

"The Poor and the Law: BRAC's Human Rights and Legal Education Program"

Abstract

The Human Rights and Legal Education (HRLE) Program of BRAC intends to empower its members by educating them through training about human and legal rights and on some essential laws of Bangladesh. The study investigated the effectiveness of training and its impact on the trained and on their society. In conducting this study a training session in three groups including members with and without training and villagers from without BRAC program were observed. Some 61 % of members with training carried out HRLE- related actions compared to 12% and 45 in the case of members without training and villagers from non- BRAC villages respectively.

The Poor and the Law: BRAC's Human Rights and Legal Education Program

Introduction

An overwhelming portion of the rural poor in Bangladesh are unaware of their legal rights. This ignorance allows others to exploit the poor and, in particular, women. The rural elite by dint of their power and influence in society manages to achieve their objectives often by infringing the rights of the poor (White 1992; Arens and Burden 1985). Village-courts (shalish), a traditional institution, are often manipulated by the elite who use it as a means to achieve their ends (Rahman 1996; Karim 1990). The state machinery- the courts, the police and the judiciary- are not always accessible to the poor and can be influenced by the elite (Throp 1978). Thus, because of

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lack of knowledge, the activities of village elite and weak state institutions the rural poor are often denied of their human and legal rights. BRAC, a large non-government organization (NGO) in Bangladesh, have observed this situation across the villages of Bangladesh and have evolved a program to address it.

Human Rights and Legal Education Program

BRAC is devoted to promoting the welfare and development of the rural poor through poverty alleviation and empowerment. In order to achieve these objectives it has established a number of activities with a particular emphasis on social development.

The social development activities of BRAC, under aegis of its Rural Development Program (RDP), aim at developing village organization 1 (VO) with members capable of dealing with the social problems they face. Central to this is the Human Rights and Legal Education (HRLE) program.

The HRLE program was launched in 1989 to empower the VO members by educating them about their human and legal rights, and some essential laws (BRAC1995). In addressing this goal the program have set up a number of specific objectives:

1. Disseminate information on laws to all instead of keeping it in the control of a few;
2. make VO members conscious about laws and provide them the skills for their application;
3. advance/ encourage VO members to abolish existing superstitions by using laws; and
4. help in having self-confidence and skill to resolve small problems through arbitration or informal village-courts.

Training is the pivot around which the whole HRLE program revolves. In order to reach a large number of VO members at low cost a training 'cascade' has been established. Training is offered at three levels. First comes the trainers for HRLE. Next is Teachers Training for HRLE shebok/ shebikas (village level trainers). In the final stage shebok/shebikas provides Legal Education (LE) to the VO members in their villages.

A standard LE starts with 24 trainers and lasts for 28 days with a two-hour session a day. On the 14th day of the training a five-member Law Implementation Committee (LIC) from among trainees is formed. The function of this committee is to expedite the implementation of the law for VO members in their village.

The training curriculum can be divided into four broad areas to the laws of Bangladesh:

1. Citizen's Right Protection Law (CRPL), which covers laws on the basic human rights and the duties of a citizen in Bangladesh;
2. Muslim Family Law (MFL), which includes laws on matrimony, guardianship of children, and relations among the family members;
3. Muslim Inheritance Law (MIL), which covers laws on the inheritance rights of heirs and heiresses; and
4. Land Law (LL) includes laws related to land agreements and instructions on procedure to be followed in order to preserve the ownership of land.

The HRLE is an important program. By 1995 the Program had trained over 290,000 VO members and has planned to reach 1 million women by the end of this century (BRAC 1995; BRAC 1993). Such a rapid expansion of the program raises questions- how effective is the training and what is the impact of HRLE training on the VO members and in their society? This study endeavors to answer these questions.

Impact of training :a theoretical discussion

Impact in this paper refers to the changes produced as a result of training activities (Bhatnagar 1987). A study on the Impact of training asks for the investigation of the training process that leads to the change and assessment of the actual change. In order to do these systematically this study examined impact at four levels. These are: (1) execution of training, (2) content of training, and (3) extent of training and (4) impact of training.²

(1) The training process helps in the internalization (i.e; make part of oneself, through learning and social adaptation) of the knowledge and skill imparted in the training. The effectiveness of the process was assessed on the basis of following indicators.

a/ Is it participatory? The extent training provided scope for the participation of the trainees.

b/ Is it accessible? The extent training was carried out a friendly learner-centered environment.

c/ Is it understandable? The extent training content was understandable.

It was assumed that the more the training was characterized by these attributes the more effectiveness the training would be.

(2) The content of training as conceptualized by the trainee determined the extent the training would be applied. There are two types of conceptualization, viz;

a/ the extent to which different parts of the training were found easy or difficult to understand and to internalize; and

b/ the extent different parts of the training were considered useful and relevant by the trainees.

(3) The contribution of the training in bringing change is positively associated with the extent to which the training is offered. The more extensive is the training more likely that it will have an impact on the area in which the training has been offered (i.e; reference area) and population within it.

(4) The result of training can be assessed at two stages. First; the assessment of the extent to which training contributes to learning (i.e.; the gain in the level of knowledge and skills). Second, the assessment of the extent to which learning contributes to performance (i.e; the change in the attitude, in the behavior, and in the reference area). In relation to the objective of training its impact can be categorized into three (Bhatnagar 1987), viz;

a/ Positive impact- the training objectives are achieved in part or in total.

b/ Neutral impact- there are no signs of impact due to training.

c/ Negative impact- the training producing an undesirable result.

Methodology

Study Area and Sample

The study was conducted in the catchment area of BRAC's Rural Development Program (RDP) Area Office (AO) at Titpallah in Jamalpur. The area was randomly selected from among the 89 AOs having HRLE program for more than 5 years in 1995.

A LE session was purposively selected from Titpallah in order to evaluate the process and the content of training and to assess the changes in knowledge and attitude brought about in the trainees by the same,. Altogether 20 trainees who completed the course and their shebika were investigated.

In addition, 75 VO from Titpallah who received LE one year back, two years back and three years back (25 members in each group) were interviewed. They were compared with two comparison groups. One of these included 75 VO members who were yet to receive LE and the other was comprised of 50 villagers from a village without any NGO activities. 3 The areas representing the comparison groups were selected in such a way that those might become geographically comparable to that of the experimental group (i.e; VO members with LE). The samples were randomly selected for these three groups keeping in view that the schooling, occupation, age and gender ratio of the groups remain comparable. The assessment of these groups was concerned with the result level.

Assessment Strategy

The data needed for evaluating the LE training process and the content of LE curriculum were collected with the help of interview schedules from the respondents

and firsthand observation of the training by the research team. The interview schedule had provisions for receiving both structured and unstructured responses and for tabbing attitude and opinions.

The evaluation of the extent of LE was based on data derived from the secondary sources like BRAC documents.

The trainees participated in the LE were pre- and post-tested in order to estimate the gain in their knowledge due to their participation in the training. The percentage, t-test and gain ratio were used to assess the change in the level of knowledge induced by the training.

Next, in order to take an account of the changes in behavior induced by the training the experimental and the comparison groups were inquired about the actions they conducted based on the legal knowledge within the last three years. The actions of these respondents were accepted as LE induced (i.e; HRLE-related action) only when the respondents could specify a clear link between the training and the action taken. For such an acceptance the reporting were first validated through consistency checks of the information provided and through corroboration from other sources like neighbors. Also to establish the link between their knowledge and performance the groups were tested on their knowledge.

The data on the change of their attitude due to training as well as on the village (i.e; reference area) were collected through interview schedule and case studies.

Findings

The findings have been draw in terms of the impact levels and in the context of the objectives of the HRLE program.

Training Process In LE session

A number of steps were followed in order to help the trainees in internalizing the knowledge imparted in the training-explanation, discussion, answering questions and memorization. Besides, the trainees memorized the law by reciting these with the Shebika. Measures were also taken in the training to develop a positive attitude towards the laws taught. It was done by setting examples indicating what could be the advantage in following the laws taught and disadvantage in not following the same. This process also conscientized the trainees about their rights.

The trainees gave an idea of the extent the training was participatory, accessible and understandable.

Participatory: All the trainees felt that they could ask questions to the shebika without hesitation, and in turn they always received answers to their questions. The re-

search team observed that the shebika often encouraged trainees to ask questions. Besides the trainees, the shebika also questioned them to make sure that they understood (and internalized) the lessons taught. The training held an enabling environment for learning in which exchange of ideas took place.

Accessibility: All the trainees felt that the relationships between the trainer and the trainees and amongst themselves were absolutely satisfactory. The relationships were thought to be congenial for an effective training.

Understandability: As a whole, the training was considered comprehensible by all the trainees. This was particularly because the training set familiar examples to the laws and used good flip charts. However, some (17%) experienced difficulties in understanding the training activities, to which they were not familiar.

The reporting of the trainees indicated that the LE session was sufficiently participatory, accessible and understandable to produce desired outcome.

Content and Relevance of LE

The trainees, at the end of session, categorized the laws they considered useful or not and those felt easy or difficult to internalize (Table). The CRPL was thought to be the least significant part of the curriculum by a good number of trainees. These respondents were of the opinion the CRPL had a little chance for its application in their situation and thus was not important. In contrast, MFL was thought to be very relevant to their daily life and the majority of trainees considered it to be the most significant part of the course. They felt that the implementation of MFL (against multiple marriage and child marriage, which were widely participated in their community) would improve life for many women.

(Table 1)

Content and relevance of LE Curriculum by Laws (percentage)

Laws	Usefulness		Easy to Use		Actions
	Most	Least	Easy	Difficul	
Citizens Right Protection Low	5	30	15	15	3
Muslim Family Low	80	5	95	5	42
Muslim Inheritance Law	10	10	10	40	9
Land Law	30	15	—	30	5

* Actions conducted by VO members with LE

Note: Some trainees placed more than one law in a category.

The table indicates that the MIL was difficult for the majority of the trainees as the portion of the property that different heirs might legally inherit was difficult to understand and remember. On the other hand most of the trainees felt that it was easy to relate MFL to their everyday life and thus considered that to be the easiest part of the training (Table 1).

Level of knowledge and attitude of the LE class

On an average the trainees responded 39% of the pre-test questions correct whereas, the same rose to 89% in post-test ($p < 0.001$). When these composite pre-and post-test scores were split-up by the laws the net gain in the knowledge due to the training was greater for MFL and least for MIL (Figure

1). The pre-test indicated that the trainees participated in the training with some legal knowledge particularly in MIL and LL.

The main gain ratio between the two tests was 68.1%. When this score was broken up as per laws the shares in the gain were 66% for CRPL, 81 % for MFL, 46% for MIL, and 58% for LL. These ratios indicate that the gain in knowledge of the trainees was satisfactory for all laws except MIL. In spite of this it may be concluded that the level of learning due to LE, as a whole, was satisfactory.

All the trainees confirmed that while training was in progress they were not exposed to any sources which contributed to their learning similar to one intended by the training. Thus, the gain in the knowledge as projected in the test may fully be attributed to LE, received indicating that the training was effective.

When interviewed the LE graduates unanimously stated that the application of the legal knowledge acquired in the training would benefit them and expressed a strong desire to apply this learning whenever constraints. These reports provide evidence of a positive attitude towards legal issues covered in LE.

Extent of LE

Between 1990 and 1995, an average of 34 LE courses were offered and 799 trainees graduated in Titpallah. Though 25 trainees were enrolled on each course, on the average, 24 completed the training.

The HRLE program provided a great amount of LE in Titpallah (Table 2). About 96% of the VO members had received LE by the end of 1995. As a result 23% of BRAC target group households in the area had VO members with LE by the time. The target group households owning less than half an acre of land and at least one member selling manual labour. Becoming a VO member is subject to the decision of an individual thus it is likely that only a portion of the target group households will have

VO members. The proportion of target group households having members with LE was smaller than that of the VO member households because a portion of the target group household in Titpallah had VO members.

Table 2

Coverge of Legal Education In the Catchment of RDP In titpallah

Years	Percentage of VO members completed LE	Percentage of BRAC target group households with VO members	Percentage of BRAC target group households having VO members with LE
1990	10.6	17.9	1.9
1991	64.2	18.4	11.8
1992	89.4	18.6	16.7
1993	92.8	20.9	19.4
1994	91.7	23.4	21.4
1995	95.6	24.1	23.0

With such a dense coverage of the training one might assume that there would be a considerable impact of the training in the community. These households not only had the potentialities to conduct HRLE - related actions for themselves but were also in a position to extent legal help to others in their community.

HRLE-related knowledge and attitudes of experimental and comparison groups

Figure 2 indicated that the mean test score of the VO members without LE (#2) was higher than the pre-test score of the VO members about to receive LE (#3) though both the groups had similar socioeconomic background ($p < 0.05$). This was probably due to the fact that about 31% of the tested VO members from the former group (#2) were male, whereas all belonging to the latter group (#3) were female. Male VO members without LE, in general, performed better than their female counterparts in the test.

The level of legal knowledge of VO members (#3) prior to HRLE training was identical to non-BRAC villagers (#1). At the end of LE training trainees' (#4) knowledge of HRLE materials had increased from 39% (#3) to 81% (#4).

As theory would predict, trainees' knowledge lapsed with the passage of time after training. The decline in HRLE knowledge was greatest within the first year after training (i.e.; 24%). However, in subsequent years the lapse in the knowledge was much slower.

However, even three years after the HRLE knowledge of the VO members with LE (#7), the VO members without LE (#2), and the villagers from non-BRAC village (#1) were significantly different from each other ($p < 0.05$). Similar trend was also observed in the case of these three groups when the test scores were compared by each set of laws ($p < 0.05$). The higher test score of the VO members with LE compared to the other two groups was attributed to the LE that the group received.

It was observed that the VO members with LE (i.e.; received LE 1 to 3 year back) were highly motivated in applying their training. These respondents expressed their full commitment in making efforts in applying HRLE-related knowledge in the appropriate situation that they would come across. Some of them (39%) even mentioned that they were ready to make such efforts even if they would have to incur loss. These tendencies were in line with one observed in the case of VO members without LE and villagers from non-BRAC village. Most in these groups were not sure whether they would use their legal knowledge, whatever they had, in the situations that they would come across. Findings in this and preceding sections indicate that HRLE does not merely increase the level of knowledge but is clearly associated with increased levels of assertiveness.

HRLE-related Actions Conducted by Experimental and Comparison Groups

The study found that within a three-year span 61% of the VO members with LE conducted HRLE-related actions compared to only 12% and 4% by the VO members without LE and villagers from non-BRAC village, respectively. Some of these respondents conducted more than one HRLE-related actions. Altogether 59 HRLE-related actions conducted by VO members with LE compared to only 9 in the case of VO members without LE and only 2 in the case of villagers from non-BRAC villages (Table 3). See case study for the empowerment of VO members from the training and a process followed in the implementation of HRLE related knowledge in a situation.

When these actions were grouped in terms of the legal areas it was observed that in the case of the VO members with and without LE most of the HRLE-related actions concerned MFL, indicating that the actual or attempted violation of MLF occurs most in the village.

Within the MFL category, most of the actions were related to child-marriage. The implementation of MFL was directed against behaviors which were mostly motivated by reference to traditional laws. But in the case of LI and MIL the actions were directed against the claims created by individuals to benefit themselves.

A number of significant characteristics were observed in the implementation of the HRLE-related knowledge.

Table 3
HRLE_related Actions Conducted by Groups (percentage)

Laws/Activities	BRAC member with LE	BRAC members without LE	Non BRAC villagers
Citizens' Right Protection Law	4.29(3)	1.43(1)	1.43(1)
Warrant	1.43(1)	--	--
Police detention/arrest	2.86(2)	1.43(1)	1.43(1)
Muslim Family Law	60.00 (42)	7.14 (5)	
Child marriage	21.43(15)	1.43(1)	--
Multiple marriage	4.29(3)	--	--
Dowry(intiated/ prevented)	11.43(8)	--	--
Marriage registration	4.29(3)	--	--
Divorce(intitlaed/prevented)	8.57(6)	2.86(2)	--
Verbal divorce	8.57(6)	2.86(2)	--
Hillah-nikah ⁷	1.43(1)	--	
Muslim Inheritance Law	12.86 (9)	2.86 (2)	
Improper distribution of property among the children	5.71(4) 2.86(2)	1.43(1) --	-- --
Attempt to deprive sister from inheritance	4.29(3)	1.43(1)	--
Land Law	7.14 (5)	1.43 (1)	1.43(1)
Sign or thumb-mark on blank paper	2.86(2)	--	--
Pay tax	1.43(1)	--	1.43(1)
Dispute on ownership of land	1.43(1)	--	--
Registration of land property	1.43(1)	1.43(1)	--
Total	84.28(59)	12.86(9)	2.86(2)

Notes: (1) Actions produced result both as desired and not were considered.

(2) In a situation where the performance was collaborated it went to the account of the respondent who played a dominant role in the implementation of the knowledge

(3) Figures in brackets indicate the actual number of actions reported.

1- The VO members with LE behaved as per law in achieving their objectives and helped others to do same, e.g. in the case of a marriage parents were particularly concerned not to violate the legal codes of Bangladesh. In contrast actions were taken to resolve problems, e.g. respondents provided legal help in resolving disputed claim on a piece of land developed after the death of a member in the family.

2- The HRLE-related knowledge was employed in pursuit of personal, family and community interest. In a number of incidences the respondents came forward themselves to apply their friends and relatives.

3- The HRLE-related actions were pursued by both individual trainees and in collaboration with others. Some 83% of the actions conducted by the VO members with LE were collaborative. The collaborators helped each other with the legal knowledge and in the implementation of knowledge, e.g. in the case of a marriage where the violation of the age code occurred, to refresh her memory on the age code for marriage as trained, and then convinced the parents in not marrying their below-age daughter. Thus, the lack of complete HRLE-related knowledge was not a bar to the implementation of training in many cases.

4- The VO members with LE involved in taking actions outside their own family. In most of those cases, they consulted with the BRAC staff before initiating the actions. The BRAC staff responded by providing moral support in favor of the actions and in some cases provided clarification about the relevant laws.

5- Respondents directly involved themselves in the implementation of the legal knowledge, e.g. ; divided agricultural land among the heirs according to the Koranic law of inheritance. Also, there were incidences where respondents provided legal advice only, e.g.; when a woman was approached for thumb-marking on a blank paper a VO member with LE informed her what the consequences might be for compliance to such a proposition.

6- There were occasions where respondents implemented legal knowledge in preference to implementing traditional laws. Such venture were taken in collaboration with LIC and other members belonging to their VOs,. This group first educated those who stood for the implementation of traditional laws in order to implement statute laws. Once they were convinced the respondents applied their legal knowledge. Some of these efforts turned out a failure as the party stood for traditional laws, e.g. ; village court, were not convinced or wanted that the traditional laws should be applied.

About 73% of the actions conducted by the VO members with LE produced the desired result. Of the unsuccessful actions, 33% (1) and 36% (15) were based on CRPL and MFL, respectively. The action in the case of MFL turned out unsuccessful

because the party with whom the implementation of the legal knowledge was intended refused to accept legal consultation for variety of reasons. For example, a parent refused to surrender the demand for dowry when asked for in the case of son's marriage on the ground that it would benefit his family.

Most of the unsuccessful actions produced a neutral effect. However a few produced negative result, e.g.; a marriage ended up in a divorce when the demand for dowry was rejected by the bride's parents who received the training.

Though the VO members with LE were active in implementing their learning there were occasions where they could have taken HRLE-related actions but did not. It was reported that only 77% of the situations where HRLE-related actions could have been conducted were actually conducted. The belief that it would not be appropriate for them to interfere in other's personal affair or that they would face resistance were two common reasons for not taking action in those situations.

Changes Due to LE Observed at Village Level

The VO member with LE noted a number of changes brought about in the community after the introduction of the training. The observations were both specific and general. Some 585 (n=69) felt that the level of legal knowledge of the villagers. Forty-eight percent reported desired changes in the matrimonial practices in their villages, e.g.; decrease in child marriage and less practice of dowry. Respondents felt that the villagers became more conscious in exercising their voting right and vigilant in not being unduly influenced by anybody during elections. In the case of MIL it was felt that the disputes on inheritance, particularly of land property, substantially decreased in their locality. These changes occurred as it was known to a good proportion of the villagers what was the right course of actions in their day to day life and in case of disputes they themselves were amply equipped to resolve these by applying knowledge gained in LE.

Difficulties in Conducting HRLE-related Actions

The VO members with LE identified a number of difficulties in the application of the training. Thirty-six of 56 respondents identifies village-court as the major stumbling block while 33 thought family or individual level factors were important. The difficulties identified are:

1. Village-leaders' perception about the VO members: The respondents observed that the village-leaders 6 who operate the village-courts were of the opinion that the VO members with the LE did not have the competence to play a role in the village-court. Due to this perception they were not allowed or invited to participate in the vil-

lage-court.

2. Village-leaders' perception about themselves: The respondents observed that the village leaders carried an impression that they were sole agents to conduct the village-court. Therefore, they never felt the need for sharing their such responsibilities with VO members.

3. Characteristics of the respondents : The status of VO members-being poor, women, too young and illiterate made their participation in the village-court difficult.

4. Specific situation: Implementation of the HRLE-related knowledge becomes difficult when its violation leads to the achievement of a desired objective, e.g. when a wealthy parents found marrying their daughter difficult they did not hesitate to marry her with a dowry.

5. Interference in personal affairs: the application of training becomes difficult at the family level when the HRLE-related help was thought to be an intrusion in the private affairs of the family.

6. Existing notion about the BRAC: there was a widespread belief among the non-members that the laws taught in LE were based on Christianity and if followed would be a sin. thus the HRLE-related assistance of some of these respondents were not accepted in number of incidences.

7. The power of 'traditional laws': There was a tendency among the villagers to follow traditional laws. Since LE contradicted these principles in many cases the villagers were hesitant to accept those laws.

Discussion and Conclusion

The extent to which different laws were considered relevant and comprehensible was associated with different levels of action (Table 1). The MFL was considered to be the most relevant and easiest part of the training and was used most when implementing legal actions. On the other hand, fewer actions were CRPL based. The part of the training was considered least relevant.

Presently; LE is offered to the VO members at a nominal price (US\$0.24 per course) and at a location (in the village) and at a time that is convenient to the majority in the class. Through this policy the Program has created the opportunity to provide knowledge on human and legal rights at the threshold of the rural poor. We have observed that as an outcome of such policy and for organizing LE sessions in a large scale by the Program it became possible for a good proportion of the rural folk in BRAC to receive LE.

The study observed that the training was effective in conscientizing the poor about

their rights. The trained were knowledgeable about laws because of the LE they received. The higher level of legal knowledge in this group placed them in a better position to uphold their rights than villagers without LE.

The VO members with LE had a positive attitude towards the legal information covered in the training, along with a strong motivation to apply that knowledge. The group also had a higher level of self-confidence about the successful implementation of their knowledge.

These tributes have psychologically advanced and encouraged them to implement training in available opportunities and overcome 'traditional' obstacles.

The VO members with or without LE and the villagers from non-BRAC villages shared similar social setting, meaning that the groups encountered roughly and similar number of situations where legal knowledge could have been applied. In spite of this similarities the VO members with LE conducted more HRLE-related actions than the VO members without LE and the villagers from non-BRAC village. These were not only because that the former group was better equipped with HRLE-related knowledge than its two counterparts, but also it had a much more positive attitude towards such knowledge. Such a positive attitude prompted higher levels of personal and social actions (White and Stolzenberg 1967).

The VO members with LE did not think, however, about organizing a village-court under their own aegis. However, on a number of occasions they resolved problems through small meetings, which had some similarities with the existing village-court. But, compared to the village-courts these were limited in scope regarding the sections of the community who would agree to abide by a decision. Most of the respondents avoided participating in the existing village-courts in their locality. In the cases where they participated they failed to influence the court through their knowledge. Thus the program fell short of achieving one objective--involving VO members in resolving small problems through the village-court. It may be mentioned that the achievement of this objective involves collective action of the whole village (including those eligible to become VO members and not). Any social change having involvement of such a magnitude is not likely to take place within a few years after the introduction of HRLE program in an area. As a whole the negative or the neutral impact of LE was negligible.

Limitations in applying HRLE training and measures against them

Since LE is offered to VO members and as of now 95% of the VO members are female, LE is directed almost entirely to female in the village. Undermining male folk in their participation to LE is likely to reduce the possibility of an effective imple-

mentation of HRLE-related knowledge in the village. It is undeniable that the initiative in human rights and leadership in legal/ social battles are still mostly entirely a male's job in rural Bangladesh (White 1992). In such a social set-up undermining male in their folk in their participation to LE is likely to reduce the possibility of an effective implementation if HRLE-related knowledge in the village.

It has been observed that the main difficulties in the implementation of HRLE training was the lack of influence of the poor as against the elite who happened to be rich and leaders in the village. It appeared that the successful implementation of the training in many cases, in their ultimate analysis, was a question of political and social power dynamics.

The program is not indifferent to the fact that simply the presence of legal knowledge in the poor would automatically lead to long-term improvement in the skewed social relationship that prevail in the village. The HRLE program was convinced to believe that the rights of the VO members would be better protected if the legal knowledge of the non-VO members could be raised. Therefore, the program in 1996 took up the policy of organising Local Community Leaders' Workshops in RDP areas, where-in, the government representatives, religious leaders, primary school teachers, VO leaders and LE trainer all belonging to the locality participated in the workshop. The main objectives of this workshop were to : (1) orient the participants about the existing laws of Bangladesh covered in the curriculum; (2) convince the participants that these were not contradictory to religious laws according to Islam; and (3) facilitate the cooperation of these groups in the implementation of LE in the village. Besides the workshop a 7-set posters on the LE curriculum were extensively fixed in the villages throughout Bangladesh for every body's viewing. These two efforts were thought to have created an atmosphere favorable to the application of the LE training.

The application of legal knowledge can create complication which may need referral and back-up service. In the case of such complication the fellow VO members usually come forward to help (see Case study). So long the program did not have any provision for offering such a service to VO members but in later part of 1997 it has come to an agreement with an organization which would provide legal service to the VO members in case of their need.

The HRLE training curriculum covers Muslim laws only. The non-Muslim VO members receiving this training though are in a position to apply their training in the case of Muslims in their community but, unfortunately not in their own.

The Final Words

The 4 LE is a cost-effective mechanism to educate the rural poor about their human

and legal rights. This study indicates that the Program as a whole was effective in achieving its objectives. By the end of this century the program will be extended to 42% (n=35,961) of the villages covered by the RDP (BRAC 1995a). If the program can manage to expand at its present pace and with its present standard a major portion of the population of Bangladesh will know their legal and human rights within the next decades. A tremendous potential for greater social justice will have been created and the possibility of 'social energy' (Uphoff 1992) leading to social change will have been increased.

The program may also have relevance to other societies similar to Bangladesh where human and legal rights are commonly violated because of ignorance and lack of organizing power of the disadvantaged.

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Verbal divorce and hillah-nikah			Case study
Case:	Milky Begum	Age:	22
Occupation:	Household work	Education	Nil
Joined RDP VO:	August, 1994	LE Received	1995

Milky was married to Khadem, a day laborer from her village. Milky lost her father when she was 4 years of age, so her mother had to arrange the marriage and bear the expense. The marriage was registered, a bride money of Tk,10,000 was agreed on and no dowry was given.

Khadem's father was not happy with his son marrying to a poor family, but he consented to it in order to honor his son's liking. In fact, he wanted to marry his son to a rich family and receive a big dowry. As a result, immediately after the marriage he started maltreating his daughter-in-law. He often told her, 'Get out of my home, go to your mother and come back with money.' He also mentioned that she would not have any place in his home unless she returned back with dowry. The maltreatment increased with time. Because of such treatment she was compelled to leave the house a number of times but returned back in all occasions. Her father-in-law advised Khadem to divorce her on the ground that she was a woman with loose character. He along with some relatives made false stories in support of his allegation. Though Khadem did not agree to divorce Milky based on the allegations he became a little suspicious about her character.

One day Khadem returned from work and found his father scolding Milky. For some time she did not react but at one point she talked back to her father-in-law. Seeing this, Khadem beat Milky and pronounced 'Tin Talak' (verbal divorce). When this incidence was taking place number of their neighbors were present at the courtyard. Khadem told to them, 'You all are the witness to this divorce'. At this, Milky burst into tears. Such a behavior from her husband was very much unexpected to her. In the same afternoon Milky's mother Sakina came. Both Milky and her mother attended

the LE. The legal procedure for the divorce they learnt in the training was still clear in their mind. It was known to them that divorce could not be conducted verbally. After some days Sakina met Khadem's father and informed him of the right procedure for divorce. There along, she mentioned that the verbal pronounced by Khadem was not effective. She requested him to take Milky back but her request was not honored.

In the mean time Khadem realized his fault and the injustice he committed to his wife. He decided to reunite with Milky and stay at her mother's home. Milky's mother welcomed the idea by mentioning that, "Verbal divorce is not effective. You and Milky should live together at my home". She was very happy about the decision and built a small cottage for them at her courtyard. Both Milky and Khadem started living there together.

This reunion was considered illegal by a section of the villagers as Milky did not go through the hillah-nikah according to shariyah (Islamic jurisprudence). The group mentioned, "If Milky and Khadem want to live together in the village Milky should follow the shariyah, otherwise they would be excommunicated from the society". When the couple paid no heed to this the group organized a village-court on the reunification of the couple. The elite, particularly the clergymen, both from and outside the village were present in the court. The court decided that (1) nobody from the village should maintain any relationship with couple and (2) the couple should not be offered any job in the village. Sakina who was most vocal against verbal divorce and hillah-nikah at the court was threatened and rebuked for her behavior in the court. At one point when the situation was tense at the court Milky clearly and loudly spelled out her position that, 'I will not go through hillah-nikah, because there is no provision for such malpractice in the law.' (3) he also mentioned in the court the source of her knowledge based on which she took such a stand. That was LE.

Milky and Khadem disobeyed the decision of the village-court and continued to live together. Though they were excommunicated there was a section of people in the village including VO members who extended help to them.

1- The VO is an organization of the poor, supported and patronized by BRAC. the female villagers who's family own less than half an acre of land and one member of the same selling manual labor are eligible to join it.

2- There are number of approaches (Warr and Rackham, Galvin 1983, and the Kirkpatrick 1983) available to evaluate the impact of training. These were developed to evaluate human resources development training thus inappropriate to meet the impact assessment need of a training directed towards social development in a rural setting.

3- the VO members without LE were selected from the catchment areas of RDP in Chechua. The area was not covered by HRLE program. The villagers from non-BRAC village were selected from Uluhati (a village in Rajgati union in Nandail thana) about 9 kilometers away from any NGO activities.

4- the grain ratio score under 50% indicates below standard performance of a training (Bramley 1986).

5- BRAC's policy is that a household may have only one VO member.

6- The persons occupying position of dominance and influence in the village, e.g.; clergies, land lord, elected representatives, etc.

7- A matrimonial dictate on the reunion of the divorced couple. The wife needs to marry another person, live together with him for a minimum four months, get divorced and then remarry the previous husband with whom the reunion is intended.