

# “I’M A HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER”

**Ishtar Lakhani**

- *What’s your superpower?* •

## ABSTRACT

*What made you care about human rights and why should others? Through personal story telling, this article explores how social justice activists can use their own journeys and narratives to motivate and inspire others to involve themselves in the fight for justice and equality. By harnessing the power of narratives, creativity, as well as fun, human rights activists can create more accessible, collaborative, and effective campaigns.*

## KEYWORDS

Creative activism | Narratives | Human rights

## 1 • The origin story

Every superhero has an origin story, a narrative that grounds, explains and often fuels the heroes' unrelenting fight for justice. Bruce Wayne (aka Batman) was left orphaned after he witnessed the murder of his parents during a robbery. Princess Leia's entire planet was destroyed by the evil Empire in Star Wars. Katniss Everdeen volunteered for the Hunger Games to protect her younger sister and The Bride's (aka Uma Thurman's character in Kill Bill) hero origins came out of revenge for the murder of her wedding party. All these characters have something in common other than their shared desire for justice: they had a deeply personal experience that moved them to devote their lives to fighting against injustice, often at their own peril.

Now, what has superhero origin stories got to do with human rights defenders and the current social justice landscape? I would argue that almost everyone who works in the field of human rights has their own origin stories not dissimilar to the stories described above. Having worked with a range of human rights practitioners across the world from community organisers to lawyers, communicators to policy specialists, I have always been profoundly interested in their origin stories. I have asked hundreds of people the simple question: "what made you care about human rights?" I can say with confidence that those who have chosen the uphill path of fighting for social justice have done so out of complex motivations that are deeply personal.

My origin story and the reason I care about social justice is no different. As a queer woman of colour, born in apartheid South Africa to a Hindu father and a Muslim mother, my experience of inequality and injustice was, and is (for lack of a better word) complicated. From a very young age I realised that all was not quite right with the world when the apartheid state told us where we were allowed to live and go to school and who we could love. I was lucky enough to have two parents involved in the anti-apartheid struggle and the fight for equality. But even luckier still, they both used their creative passions to support their activism. My mother, a feminist, art historian and teacher, and my father, an actor and journalist, exposed me to the multitude of ways that one can challenge oppression, disrupt power and mobilise people in solidarity. Sometimes resistance looked like a mass march in the streets, sometimes it was a boycott, sometimes it was having friends over for dinner and sometimes it was loving someone. Growing up surrounded by protest theatre, art, feminist literature and an ungovernable family led me down the activist path. This path hasn't been easy (trying to smash the capitalist patriarchy never is) but I would like to share some of my learnings so far.

## 2 • Speaking in Social Justice Acronym

"We are doing serious work here. There is no room for fun and games", "Why do you think they call it the anti-apartheid *struggle*?", or "Let's march to parliament and hand over a memorandum of demands!" – does any of this sound familiar? Having spent the majority

of my adolescent and adult life in and amongst social justice movements, networks and organisations, I have heard sentences like these a lot. Within a few years of being a full-time “professional” activist, I could mobilise a 500-person protest without breaking a sweat, give a slick Power Point presentation with my eyes closed and I learnt to speak fluent Social Justice Acronym: “Why yes, we’ve partnered with the MPWC and the CGE and approached the DOJ, DOH and DSD about the SW NSP on GBV”. I had cultivated all the skills that I thought were essential to successfully pursue my social justice calling. Fuelled by bad coffee and righteousness, I ploughed through policy documents, drafted petitions, sat on panels and spent endless days in overly air conditioned meeting rooms speaking in Acronym, eating small triangular cheese and tomato sandwiches. All in the pursuit of justice.

But after a while, I asked myself the difficult question: was it working? I was burnt out, following in the ashy wake of mentors, colleagues and friends, all of whom were doing (and for the most part, are still doing) incredibly important work of fighting inequality and injustice in all its manifestations. Was patriarchy (replace with misogyny or racism or homophobia or xenophobia or rampant capitalism) on the decline? I could answer none of these questions with a definitive yes. This state of affairs forced me to reflect on what I was actually trying to achieve. What were we as so-called human rights defenders trying to achieve? In my mind, I wanted (*still* want) people to be kinder, more compassionate and empathetic towards each other, for people to actively resist systems of oppression and exclusion and finally, I want people to care about human rights.

This led me back to thinking about superheroes and what made superheroes care (and care enough to act). My logic was if I could figure out what moved myself and others to care about human rights, I could harness that knowledge and use it to motivate others to care. But on deeper reflection I realized that Katniss Everdeen did not sign an online petition to end the Hunger Games; Princess Leia did not become a general in the Rebel Alliance because she was invited to a Facebook group called “The Empire Sucks!”; Batman did not read a 100-page inter-ministerial report on crime statistics in Gotham City; and the Bride certainly did not form an interim advisory steering committee to draft a “Protocol on Revenge (version 14)”. They were all *moved* to care about justice in the same way that I was moved to care. Which left me with a fundamental question: how do we move others?

### 3 • Putting the “fun” in fundamental rights

Throughout my activist journey, I have experienced the full range of human emotions from unadulterated rage at the systems of injustice to sheer joy in a gathering of my chosen community. However, when looking back at the predominant emotions that pervaded my early work, they were usually rage, anger, guilt and frustration. Although I am doing the serious work of human rights, I don’t really see myself as a serious person. My default settings are generally optimistic and humorous. My exclamation of “Don’t worry everyone, it’s aaallll going to be OK” in the middle of any crisis make people love and hate me in

equal measure. In awkward situations, whether a dinner party with a group of teetotaling, introverted strangers or a meeting with faith-based community leaders where I am wearing a t-shirt that says "This is what a sex worker looks like", finding a shared connection of humour or light heartedness gets me through relatively unscathed. Not only am I unscathed, but in most scenarios, I am able to share my 'very serious' thoughts and work in human rights with people in a genuinely honest and meaningful way. Telling a funny personal story or starting a conversation about favourite foods has often been the key to unlocking some uncharted common ground in which to introduce and explore the topic of human rights.

I am definitely not the first person to discover the miraculous power of fun and humour as an ideal vehicle for human rights messaging. Social justice movements have been tapping into the power of play and creativity for centuries. Playtivism, creative activism, craftivism, activism, artistic activism are a few of the terms used to describe an approach to social justice activism that emphasises creativity and fun as a point of entry to engage people in particular issues. Over the last 6 years, colleagues and I have been experimenting with these approaches, specifically in the fight for the human rights of sex workers in South Africa.

#### 4 • Being seriously funny

The lived reality of sex workers in a criminalised context is one of exclusion, ostracism and brutal violence, with little access to fundamental human rights. When one has to work in this context every day, it is very difficult to tap into emotions other than frustration and hopelessness. But that is what we tried to do. We decided we were going to find new ways to approach our issue because what we were doing wasn't working (for our issue and for ourselves). We wanted to create new and engaging narratives that did not feed into inaccurate, Hollywood stereotypes of "the dark, seedy underbelly of sex work." We wanted to reflect the people behind the issues: our amazing community. We did this in a number of ways. We set up brightly coloured "Ask a sex worker" information booths with music and prizes; we gave fake awards to celebrities (and got to meet Sir Elton John in the process); we mocked our Department of Justice using a hilarious cob-webbed skeleton desk; we showed support to our allies by delivering cake and balloons; and we even ran a fake sex worker-led political party in our National Election (the Sex Workers Action Group, aka SWAG). It was some of the most fun I have ever had as a human rights defender.

What did all of this play achieve, you may ask. There were many intended (and unintended) consequences to our interventions. These experiments with fun, creative approaches to human rights advocacy taught us that humour is one of the most effective tools in our activist arsenal because it has the ability to disarm and bring people together from a space of shared connection rather than fear. Through being 'seriously funny', over the past 6 years we have made some of the biggest strides in the fight for sex workers rights in South Africa. A number of leading political parties and major labour unions have recognised the rights of sex workers. The need for the full decriminalisation of sex work has been recommended in a

number of national policies including the National Strategic Plan to Combat Gender-based Violence. Our issues are far more visible and the narratives around sex work are shaped and produced by people who sell sex (rather than tabloid media). Our number of allies have also grown exponentially and we saved a ton of money (a fake political party on social media costs a lot less than a mass march to parliament).

The legislative, policy and narrative changes have been important. However, equally important has been the impact of this approach for those on the frontlines of human rights defence. These interventions required thought, creativity and risk. Long hours of making props, doing research and sneaking around in the middle of the night. But I say again, it was some of the most fun I have ever had as a human rights defender. The work was energising, to ourselves, our team and even our organisation. We laughed (especially when people believed SWAG was real) and danced and sang and made new friends. Yes, this all sounds positively romantic. But, to be clear, it was not only the fun and games that led to our victories. While we were dreaming up our creative interventions, we were simultaneously speaking in Acronym on conference panels and in parliament, creating substantive, evidence-based submissions to policies and providing direct legal, health and psychosocial support to sex workers who are on the frontlines of the battle for basic human rights.

It was this balanced approach to social justice activism that made me feel more genuinely myself and on deeper reflection, I realised why. This approach to activism spoke to my origin story: the combination of art and activism, of creative passion and politics. This combination is something that I strive for because when done just right, for a brief moment, we are able to create and live in the world of our dreams.



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