

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

Alice M. Nah and Juliana A. Mensah

• *Foregrounding the emotional journeys* •
of human rights defenders through artistic practice

1 • Introduction

Human rights defenders navigate complex and intense emotional journeys as they face risks. Some of these journeys are experienced collectively; some are undertaken alone. The extent to which defenders feel comfortable expressing their emotions to others are guided by (invisible) standards about what *should* be felt – what sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls ‘feeling rules’.¹ Gendered ‘feeling rules’ that valorise human rights defenders as brave, committed, self-sacrificial and selfless shape what defenders feel they can express to others.²

In an international research project examining the experience of over 400 human rights defenders in Mexico, Colombia, Egypt, Kenya and Indonesia, we found that defenders experienced a wide range and depth of emotions – including anger, indignation, fear, anxiety, dread, sadness, grief, resignation, disappointment and hopelessness as well as determination, trust, joy, hope, surprise, excitement, love and solidarity. These are better described as ‘journeys’, for emotions are rarely experienced in a static way. Defenders move from one emotion to another; their feelings are connected, even when they are contradictory. We found in this study that many defenders felt that they could not or should not share some of their emotions for the sake of others, which sometimes led to feelings of isolation and loneliness.

In this project, we wanted to make visible the breadth and depth of these emotions to wider audiences and to reflect back the experiences of defenders to themselves – so that they would know that they are not alone. As such, we invited an international group of artists with diverse

skills to produce creative responses to some of the research findings. In this article, we explore this creative process as well as some of the key themes that emerged from this research.

2 • Creative research practice

Arts-based approaches have been widely used in human rights research, gaining prominence as a means for producing holistic knowledge and amplifying marginalised voices.³ The arts have gained traction within social science research as a “critique to the dominance of positivist epistemologies” – as they are seen as enabling “new forms of imagining”, and “new registers of analysis”.⁴ Art-forms are perceived to offer a creative lexicon that complements and challenges dominant paradigms.

In our research, we engaged artists as we sought to create opportunities for the testimonies that had been gathered to be shared widely and in different forms. Ten researchers – five men and five women – conducted interviews, focus groups and administered a survey with 407 defenders in five countries between July 2015 and November 2016. 52 percent of participants were men, 47 percent women, and 1 percent were transgender persons.⁵

The creative process began when Juliana Mensah worked with anonymised transcripts from interviews and focus groups to create a series of verbatim poems. I (Mensah) read the transcripts looking for the emotional centre: the issues that defenders spoke of with most passion or concern. I sought to achieve Leavy’s concept of poetry as method, to create words “surrounded by space and weighted by silence” that might “break through the noise to present an essence”.⁶ Consequently, I edited the interview transcripts into verbatim poems to foreground emotion and highlight difficult social realities.

We shared the verbatim poems and some of the anonymised transcripts with a selection of international artists from the five countries in this study and the United Kingdom. The rich and diverse creative responses they produced included a blanket (by Rosa Borrás featured on the front cover of this Special Issue⁷); poetry films; songs and music; short films; poems; animation; drawings, paintings, and a mural, some of which are described below.⁸

3 • Navigating risk and insecurity

In the mixed media film, ‘Greater Than Love’,⁹ Alejandra Jimenez uses found sounds and illustrative noises, the movement of dancers, and pencil-drawn silhouettes to evoke the intangible interactions between life, risk and death, and the contradictory efforts of making sure family members and loved ones are kept near and safe, while keeping attackers at bay. The fear that defenders face as they witness human rights violations is captured in the oil painting ‘The Witness’ by Ndereva Mutua, whose graphite pencil drawing ‘Backstabbed’ pays homage to a Kenyan woman defender whose son was killed in an effort to stop her work.

Like *Mutua*, several artists used the research material to explore issues faced by human rights defenders who were their personal friends, colleagues and allies. ‘Divine’ is a visual art work created by Ruben Ochoa in which statistics of the attacks on human rights defenders in Mexico are visualised as three opaque panels that grow progressively larger, forming bars across a pane of glass. Behind the bars, with his hands up, is a local Mexican human rights defender, Padre Alejandro Solalinde, who has been the target of violence. Shades of fear, sadness, anger, determination, trust and joy are explored in Amira Hanafi’s interactive digital artwork ‘We are Fragmented’¹⁰ which displays quotes from the study as the audience engages with the website, scrolling over and clicking on coloured circles that represent shifting emotions. With care and attention, each artist took the research and created a response that expanded interpretations and initial understandings of the material.

Using illustration, Deena Mohamed¹¹ highlights factors that make defenders feel insecure, including witnessing human rights violations committed with impunity; feeling the judgement of society; and living in a ‘tyrant-ruled state’. She also shows how the factors that make defenders feel secure include solidarity in the human rights community; the belief in the inherent rightness of their work; and practical measures such as maintaining “digital security and (having) a good lawyer”. Mohamed ends the series with the quote of a woman defender from Egypt: “in order to continue our work, we must somehow ignore the risks”.

4 • The mental and emotional wellbeing of defenders

In this study, 86 percent of the defenders expressed that they were ‘somewhat concerned’ or ‘very concerned’ about their own mental and emotional wellbeing; they were as concerned about this as they were about their physical and digital security. Nevertheless, they tended to give only secondary attention to their own wellbeing, prioritising first the wellbeing of victims of human rights violations and the wellbeing of their family members and loved ones.

In ‘Room at Region (X)’,¹² narrated in Arabic with English sub-titles, Nada Hassan focuses on the experiences of women defenders in confronting enforced disappearances, and dealing with isolation and exhaustion. In the dance film ‘Vis-à-vis’ by Simona Manni,¹³ a dancer moves to express anxiety, fear, suspicion, nervousness, exhaustion and depression, communicating the need for forgiveness, hope, and love. Narrators read excerpts of interviews, sharing defenders’ experiences of surveillance, disappearances, and violence.

5 • Conclusion

The art work became a centrepiece for collective reflection as a research team; it was a means by which we could reflect back to the defenders who had participated in the research our responses to the stories they had shared. Finally, the art was also a prompt

for discussion in conferences, exhibitions, and public events with policymakers, NGOs, other human rights defenders and wider audiences.

Art speaks to us on sensory and emotional levels, and in so doing it has the potential to elicit compassion, empathy and understanding. Working with artists enabled us to access different conceptual lenses with which to consider the research material; it allowed for a deeper connection and interrogation of the issues raised in the research. Each of the pieces in this collection reflected the stories of defenders and the meaning of their lives for others. As musician and composer John Otieno Oduor Rapasa observes in his song, *Wan Kale*,¹⁴ written in the Luo language, “they wiped tear drops; they gave water to thirsty people”.

Human rights defenders around the world persevere in spite of the grave risks they face, and we hope that this body of work makes visible – to them as much as others – the emotional journeys they experience that change their souls. We end this article by echoing the words of Ndungi Githuku, who, in an uplifting music video entitled ‘Amba’,¹⁵ calls for the public celebration of the work and lives of ‘heroes and sheroes’, past and present. He exhorts human rights defenders around the world, singing:

*Rise up, rise up
Don't give up
We shall overcome
Rise up, rise up*

NOTES

- 1 • Arlie Hochschild, "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure," *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1979): 551-575.
- 2 • Alice M. Nah, "Navigating Mental and Emotional Wellbeing in Risky Forms of Human Rights Activism," *Social Movement Studies* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1709432>.
- 3 • Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2014).
- 4 • Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael, *Senses of Culture* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 5 • Alice M. Nah (ed.). Forthcoming. *Protecting Human Rights Defenders* (Abingdon: Routledge).
- 6 • Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (New York: Guilford Publications, 2014): p. 63.
- 7 • See the essay by Rosa Borrás in this issue of *Sur Journal*, "A Blanket for Human Rights Defenders" (p. 145 - 149).
- 8 • All of these artistic works are available in the multi-lingual website in English, Spanish, Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia and Kiswahili: "The Security and Protection of Human Rights Defenders at Risk," Homepage, Security of Defenders Project, 2020, accessed June 15, 2020, <https://securityofdefendersproject.org/>.
- 9 • depois da nota #8, completar com mais essas:
- 9 • Also available in English here: "Greater Than Love," Vimeo video, 04:17, posted by Alejandra Jiménez films, July 6, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/224473562>; and in Spanish: "Mas Grande que el Amor | Greater Than Love - Spanish Version," Vimeo video, 04:18, posted by Alejandra Jiménez films, January 9, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/250362991>.
- 10 • Also available in English here: "We Are Fragmented," Homepage, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <http://wearefragmented.amiraha.com/>.
- 11 • Also available in English here: "What Factors Make You Feel Insecure? What Factors Make You Feel Secure?," Egypt Defenders, July 23, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://egyptdefenders.tumblr.com/>; and in Arabic: Egypt Defenders, July 24, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://egyptdefenders-arabic.tumblr.com/>.
- 12 • Available here in Arabic with English sub-titles: "Room At Region (X)," YouTube video, 12:05, posted by Nada Hasan, July 28, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://youtu.be/sNEKy4XyeZg>.
- 13 • Also available in English here: "Vis a Vis," YouTube video, 08:44, posted by Simona Manni, August 29, 2017, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://youtu.be/ZB5BhHg0DzU>; and with Spanish sub-titles: "VisAVisSpanighSubs," YouTube video, 08:44, posted by Simona Manni, October 17, 2018, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://youtu.be/y1tej7ai1r8>.
- 14 • Available in Luo here: "Wan Kale," YouTube Music, 04:06, posted by Rapasa Nyatrapasa Otieno, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=kbVNjh2dCbM&feature=share>.
- 15 • Available in English here: "AMBA by NDUNGI GITHUKU (subtitled)," YouTube video, 03:53, posted by cahruoy, January 29, 2019, accessed August 31, 2020, <https://youtu.be/q2-sAS5Fuj4>.



ALICE M. NAH – *United Kingdom*

Alice M. Nah is a Lecturer at the Department of Politics and the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York, UK. She conducts research on the security and protection of human rights defenders at risk and on migration and asylum in Southeast Asia.



JULIANA A. MENSAH – *United Kingdom*

Dr Juliana A. Mensah is a writer and researcher. She was Leverhulme Artist in Residence at the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the University of York and she holds a PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from Newcastle University. Her first novel won the inaugural NorthBound Book Award.

Received in June 2020.
Original in English.



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