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---

**CIRCULATION**

Mila Dezan

---

**PRINTING**

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---

**SUBSCRIPTION AND CONTACT**

Sur – Human Rights University Network

Rua Pamplona, 1197 - Casa 4 São Paulo/SP - Brasil -

CEP: 01405-030 Tel.: (5511) 3884-7440 - Fax (5511) 3884-1122

E-mail: <[surjournal@surjournal.org](mailto:surjournal@surjournal.org)>

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# PRESENTATION



The ninth issue of the *Sur Journal* is dedicated to the commemoration of the sixty years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The articles on this subject were chosen in collaboration with the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR). Two main issues were addressed in the selected articles: the indivisibility and the universality of human rights. These two issues were initially raised sixty years ago by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the pillars of international human rights law. In this ninth issue of the *Journal*, they are revisited under an especially critical light.

The issue of indivisibility is analyzed by both Eitan Felner and Fernanda Doz Costa. Felner adopts a pragmatic perspective: how can economic and social rights not only be recognized as human rights, but also be effectively implemented? The author proposes a methodological framework to assess whether or not a State has violated human rights obligations related to this set of rights. He also reveals some of the challenges in identifying violations of economic and social rights. Doz Costa approaches the issue from a conceptual perspective, discussing the possible connections between human rights and poverty.

Anthony Romero, Executive Director of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), in an interview with Conectas Human Rights, sheds light on how important the human rights movement is for the protection of individuals in the currently most powerful country in the world, a country that has “seen a remarkable loss of human rights” in the last eight years. In Romero’s words: “[t]he existence of a global human rights movement is actually, for this very reason, vitally important. Even if one government of one country sets back human rights, there is a movement of leaders and human rights NGOs that can keep the pressure on and keep pushing for advances in human rights.”

Katherine Short’s paper analyzes to which extent the Human Rights Council has been successful in overcoming the over-politicized approach adopted by the former UN Commission on Human Rights. Short highlights, however, that the Council’s effectiveness has been partially “undermined by both its failure to implement mechanisms to prevent its own membership to include acknowledged human rights violators and its continuing inability to harness US support.”

This issue of the *Sur Journal* also includes an analysis of the UN human rights system from an internal perspective: the perspective of Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar (2001-2008), former UN Independent Expert for the Study on Violence against Children (2003-2006), and former UN Special

Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Burundi (1995-1999). Pinheiro is currently member of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

This issue of the *Sur Journal* also includes three thought provoking articles by Barbora Bukovská, Jeremy Sarkin and Rebecca Saunders. Bukovská defends an idealistic view of human rights organizations, a view that is not content with mere normative achievements in the field. According to the author, as human rights should always result in concrete protection for victims of violations, Bukovská highlights the need to bridge the gap that frequently exists between international human rights organizations and the actual victims of violations.

Sarkin examines the historical development of African prisons from colonial to modern times, raising two issues: first, he understands that African prisons current conditions are in great part a legacy of colonialism; second, he argues that overcrowding and violence are a widespread problem in prisons all over the world.

Finally, Saunders criticizes the system of transitional justice established in South Africa after Apartheid. In her own words, her article addresses "what is gained and lost when expressions of human suffering are translated into a standardized language of human rights." The author also questions the priority given to national over individual forms of healing.

These three articles invite discussion. We therefore invite readers to respond either with another article or with a three-to-five-page essay. Articles and essays will be subjected to the *Journal's* selection process, and hopefully will encourage further discussion on these key issues.

We would like to thank the following professors and partners for their contribution to the selection of the articles for this issue: Andre Degenszajn, Andrea Pochak, Fabián Sanchez, Flavia Piovesan, Habib Nassar, Inês Lafer, Juan Amaya Castro, Kwame Karikari, Lucia Nader, Magdalena Sepúlveda, Mustapha Al-Sayyed, Olga Espinosa, and Richard Pierre Claude. We would also like to inform that Profesor Upendra Baxi (Warwick University) has accepted our invitation to join the *Sur Journal* Editorial Board.

Finally, we would like to announce that the next edition of the *Sur Journal* will be a special issue on "People on the Move: Migrants and Refugees", to be published in collaboration with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (**UNHCR**). The journal will also carry articles on other human rights topics.

The editors.



#### BARBORA BUKOVSKÁ

Barbora Bukovská has graduated from the Law School of Charles University in Prague and has earned a doctorate degree in law in Slovakia and a LLM degree from Harvard Law School. Since 1994, Bukovská has been working with different organizations in the Czech Republic and Slovakia on cases involving equal opportunities, access to justice, rights of prisoners, and deprivation of liberty. In 1998 and 1999, she was a visiting scholar at the Columbia University Law School in New York. In 2001, Bukovská founded the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Košice, Slovakia, where she led efforts

to eliminate the practice of forced sterilization of Romani women in Slovakia as well as discrimination of Roma in access to housing, employment and public accommodation. From 2006 to 2008, she was the Legal Director at the Mental Disability Advocacy Center, an international organization based in Hungary. Bukovská has published a number of human rights reports and articles on NGOs, minorities' rights, equal opportunities, Roma rights, legal aid and other human rights related issues.

Email: [bbukovska@post.harvard.edu](mailto:bbukovska@post.harvard.edu)

#### ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the negative impact of popular strategies used by international human rights organizations when promoting human rights causes; namely human rights reporting, advocacy and strategic litigation. It critically assesses these strategies, and questions whether they are working and if so, for whom. At the same time, the author questions the legitimacy of international human rights organizations to represent victims of human rights violations and their lack of accountability towards the victims. The author argues that the means used by human rights advocates in their work might be damaging and counterproductive for the victims as their methods often falsify the true experience of victims of human rights violations and end up suppressing their independence, competence and solidarity. Rather than eliminating power relations and domination over those they aim to help, human rights advocates often sustain power imbalances and use human rights violations as a commodity. The article calls for broader cooperation of human rights advocates with victims, by embracing more holistic models of activism.

Original in English.

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#### KEYWORDS

Perils of international advocacy – Accountability - Human rights organizations – Victims - Critical lawyering



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# PERPETRATING GOOD: UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Barbora Bukovská

*Half of the harm that is done in this world  
Is due to people who want to feel important.  
They don't mean to do harm—but the harm does not interest them.  
Or they do not see it, or they justify it  
Because they are absorbed in the endless struggle  
To think well of themselves.  
—T.S. Eliot, 1949*

Being a human rights advocate is noble and hard work. It means speaking truth to power. It means standing up for the other—for the oppressed, disadvantaged, marginalized, poor, and underrepresented. It means making the world—which is full of human rights abuses, repression, and inequalities—a better place. The role of human rights advocates is indeed a heroic one: they are helpful and courageous experts, who deploy their legal and advocacy skills to call attention to human rights abuses, promote justice, and make perpetrators of violations accountable. In all this, they are motivated primarily by altruism and a deep commitment to justice.

However, there are some fallacies inherent in such perceptions of human rights advocacy that I would like to confront, and contradictions I would like to expose in the ways in which human rights advocates operate. I do so through an inquiry into three popular and widely used methodologies applied by international human rights advocates in the pursuit of their well-intended goals: reporting, advocacy, and strategic litigation. A detailed examination of these methodologies focuses on their impact on human rights victims; while doing so, I am asking whether these methodologies are working—and if they are, for

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*Notes to this text start on page 19.*

whom. My assessment is a critical one: I argue that the means used by human rights advocates in their work might sometimes be damaging and counterproductive to efforts to bring the desired change, because rather than eliminate relations of power and domination over those whom they aim to benefit, they often reify and sustain them. Ultimately, I submit that these methodologies falsify the real experience of victims of human rights violations and suppress their independence, competence, and solidarity.

In my analysis, I focus on the application of the human rights methodologies solely by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—that is, by organizations that have no particular “constituency” or specific group of beneficiaries, but that operate at the international level and whose experience with human rights abuses is indirect, only through projects. I am aware that these methodologies are popular among national or grassroots NGOs, and effectively applied by them, in individual countries; however, their application by international NGOs raises a specific set of questions and concerns that are significantly different from those pertaining to domestic groups. In this regard, I contest the legitimacy with which international NGOs claim to speak on behalf of defined (or undefined) classes of victims or on behalf of “international civil society”. At the same time, I reflect on the lack of genuine connection between the international world of NGOs, on the one hand, and the situation of human rights victims on the ground, on the other.

The critique in this paper does not intend to suggest that the methodologies of human rights advocates are completely incompatible with the interests of victims and should cease to be used. Certainly, they are important mechanisms in promoting respect for, and protection of, human rights worldwide. Still, I believe that if human rights advocates are to be responsible to themselves, and those they defend or represent, they need to examine honestly their activities and the practical results. Therefore, instead of offering specific solutions to issues identified here, I urge human rights advocates to embrace different and more holistic models of activism: activism that, in paraphrasing the terminology of critical scholars, I call “rebellious” or “community” activism.<sup>1</sup> By this, I mean activism that interacts with victims of human rights violations on a nonhierarchical basis, truly cooperates with them, and does not just “advocate” on their behalf. Only collective efforts that are closely connected to communities, groups, and individuals facing oppression, and that “nurture sensibilities and skills compatible with a collective fight for social change”,<sup>2</sup> can be ultimately successful in addressing human rights problems that we face at present, and may face in the future.

### **The bright side of human rights methodologies**

Human rights advocates have a broad range of tools that can be used to expose human rights violations and to seek solutions to issues conceived as problems. The most popular and effective of these tools are undeniably documenting



human rights abuses via fact-finding missions and publishing reports on findings; lobbying and otherwise advocating for recognition of their causes or identified abuses at the international, regional, and domestic levels; and taking individual cases of human rights violations to domestic or international courts. These three human rights methodologies—reporting, advocacy, and litigation—have certainly proved very successful over the years. While using them, human rights advocates have succeeded in shaming governments about serious human rights violations, or in gaining publicity and raising consciousness about neglected human rights issues. They have been very useful in pushing for law reforms in various areas of human rights protection and have brought concrete remedies to many victims of human rights abuses. Thanks to the effectiveness of these methodologies, human rights advocates have been accepted as partners by governments and intergovernmental organizations and are consulted in policy formulations or are able to participate in negotiations on various issues of public interest.

However, as the following sections of this paper show, these methodologies also have their shadowy parts and too often might be increasing, instead of reducing, the subordinated positions of victims of human rights violations.

### **Everybody wants to listen but nobody wants to help**

The first two human rights methodologies are closely linked. Gathering information and documenting human rights abuses are prerequisites for any further action: fact-finding serves as “a means of producing authoritative accounts” and evaluating situations that are later targeted via concrete action.<sup>3</sup> Facts are usually collected through fact-finding missions or research and published in the form of analytical reports, empirical studies, or personal accounts.

Reporting is followed by advocacy: the presentation of information to various actors, mainly to international bodies charged with monitoring states’ performance in implementing human rights standards, as well as to regional bodies and to transnational political organizations (such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) and their respective governments. For example, organizations and advocates applying this methodology produce “shadow reports” that contradict governmental reports on compliance with specific international or regional human rights treaties, lobby the human rights bodies to follow up on the situation in individual countries, or send “protest” letters or “letters of concern” to governments—all accompanied by media attention. It is hoped that, as a result of the “shame” that is brought on them, violators will subsequently change their practices, amend the laws, and provide remedies, as warranted. Scholars and activists suggest that “promoting change by reporting facts” is effective because it has a universal language, moral authority, and a measure of accountability that can invigorate the struggles of

affected individuals and groups and put pressure on government to end violations.<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly, reporting and advocacy have provided an invaluable service to victims of human rights abuses by calling the world's attention to their conditions. However, lately these methodologies have been the subject of increasing criticism for at least three reasons: the way they portray the victims, the way the facts in the reports are obtained, and the imposition of certain interpretations of situations while suppressing victims' voices.

### *Perpetuating victimization*

In order to secure attention from an otherwise uninterested audience, human rights reports need victims. Human rights reporting, therefore, always adds "a human touch" and describes particular stories of persons "subjected to cruelty, oppression or other harsh or unfair treatment or suffering death, injury, ruin, etc. as a result of an event, circumstances, or oppressive or adverse impersonal" violator.<sup>5</sup> Typically, the victim is also described as someone who is not responsible for his or her condition and who is weak, submissive, pitied, defeated, and powerless.<sup>6</sup> Reproducing images of incompetence, dependence, and weakness, reports on human rights violations can constitute further victimization. For example, David Kennedy argues that reporting on victims is an "[i]nherently voyeuristic or pornographic practice which no matter how carefully or sensitively it is done, transforms the position of the victim in his or her society and produces a language of victimization for him or her to speak on the international stage".<sup>7</sup> Similar criticism has been formulated by Makau Mutua, who defines human rights reporting by the savage-victims-savior metaphor, in which a victim is portrayed as a "powerless, helpless, innocent whose naturalist attributes have been negated by the primitive and offensive action of the state".<sup>8</sup> He objects that this construction does not promote the rights of victims but rather serves the interests of organizations producing the reports.

This victimization can also lead the portrayed individuals to conform to the expectations and stereotypes that outsiders have about their identity, as well as entrench stereotypes about some groups (for example, women, the disabled, minorities) in the eyes of the public.

### *Collecting testimonies*

Some concerns can also be raised with regard to the way the facts for the reports are obtained. International organizations that produce those reports are based outside the countries they criticize and operate at the international level. The information collected in the reports is gathered through interviews with victims who are contacted either directly and randomly, when reporters visit places where victims live and can be found, or through

the contacts of domestic and community NGOs. Based on my experience, the approach of those conducting the fact-finding is, in many instances, disrespectful toward victims. Interviewers are unable to explain who they are, what they are doing and why, and what will happen with the information provided. Even if the interviewers honestly try to explain their mission, victims are often not in a position to comprehend the full impact of the results of the reports. Moreover, in many instances, victims are willing to provide testimonies due to growing frustrations over some problems or in the interest of distracting themselves from a monotonous life (for example, in prisons or segregated communities). The validity of these testimonies (especially when collected during a single visit and not through systematic monitoring) can sometimes be dubious. Critics also suggest that in the reporting strategy, international NGOs depend on maintaining a high public profile, and “[they] feel pinch to break the reporting stalemate by devising dramatic new angles, uncovering even greater atrocities”<sup>9</sup> or simply “seizing on issues that seem designed more to promote their own image and fundraising efforts than to advance the public interest”.<sup>10</sup>

### *Monopolizing the struggle*

Reports on human rights abuses are prepared and issued by organizations that grasp the techniques necessary for the compilation of these reports and who have sufficient funding for them. Victims, who are dealing with the problems on the ground, either do not have the personal and financial resources to publish and use these kinds of reports, or would not have the resources to work with them at the necessary international level after they are issued. Complex reports prepared by outsiders thus necessarily interpret the language of victims; the victims are not allowed to serve as subjects in the production of their own narratives but are only sources of material for the reports. In this regard, critics raise concerns that such reports might reinforce and distort the information conveyed and hamper the access of victims to the audience.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, by repackaging grievances into a legal format and using legal jargon, reports can effectively silence the lay voices of victims and create “a hostile cultural setting” for marginalized groups.<sup>12</sup>

These arguments are certainly consistent with what I have experienced in my work on human rights violations in Central and Eastern Europe. Reports are produced by international human rights organizations far from the detachment of their comfortable offices in New York, Geneva, and other such places, far from the places where violations occur. The situations described in the reports are usually the result of complicated and manifold circumstances that in the studies are only summarized and adapted into an easily understandable form for an outside audience. Moreover, regardless of who the particular victims in a given case are (for example, rural women, ethnic minorities, prisoners, refugees, disabled persons, and so on), by discussing

victims as objects of research rather than giving them the opportunity to be subjects of a whole process, the human rights reporters maintain control over them, their reports perpetuating the image of victims as incapable individuals or groups that must be saved from their misery by human rights advocates. As such, this process can represent a new form of victimization.

Many times in my experience, the contacts that international organizations producing reports have with victims stop with the end of their fact-finding missions. The victims are almost never subsequently visited and are not given help either with the documented problems or with the potential backlash that they might face because of the report. I even encountered an opinion that international organizations “[a]re focusing more on overall and systemic changes [...] There are no individual victims as far as our organization is concerned”.<sup>13</sup>

If the fact-finding is targeting a serious problem (such as genocide or another serious human rights violation), usually a large number of international organizations are documenting, reporting, and advocating the issue; later on, the number of interviews with victims is multiplied by the media covering the problem after the publication of the human rights reports. When no practical remedy is seen on the ground, communities and individuals affected by the particular problem subsequently feel disillusioned, as they conclude that everybody wants to hear their stories but nobody wants to help them. Sometimes, studies conducted by organizations disconnected from victims might even have a negative impact on the work of local groups, which—as intermediaries in contact with international NGOs—are blamed for any backlash or increased influx of media attention.

### **In whose interest?**

“Impact” or “strategic” litigation has been another powerful tool used by human rights advocates in addressing certain problems. Impact litigation is a type of lawsuit that has a wider effect than simply providing a remedy for a particular plaintiff in a specific case. It involves cases at a higher level—for example, before supreme or constitutional courts or international bodies (for example, the Human Rights Committee, the European Court of Human Rights, and other regional human rights bodies), where it aims to change the law or practice through judicial decisions. Often, it also seeks to interpret constitutional or international law, in particular in those areas where it is “difficult to achieve legislative consensus on an issue”.<sup>14</sup>

In strategic litigation, the relationship between human rights advocates and victims is even more important and sensitive than in reporting and advocacy. Strategic litigation fares better in comparison with reporting: despite its potential limitations, which I discuss below, at least some participation by victims is necessary. Minimally, there needs to be a concrete individual who comes forward with a case and lets himself or herself be represented. Moreover, in an ideal case of winning a remedy or compensation, the victim gets something

tangible out of it. Compared with reporting and advocacy, victims are not reduced to passive objects completely (without getting any material or even moral compensation), in the care of brave human rights advocates. But as with the previously discussed methodologies, litigation has been criticized for creating and maintaining a power imbalance between human rights advocates, in this case lawyers, and their clients.<sup>15</sup> Victims are often uneducated, with little or no understanding of the law, and assume a subordinated position with regard to tactics and strategy after human rights advocates decide on litigation. Once victims are confronted with a mysterious legal procedure and complicated legal language, their “fate is no longer in their hands” as legal specialists automatically take over their problems.

What I have experienced in my legal practice, and in cooperation with international human rights organizations promoting impact litigation is, again, precious little consideration of ethical responsibilities or even a basic respect for victims. In many cases, there is obviously the conflict between the interest of clients and the goal one wants to achieve with the case. I have seen that in international or other high-impact litigation, the interest and opinion of particular plaintiffs are very rarely taken into consideration; instead, they are “sacrificed” for the public interest. Usually, once the case is filed, or very often even before, the represented person is a secondary consideration, and “the individual client fades into the background”, left to deal with the consequences of litigation on her own.

The interest and involvement of victims are particularly important in cases in which litigation did not originate at all from the activities of the victims themselves. By this, I mean cases where a particular issue is identified by an outsider organization that decides the best way to address it is through litigation, then develops a case and persuades someone from an affected group to be its client. Litigation can have a great impact on a particular issue but without extensive support for victims, it can be completely disruptive for the individual. It can very easily happen that the victims are, in a sense, manipulated and abused twice when the focus of the action is not the victim but an ideology alien to them.

This problem can be demonstrated through two examples. The first is the story of the woman identified only as Jane Roe in the famous *Roe v. Wade* case.<sup>16</sup> The case is certainly one of the most important decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court. The plaintiff in the case revealed her identity several years ago and spoke about her frustration over the case. She publicly criticized her attorneys as being unable to defend her interests: what she really was after was an abortion—but she never got it, as it would not have been good for the case. She claims:

*[P]lain and simple, I was used. I was a nobody to them. They only needed a pregnant woman to use for their case, and that is it. I was chosen [to sign the affidavit in the Roe case] because [the attorney] needed someone who would sign the paper and fade*

*into the background, never coming out and always keeping silent. As long as I was alive, I was a danger. I might speak out. I could be unpredictable (...) Even after the case, I was never respected—probably because I was not an ivy-league educated, liberal feminist like they were.*<sup>17</sup>

Eventually, the woman became an evangelical Christian and an antiabortion activist and filed for a reversal of the case.

The second example is the success story in the case of *Koptová v. Slovak Republic*, brought by an international NGO under the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.<sup>18</sup> The case involved two municipalities in Eastern Slovakia, Ľagov and Rokytovec, that in 1997 enacted resolutions expressly forbidding local Romani families from registering permanent residencies in these municipalities. One resolution even prohibited Roma from settling there and threatened them with expulsion should they try to do so. The international organization initiated a complaint to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination; the complainant was Mrs. Koptová, a person of Romani origin but not directly affected by the decrees—she did not reside in the municipalities and did not have any connection at all with the local communities. Under international pressure, the municipalities rescinded both resolutions, upon which the Committee recommended that the Slovak Republic “[t]ake the necessary measures to ensure that practices restricting the freedom of movement and residence of Romas under its jurisdiction are fully and promptly eliminated”.<sup>19</sup>

This ruling has been celebrated as a great victory of a legal strategy; however, as the international organization that initiated the case was not working on it with a local community and focused on publicizing the case internationally, it did not follow up with the situation on the ground. If it had done so, the organization would have found that the municipalities continued discriminatory policies despite a formal abolition of the municipal resolutions. When I visited Romani settlements in both towns a few years later, in 2002, none of the Romani families living there were registered as permanent residents in the municipalities, none of them were aware of any previous decision of an international body, and none of them had ever seen a lawyer to advise them on how to proceed when refused registration for permanent residency. I subsequently contacted the international organization and asked it to step in and provide legal assistance to Romani families, but I got a response that the problem had been sufficiently addressed in the international forum in 1999 and was not of interest to the organization anymore.

Measured by any standards of strategic litigation, the results in both of these cases can only be applauded. At the same time, they clearly demonstrate that the quest of the human rights advocates disregarded the wishes, opinions, or particular needs of the victims concerned, and that they sacrificed the interest of actual victims for the goal that the particular organization was pursuing.

## The right to do what they do and to say what they say

An underlying concern regarding all issues discussed so far is the fundamental question of the legitimacy of human rights advocates to do what they do and to say what they say when using these methodologies.

Legitimacy has been defined as “the particular status with which an organization is imbued and perceived at any given time that enables it to operate with the general consent of peoples, governments, companies and non-state groups around the world”, and which ensures that an organization “is accepted by antagonists as speaking for its constituency”.<sup>20</sup> As such, the legitimacy of international NGOs should be derived from their rootedness in an engaged and supportive constituency of victims.

However, with few exceptions, most international human rights NGOs purporting to speak for the masses are clearly not representatives of larger constituencies of human rights victims; their constituencies are donors, their employees, other international organizations, and governments. Most of these organizations are professional organizations that almost automatically exclude the participation of the people whose welfare they claim to advance.<sup>21</sup> Unaccountable to anyone other than themselves or their donors, international human rights NGOs often can lose touch with the “powerless and voiceless” whom they claim to represent.

Critics also point out that many human rights activists in international organizations come from elite backgrounds and form a privileged class or social group, often shuffling back and forth from organization to organization, or eventually serving stints in governmental or intergovernmental agencies.<sup>22</sup> As Chidi Odinkalu has observed, “with media-driven visibility and a lifestyle to match, the leaders of these initiatives enjoy privilege and comfort, and progressively grow distant from a life of struggle”.<sup>23</sup> As such,

*instead of being the currency of social justice or consciousness driven movement, ‘human rights’ has increasingly become the specialised language of a select professional cadre, with its own rites of passage and methods of certification. Far from being a badge of honour, human rights activism is, in some of the places [...] increasingly a certificate of privilege.*<sup>24</sup>

The negative aspects of these methodologies are certainly perpetuated by those who use them. Human rights reporting, advocacy, and impact litigation that pursue their goals without the broad support and engagement of victims, the real constituency looks like a form of “imperialism” that colonizes the real struggle of human rights victims. When international organizations use victims as a means for producing reports and initiating cases in which victims are used as objects, only fuels the critique by some that a global human rights market has emerged that understands the plights of oppressed groups

of individuals only as a commodity. The human rights field, dominated by closed networks of elites and professionals and excluding those who are directly concerned, hardly encourages the independent initiative of victims. More likely, it will “undermine the possibility of the sorts of political activity essential to any long term resolutions of the inequities that burden [the victims of abuses]”.<sup>25</sup>

### **La critique est facile, mais l’art est difficile**

This paper is definitely not intended to be a call for human rights advocates and NGOs to cease using the discussed methodologies and go home. It is instead a call for them to be more conscious of their weaknesses and to develop and implement an alternative set of practices. When considering these issues, one might find a lot of wisdom in works of critical scholarship that demand strategic innovation and critical reflection about the means they use in their work. Their approach to advocacy has been given many labels (community lawyering, critical lawyering, rebellious lawyering, and the like). Regardless of the term, the main aspect of such an approach is that it values broad participation in collective efforts for eliminating certain injustices or improving some problems. It argues that in order to make real lasting changes, advocates must reshape the ways they think about themselves and the victims or communities they serve. This approach also embraces a greater respect for the power of marginalized and oppressed individuals and communities—deeper attention to the influences of race, gender, class, and culture on human rights advocacy as well as on the relationships between professionals and their clients. As first introduced by Gerald Lopez, rebellious or community advocates “respect the energy and the commitment of community members working together and [...] with them for meaningful change, emerging from political and grass-root movements rather than from clever advocacy efforts by smart lawyers in suits”.<sup>26</sup>

Despite a certain skepticism that this form of activism has also received for its “idealized vision” or the difficulty of implementing its ideas,<sup>27</sup> I believe that this model of advocacy would not be contradictory to professionalization, as advocates would see themselves as more a part of the communities or groups for whom they work and would share with them the special knowledge and expertise they have gained through their education and expertise. They would still put the human rights violations in the spotlight, but in a way that enhances the victims’ autonomy and their rights to control their own lives and affairs.

Balancing different interests is definitely not an easy task, but international human rights advocates should not give up on finding such balance. In the end, after all, human rights instruments were designed to protect the rights of individuals, not to serve the interests of their advocates or the organizations that claim to represent them.



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## NOTES

1. Critical legal scholarship developed concepts of “community,” “political,” or “rebellious” lawyering. See, for example, works by Anthony Alfieri, Gerard Lopez, Lucie White, and Binny Miller, including: ALFIERI, A. Reconstructing Poverty Law Practice: Learning Lessons of Client Narrative. *Yale Law Journal*, New Haven, v. 100, 1991, p. 2107; LOPEZ, G. *Rebellious Lawyering: one Chicano’s vision of progressive law practice*. Westview Pr - Short Disc, 288 p., 1992; WHITE, L. Mobilization on the Margins of the Lawsuit: Making Space for Clients to Speak. *New York University Review of Law & Social Change*, New York, v. 16, 1987/88, p. 535; WHITE, L. Representing ‘The Real Deal’. *University of Miami Law Review*, Miami, v. 45, 1991, p. 271; MILLER, B. Give them back their lives: recognizing client narrative in case theory. *Michigan Law Review*, v. 93, 1994.
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## RESUMO

O artigo analisa o impacto negativo de estratégias comumente usadas por organizações de direitos humanos na promoção de suas causas, nomeadamente: relatórios de direitos humanos, *advocacy* e litígio estratégico. Este artigo questiona se tais estratégias funcionam e para quem funcionam. Questiona ainda a legitimidade de organizações internacionais na representação de vítimas de violações de direitos humanos e a ausência de responsabilidade por parte daquelas organizações em relação às vítimas. A autora argumenta que os meios usados por defensores de direitos humanos podem ser prejudiciais e contra-producentes para as vítimas: seus métodos frequentemente falsificam a verdadeira experiência vivida pelas vítimas, suprimindo sua independência, competência e solidariedade. Ao invés de eliminar relações de poder e de dominação sobre aqueles que desejam ajudar, o que se faz é sustentar desníveis de poder e utilizar violações como uma mercadoria. O artigo propõe uma cooperação mais ampla entre defensores e vítimas por meio de modelos mais holísticos de ativismo.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Perigos do litígio internacional – Responsabilidade – Organizações de direitos humanos – Vítimas – Advocacia crítica

## RESUMEN

El artículo analiza los efectos negativos de estrategias utilizadas por organizaciones internacionales al momento de promover causas de derechos humanos, a saber, la presentación de informes de derechos humanos, la promoción y defensa y el litigio estratégico. Se evalúan críticamente estas estrategias, y se cuestiona si están funcionando y, en caso afirmativo, a favor de quién. Al mismo tiempo, la autora pone en duda la legitimidad de las organizaciones internacionales para representar a las víctimas de violaciones de derechos humanos y cuestiona su falta de rendición de cuentas. La autora sostiene que los medios utilizados por los defensores de derechos humanos en su labor pueden ser perjudiciales y contraproducentes para las víctimas ya que a menudo falsifican la verdadera experiencia de las víctimas y terminan suprimiendo hasta su independencia, competencia y solidaridad. Bukovská afirma que en lugar de eliminar las relaciones de poder y de dominación, los defensores de derechos humanos a menudo perpetúan los desequilibrios de poder y usan las violaciones de derechos humanos como una mercancía. El artículo insta a una cooperación más amplia entre los defensores de derechos humanos a través de modelos más integrales de activismo.

## PALABRAS CLAVES

Peligros de la promoción internacional - Rendición de cuentas - Organizaciones internacionales de derechos humanos - Vítimas – Crítica de la abogacía

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