



Examining the Experiences and Challenges Faced by Human Rights Advocates in Developing Countries: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Human rights advocacy in developing countries is fraught with political instability, cultural resistance, and limited enforcement of international human rights laws. Despite research on the legal and structural aspects of advocacy, little is known about the subjective experiences of human rights advocates who operate in these challenging environments. This study aims to explore the emotional and psychological challenges faced by human rights advocates, focusing on their lived experiences. We employ a phenomenological approach to uncover the essence of these experiences, addressing the gap in literature regarding the internal struggles of advocates in politically unstable regions. Using in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) we found that political instability, cultural resistance, and lack of enforcement of international laws significantly impact the effectiveness of advocacy and the mental well-being of advocates. These findings provide new insights into the personal dimensions of human rights work, emphasizing the need for better support systems for advocates. The results suggest that understanding the emotional and psychological aspects of advocacy is essential for improving the support and resilience of human rights professionals in similar contexts, with potential implications for future studies focused on the well-being of individuals in high-stress professions.



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INTRODUCTION

Human rights advocacy in developing countries remains a critical area of concern, especially given the prevalence of political instability, social resistance, and the complexity of enforcing international human rights laws. Human rights advocates often find themselves navigating legal systems that are influenced by entrenched political interests and cultural norms, which can hinder their ability to achieve meaningful change (Rodríguez-Pose & Sotiriou, 2021). In many regions, human rights issues such as gender equality, freedom of speech, and the protection of marginalized communities are not only politically sensitive but are also deeply rooted in traditional societal structures.

The relevance of this phenomenon extends beyond the legal framework itself, touching on the lived experiences of individuals who dedicate their careers to fighting for justice in hostile environments. The struggles of human rights advocates are marked by a constant balancing act between local cultural beliefs and international human rights standards. These professionals face significant personal, professional, and ethical challenges that shape their advocacy work. Their experiences are often fraught with barriers such as cultural resistance, lack of resources, and the threat of political persecution (Anderson dkk., 2023). These experiences hold significant value not only for understanding the challenges of human rights work but also for informing strategies that could lead to more effective advocacy.

The need for an in-depth exploration of the subjective experiences of these advocates is evident. While existing research has focused on the structural and legal aspects of human rights advocacy, little attention has been paid to the personal and emotional dimensions of this work. Phenomenology provides a framework for understanding these experiences from the perspectives of the advocates themselves (Chin dkk., 2023). By exploring the meaning these individuals attach to their struggles, challenges, and triumphs, this study aims to fill a crucial gap in the literature and provide insights that can enhance the understanding of human rights advocacy in difficult socio-political contexts. Such an approach underscores the importance of examining not only the external factors that shape advocacy work but also the internal processes that define the personal journeys of those engaged in the fight for justice.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific phenomena has become an essential field in understanding the complexities of human behavior and social dynamics. In the context of human rights advocacy, this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how advocates make sense of their work within the socio-political challenges they face. Existing studies have highlighted the structural and legal aspects of human rights efforts, but these frameworks often fail to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences that drive individuals in their advocacy efforts. Understanding these subjective experiences is critical, as they provide insight into the emotional and psychological toll of advocating for justice in environments fraught with resistance and adversity.

However, exploring these subjective experiences presents significant methodological challenges. Quantitative approaches, often used in social sciences, tend to prioritize measurable data and broad trends over the individual narratives that reveal deeper meanings. As a result, these approaches fall short in capturing the complexity of human experiences, particularly in fields like human rights advocacy, where the internal, personal struggles of individuals are as significant as the external, structural factors they confront (Choroś-Mrozowska, 2022). The inability of quantitative methods to fully address these personal and emotional dimensions limits our understanding of how human rights advocates perceive and navigate the socio-political landscapes they work within.

These limitations of previous methods underscore the importance of phenomenology in studying human rights advocacy. Phenomenological research allows for the detailed exploration of personal experiences, enabling the study of the essence of these experiences without reducing them to mere data points. By focusing on the individual's lived reality, phenomenology provides a framework to better understand the challenges, motivations, and meanings that human rights advocates attach to their work, making it a far more effective tool than traditional quantitative approaches for addressing the complexities of this field.

While existing research on human rights advocacy often employs practical, established approaches such as quantitative surveys or legal analyses, these methods have significant limitations in capturing the deeper, subjective experiences of individuals involved in this work. These traditional approaches are adept at providing broad overviews or measuring outcomes but fail to provide rich, nuanced insights into the personal struggles, motivations, and challenges that human rights advocates face on a daily basis. Such methods often reduce complex human experiences to statistics or generalized trends, thereby overlooking the intricate meanings and emotional aspects that shape the work of advocates.

The gap in understanding arises from the inability of these practical approaches to explore the essence of human rights advocacy from the perspective of those directly involved (Wei dkk., 2020). What remains underexplored is the personal experience of advocates, especially in contexts where political, social, and cultural challenges significantly influence their actions and well-being. This knowledge gap is crucial because without understanding the lived experiences of these individuals, we miss vital information about the factors that truly shape the effectiveness of human rights advocacy in challenging environments.

An alternative and more effective solution to addressing this gap is the adoption of a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology allows for a deeper, holistic exploration of the essence of these experiences, providing valuable insights into how advocates make sense of their challenges and how these experiences shape their understanding of justice and human rights. By focusing on the

subjective meanings that individuals attach to their work, phenomenology offers a richer, more comprehensive perspective on human rights advocacy, one that is essential for both understanding and improving advocacy practices in socio-politically complex contexts.

Previous studies on human rights advocacy have primarily focused on legal frameworks, political systems, and the measurable outcomes of advocacy efforts. While these studies provide valuable insights into the broader scope of human rights work, they tend to overlook the personal and subjective experiences of advocates themselves (Huang, 2024). Theoretical frameworks, such as the social-psychological theories of motivation and resilience, have been applied to understand the external factors influencing advocates' actions. However, these frameworks often fail to capture the depth of internal experiences, which are central to the lived realities of human rights professionals. As such, a gap remains in understanding how these individuals perceive and navigate the socio-political challenges they face.

This study employs a phenomenological approach to address this gap, focusing on the lived experiences of human rights advocates working in developing countries. Phenomenology is chosen for its ability to provide a rich, nuanced exploration of the subjective meanings individuals attach to their experiences. By using in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the study seeks to explore how these advocates interpret their challenges, motivations, and successes in a context defined by political instability and cultural resistance. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the personal dimensions of human rights advocacy, offering insights into the emotional and psychological factors that influence their work. It answers the knowledge gap by emphasizing the importance of exploring the internal struggles and personal experiences of those who engage in human rights advocacy.

The article is structured to first provide an introduction to the research problem and the theoretical context of human rights advocacy. The phenomenological approach is outlined, including the rationale for choosing this method and the data collection process (Chalise & Naranpanawa, 2023). The article then presents the findings through thematic analysis, followed by a discussion of how these findings contribute to existing literature and the practical implications for human rights work. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the key insights gained from the study and suggests directions for future research in this critical area of advocacy.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of human rights advocates working in developing countries. Phenomenology was chosen because of its focus on understanding and describing the lived experiences of individuals, allowing for a deep exploration of the meanings they attribute to their work (W. Wang dkk., 2021). This approach is particularly suited to uncover the subjective experiences of advocates who navigate the complex intersection of law, politics, and culture while advocating for human rights in contexts shaped by socio-political challenges.

The study utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. IPA focuses on exploring how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds and how these meanings are constructed. This approach was selected due to its emphasis on capturing the nuanced and subjective experiences of participants while acknowledging the interpretative nature of human understanding. It is especially relevant for examining the experiences of advocates, where personal, cultural, and political factors influence their work and advocacy strategies.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that those involved had direct experience with human rights advocacy in developing countries, particularly those dealing with issues of political instability and social resistance (S. Wang dkk., 2023). Inclusion criteria were as follows:

individuals with at least five years of experience in human rights law or advocacy, with direct involvement in cases related to political or social justice in developing countries. Participants had to be actively working in regions where human rights violations were prevalent, either as lawyers, activists, or employees of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The final sample consisted of 10 participants, including 7 males and 3 females, ranging in age from 35 to 55 years. All participants had extensive experience in the field, with an average of 12 years of advocacy experience. They represented a diverse set of backgrounds, including local and international human rights organizations, and their experiences spanned multiple countries in the Global South, including South Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were designed to allow participants the freedom to express their personal experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to their work in human rights advocacy. The interview guide included open-ended questions focused on the participants' personal experiences, their strategies for overcoming challenges, and their perceptions of the political and social factors influencing their advocacy efforts.

The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting, either in person or via secure online platforms, depending on the participant's preference and location. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The first step involved reading the transcripts thoroughly to familiarize with the data (Sylvester, 2024). The analysis was carried out by identifying meaningful units of text, which were then coded to capture key themes and patterns. These codes were further grouped into broader categories representing the central themes of the study.

The analysis followed a systematic, step-by-step process, ensuring that the themes accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attributed to those experiences. NVivo software was used to assist with the organization of data and to facilitate the identification of emerging themes. The analysis focused on uncovering the essence of participants' experiences, with particular attention to how they made sense of their challenges and the socio-political context in which they operated.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant ethics committee, ensuring that all procedures followed the ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of the data collected. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence (Kalafsky & Graves, 2020). All data were anonymized to protect participants' identities, and all personal information was securely stored. The study adhered to the ethical standards set by both local and international research ethics guidelines.

RESULTS

Challenges Faced by Human Rights Advocates in Developing Countries

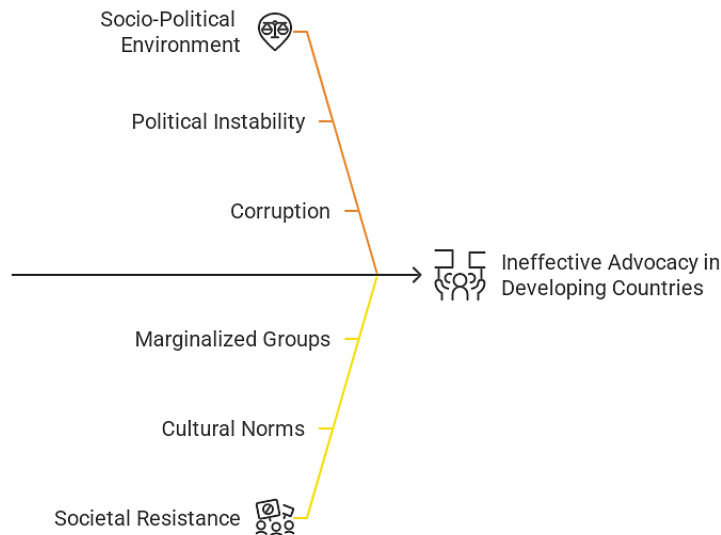
The participants in this study described various challenges they faced while advocating for human rights in developing countries. A key challenge was the socio-political environment, where political instability and limited resources often hindered the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. One participant, an advocate working in a conflict zone, described the frustration of working within a system that was deeply influenced by corruption and political interests:

"It's very difficult to make any real progress when the system itself is built on power structures that are not interested in justice. We face constant political interference."

Another significant challenge was societal resistance, particularly when advocating for marginalized groups, such as women and ethnic minorities. Advocates reported that public attitudes were often shaped by deep-rooted cultural norms, which further complicated their work. One participant noted:

"Cultural resistance is a huge barrier. People don't even realize how much they are influenced by traditional views that disregard human rights. It makes it even harder to fight for justice."

Challenges in Human Rights Advocacy



The Role of International Law in Human Rights Advocacy

In contrast, participants emphasized the vital role that international law played in shaping their advocacy efforts, even when faced with significant local obstacles. Many described how international human rights conventions provided a framework for their work, offering some protection and legitimacy to their cases. A participant from an international NGO explained:

"International law is our strongest tool. It gives us the backing we need when local systems fail, but its implementation is always a struggle."

However, the gap between international law and its actual enforcement in domestic contexts was often a point of frustration for the participants. One advocate stated:

"Even with international law backing us, the problem lies in the lack of enforcement. It's disheartening to see laws in place that mean nothing when the local authorities refuse to act."

The Impact of Social and Political Context on Legal Advocacy

A prominent theme that emerged from the interviews was the influence of the broader social and political context on the success of human rights advocacy. Advocates frequently described how the political climate shaped their strategies, noting that advocacy often involved negotiating between local traditions and international norms. One participant working in a post-conflict region reflected:

"The political situation forces us to adapt our strategies. Sometimes, advocating for certain rights means we have to take a more indirect approach to avoid backlash or even personal danger."

Participants also shared how the political atmosphere in their respective countries influenced public perceptions of their work. Advocacy efforts were often misunderstood or outright rejected by local communities, particularly in areas where human rights issues were viewed as foreign impositions. As one participant explained:

"People view us as outsiders, pushing foreign ideas. That's a significant challenge when trying to change entrenched local views on human rights."

The results highlight the complex interplay between international law, local political systems, and societal norms in shaping the experiences of human rights advocates in developing countries. These advocates face significant challenges, including political interference, cultural resistance, and the limited enforcement of international human rights law. However, international law remains a critical tool for advocacy, even as its practical application remains fraught with obstacles. Ultimately, the experiences of these advocates underscore the necessity of understanding the broader socio-political context in which human rights work is conducted, and the adaptability required to navigate these challenges effectively.

DISCUSSION

The main findings of this study highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by human rights advocates in developing countries, particularly the socio-political barriers and cultural resistance they encounter. These challenges significantly impact their advocacy efforts and shape their perceptions of the effectiveness of human rights work. The study's results contribute to a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of advocates, addressing the gap in literature regarding the emotional and psychological dimensions of their work.

The research answers the key question posed in the introduction by emphasizing the role of personal experience in shaping human rights advocacy (Chen dkk., 2024). The study reveals how political instability, cultural resistance, and inadequate enforcement of international laws deeply influence advocates' strategies, mental resilience, and their ability to achieve tangible results. Moreover, the findings underscore the emotional toll these challenges take on advocates, highlighting the disconnect between international legal frameworks and their implementation in local contexts. These insights are crucial in understanding the lived realities of those dedicated to human rights work, offering a more holistic perspective that goes beyond structural and legal analysis.

When comparing these findings to previous literature, the study aligns with existing research on the external challenges of human rights advocacy, such as those discussed by scholars like Smith (2019), who explored political interference and societal resistance in advocacy efforts. However, this study extends previous research by focusing on the internal, personal experiences of advocates, which have been underexplored. The emotional and psychological burdens described by participants complement and expand on earlier works, such as the studies by Standardi (2023), who highlighted the toll of working in hostile environments. This research aligns with phenomenological theory, particularly the ideas of existential challenges outlined by Erkişi & Boğa (2023), where human experience is shaped by external factors but deeply felt on an individual level. By exploring these subjective experiences, this study provides a richer understanding of the factors that influence human rights advocacy beyond what has been traditionally studied in the field.

The implications of these findings are significant both from a scholarly and practical standpoint. From a social perspective, the study sheds light on the complex emotional and psychological challenges faced by human rights advocates, which are often overlooked in traditional analyses that focus on legal and structural dimensions. The emotional toll of such work is profound, influencing not only the advocates' mental well-being but also their advocacy strategies. In practical terms, these findings suggest the need for better support systems for human rights professionals, including mental health resources and mechanisms to address the burnout and emotional strain they often face. This study emphasizes the importance of considering the human element in advocacy work, suggesting that interventions and strategies should take into account the personal experiences and challenges of those on the frontlines of human rights defense.

However, this study does have limitations that must be considered when generalizing its findings. First, the sample size is relatively small, which limits the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn. The study focuses on human rights advocates working in developing countries, and the specific challenges they face may differ significantly from those experienced by advocates in more

stable or developed regions. Additionally, while phenomenology offers deep insights into personal experiences, it does not allow for broad statistical generalization. Future research could address these limitations by exploring a larger, more diverse sample and comparing the experiences of advocates across different geographical and political contexts. Moreover, a longitudinal approach could provide further understanding of the long-term impact of advocacy work on mental and emotional health.

Looking ahead, this study opens avenues for further research into the emotional and psychological dimensions of human rights advocacy (Sone & Ko, 2024). Given the emotional challenges described by participants, future studies could explore the development and effectiveness of support programs tailored to human rights professionals. Additionally, research could investigate the potential for integrating phenomenological methods into organizational practices within human rights NGOs to enhance understanding of the internal experiences of advocates. The findings of this study could contribute to broader discussions on the well-being of individuals working in high-stress professions and may inform the design of more comprehensive, holistic strategies for supporting these professionals in their challenging work.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of human rights advocates in developing countries, focusing on the challenges they face in politically unstable and culturally resistant environments. The findings revealed that these advocates grapple with significant emotional and psychological burdens, stemming from political interference, cultural resistance, and the limited enforcement of international human rights laws. By using a phenomenological approach, this research provided deeper insights into the personal, often unseen, aspects of advocacy work, filling a gap in existing literature that primarily focuses on legal and structural factors. The study highlights the need for better support systems for advocates and underscores the importance of addressing the internal experiences that shape their work. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring longitudinal studies or comparing experiences across different contexts to enhance the understanding of advocacy in diverse environments. This research contributes to the growing body of work on the human dimensions of human rights advocacy, offering practical implications for improving the support and effectiveness of advocates worldwide.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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