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Feminist Approaches to Human Rights Education

Challenging Structures of Power. Feminist human rights education seeks a transformation in the way that power is exercised throughout society, locally and globally, in public and in private, so that women's human rights can become a reality. It includes education about civil and political rights such as the right to run for public office, as well as economic and social rights such as the right to equal pay, to belong to a union, or to have access to adequate health care and child care services. It also looks at gender specific human rights issues such as violence against women, reproductive rights and women's poverty, and promotes the use of human rights language and tools to bring about change.

It is also important to acknowledge the need to work at different levels. While a systemic social analysis ought to inform our work, some actions might not necessarily challenge power structures. There is also a need for the personal development of women.

Combining Human Rights and Feminism. Feminism and human rights are similar in that they can both be seen as a "world view" and as an ethos or analysis that can be brought to bear on any situation. It is a useful strategy to link the language of feminism to that of human rights because "it is more difficult to oppose a human rights issue than a feminist one." The human rights model also allows us to name the different aspects of oppression – for example, the discrimination from the settled community faced by Traveller women because they are Travellers, and the domestic violence some Traveller women experience because they are women. At the same time it underscores the commonality of our experience in our expectation and entitlement to be treated with respect and equality by virtue of our humanity.

Recognition of Difference. The recognition and acceptance of difference within the women's movement must form a cornerstone of any human rights education strategy. It is important to include women from diverse backgrounds and not to make assumptions on the basis of labels. An example given was the assumption that all lesbians are feminists or that all feminists are lesbians. As part of human rights education, for example, it is important to examine the homophobic attitudes which prompt many to reject feminism because they fear the label "lesbian" and to recognise the pervasive hostile attitude to lesbians in our society as a human rights concern. Similarly, feminist human rights education will incorporate the concerns of women with disabilities and Traveller women, for example, and work to ensure that they have greater visibility.

Concrete applications of feminist approaches to human rights must be developed. We need to include more women and we need to look at ways we can access women who are outside women's groups. It is very important to "find ways of working with women where they are at." This involves discussing feminism and "de-mystifying the word so that we can discover all that we have in common." Some felt that the term "women's human rights" as opposed to "feminism" is more acceptable, especially where women are working in contexts where there is a "distrust of gender." However, while the "human rights label" encourages people to take women's issues seriously, it should not provide an excuse not to address "feminist issues."

Gender awareness education should be encouraged and developed in primary and post primary schools and greater resources must be allocated to this end. School policies need to be challenged at board of management level, if necessary, to implement gender policies and to encourage the training of staff in such issues.

Further, each person should take responsibility to educate those people around them by challenging myths. Gender-aware human rights education is also needed for professionals in all areas, including governmental, medical, legal, social work, and teaching institutions, "in order to humanise their approach."

Gender Proofing. Beginning within our own organisations, we should adopt equality/gender policies and not allow the gender issue to be pushed into the background. One suggestion was to draft Equality Statements – a process which can be an effective human rights education tool. The women’s subgroup of the Community Workers Co-operative, for example, is in the process of drawing up such a statement in which all difference would be accepted and supported. The importance of learning how best to implement such a statement was also stressed.

Making Local-Global Links. The annual international campaign of "16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence," which takes place between November 25 (International Day Against Violence Against Women) and December 10 (International Human Rights Day), is designed to raise awareness about all forms of violence against women as human rights concerns. Because hundreds of women’s groups in dozens of countries take part in the "16 Days" each year, it is an opportunity to make links with groups working in other countries and to conduct human rights education activities which highlight the commonality of women’s concerns across different regions. Women’s Aid has been very active in the campaign around the issue of domestic violence in Ireland. (For more information on the "16 Days" campaign at the international level, contact the Center for Women’s Global Leadership, <http://cwgl.rutgers.edu/>.)