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# Human Rights Leadership: Towards a Research and Practice Agenda for Challenging Times

Eric Hoddy and John Gray
May 2020

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# Executive Summary

Recent cases have highlighted how human rights defending is having to reckon with a sustained underinvestment in leadership. This has been shown by the recent Amnesty International UK case for example, which is symptomatic of the field's wider problem.

Globally, the challenge is amplified by the pressures of having to navigate and strategise in increasingly difficult contexts. Human rights organisations and activists are confronting new restrictions on freedom of information, expression, assembly and public participation (see Flower, 2019, this series) which squeeze civic space and introduce new risks. In recent weeks and months, further challenges have arisen for defenders in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Human rights issues such as around poor access to healthcare and the right to water and sanitation may be dramatically worsening in some settings, while governments begin using crisis to silence critics and suppress information (HRW, 2020a; UN, 2020).

Complicating matters further are martyrdom cultures in rights-based organisations and a reticence among some activist quarters to engage with questions of leadership.

In the academic and practice literature meanwhile, leadership has not been given due attention. Narratives about human rights defending and activism in challenging contexts make at best only fleeting and often implicit reference to leadership with the result that leadership and the contexts for human rights defending remain poorly understood.

This working paper presents findings from a review of the literature on leadership in times of stress and crisis.

It presents various leadership concepts, frameworks, historical lessons and strategic insights from the academic literature outside the field of human rights practice. This wider literature is vast, and the review presents that which seems most relevant and potentially useful to human rights defending.

Overall, the working paper builds towards an integrated research and practice agenda for understanding and supporting human rights leadership. It also aims to serve as reference point on leadership for human rights organisations, movements, practitioners and academics in the field.

## Implications for practice

Several implications for practice follow.

- **Feminist, collectivist and followership approaches to leadership provide potentially useful resources for developing human rights leaders and leaderful behaviour. They can also be employed as frameworks for helping to guide relationships between human rights organisations and communities;**

- **Emerging research examining difficult or 'extreme' contexts for leadership may be harnessed for developing tools to assist human rights leaders and practitioners in their analyses of strategic contexts, planning action in complex settings, developing resilient organisations, and making critical decisions in times of stress and crisis;**
- **Lessons from formal and informal social movements and other forms of collective action may be a source of insight for human rights organisations operating in heavily power-laden contexts, such as where civil and political freedoms are severely restricted. Leadership and organisational studies fields have rarely engaged with such contexts and seem an unlikely significant source of insight on this question for the time being.**

# Table of contents

Executive Summary **4**
    Implications for practice **4**
Table of contents **6**
Introduction **7**
1. What is leadership? **9**
    1.1 Definitions **9**
    1.2 Feminist leadership **9**
    1.3 Collectivistic forms of leadership **10**
    1.4 Followership and values-based leadership **11**
    1.5 Emerging research questions **13**
2. Leadership and context **14**
    2.1 Introduction **14**
    2.2 ‘Extreme contexts’ and crises **16**
    2.3 Leadership and resilience **18**
    2.4 Emerging research questions **20**
3. Resistance **20**
    3.1 Resistance in power-laden and non-democratic contexts **22**
    3.2 Emerging research questions **23**
Conclusion **24**
References **24**

# Introduction

In 2019, a wellbeing review at Amnesty International's London headquarters revealed serious failures in organisation leadership and management. At this world-leading human rights organisation bullying and humiliation were found to be routinely used by managers and leaders. Multiple cases of discrimination on the basis of race and gender were identified. Amnesty Staff, the report revealed, had little trust in the organisation's leadership. Among staff, there was a feeling that individual leaders, who often did not share a human rights background, were motivated by different values to theirs. The report highlighted the emergence of an 'us versus them' culture between staff and leadership/management as a key source of stress and barrier to healthy organisational functioning. This Amnesty case is symptomatic of a wider problem in human rights defending that there has been a sustained underinvestment in human rights leadership to the detriment of the field (Avula et al., 2019; Ghere, 2013; Satterthwaite et al., 2019).

Accordingly, this working paper responds to the urgency of leadership development in human rights defending, in particular in situations of shrinking public space. This practice deficit is reflected in emerging narratives about human rights defending and activism in such contexts, which at best make only fleeting and often implicit reference to leadership (for example Sundkvist, 2018; Kapronczay and Kertesz, 2018). Human rights leadership and the contexts for human rights defending remain poorly understood as a result. This review presents various leadership concepts, frameworks, historical lessons and strategic insights from the academic literature outside the field of human rights practice, and from some emerging perspectives on leadership in the context of Covid-19. It draws as well on insights from eight human rights defenders on their understanding of leadership and their leadership style and practice. They were interviewed while on a Protective Fellowship Scheme for Human Rights Defenders at Risk, at the Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York. These Defenders work on a variety of human rights issues in the Global North and South and their reflections offer a relevant counterpoint to the academic analysis of leadership.

Some key questions have guided and emerged through this review, including

- What is 'good leadership' in the context of a human rights organisation or movement?
- What do leadership theories bring for understanding leadership in human rights organisations?
- What existing leadership styles fit with current Defender leadership practices?
- Do value-based leadership models fit more naturally with leadership in human rights organisations and movements?
- Are there common themes or styles of leadership which can be articulated from Defenders' leadership in contemporary human rights contexts?

- To what extent does good leadership contribute to security, management of risk, and well-being (of Defenders, and those they work with)?
- What organisational practices and policies contribute to the security of human rights organisations and staff?
- What risk and resilience practices can be modelled by those in leadership roles? What contribution can be offered by boards and other organisational governance structures?

The review is organised around a number of key themes with the potential to inform work on human rights leadership. Section 1 discusses some of the more prominent theories and approaches to leadership that appear particularly significant to human rights defending: collectivistic forms of leadership, followership and values-based leadership. Section 2 discusses concepts, frameworks and some strategies that have featured in the work examining contexts for leadership. It deals with recent work on 'extreme contexts' and crises, including how these are conceptualised and might be responded to, and associated work on complexity and organisational/leader resilience. It highlights the VUCA framework (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) as a potentially useful tool for human rights practitioners. Section 3 reviews more sociologically-informed work on resistance and leadership that engages with power, politics and gender as matters of context. Each section concludes with a set of questions for human rights leadership that draw on the content discussed.

Organisations, social movements and gender are drawn on as examples in the review. The formal organisational basis for human rights defending globally makes insights from organisations and organisational studies useful. Organisations do vary enormously from one another. But the various components that all organisations share in common (structures, institutional forms, processes and change etc.) can make insights and lessons transferable. Social movement cases may be useful to human rights defending in a different respect, in particular where defending is carried out through informal institutions or organisations, where there is a significant membership/follower base, such as which underpins campaign work, and where activism takes place in undemocratic and power-laden contexts. The examples of activism and leadership around women's rights, which draw on a gender lens, highlight how gender, activism and leadership intersect in ways that shape leadership practices and which generate both enablements and constraints on participation. Excerpts from interviews with Defenders help ground the various concepts, theories and approaches in the everyday practice of human rights defending.

# 1. What is leadership?

## 1.1 Definitions

There is little agreement in the literature about how to define leadership. In his examination of leadership, Northouse (2016) identifies an 'evolution' in leadership definitions over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first that is associated with different concepts and components. "After decades of dissonance," Northouse (2016, p.5) suggests, "leadership scholars agree on one thing: They can't come up with a common definition for leadership." The bottom line is that leadership "is a complex concept for which a determined definition may long be in flux."

The lack of an agreed upon definition of leadership has not however held back the development theories or approaches for examining processes of leadership. Among the most widely known and applied definitions of leadership include trait-based leadership, behavioural theories and transformative theories.[1] Several leadership styles have also been identified by the leadership literature. Among the most prominent of these are command and control; situational leadership; servant leadership; facilitative leadership; transformative leadership and authentic leadership.[2] In recent years, collectivistic and values-based theories of leadership have also emphasised behaviours and styles of leadership with moral and ethical dimensions. These may be of especial use to human rights practice and research.

## 1.2 Feminist leadership

In the first instance, feminist leadership has been distinguished as a form of leadership that engages with gender power and women's lack of access to

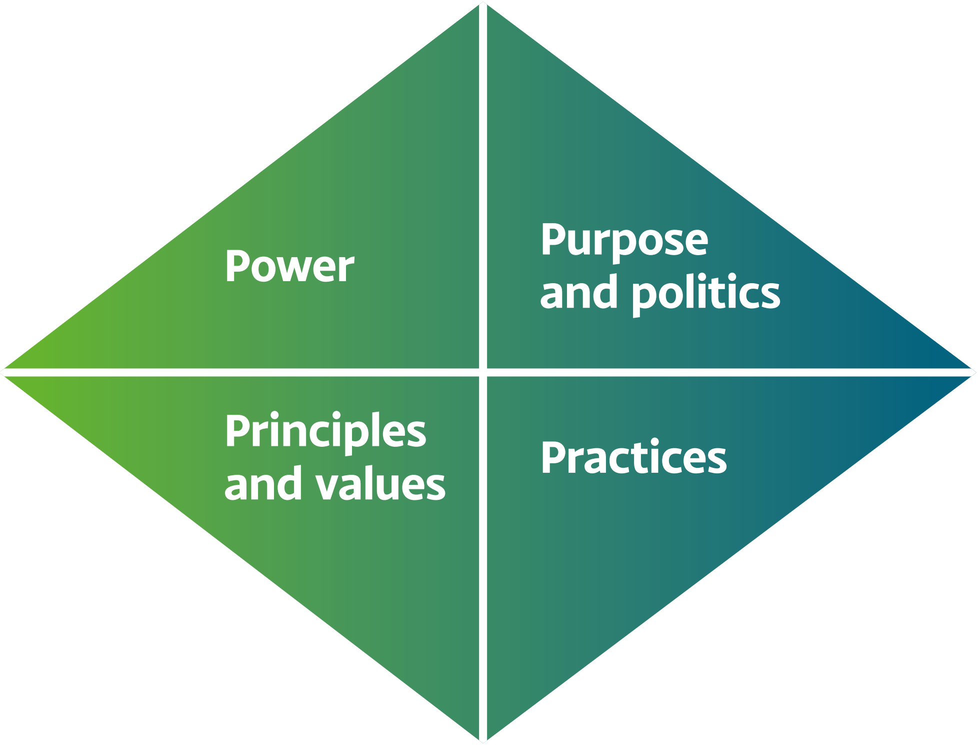

*Fig 1. The feminist 'leadership diamond' (Batliwala, 2010, p.15)*

formal leadership positions (Chin, 2007; Batliwala, 2010; Poltera and Schreiner, 2019). Advocates emphasise its potential to foster "democratic, weblike, collaborative relationships" (Eagly, 2007, xviii; also Chin, 2007) over hierarchical and autocratic ones, such as which might emerge through command and control styles of leadership. However, definitions of feminist leadership are various and are yet to be "fully explored or developed as a feminist construct" (Batliwala, 2010, p.9).[3] Batliwala (2010, p.14) synthesises a number of definitions from distinct fields to propose a working definition and framework for feminist leadership in women's rights work:

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[1] Trait-based leadership theories emphasise personality or behavioural characteristics that are shared among leaders. Behavioural approaches emphasise instead how leadership effectiveness is explained by behaviour rather than traits. Because leaders are 'made' rather than 'born', behavioural approaches consider processes of learning, observation and training. Transformative theories treat both leaders and followers as objects of analysis and seek to explain outcomes in terms of leader-follower relationships or processes, where leaders uplift, inspire and motivate followers around organisational or collective goals

[2] Command and control refers to a top-down, hierarchical approach to leadership. Situational leadership emphasises how different situations demand different kinds of leadership, requiring leaders to adapt their styles to different situations. Facilitative leadership involves group decision-making and refers to the alignment of team members towards shared goals. Transformative leadership describes how followers are motivated and transformed by leaders. Authentic leadership emphasises leaders exhibiting genuine leadership and leading from conviction.

> *"Women with a feminist perspective and vision of social justice, individually and collectively transforming themselves to use their power, resources and skills in non-oppressive, inclusive structures and processes to mobilize others – especially other women – around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic and political transformation for equality and the realization of human rights for all."*

This approach encompasses several themes identified in existing leadership definitions: attributes, behaviours, values and practices that focus on inclusivity, participation, empowerment, and consensus building; issues of power and politics which are less visible in mainstream approaches to leadership; and feminists' own uses of power when they are in leadership positions (Batliwala, 2010). The feminist 'leadership diamond' (Fig 1) captures the core components that make up feminist leadership for social transformation: i) power, which, as indicated in Box 4 (p.6), includes leaders' abilities to examine different forms of power and how they operate in social contexts; principles/values, such as equality, human rights, inclusion etc.; politics/purpose, by which is meant analysing socio-economic realities and ideologies informing analysis and the "longer-term vision and mission for change that emerges from that politics"; and practices, which refers to how leadership unfolds in practice and in relation to these other components. This definition and approach has contributed in a strong way to Oxfam's work on 'Transformative Leadership for Women's Rights', which has sought to re-examine concepts and approaches to leadership in the organisation's work and to embed it with transformative feminist leadership practices (Brown et al., 2019; also Azevedo et al., 2019). Brown et al. (2019; also Wakefield, 2017; Smyth 2015) identify a number of key characteristics for Oxfam's programming which include collectivistic modes of leadership as opposed to "individualistic, potentially atomising approaches" (Brown et al., 2019, p.24); men being leaders for women's rights – and not just partners; combining organisational skills with feminist analysis; intersectionality in analysis and practice, which includes awareness of race, class, disability, religion, age and sexuality; and transformations of the "systems, structures and institutions in which transformative leaders work" in order to embed change (Brown et al., 2019, p.24).

## 1.3 Collectivistic forms of leadership

Collectivist modes of organising and leadership may be adopted by human rights organisations in times of stress and crisis. Collectivistic forms of leadership were identified by Human Rights Defenders in interviews (Box 1). These modes of leadership have emerged as particularly relevant amidst the

[3] Batliwala (2010, p.10) suggests that feminist contributions to defining leadership were strong in the 1970s and 1980s but that these are difficult to access because "it is not available online or in scholarly social science journals – it is located in libraries of universities or independent women's studies centres, in unpublished reports of meetings, or in women's personal archives of the debates and discussions around the subject in the 1970s and 1980s."

ongoing Covid-19 pandemic settings, where responses require harnessing expertise across spaces and sectors for responding to systemic problems (e.g. Reynolds, 2020; Bond, 2020).

In the academic literature, collectivistic forms of leadership (Cullen-Lester and Yammarino, 2016; Yammarino et al., 2012) is an umbrella term that captures a number of approaches, including team leadership (Day et al., 2004; Burke et al., 2006); complex systems leadership (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007); network leadership (Balkundi and Kilduff, 2005); and collective leadership (Friedrich et al., 2009). Though these approaches differ from one another they all engage with collectivist leadership as a type of leadership involving “multiple individuals assuming (and perhaps divesting themselves) of leadership roles over time in both formal and informal relationships” (Yammarino et al., 2012, p.382). The taking on informal leadership roles during circumstances of stress or crisis was occasionally mentioned by Defenders during interviews (Box 2). Relationships and roles in such settings are not static “but are rather fluid and dynamic in nature and depend on organizational and environmental demands and requirements.” Social movement examples of more collectivistic forms of leadership are further discussed in Section 3 below.

> [Leadership is] someone who could work with the people or with a team or group of people. You can try to lead them but you must always work in a collective way, with collective ideas. Leadership is having collective ideas together and working on them.

*Box 1.*

> The situation forces you to be a strong leader, for example in our sector, we were several times under pressure, we had problems with arrests, so in my experience I had always forced to be very strong in some difficult situations. For example the first time when I needed to decide or do something that was connected to the arrest of the head of the organisation and some young leaders who had participated in a peaceful demonstration. I hadn’t any knowledge about how I would do, I was much younger, it was the first time.

*Box 2.*

## 1.4 Followership and values-based leadership

Interviews with Human Rights Defenders also spoke to some emerging academic work around followership and values-based leadership. Followership theory diverges from dominant conceptualisations of followers as recipients or moderators of leader influence to a perspective on followers as active subjects (Kelley, 1988; Baker, 2007; Uhl-Bien et al, 2014; Crossman and Crossman, 2011). For example, where national leadership comes to depend on active citizen-followers through the latter’s observing of social distancing advice (Bolden, 2020). In Uhl-Bien et al’s (2014) influential followership framework, individuals both enact followership in the context of hierarchical roles (with an emphasis on follower traits, characteristics and styles and follower behaviour), while also engaging in “following behaviors in ways that construct leadership” (Uhl-Bien, 2014, p.94). For instance, in a study of human rights leaders in Myanmar White (2015) suggests moral courage has been a key leadership practice and behaviour that is of value to followers.[4]

Aspects of followership have been expressed by Human Rights Defenders in interviews. Defenders indicated the importance of followers – especially followers who can be constructively critical and challenge the leadership when necessary, and how leadership arises because other people invest a particular person with authority or influence (Boxes 3 and 4).

> Leadership is taking initiative in relationship? Yes, I agree with that, for people to recognise your leadership and to see the influence you have, it's all about the relationship, and how you play your role in that relationship, and they can tell and identify whether you have that leadership role and if you have ability as a leader. You don't need a lot of followers, but you can have people who will admire you, who will support you, they don't have to follow you. But along they can tell you if it's not right the way you're doing it or leading it, and if you accept the correction then you're a good leader. But if you reject it you're not learning anything.

*Box 3.*

> It's a very hard process, not a very easy process to bring the changes when everything is governed by patriarchal norms and we are challenging the structure, but somehow we achieve a change of mind of people towards these issues and also we create our space to accept us, and to listen to us, and in that way they are accepting my leadership.

*Box 4.*

Behaviours and styles of leadership with moral and ethical dimensions are emphasised by values-based leadership theories (Brown et al., 2005; May et al., 2003; Avolio and Gardner, 2005). These theories look relevant to human rights leadership since it can be expected that human rights leaders are likely to identify strongly with values. For instance, equality and non-discrimination emerge as key values driving leadership work on women's rights (Box 6, p.23; also Boxes 3 and 4). Values may be religious as well as secular and underpin the discourses and practices of religious human rights organisations and movements (Butcher and Hallward, 2018; Mayer and John, 2017). For instance, human rights law is identified by a leader of the World Council of Churches in terms of "God-given human dignity" (Butcher and Hallward, 2018).

In respect to movements, Christian values were a significant framing and narrative resource in the early years of Brazil's landless workers' movement (MST), at a time when it was led by sectors of the Catholic Church aligned to liberation theology (Hoddy and Ensor, 2018).

Ethical leadership refers to "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown et al, 2005, p.120). For Brown et al., people perceived as ethical leaders are those that model conduct which followers consider "normatively appropriate", such trustworthiness, fairness and so on, and this makes them legitimate and credible. Feminist contributions to

[4] She indicates how strengthening leadership requires programmes of action around "identify[ing] [leadership] goals and motivations, tap into their moral commitment, core principles and values, recognize the potential risks, utilize their skills, and work collectively to change individual and organizational behaviour."

the theme (e.g. Fine, 2009) have highlighted moral and ethical dimensions of leadership that are grounded in the feminist ethic of care.

Ethical leadership shares with servant leadership a common concern for care, trust, integrity and serving the greater good, but departs from it on account of the stronger emphasis it places on directive and normative behaviour and servant leadership's concern for developing people (Van Dierendonck, 2010; Greenleaf, 2002).

Authentic leadership refers to "a process that draws from both positive psychological capacities and a highly developed organizational context, which results in both greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviors on the part of leaders and associates, fostering positive self-development" (Luthans and Avolio, 2003, cited in Avolio and Gardner, 2005, p.321). The approach seems especially relevant to recent work around mental health and wellbeing-promotion in human rights organisations since studies have shown how leaders in other contexts can play an important role in staff mental health (Satterthwaite et al., 2019).[5] Authentic leadership has been identified as being preferred by followers and that it helps create positive working environments (May et al., 2003). Research suggests authentic leaders have acquired self-realisation or eudaemonic well-being and are able to impact the well-being of their followers (Ilies et al., 2005).

In interviews, collaboration and trust were emphasised over top-down command and control, and reliance on personal values and leading in a way which is congruent with those values were underscored as necessary for effective leadership. For instance, one defender felt that "leadership is how to advance, to make humanity thrive, to bring dignity to very many people who have been denied it." One Defender indicated a mode of leading akin to servant leadership when they suggested that "when you serve you also have the power. They also contribute how they want it to go, and you take what is good and you leave out what is not good and you go forward." Some elements of authentic leadership were also emphasised by the Defender below (Box 5).

> Leadership by example; also because to inspire people. If the women or men came to you and say I want to be like you, I want them to change themselves. This is because culture is very powerful against us and also against men. And to encourage people to love himself, love herself. Because we are told all the time you should feel guilty, guilty, guilty. But I cannot live my life under the table, invisible; and people think I am brave when I do this.

*Box 5.*

## 1.5 Emerging research questions

Some questions follow that draw on insights from followership and values-based leadership, and which may inform future research:

- What is 'good leadership' in the context of a human rights organisation or movement?
- Through which actors (individuals, organisations, formal and informal institutions, movements etc.) and processes are effective human rights leadership constructed?

[5] Satterthwaite et al.'s (2019, p.497-498) study of mental health and wellbeing in human rights organisations finds that "Yet, too often, advocates reported that fostering well-being is not a real part of the manager's role and portfolio [...] One advocate explained that 'there was one case of a complete nervous breakdown ... management did not assume any responsibility for that, and they just claimed that she had a mental illness that was not related to work.' Another advocate noted that when a staff member expresses concerns about health, 'because of poor management style or leadership, the management will get defensive and will keep on blaming the staff instead of supporting the staff ... the staff are shamed publicly.' One advocate who works with an international human rights organization noted that part of the problem was a lack of training for managers. This advocate saw management as traditionally lacking prioritization, or even understanding, of well-being issues: "Just in the past few years, there has been a realization that [mental health] is a problem. Even just two years ago, we discussed these issues at a meeting, and managers were responding with 'I don't really see what else we could do.'"

- How might a research and practice agenda on human rights *followership* add to, support or strengthen an agenda on leadership?
- What existing leadership styles fit with current Defenders' leadership practices?
- Are there common themes or styles of leadership which can be articulated from Defenders' leadership in contemporary human rights contexts?
- What can definitions and frameworks of feminist leadership bring to human rights defending?
- Do values-based leadership models fit more naturally with leadership in human rights organisations and movements? What does a values-based leadership imply for women's leadership, and gender relations?
- What do leadership theories bring for understanding leadership in human rights organisations?
- How are conflicting values negotiated in processes of human rights leadership and decision making?
- Where can values-based leadership in human rights defending break down?

## 2. Leadership and context

### 2.1 Introduction

Collectivist and other emerging theories in the literature build on developments in the field around improving understandings of the relationship between leadership and context (Osborn et al., 2002; Oc, 2018; Porter and McLaughlin, 2006; Johns, 2006). This growing body of literature seeks to address the neglected role of context (organisational, social and political) in shaping leadership behaviour and outcomes. In this literature, the "contexts, contingencies and situations" (Antonakis and Day, 2012, p.139) of leadership work are the objects of study, understanding of which intends to inform the development of new explanations for leadership outcomes. For example, how context influences the type of leadership that emerges, goals, and effectiveness (Antonakis and Day, 2012; Acton et al., 2019). The theme is significant because it suggests that understanding and supporting human rights leadership requires awareness of and responses to the interactions and interrelations between leaders and context.

Several recent and oft-cited articles have contributed frameworks identifying core contextual factors considered relevant to leadership and organisational contexts, helping steer empirical research on the topic. For instance, key components of contexts that are internal to organisations are distilled out in Porter and McLaughlin's (2006) review, and include:

- culture/climate, such as whether organisational culture is adaptive or bureaucratic and whether there is a cultural emphasis on ethics;
- the goals, missions and strategies of individuals, groups and organisations;

- state and condition, such as whether the organisation is in a state of stability or crisis;
- and organisational structure, such as the degree of formalisation and centralisation.

A cultural component is developed further by Antonakis and Day's (2012), who identify the objective and subjective dimensions of culture as both a potential antecedent to leadership behaviour and as an influencer on the relationship between leadership and outcomes. As indicated in feminist leadership thinking, masculinised organisational cultures for example can shape leadership styles: "often women leaders [...] believe that they must adapt their leadership style accordingly. Women leaders are often bound by these perceptions that constrain them to their gender roles and influence their leadership styles and behaviors. At the same time, these same behaviors may be defined as signs of ineffective leadership" (Chin, 2007, p.7).

The contextual components that are external to the organisation are captured in a recent contribution by Oc (2018), who adapts Johns's (2006) framework for organisational context to examine leadership. Two levels of analysis are delineated: an 'omnibus context' that describes the context as a whole in reference to the questions, 'who?', 'where?', 'when?' and 'why?'; and a 'discrete context' nested within the former that refers to "specific situational variables that influence behaviour directly or moderate relationships between variables" (Johns, 2006, p.319). Adapted for leadership, these terms refer to the following:

- 'where', in the omnibus context, refers to the influence of location on leadership, and may include culture as a factor, such as how culture differently construes leadership qualities (Martin et al., 2013); and institutions of the wider environment that prescribe rules, norms and requirements and from where legitimacy can be obtained. Human rights leaderships that have been forced into exile can generate particular challenges for instance, such as the need to recalibrate, strategise and effect change from the outside-in and respond to novel strategies of state repression (Michaelsen, 2018; Dunne and Hamzawy, 2019).
- 'who' refers to the actors in a leadership process and can be examined in terms of characteristics such as sex;
- 'when' refers to events such as organisational change, economic conditions and crisis situations, about which more is written below (Oc, 2018).

Research on leadership around the 'discrete context' meanwhile has engaged with several themes:

- 'task', that is the task-related factors such as the complexity of the job or task and the mode of leadership that arises (Wang et al., 2014);
- 'social context', which refers to social factors such as social networks and their characteristics (Cullen-Lester et al., 2017);
- the 'physical context' which refers to the spatial distance between leaders and followers;
- and temporal context (Oc, 2018) that refers to factors such as time pressure and perceptions of threat (Barrett et al., 2011).

## 2.2 'Extreme contexts' and crises

Within this broad literature, research on 'when' and 'where' contextual factors influencing leadership appear to be of most immediate relevance to the question of human rights leadership in times of crisis and stress. These factors are captured for instance in much of the recent literature on human rights activism in contexts of shrinking public space (e.g. Sundkvist, 2018; Rodrigues-Garavito and Gomez, 2018).

One recent stream of literature that speaks to these themes has considered extremities of context and its relation to leadership (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010; Hallgren et al., 2017). This growing literature on leadership in 'extreme contexts' builds on the ideas originally set out in a review and framework by Hannah et al. (2009). In this paper, Hannah et al. developed a typology of extreme contexts and the influences these have on leadership, viewing leadership as a contextualised phenomenon unfolding amid "particularly unique contingencies, constraints and causations" that characterise extreme contexts, events and conditions (Hannah et al., 2009, p.898).

What makes contexts extreme is that these events exceed the capacity of an organisation to prevent them and the impacts that follow. For instance, the operating environment for human rights organisations in Egypt post-2013[6] became increasingly extreme, such that many leaders were forced to disband their organisations, change their work or go into exile (OpenGlobalRights, 2018). Extreme events requiring responses might include the arrest of leaders and followers, or the implementation of repressive laws or measures, such as China recently introduced under the guise of public health (HRW, 2020b).

Leadership responses influence contexts in ways that intensify or attenuate levels of extremity, and Hannah et al. introduce several such attenuators (psychological, social, organisational resources) and intensifiers (time and level of complexity). Crucially, Hannah et al.'s framework suggests a contingent approach to leadership under extreme conditions, where adaptive leadership is likely to vary across situations and contexts. A general definition of leadership in extreme contexts is put forward as

> *"adaptive and administrative processes of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how to do it, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish shared objectives and purpose under conditions where an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences may exceed an organization's capacity to counter and occur to or in close physical, social, cultural, or psychological proximity to organization members"* (Hannah et al., 2009, p.913).

Insights drawing on an earlier – if narrower – literature on crises and crisis leadership and management have sought to enhance how extreme contexts are understood and dealt with (Hallgren et al., 2017; Stern, 2017). Stern (2017) for instance identifies contexts and organisations which were not initially considered by Hannah et al. (2009) and which may share common features with the practice of human rights defending, such as "acute political or economic crises involving threats to civil liberties, rule of law,

[6] Egypt underwent a military coup in July 2013 which removed the President of Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, from power.

individual and national prosperity", public leaders and institutions, and leaders in media organisations employing journalists working in hostile or dangerous environments.

There are a number of key references and themes of interest in the crisis literature in this regard. Boin et al.'s (2017) work deals with public leaders and institutions in circumstances of crisis in the public domain, which they define as a "a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions." The emphasis on values and norms in their approach points to the need to consider the subjectively perceived and socially constructed nature of threats and crises as opposed to treating these as purely objective phenomena. They indicate that crises can be very much 'in the eye of the beholder', with people's "frames of reference, experience, and memory, values and interests [determining] their perceptions of crisis" (Boin et al., 2017, p.138).

In addition, several reviews have sought to synthesise the crisis leadership and management literature (Hallgren et al., 2017; Bundy et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2017) in the direction of extreme contexts. Hallgren et al.'s (2017) review of the literature on extreme contexts research leads them to propose a taxonomy of extreme contexts on the basis of studies examined and the kinds of organisational responses that have been found to occur.

- 'Risky contexts' captures organisation strategies in situations of "near-constant exposure to potentially extreme events" (Hallgren et al., 2017, p.11). Several research themes characterise the work on risky contexts and are identified in Hallgren et al.'s review: risk management by organisations, namely how organisations design their operations in environments where there are knowable and specified risks with serious consequences; responses to risk by individuals, teams and organisations, such as initiating 'team scaffolding' strategies (Valentine and Edmondson, 2014)[7]; the role of stakeholders in risky contexts, for example upon whom at-risk human rights organisations might depend for resources, operating licences and less tangible phenomena such as legitimacy (Desai, 2011); and lessons learned from managing risk.
- A second context identified in their review is one where the potential for catastrophe that characterised 'risky contexts' has become actualised. Research into 'emergency contexts' considers organisational responses to actual events, such as the arrest of an activist, and, like risky context research, comprises a number of themes: how organisations respond to emergencies, including the successes and failures in adaptive responses (Bechky and Okhuysen, 2011; Geier, 2016) and the difficulties of reorienting action (Barton and Sutcliffe, 2009); how emergencies are experienced by individuals and teams, of which a strong focus includes emergencies as a site of stress, anxiety, fear and sadness and the consequences for dealing with them; the role of stakeholders in positively or negatively affecting responses; and lessons learned.
- 'Disrupted contexts' refers to contexts "triggered by extreme events that occur outside the core activities of organizations or communities" which

[7] Team scaffolds are organisational structures that allow transitory groups of people to act like a team. They have been applied in organisations where work involving stable teams is not feasible.

catch organisations unaware and which they have therefore been unable to plan for. Empirical work in this area is organised around two main research themes in this regard: organisational responses, such as the creation of teams and organisations that operate in the short term for dealing with the task at hand, and the role of stakeholders.

In terms of what this means for human rights practice, the VUCA framework offers a potentially helpful avenue that moves beyond descriptions of context to identify a typology of risks/unstable contexts which Defenders are grappling. First coined in 1985 (Bennis and Nanus, 2007), the acronym VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) aims to distinguish between the different types of external challenges which threaten organisations:

- complexity, which is arguably its core concept (Ferrari et al., 2016), refers to where there is high interconnectedness of parts and variables, preventing complete analysis or leading to similar processes delivering different outcomes;
- volatility refers to turbulence, and the speed and nature of changes in the environment;
- uncertainty concerns the impossibility of prediction and of being able to evaluate a situation properly;
- ambiguity refers to the lack of clarity about the meaning of events.

The potential value of VUCA analysis is that it may help Defenders and organisations assess their external challenges more accurately and identify relevant leaderful actions for individual or organisational security, or effectiveness in human rights practice.

## 2.3 Leadership and resilience

Insights into extreme contexts, crises and leadership and organisational responses may be starting to converge with new work on the idea of 'organisational resilience' or 'resilient organisations' (Boin and van Eeten, 2013; Pettersen and Schulman, 2019). This approach draws on complexity science and systems thinking, at the heart of which is an understanding that cause-effect relations are non-linear in open systems and that real causes are difficult to trace. This thinking has become increasingly relevant in the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic for understanding the spread of infection, its consequences and how to respond (Reynolds, 2020; Bolden, 2020). Complex systems leadership, as discussed in section 1.3 above, has emerged from this thinking as an approach that considers leadership and decision-making in dynamic and complex systems, such as where apparently positive effects in one part of the system lead to negative consequences elsewhere or where feedback loops limit the capacity of systems (from organisations to societies) to adapt to changing circumstances. Resilience and resilient leadership share similarities with this approach as one that is widely viewed as a solution to complex challenges posed by disasters and crises. What is meant by 'resilience' is organisational

> *"flexibility, coping with unexpected and unplanned situations and responding rapidly to events, with excellent communication and mobilisation of resources to intervene at the critical points* [...] [as well as] *the ability to avert the disaster or major upset, using these same characteristics. Resilience then describes also the characteristic of managing the organisation's activities to anticipate and circumvent threats to its existence and primary goals"* (Hale and Haijer, 2006, p.35).

Resilient organisations are considered able to maintain a high level of performance under pressure and when threats and uncertainties arise. They are also expected to 'bounce back' in the face of unexpected adversity (Boin and van Eeten, 2013). For example, organisations remaining in Egypt after 2013, such as the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance and the Al-Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture, seemed to exhibit a large measure of resilience (OpenGlobalRights, 2018). Their responses to changing context involved measures to cut staff and reconfigure or decrease their activities (OpenGlobalRights, 2018; Mansour, 2018). Sundkvist (2018, p.35) shows women's organisations and activists in the country responded by shifting towards 'using the legal framework without mobilisation'. And in Venezuela, Uzcategui (2018) describes how building resilient human rights organisations required adaptive responses, such as seeking to maintain higher public profiles and moving towards less technical language in its communication strategies that allowed more people to understand how the political costs of attacks on human rights defenders would increase.

Key contributions to the theme of resilience include for instance Woods's (2016) treatment of 'four concepts for resilience' (resilience as rebound; resilience as robustness; resilience as graceful extensibility; and resilience as sustained adaptability), and a number of volumes on the theme, such Comfort et al.'s (2010) edited volume on 'Designing Resilience' and Hollnagel et al.'s (2006) volume on 'Engineering Resilience'. This literature is highly business-focused and remains largely conceptual however (for a comprehensive review see Ruiz-Martin et al., 2018).

The bringing of insights from complexity science into leadership studies has been identified above in reference to a number of contributions to leadership thinking (such as complex systems leadership), though these do not deal explicitly with resilience or directly as their subject matter. The academic literature concerned with the relationship between resilient organisations and leadership is still rather thin, though some attempts have been made to develop a theory of 'resilient leadership' (Dartey-Baah, 2015). Academic contributions have sought to identify the characteristics, skills and activities of resilient leaders (Sutchcliffe and Vogus, 2003; O'Malley, 2010; Lane et al., 2013). Lane et al.'s (2013, p.11-12) review of the literature for instance suggests resilient leaders require abilities to be "flexible, adaptable, and innovative within an increasingly complex and dynamic environment: to be the leader of change who is prepared to take risks". To a far larger extent, resilient leadership has been described by practice-oriented texts, such as Strycharczyk and Elvin's (2014) volume on developing resilient organisations, Pirotti and Venzin's (2016) book on resilient organisations, and Jacqui Grey's (2013) book on resilient leadership.

## 2.4 Emerging research questions

- What are the contingencies, constraints and causations that characterise the contexts of human rights defending?
- What are the objective and subjective dimensions of context (and crisis) that human rights leaders operate in? Has the pandemic setting played role? Have there been any long-term consequences?
- How do human rights leaders respond to and seek to shape context? (strategy, resilience etc.).
- Are more authoritarian styles of leadership justified in crisis situations? What implications do such styles have for organisational dynamics e.g. gender relations?
- How generalisable are findings on contingencies, constraints and causations? How suitable are existing context concepts ('extreme', 'risky', 'emergency' etc.) for thinking about human rights leadership?
    - How far do these concepts allow us to capture the salient contextual features of human rights leadership and factors affecting outcomes (e.g. repressive/less repressive contexts)?
- To what extent does good leadership contribute to security, management of risk, resilience and well-being (of Defenders, and those they work with)?
- What organisational practices and policies contribute to the security of human rights organisations and staff?
- What risk and resilience practices can be modelled by those in leadership roles? What contribution can be offered by boards, trustees, community stakeholders and other organisational governance structures?
- What can be learnt from different organisational forms – NGOs, community groups, social movements, literation and political organisations – about surviving extreme situations and resilience?

# 3. Resistance

Resistance studies and its associated concepts, frameworks and historical examples are likely to be relevant to human rights defending, in particular where defending is carried through informal institutions or small organisations and where contexts are heavily power-laden. The field overlaps with social movement studies and shares many of its concepts. Crucially, the common sociological roots of these fields bring them into convergence with a more relational and sociological approach to leadership that has begun to consolidate in recent years. This approach contests the conventional focus on individual leaders and leader-follower relationships in favour of a relational perspective that recasts leadership as social and relational processes (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014; Ospina and Fodly, 2010). Leadership refers to what social actors do collectively to construct and advance a common purpose (Ospina and Fodly, 2010; Ospina and Hittleman, 2011; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2012; Ospina and Su, 2009; Pares et al., 2017). The sociological roots distinguish this body of literature from much of the leadership studies scholarship, such as presented in section 2, and brings in different objects for leadership analysis, such as formal and informal movements.

In terms of organised movements operating in the public sphere, studies have revealed significant variation in the way these are internally structured. This ranges from horizontal forms of organising, where the leadership is informal or appears non-existent, through to more hierarchical structures, where the leadership is largely unaccountable. In the case of the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil for instance, an ostensibly democratic structure at the lower and mid-levels of the organisation exists alongside a top-level leadership where transparency and accountability appear weak (Navarro, 2005; 2006). Navarro explains the adoption mode of organisation as a partly strategic response to an historically repressive state and to violence and intimidation initiated by organised landowners in the late 1980s and early 1990s; although he views it as archaic and ill-suited to the post-1990s era.

In contrast, more horizontal and less hierarchical modes of organising have been identified and examined in studies of recent episodes of contentious politics that are attuned to context and movement goals (for useful overviews see Sutherland et al., 2014 and Benski et al., 2012; for Occupy Wall Street, see Sitrin, 2012; for the Egyptian uprising see Chalcraft, 2012). Eslen-Ziya and Erhart (2015, p.13) for instance discuss how leadership and organising in the Gezi Park movement in Turkey adopted a "horizontal, mostly postheroic, and in some instances, leaderless configuration." By 'postheroic', the authors mean a mode of organising that restricts the emergence of formal leaders and which fits with movement aspirations to have the regime replaced with a more democratic, less hierarchical order. Horizontal leadership in the movement was facilitated by social networking tools (Facebook, Twitter, blogs) as a "global hybrid context of peer-to peer communication culture," and their study seeks to make a contribution to definitions by suggesting "ideas and common goals may serve as the leader" (Elsen-Ziya and Erhart, 2015, p.2).

Along similar lines, Cheng and Chan (2017) describe how the activities of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014 counted on a horizontal-network structure (Sitrin, 2006) and decentralised protest groups. While formal leadership actors and organisations played key framing and negotiation roles with the government, daily operations were conducted by a "plurality of self-organized groups serv[ing] as temporary centres of influence through flexible networks and overlapping membership. Informal leaders and protestors exchanged ideas and coordinated participation in joint actions" (Cheng and Chan, 2017, p.233). Like the Gezi Park case above, this was aided by social media tools (Whatsapp, Facebook) that enabled action to be coordinated. The movement's decentralized, polycentric and networked structure was brokered, Cheng and Chan (2017, p.234) indicate, by "the countless informal leaders" that had emerged over the course of the occupation and "who collaborated with one another through both online and face-to-face interactions."

Despite the potential strengths of this mode of organising, it may come with some serious liabilities. As is presently happening in Hong Kong for instance, the absence of formal leaders can stymie the emergence of negotiated solutions since the state lacks negotiating partners. Movement demands may be internally contested, unclear or not forthcoming (Roberts, 2012). In addition, Marcus (2012) suggests the anti-institutionalism of horizontal organising may circumvent coercive systems without necessarily subverting them. It may also mean that some important avenues for freedom are overlooked: "in particular, those social and economic rights that can only be protected from the top down. In this way, the anti-institutionalism of horizontalism comes dangerously close to that of the libertarian Right" (Marcus, 2012, p.58; also Milkman, 2014).

## 3.1 Resistance in power-laden and non-democratic contexts

Studies have further shed light on protest activity, resistance and leadership in more power-laden and non-democratic contexts, which may be useful for research on human rights leadership in similar places (O'Brien and Li, 2006; Chen, 2011; Malseed, 2009; Lu and Tao, 2017; Wu, 2013; Zhang, 2015; Sadek, n.d.). Power may operate both in the wider social and political context as well as within movements and organisations. These issues are dealt with in this section. This literature is significant given that the lion's share of empirical cases in the field of leadership studies has been of actors and organisations in democratic societies.

In the first instance, interviews with Defenders have provided insights that are consistent with some emerging academic findings on gender in social movements. This work points towards how gender norms, as a feature of social context, enable and constrain men and women's participation in movements. In one interview, a Defender shed light on how the possibilities for women's leadership is constrained by cultural context and how activists strategise in response to this (Box 6). In the case of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement, Kong et al. (2018) describe how women leaders in the post-Umbrella period have been able to claim leadership only when they are in familial or intimate relationships with male leaders. They emerge as leaders when their male partners have been imprisoned, yet are conceived within the movement as politically inferior to their partners. Kong et al. (2018) highlight how women leaders' legitimacy is fragile, subject to changing circumstances, and contingent. Whether they remain in leadership positions depends on whether their male counterparts are able to reclaim their formal leadership positions. Violence directed towards women is also highly gendered with the result that women leaders struggle to participate safely in the political sphere. Ho et al. (2018) situate these movement practices in relation to Hong Kong's familial (social) context, where everyday family life is organised along highly gendered lines in which male members retain decision-making power, and disagreement is suppressed by appeals to family 'harmony' (Ho et al., 2018).

Further, social movement insights address deficits in leadership studies thinking around leadership in authoritarian contexts. In such contexts, where political protest may be repressed or severely restricted, with leaders and followers routinely exposed to acute risk.

It is also very challenging for women to become leader, if the organisation has both male and female then acceptance as a leader is very challenging. The participation of women in decision making is very weak, especially when you talk about leadership and about women rights.

However, we cannot group women in all one basket. Women are not a homogenousgroup, especially in India, society is divided into ethnicity, the caste system, your geographical remoteness. That was a real struggle for us to get leadership role in any organisation. And it is very difficult sometimes to convince your main counterparts of the need to change.

So women activists came together, working in three constituencies: the Dalit women, the untouchable caste; women from the north-east region, because geographically we are very very remote and also affected by conflict; and tribal women, Adivasi. We are victims of structural violence by the state as well as by the societal structure. These women are always vulnerable. Not only are they women, they are carrying their caste card, their ethnicity card, or their geographical remoteness. We are unique in the constituencies that brought us together in 2009 and formed a network called Women in Governance (WinG). We came together and we are building collective leadership. We have a steering committee from different groups, we take decisions collectively.

We didn't want to be part of the larger general women rights movement because our voices are never being heard, in India it's very difficult when it is a mainstream organisation for us as a leader, and especially these three constituencies. They are discriminated against in many ways, even in social movements. We have seen many social movements in Assam where the leadership is in the hands of men, and if you ask about women issues they will say 'We have a women's wing', so we ask why can't women issues can't be at the core, but in a separate wing. We know of women who were asked to leave the movement if they are raised questions about this leadership, her space, the decision making.

*Box 6.*

Li and O'Brien's studies on 'rightful resistance' in rural China for instance examine how claims are made and framed by informal and local level movements in a context where overt and explicit advocacy politics is restricted (Li and O'Brien, 2006). Rather than make claims to universal human rights, rightful resisters frame their claims in relation to protections implied in ideologies or that have already been conferred by authorities. It often involves making authorities "prisoners of their own rhetoric" (Li and O'Brien, 2006, p.23), and enforcing claims through "strict adherence to established values" (Li and O'Brien, 2006, p.3). Rightful resisters operate close to the formal, approved channels and strategically seek to exploit tensions ('political opportunities') between China's central government and its local representatives "where elite unity crumbles" (O'Brien 2013).

Crucially, Li and O'Brien (2008) identify several practices that local level leaders engage in for promoting responses (rather than 'reactions'). First, they shape individual grievances into collective claims. They tend to do this by attributing "villagers' woes to local violation of a central policy, thus placing the blame squarely on rural officials and identifying a powerful potential ally in the central government" (Li and O'Brien, 2008, p.6). Second, they draw on their social networks to recruit activists and mobilise the public. Persuasion and the deployment of moral authority are the two main mechanisms. Third, leaders devise and orchestrate collective action, which requires making decisions about the appropriate tactics and strategies for particular situations and contexts. For instance, they may "elicit an innocuous remark such as 'it is lawful to publicize central policies' from a high-ranking official and then use it as a justification to call a mass meeting in their locality to 'study policies.' At other times, they may mobilise a large number of people and rely on safety in numbers. Finally, leaders organise multi-village and multi-township episodes of contentious politics, sometimes creating formal and informal organisations or groups for communication and decision-making. Other key studies of movement activity in repressive contexts have considered resistance in pre-transition Myanmar (Malseed, 2009); and public demonstrations over land issues in Vietnam (Kervliet, 2014).

### 3.2 Emerging research questions

- What is the role of power relations, both within and external to organisations and movements, in mediating the work of Human Rights Defenders?
- How do social hierarchies such as gender, age and race and ethnicity, enable and constrain leadership practices in human rights defending? Are there specific challenges that are unique to human rights defending?
- How can an organisational culture of learning from mistakes be created and supported, especially within external environments characterised by vulnerability and attack?
- Does 'working the system' provide the foundations for more radical agendas when the political landscape changes, or legitimise the existing system while delegitimising human rights?
- How can authoritarian context be challenged, both in terms of 'working the system' and through the suggesting/implementing alternatives?

## Conclusion

The squeeze on civic space in recent years, the recent Amnesty International UK case, and emerging challenges for human rights defending in the context of Covid-19 raise again the question of why so little attention has been given to human rights leadership. This working paper is intended as an initial step towards addressing this gap. A (non-exhaustive) set of conceptual and practice-oriented questions has been set out at various places in this working paper that might be investigated in collaboration with defenders and other practitioners in the field. These questions are organised around some key themes identified through this review, namely how leadership and leaderful behaviour and practices in human rights defending may be understood; and the contexts for human rights defending, which includes circumstances of crisis or emergency and issues of politics and power in the wider society. Overall, the working paper begins setting out an integrated research and practice agenda on human rights leadership that is concerned to develop new knowledge about leadership in human rights defending and the unique challenges defenders face; and to find ways of supporting the development of leadership capabilities and leaderful behaviour.

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