

# A Brilliant Way of Living Our Lives: How to Talk About Human Rights

Anat Shenker-Osorio

*Using language data from advocacy, opposition, political speech and popular culture, I analyzed why certain messages resonate where others falter in the human rights sector in Australia, the UK and the US. Complementing this written discourse were 53 interviews with advocates in these three countries in order to draw out what we wish people believed – the vision for which we'd like to inspire increased activation from present supporters and persuade new ones. Recommendations here also draw upon previous research and empirical testing across issues related to human rights.*

# Messaging Pitfalls and Fixes

1

## Implying human rights exist in an apolitical space where people are treated equally

*“Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion or other status.”*

### Rewrite

*Human rights allow us to challenge the people in power that keep us from living fairly and freely as equals because of our race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion or other status.*

*“Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death.”*

### Rewrite

*Human rights are the tools we use to fight for the basic rights and freedoms that belong to every person in the world, from birth until death.*

*“Human rights are the basic rights and freedoms that all humans should be guaranteed.”*

### Rewrite

*Human rights give us a means to contest the beliefs, choices and powers that deny all people the same basic rights and freedoms.*

## Suggesting human rights apply to atomistic individuals divorced from social connections

*“If we strip away the complexity of modern society, beneath these layers we are all the same. We all have fundamental human rights. We all have basic needs.”*

### Rewrite

*We all exist within society, live in relationship to one another, and need rules to govern how we interact with each other.*

*“Our work focuses on the individual – people whose human rights are abused, and people who have the power to change the world.”*

### Rewrite

*Our work focuses on people – people whose equal worth, rights and dignity are challenged or denied, and people who see these injustices and fight together to address them.*

*“The Human Rights Act protects all of us – young and old, rich and poor.”*

### Rewrite

*The Human Rights Act provides all of us – young and old, rich and poor – the tools to demand we are treated as equals in our society.*

## Implying human rights violations are of origin unknown

*“Women lack equality”*

**Rewrite**

*Leaders deny women equality*

*“Political freedoms are curtailed”*

**Rewrite**

*People in power curtail freedoms*

*“People are denied X”*

**Rewrite**

*Authorities deny people X*

*“Civilians are targeted”*

**Rewrite**

*X target civilians*

*“Abuses can arise”*

**Rewrite**

*X commit abuses*

*“Ensure no one loses their rights”*

**Rewrite**

*Ensure no one blocks people from their rights*

## Negation of damaging claims

“Refugee children, like 4-year old Nada who fled her Syrian home with her family, have been terrorized. **They are not terrorists.**”

### Rewrite

Refugee children, like 4-year old Nada who fled her Syrian home with her family, have been terrorized. **They, more than anyone, fear terrorists.**

“Repression and injustice, and the criminalisation of non-violent speech and protest, make us less safe - **not more.**”

### Rewrite

Freedom and justice, and protection of non-violent speech and protest, **make us safer.**

“Human rights, including the **right not to be subjected** to degrading treatment, to a private and family life, to free expression and protest etc. apply to all human beings. These rights **do not depend on citizenship.**”

### Rewrite

Human rights, including the **right to** humane treatment, to a private and family life, to free expression and protest etc. apply to all human beings, **wherever we are from and wherever we reside.**

“There is **nothing** in the Human Rights Act that **stops the courts** from locking up convicted criminals and terrorists.”

### Rewrite

The Human Rights Act **permits courts** to detain convicted criminals and terrorists.

“Human rights **do not elevate** one group over another.”

### Rewrite

Human rights **ensure equality** among all groups.

## Making *rights* the ends or implied agents of change, not the means to human betterment

*"[Organization] defends the rights of people worldwide."*

### Rewrite

*[Organization] ensures people worldwide can exercise their rights*

*"We want a world where human rights are no longer under fire."*

### Rewrite

*We want a world where human beings are no longer under fire.*

*"We want to secure the rights of people living in poverty to food and income security and decent work within the context of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing inequality, and ensuring the sustainable use of land and water."*

### Rewrite

*We want to ensure people, no matter their race, station or situation, have enough to make ends meet by tackling the hoarding of wealth in too few hands, denial of land and water rights, and deliberate decisions to create and sustain poverty.*

*"Human rights have produced real results."*

### Rewrite

*People fighting to have human rights respected have produced real results.*

# Words that Work

Shift From	Move Toward	Because...
<i>Have</i> human rights	Exercise our human rights; Treat each other fairly	Implying human rights are objects that we “have” hides the daily decisions people in power make that affect our exercise of these rights. In contrast, describing human rights as actions helps indicate we must constantly make choices and act to maintain and expand rights.
<i>Take away</i> human rights	Blockade us from our human rights; Keep us from participating fully in society	
Human rights <i>belong</i> to each of us	Human rights are the choices we/our leaders make; Human rights are the responsibilities we have to each other	
Fix our broken system; end [X]; stop [X]; help prevent [X]	Create a fair process; respect people’s rights; ensure the well being of families; create and maintain peace; create prosperity	People are more motivated by creating something good than ameliorating harms.
Our opponents are racist; this policy is xenophobic	Our opponents seek to divide us against each other; certain politicians shame and blame new immigrants; a powerful few point the finger at people of color	Connecting racist or xenophobic actions to <b>intentional division</b> or <b>scapegoating</b> helps listeners understand how what happens to others affects us all.
Security; survival; escaping violence; fleeing danger	Live in peace; care for children; live free from danger	Explaining the <b>positive</b> motivations rather than the push factors increases support for immigrants’ rights.
As [nationality]	As caring people	Evoking national identity brings “us/them” top of mind and makes respondents less receptive to others’ rights.
It is not illegal to seek asylum; not a security issue; no human is illegal; <i>myth busting</i>	It is legal to seek asylum; when people cross borders their human rights come with them; all people have rights	Negating a frame brings it top of mind. Best to say what we are for, not what we oppose.

# Words that Work

Shift From	Move Toward	Because...
Immigrants; Roma; Muslims; Gays and Lesbians	A person who is [X]; a [X] person	Mass nouns evoke stereotyping effects and eclipse the individuals and their stories, needs and courage.
[Opposition's] plan/law/order will not work	We have a common sense solution that [does X]	Negating a frame brings it top of mind. Best to say what we are for not what we oppose.
[X] seeks to protect; [X] works to create; [X] fights to maintain	Protect; create; maintain	Adding an extra verb is unnecessary and dilutes the impact of our work and calls into question whether we achieve our aims or merely try hard.
Child migration; forced migration	A child forced from home; a person who must leave	We must help audiences focus in on real people, not imagine an undifferentiated mass of moving bodies.
This is an unprecedented crisis; massive human rights violations	We know how to fairly examine each case in a safe space; we know how to bring about a resolution; we can choose to [X]	Enumerating massive problems makes people shut-off and look away. We must provide a sense that we know how to handle this situation.
Under human rights law; as signatories to this treaty	Treat others the way we want to be treated; respect people's basic rights; uphold our values	Appeals to laws or conventions are intellectual, not emotional. In contrast, appeals to shared values engage our base and move the middle.
People crossing our border; people entering our country	People coming here	"The border" evokes unhelpful associations and activates the opposition's frames.
People obtain their rights; prevent people losing their rights	People are free to exercise their rights; prevent anyone from blocking the exercise of rights	Implying that rights are externally bestowed or eliminated undermines core arguments about their universality and importance.

# Contending with Common Critiques

## Attack...

## Response

*“You want to shut down our freedom of speech.”*

*What you say in the privacy of your own home is your own business. What you say in public, when it shames or threatens, harms or humiliates others is everyone’s business. Freedom of speech doesn’t extend to freedom from consequences.*

*“We are moving towards a system based on different rights for different people, based on their membership of multicultural groups.”*

*Most of us want pretty similar things – a fair day’s pay for a hard day’s work, time with our loved ones, a more prosperous future. But today, a handful of people try and divide us based on what we look like, where we come from, or how we worship. They shame and blame specific groups, denying them basic rights, hoping we’ll look the other way while they dismantle healthcare systems, hold down wages and undermine public education. We must join together across any differences those powerful few use to divide us.*

*“Human rights should extend to meeting our basic needs to sustain life, without torture or degradation only, nothing more.”*

*Whether it’s for our neighborhoods, our country or beyond, we require guidelines to make ours a fairer, more prosperous and more livable world. Human rights are the tools we use to ensure people treat others as they wish to be treated, or face meaningful consequences. Our lives are about much more than surviving – they’re about thriving.*

*“They broke the law.”  
“They should have come the right way.”*

*People moved here in the past for the same reason as today - to work hard and leave things better for those to come. Moving to make a better life is one of the best things and hardest things a person can do. As the saying goes – when the going gets tough, the tough get going.*

### **If possible add:**

*“...Certain politicians try and turn us against each other based on what we look like or where we were born. They point the finger for our hard times at new immigrants, while they keep handing kickbacks to their corporate donors and destroying basic freedoms for everyone. We know we’re stronger when we join together across racial differences and demand that our leaders respect and govern for all of us.”*

## Attack...

## Response

*“You’re for open borders.”  
“We need to look after our own people first.”*

*We deserve a common sense immigration process that makes our country stronger by respecting people’s rights and honoring our values. For decades, we have known what works: fairly assessing each person’s case, integrating new immigrants as contributing members of our communities, and keeping families together.*

**If possible add:**

*“...A handful of politicians want to turn something that’s common sense into a way to divide and distract us – pitting the blame on new immigrants so we won’t join together across racial differences to demand a government that works for all of us.”*

*“Human rights undermine our safety by tying the hands of law enforcement and letting terrorists get away with murder.”*

*We all want to live in communities that are safe – communities where we know our neighbors, look out for each other and have robust social services so that all of us, whether we’re tenth generation or newcomer, Black, white or brown, can contribute to our communities and raise our families.*

**If possible add:**

*“...A few of our elected leaders want to turn us against each other – stoking fear against people based on where they come from, what they look like, or how they worship. Our strength and our safety comes from our ability to stand up for each other and pick leaders who respect everyone of us.”*

*Research for this messaging brief was supported in part by the Open Society Foundations. The opinions expressed herein are the author’s own and do not necessarily express the views of the Open Society Foundations.*