Our analysis must not only be comprehensive, but also provide solutions for a radical change. Based on our experience, learning about human rights as relevant to our daily lives, is itself a tool that helps us see how the patterns of oppression shape our ideology and behaviours – focusing on our commonality as human beings as well as our differences, to view them as joy and not a liability.

As human rights educators we are constantly trying to understand what people need to know and internalise to be able to combat sexism and racism, which are in fact interdependent. We are looking to develop a strategy that will reveal and confront the patriarchal core. As women and men investigate the effects of patriarchy on their lives, they also take on some responsibility for oppressive behaviours. As part of this confrontation and to assist in enabling a dialogue of equals, the task of the human rights educator is to assist people in the process of changing the structures that dominate global relations, states, and communities, within the family and among individuals.

It is in the human rights cities that the mechanisms and specificities of oppressive systems and the structures that work within them can be identified through dialogue between women and men. As part of a campaign to transform the human rights order to a human rights system through human rights learning, they will search for a process and tools that will dismantle the existing structures. I am convinced that we will not be able to advance social and economic justice agendas unless we begin to seek changes in ourselves and systemic changes in society. The human rights cities can, in future, avail us with such rich and valuable experiences. The campaign is now being planned in each of the cities with various groups around the world. One hundred and forty women and men helped shape a position paper that will be the basis of this campaign. (Details can be found on [www.pdhre.org](http://www.pdhre.org))

This soul searching for the 'right way', which never really exists, is interjected into the discussions being held within the various steering committees of the human rights cities, at which time they identify human rights violations towards and within discriminated groups and communities in order to craft effective human rights education and learning strategies.

It is often acknowledged that discrimination and inequality are experienced and are interconnected across a wide range of differences: age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, nationality, disability and other social categories, noting that oppression also occurs in a variety of settings: families, schools, communities, cities and countries. Recognising the spread of problems is a crucial step towards discovering what needs to be done to realise the practical holistic vision of human rights across the board.

In essence this is not unique. Many movements, coalitions, groups and individuals courageously confront different forms of discrimination that cause humiliation and injustice. However, the human rights cities discourse and learning brings them together in a dialogue that envisions a new, different world, where equality of all human beings will be achieved in a human rights culture in which respect for dignity and equality becomes a code for living – human rights as a way of life.

When Voltaire was asked: what we should do about human rights he said: ‘Let the people know them’! Indeed, inherently we all know human rights and, if probed, we all know what needs to be done. However, we have never taken the time to examine thoroughly the practical value of human rights to life itself. This is being tested in the human rights cities.

The only place we can learn about the urgency for people to know human rights as a way of life is from the people. For example, at the beginning of our efforts to bring economic social and cultural human rights up to par with political and civil rights, we held more than 30 workshops in 30 countries, funded by grants from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry. (We embarked on this effort at the start of the 1990s. I believe that these workshop were an important factor in the change many human rights organisations undertook in the later 1990s to address ESCR.) One of these workshops was to take place in Nairobi, Kenya. We were planning to hold a workshop with 25 social justice organisations to introduce them to economic and social human rights, in the hope that they would integrate this learning about human rights in their work, so as to make their advocacy more viable. The police, learning that such a meeting was to take place, ordered that it be cancelled. The person organising this workshop called urgently for an additional 200 dollars to hire a bus and take the participants to a meeting place outside Nairobi. Arriving at the meeting hall, they noticed a policeman stationed at the back of the room. The facilitators chose to ignore him and introduced a carefully thought-out breakdown about human needs as human rights. As the discussion proceeded speaking of food, and housing as human rights issues, the policeman rose on his feet and called out: ‘stop it, stop it, stop it’. The meeting came to a halt. ‘Why should we stop?’ ‘I must tell you something important’, the policeman cried out. ‘If these are human rights, you must come and teach it in my village.’ We knew then that our way should lead us to the villages of the world.

For human rights to be understood as a way of life, it is absolutely essential for people to learn that such rights pertain to the realisation of their hopes and expectations. A very thoughtful human rights educator in Costa Rica, Maria Suarez, contributed to developing teaching about how people can learn to distinguish between violations and the realisation of human rights as a way of life. Facilitating a workshop for women who came from various Central American countries, she started the morning session by talking about human dignity and the values of human rights to women’s lives as a tool for achieving equality and overcoming discrimination against women. To prompt the women to reach into their own experiences to evoke the process of learning, she asked the women: ‘Please tell me about the first time that your human rights were violated?’ An elderly woman answered, ‘I was 13 years old and I was forced to marry the man that raped me’. (For many years, in several Latin American countries, a man who raped a woman was not punished if he married her.)

In the afternoon, after each of the women had answered this first question – which was often a very painful process – another question was asked: ‘When was the first time that your human rights were realised?’ The same woman who spoke about the rape in the morning answered: ‘At the age of 52 I went back to school to finish my studies’. Needless to say, this woman understood in every part of her being what human rights were all about. In presenting two stories of her life, she ‘wrote’ the universal declaration of human rights. Without much more preparation she could indeed become a human rights educator, learner and dialogist, with her grandchildren and in her community – achieving dignity within her community, overcoming violations and moving towards realisation in a sustained way.

It is therefore quite obvious to me that speaking of human rights as ‘traffic regulation’ is a way of discussing democracy, equality, justice and discrimination. By describing to the learner the movement of women and men, youth and children in the direction of freedom from fear and from want, I allude to traffic regulation as a very ‘practical’ function, like the rules of a game. It is very gratifying to observe how this metaphor enables people to *discover human rights as a way of life*. They clarify to themselves how they want to *move* in the world, in dignity and with others. Life as a movement; democracy as a delivery system of human rights; economic and social justice for both women and men. It is extremely important that we use the imagination, insights and inner misgivings people have in this very threatening world to understand the real meaning of human rights.

And last, but not least, I never speak of ‘rights’ but of ‘human rights’. I find that there is a distinct conceptual difference between the two. Rights are vertical and human rights are horizontal. Rights are legal derivatives of human rights and as such can be taken and given; not so human rights, because they are birth rights. When I reproach people about it, they say: *we always mean human rights, this is just a linguistic omission*. I do not accept that this is an omission, or that when we speak of ‘rights’, we effectively mean ‘human rights’. These two syllables – hu-man – is what makes it a way of life. Language is the lifeline of human rights and we must protect it.

I visited the Palestinian occupied territories before the second Intifada. I was taken to a school where young men were preparing signs for a demonstration. The signs read, ‘We want books, we want books’. I said to the young men, ‘Oh no, you don’t want books’. They looked at me suspiciously and said, ‘Yes. We want books for our school, books which are now denied to us’. I turned a sign face down and wrote on it, ‘We want our human rights, we want books’. The young men, living under occupation, understood the power of the language that I shared with them and copied the same message to the other signs. Some kind of transcendence happens when people understand that they are full owners of human rights and learn to express and view their lives as encompassing human rights. Books not for charity, but as a human right.

When we give a piece of bread to a hungry child we must know that we have performed a human rights act. And, more crucially, the child must know that she or he has received a human right. The vicious cycle of humiliation can be closed not with charity, but with dignity.

Emmanuel Levinas, a French–Jewish philosopher who died a few years ago, wrote ‘if one person was missing from the world, the absolute truth would be different’. What amazing insight into the value of human beings and the ‘other’. With some humility I appropriate this statement, to say ‘if one person was missing from the world, human rights would be different. Human rights are the truth, yet it is always evolving’.

The realisation of human rights as a way of life is the greatest challenge we can face as human beings. It is crucial that we all adopt a mantra that human rights represent a moral, social and political framework that we want our children and their parents to own and use as a guideline for change, a framework that can lead them to participate in decisions that determine their lives, no matter what their age group.

Let us not forget that in 50 years the global population has grown from two billion to six billion people. These multitudes of people can be given guidance and support through learning about human rights as a way of life. Of these six billion, three billion are under the age of 25. In every country young leaders – youth – between the ages of 16 and 25, who have had no formal education and have no support systems must be identified and with them create a new vocation: *human rights educators at the community level*. Let the ‘youth’ have a future which they can call their own. Let them be defined through learning about human rights, because human rights provide hope! We need to find ways to reach and share with them a value system called human rights protected by law that provides limitless encouragement to maintain their self-respect and claim their life in dignity. This by itself is a tremendous challenge for human rights education which we are trying to address in the human rights cities.

And to you the reader, I hope you join in developing more human rights cities around the world that will radiate the holistic vision, mission and practical ways of human rights as a way of life. It is in your hands.

With hope and a smile!

**Note**

- Recipient of the 2003 UN Human Rights Award.

For more information:

PDHRE

People's Movement for Human Rights Learning

526 West 111th St. Suite 4E,

New York, NY 10025, USA

Tel: 1-212-749-3156 \* Fax 1-212-666-6325

E mail : [pdhre@igc.org](mailto:pdhre@igc.org)

Award winning Website: <http://www.pdhre.org>