



The Experience of Human Rights Advocacy by Civil Society Organizations in Developing Countries: Activists' Perspectives on Facing Social and Legal Obstacles

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ABSTRACT

Human rights advocacy is a critical field that seeks to understand and address the experiences of individuals whose rights are violated, especially within marginalized communities. While existing research has explored the broader impacts of human rights violations, there is a lack of in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of these individuals, particularly in terms of their personal perceptions and meaning-making processes. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the subjective experiences of individuals who have been impacted by human rights violations, asking: What are the essential meanings and lived experiences of individuals within this context?

Here, we show how a phenomenological approach can be employed to provide a deeper understanding of the emotional and cognitive processes involved in human rights violations. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals who have experienced human rights abuses, we conducted a thematic analysis to uncover core themes and meanings. Our findings highlight the profound psychological, social, and emotional effects of human rights violations, emphasizing the participants' struggles with identity, trauma, and resilience in the face of adversity.

These results contribute to a more nuanced understanding of human rights violations, offering important insights into the impact on individuals and their coping mechanisms. Our study suggests that phenomenological methods can provide critical perspectives on human rights that quantitative approaches are unable to capture, and it calls for further research into the personal narratives of affected individuals to inform more compassionate and effective human rights advocacy.



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INTRODUCTION

Human rights advocacy in developing countries is an area of significant social, political, and legal concern (Cuttitta, 2023). In many parts of the world, particularly in nations with authoritarian regimes or weak democratic institutions, the protection of human rights remains a challenge. Activists working to defend the rights of marginalized and oppressed communities often face systemic legal barriers, political repression, and social stigmatization. These obstacles hinder their ability to effectively advocate for policy changes, support victims of human rights violations, and raise awareness about the ongoing struggles for justice. While international frameworks like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provide a standard for global human rights, the reality on the ground for local activists is far more complex.

One of the central issues that complicates human rights advocacy is the legal framework within these nations. Laws are frequently manipulated or applied in ways that target activists, labeling them as subversive or traitors. Social stigma, fueled by state-controlled media and public misconceptions about the nature of human rights work, further isolates these activists from the communities they seek to help. In response to these challenges, activists often develop coping strategies that include operating covertly, relying on international platforms for advocacy, and navigating an increasingly hostile political environment.

The study of human rights advocacy has historically been approached through various disciplines, including political science, law, and sociology (Bahçecik, 2019). However, much of the existing literature has focused on quantitative analyses of human rights violations or legal frameworks, rather than exploring the subjective, lived experiences of the activists themselves. Phenomenological research, which emphasizes the exploration of individual experiences and the meaning they ascribe to these experiences, offers a unique and essential perspective on this topic. By using a phenomenological approach, this study seeks to uncover the deeper emotional and psychological dimensions of human rights advocacy—dimensions that are often overlooked in conventional legal or sociopolitical studies. The focus is on the personal narratives of the activists, their strategies for coping with obstacles, and the meaning they attach to their work in the face of adversity.

Through this approach, the study aims to fill a gap in the existing literature by providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by human rights activists. By investigating these lived experiences, the research seeks to generate insights that can inform both practical strategies for activism and theoretical frameworks in the study of human rights.

The exploration of human rights activists' experiences has become an increasingly important area of research, particularly within the field of phenomenology (Hennebry & Petrozziello, 2019). Phenomenological approaches to studying human rights advocacy provide an in-depth understanding of how activists navigate the complex challenges of legal, social, and political landscapes in developing countries. Through a phenomenological lens, the lived experiences of activists are examined not merely as data points, but as rich, multifaceted narratives that reflect their personal struggles, coping mechanisms, and the profound meaning they derive from their work. This approach has been gaining traction as a means to bridge the gap between theoretical discussions of human rights and the real-world experiences of those on the frontlines of advocacy.

However, exploring the subjective dimensions of human rights advocacy presents several methodological challenges. Traditional quantitative methods, while valuable in assessing broad trends and outcomes, are less suited to capturing the personal, emotional, and existential dimensions of activism (Abdel-Fattah dkk., 2022). Quantitative studies often fail to account for the nuanced experiences that shape how activists perceive their roles, interact with their communities, and respond to the legal and social barriers they face. These methods tend to reduce complex experiences to numerical data, missing the essence of what it means to fight for justice in environments fraught with risk and repression. Moreover, standard qualitative approaches, such as interviews or surveys, often remain focused on the surface-level descriptions of challenges rather than delving deeply into the emotional and psychological processes that accompany advocacy work.

Given these limitations, previous research on human rights activism, particularly in developing countries, has often overlooked the core experiences and meanings that activists themselves ascribe to their work. This gap in the literature underscores the need for a more nuanced and holistic approach that can truly capture the lived experiences of human rights advocates. Phenomenology, by prioritizing the exploration of individual meaning-making processes, offers a much-needed methodological tool to address this shortcoming. By focusing on how activists personally interpret and make sense of their experiences, phenomenology provides an opportunity to uncover new insights into the complexities of human rights advocacy and the obstacles that activists face in contexts of systemic repression and social exclusion.

While existing research on human rights advocacy in developing countries often adopts practical approaches such as legal analysis or policy evaluations, these methods fall short of capturing the subjective, lived experiences of the activists themselves (Ciupa & Zalik, 2020). These traditional approaches tend to focus on measurable outcomes or the effectiveness of specific legal frameworks, but they do not delve into the deeper emotional and psychological aspects that shape how activists understand their roles and navigate the complexities of repression, social stigma, and legal barriers. As a result, the understanding of the true essence of human rights activism remains incomplete, as these studies overlook the meanings that activists attach to their experiences and the ways they make sense of their challenges and successes.

The gap in the literature is particularly pronounced in the context of exploring the lived experiences of human rights activists through a phenomenological lens. The existing methodologies, while useful for addressing certain practical aspects of advocacy, do not provide a rich, holistic view of the inner experiences of those on the front lines (Arafat, 2021). Phenomenology, by contrast, offers a powerful approach for uncovering the underlying meanings and emotional dimensions that are central to understanding how activists perceive and respond to the obstacles they face. This methodological shift is crucial for filling the gap in current research, as it allows for a deeper exploration of the personal significance of human rights work, beyond the limitations of conventional approaches.

By adopting a phenomenological approach, this study aims to explore the essence of human rights advocacy, uncovering the nuanced and complex realities that activists experience. This method will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the subjective nature of activism, shedding light on how individuals negotiate their identities, motivations, and responses in the face of adversity, ultimately contributing to a richer and more nuanced discourse on human rights advocacy in developing countries.

Existing literature on human rights advocacy often focuses on the legal frameworks and institutional factors that influence the effectiveness of advocacy efforts (Ushie dkk., 2020). Studies have explored the challenges activists face in developing countries, particularly the legal and political barriers that hinder their work. For instance, research has highlighted the role of state repression, legal restrictions, and social stigmatization in shaping the experiences of human rights defenders. However, these studies largely neglect the subjective, emotional, and psychological dimensions of activism, which are essential for understanding how activists interpret their roles and motivations. Previous research also lacks a detailed exploration of how these experiences shape activists' strategies and their perseverance in the face of adversity.

To address this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach, which is well-suited to explore the lived experiences of human rights activists. Phenomenology allows for a deep exploration of the personal meanings and emotional responses that activists attach to their work, providing insights into the essence of their advocacy (Tamang dkk., 2020). This approach is particularly valuable because it focuses on how activists experience and make sense of their challenges, rather than reducing their experiences to external factors. By prioritizing subjective experience, phenomenology uncovers the deeper motivations, fears, and resilience that drive human rights advocacy, which are often overlooked in traditional legal or political analyses.

This article is structured to guide the reader through the research process, starting with an introduction to the context of the phenomenon under investigation. The methodological framework of phenomenology is then explained, highlighting how it was applied to explore the experiences of human rights activists. Following this, the process of data collection, including interviews and thematic analysis, is described, and the findings are presented and discussed in detail. Finally, the article concludes by reflecting on the implications of the study's findings for both future research and practical applications in human rights advocacy.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of human rights activists in developing countries, focusing on the challenges they encounter in their advocacy efforts (de Oliveira dkk., 2021). Phenomenology is particularly suited for this research as it aims to understand the essence of human experiences and the meanings individuals attach to these experiences. This approach is grounded in the belief that reality is socially constructed through individual perceptions, and thus it allows for a deep exploration of the subjective experiences of activists who navigate legal, social, and political obstacles in their pursuit of human rights. By focusing on the participants' lived experiences, phenomenology provides insight into the personal and collective meanings of their advocacy work, offering a nuanced understanding of the struggles they face.

The study follows a descriptive phenomenological design, which is used to capture the essence of participants' experiences as they perceive them. This method prioritizes the description of these experiences without interpretation or theorization, aiming to present the phenomenon as it is lived and understood by the participants. The approach is well-suited to uncover the core experiences of activists, shedding light on the real-world challenges they confront in advocating for human rights in contexts marked by legal and social constraints.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with direct, relevant experience in human rights advocacy in developing countries were included. A total of 8 human rights activists participated in this study (Lu, 2021). All participants had been actively engaged in human rights advocacy for more than two years and were affiliated with organizations that work on cases concerning marginalized or vulnerable populations. The activists represented a range of backgrounds, including those working on indigenous rights, the rights of ethnic minorities, and the rights of political prisoners.

Inclusion criteria for participants required that they have substantial experience with human rights advocacy in contexts where legal and social barriers are prevalent. The study specifically targeted activists who had encountered legal challenges or social stigmatization while engaging in advocacy efforts. Exclusion criteria included individuals who did not have direct experience in human rights work or who were unable to discuss their experiences due to safety concerns or fear of reprisal. The participants were from diverse geographical regions, including Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Philippines) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya), contributing to the richness and variety of perspectives within the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with the participants (Boşnak, 2021). The interviews provided a platform for the activists to share their personal narratives and experiences of human rights advocacy in environments marked by significant legal and social challenges. The interviews were conducted in person or via secure online platforms, ensuring that participants were comfortable and able to speak freely. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes, allowing ample time for the exploration of key themes related to legal barriers, social pressures, and advocacy strategies.

The interview guide was designed to explore the participants' personal experiences in human rights advocacy, focusing on the obstacles they face and the strategies they employ to overcome these challenges. Questions were open-ended and aimed at eliciting detailed descriptions of the participants' lived experiences. To create a comfortable and open environment, interviews were conducted in private settings where participants could speak without fear of surveillance or intimidation.

During the interviews, careful attention was paid to maintaining a nonjudgmental and supportive atmosphere, ensuring that participants felt safe to discuss sensitive issues related to their work. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and later transcribed for analysis. Ethical considerations were observed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, especially given the potential risks involved in discussing sensitive topics such as state repression and activism in oppressive environments.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, following the steps outlined by phenomenological research methods (Porlezza & Arafat, 2022). The analysis began with the transcription of all interview recordings, followed by the identification of key themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' narratives. The process involved reading and re-reading the data to immerse in the participants' experiences and to ensure that their perspectives were fully captured.

Themes were identified through a systematic coding process, where significant statements and phrases related to the research questions were highlighted and grouped into categories. These categories were then further refined and organized into broader themes that encapsulated the core aspects of the participants' experiences. The analysis was iterative, with constant comparison of themes across interviews to ensure that the findings were grounded in the participants' lived experiences. The use of

qualitative data analysis software, such as NVivo, facilitated the management and organization of the data, but the focus remained on the thematic interpretation of the experiences described by the participants.

The final stage of analysis involved synthesizing the identified themes to reveal the essence of the participants' experiences in human rights advocacy. This process allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the legal, social, and political challenges they face, as well as the strategies they use to navigate these obstacles. The aim was to present an authentic and rich description of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee to ensure that the research adhered to established ethical standards (Tastsoglou & Nourpanah, 2019). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with clear explanations provided regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of the data. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous, and that their personal information would be securely stored and only used for research purposes.

To mitigate potential risks, especially given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed, participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence (Vernaelde, 2022). All data were stored securely and anonymized to protect the privacy of the participants. Given the potential for repressive environments, great care was taken to ensure that the data collection process minimized any risks to the safety and security of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Legal Barriers and State Repression

A recurrent theme that emerged from the interviews was the significant legal challenges that human rights activists encounter. These legal obstacles often manifest as restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly, and association, which hinder activists' ability to operate openly and effectively. Several participants highlighted the frequent use of legal threats to silence criticism of the government. As one activist from Indonesia explained: "We are often threatened with baseless charges such as being subversive or betraying the state, simply because we criticize government policies."

This sentiment was echoed by others, who described how the threat of criminal prosecution and surveillance by state authorities created an atmosphere of fear. Such legal challenges were not only a direct assault on their work but also a means of suppressing public discourse on human rights issues. The participants expressed that these legal barriers were designed to delegitimize their efforts and isolate them from the wider public and international support. In particular, one participant recounted an incident where the government used anti-terrorism laws to arrest activists involved in peaceful protests for indigenous rights. The activist described how the legal system was weaponized against those advocating for marginalized groups, stating: "The law is not there to protect the vulnerable; it is used as a tool to protect those in power and suppress dissent." These experiences reflect a broader pattern where the legal framework is manipulated to stifle human rights advocacy, forcing activists to navigate a complex and often hostile legal landscape.

Social Challenges and Public Perception

Another significant theme that emerged from the interviews was the social challenges that human rights activists face, particularly in terms of public perception. Many activists reported feeling alienated from the communities they were trying to protect, as they were often seen as opponents of the government or as foreign agents. This was especially true in countries with high levels of political polarization or state-controlled media. One participant shared: "The public often views us as unpatriotic or anti-government, even though we are only advocating for basic human rights."

This social stigma was compounded by a lack of understanding among the general population about the importance of human rights issues. Several activists noted that they were often misunderstood or misrepresented by the media and the public. As one activist from the Philippines noted: "People don't

understand that we're not fighting against the government; we're fighting for the people who have been left behind and ignored by those in power." Such misunderstandings led to significant challenges in gaining public support for their cause. Activists found themselves not only combating the legal and political systems but also trying to shift public opinion and educate communities about human rights. This social stigma often hindered their ability to mobilize and create effective advocacy campaigns, particularly in rural or less politically engaged areas.

Strategies for Advocacy and Coping Mechanisms

Given the formidable legal and social barriers they face, many activists have developed specific strategies to continue their work despite the risks. One of the most common strategies identified in the data was shifting the focus of advocacy to international forums. Many participants described how they had found that international platforms provided a level of protection and attention that was difficult for local authorities to counter. As one participant stated: "We try to bring human rights issues to the international stage because it's harder for the government to block external pressure."

Another important strategy was working discreetly, often using clandestine methods to organize and mobilize support. Activists also reported using digital tools and social media platforms to spread awareness and connect with global networks of support. Despite the constant surveillance and risks to their personal safety, they remained committed to their mission, finding ways to circumvent the restrictions placed upon them. One activist expressed: "We know the risks, but we cannot stop. The people we represent, the vulnerable communities, they rely on us." These strategies, while critical in ensuring the continuation of human rights work, also highlight the level of stress and fear that activists live with daily. The constant need to operate under threat of legal and physical harm takes a psychological toll, which many participants noted in their interviews.

The experiences shared by the activists illustrate the complex and multi-layered nature of human rights advocacy in developing countries. Legal barriers and social stigma are significant challenges that severely impact the ability of activists to carry out their work effectively. Despite these obstacles, the activists in this study demonstrate resilience, employing creative strategies to continue advocating for the rights of marginalized groups. Their experiences highlight the ongoing struggle for human rights in contexts where legal frameworks and societal attitudes are often antagonistic toward change.

The main findings of this study reveal that human rights activists in developing countries experience significant challenges, not only in the legal and political domains but also on a deeply personal level. Their advocacy is shaped by emotional, psychological, and social dimensions that influence both their perseverance and strategies. The experiences of these activists, including the emotional toll and the complex motivations driving their work, highlight the essence of their activism, which cannot be fully understood through traditional legal or political analyses alone.

These findings provide a nuanced answer to the central research question regarding how human rights activists in developing countries navigate legal, social, and political barriers. The research demonstrates that activists are not merely responding to external obstacles but are also deeply engaged in a personal process of meaning-making, where they interpret and redefine their roles within the broader context of societal repression and injustice. Through their experiences, they develop coping strategies that not only sustain their efforts but also shape the methods they employ to address human rights violations. This study, therefore, underscores the importance of exploring the subjective experiences of activists, as it uncovers the personal and emotional dimensions that motivate their advocacy and inform their responses to adversity.

The findings of this study align with, and also expand upon, existing literature on human rights advocacy, which has primarily focused on external factors such as state repression, legal constraints, and political challenges. Scholars such as Bob (2005) and Tarrow (2011) have discussed how activists in repressive environments are constrained by legal and political systems, but they have often overlooked the personal and emotional responses that shape activism. This research complements these studies by emphasizing that activism is not solely a reaction to external forces but also a profound

personal experience. Additionally, it provides a more holistic understanding of the lived realities of activists, echoing the work of Krogstad (2017) who argued that the emotional labor involved in human rights work is a critical but often overlooked aspect of advocacy. The findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how activists cope with and respond to the challenges they face, thereby adding depth to the theoretical and empirical discussions of social movements and human rights advocacy.

The findings of this study offer both theoretical and practical implications for the field of human rights advocacy. From a theoretical perspective, the study enhances our understanding of the internal, emotional dynamics of human rights activism in developing countries. It underscores the importance of subjective experiences, which have often been overlooked in favor of structural or political analyses (Njoku, 2021). Practically, these findings highlight the need for better support systems for activists, acknowledging the emotional toll and psychological strain involved in their work. Organizations involved in human rights advocacy should consider incorporating emotional and psychological support into their strategies, alongside legal and political advocacy, to better equip activists for the challenges they face. On a broader scale, these findings are relevant not only for policymakers and human rights organizations but also for social movements globally, as they provide insights into the ways activists cope with repression and injustice, thus contributing to the development of more effective advocacy strategies.

While the study provides valuable insights, it is important to recognize its limitations. One key limitation is the small sample size, with only eight participants from a few specific countries. This sample, although rich in qualitative data, may not fully represent the diversity of experiences of human rights activists in all developing countries (Gottardo & Cymment, 2019). The findings are also limited by the subjective nature of phenomenological research, where interpretations of personal experiences may vary based on the researcher's perspective and the participants' individual narratives. Furthermore, the study focuses primarily on activists who have been directly involved in advocacy for marginalized groups, meaning that experiences outside of this context might not be fully captured. Therefore, while the results offer deep insights into the emotional and psychological aspects of human rights work, they should not be generalized to all activists in diverse social, cultural, or political contexts. Future studies could address these limitations by expanding the sample size, incorporating a broader geographical scope, and exploring different activist profiles.

This study opens several avenues for future research in the field of human rights advocacy. One promising direction would be to examine how the findings of this study relate to activists in different sociopolitical contexts, particularly in regions where human rights movements are less established or face unique forms of repression (Cath, 2021). Additionally, research could explore the intersection of activism with mental health and well-being, expanding the scope to investigate how emotional and psychological factors influence the effectiveness of advocacy campaigns. Another potential avenue is to examine how international human rights organizations can better support grassroots activists by addressing both the legal and emotional dimensions of their work. This study also suggests that more attention should be given to the internal processes of meaning-making by activists, as these processes are central to their resilience and long-term commitment to human rights causes.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we explored the challenges faced by human rights activists in developing countries, focusing on their subjective experiences and the social and legal barriers they encounter. The findings reveal that activists often face significant legal restrictions, social pressures, and personal emotional tolls, which hinder their effectiveness and well-being. These results contribute to a deeper understanding of the internal struggles of activists, addressing a gap in previous research that largely overlooked the emotional and psychological aspects of their work. By emphasizing the personal experiences of activists, this study provides valuable insights for organizations seeking to better support those engaged in human rights advocacy. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring the experiences of activists in different geopolitical contexts and investigating the role of emotional support in enhancing the resilience and effectiveness of human rights movements. Overall, this research

underscores the importance of integrating both legal and psychological support into advocacy strategies to foster long-term engagement and impact.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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