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Saying or doing human rights? A study of victim support Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses human rights discourses and practices in Sweden's largest victim support and advocacy organisation– Victim Support Sweden. The study is based on the organisation's national archive and interviews with key representatives. The article shows that Victim Support Sweden has been consistent in what they say and do in relation to human rights. From start it has argued in line with the principles in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), that all human beings are equal and it have not polarised victims and offenders. Later the organisation developed amore nuanced understanding of victimisation and focused on so-called “vulnerable victims;”one of the categories mentioned in Article 2 of UDHR. The results of this article contradict the assumption that victim support organisations are part of a conservative political agenda. This highlights the need to counter balance the domination of Anglophone literature in the field of victim support.

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) was officially formed in 1945 and three years later, in 1948, the UN adopted the milestone *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) (The United Nations, 1948). Since then, several human rights instruments have been established throughout the world. In the 1970s, Western governments started to adopt human rights as a moral compass for a new global engagement beyond the nation-state (Hoffmann, 2016). The concept of human rights has been applied to a diverse range of groups and lately also to victims of crime (Hall, 2010). The 1948 UDHR did not specifically mention crime victims. However, in 1985, the United Nations adopted the *Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and the Abuse of Power* (The United Nations, 1985). The Declaration was intended to serve purely as guidance to the member states, but it reflected new expectations of the state, including consumer demands on the criminal justice system (Van Dijk, 1988).

The recognition and discussion of victims' rights have primarily focused on the criminal justice system. One example is the Council of the European Union (2001) *Framework Decision on the Standing of Victims in Criminal Proceedings*. Unlike the 1985 UN Declaration for victims of crime, which was made up of mere “principles,” the 2001 Declaration was legally binding within the European Union (EU). The Framework Decision did, however, use vague language, which left room for interpretation (Groenhuijsen & Pemberton, 2009). Victims' rights have historically not been seen as part of social rights, such as employment, social security, and social support. Over recent decades, however, crime victims have come to the attention of social welfare policies and practices. Holder (2016) has argued that we need to consider social rights, including access to universal

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medical, welfare, housing and social support schemes, as being relevant to victim services. In 2012, the Council of the European Union (2012) replaced the Framework Decision with a directive setting minimum standards for the rights, support, and protection of victims of crime. Member states had until November 2015 to bring into force the laws, regulations, and administrative provisions necessary to comply with the directive.

International declarations and instruments for victims of crime have to a great extent been influenced and shaped by NGOs, which have actively advocated for a human rights agenda (Mawby & Walklate, 1994). Victim Support Europe, an umbrella organisation for European victim support organisations, was, for example, directly involved in the development of the 2012 directive. Studies that deepen the understanding of advocacy work in victim support organisations are, however, rare. While the policies as such might have been studied, the knowledge of the underlying work is weak. There is also a lack of studies analysing how victim support organisations in different national contexts have interpreted and implemented universal human rights standards. Most international empirical research on victim support organisations has centred on the United States and the United Kingdom (e.g., Rock, 2004). One argument that is often put forward in common law legal systems, where victims have been assigned the passive role of witnesses, is that victims' rights are human rights and that victims should be recognised as persons before the law (Wemmers, 2012). Doak (2008) has taken the argument further and outlined several key human rights standards victims should be entitled to, for example, the right to protection and the right to participation.

This article will contribute to the literature by focusing on a victim support organisation and the UDHR outside of an Anglophone framework, more specifically in Sweden. The Swedish welfare state has long been characterised by strong social rights and universalism. Similar to other European countries, Sweden has adopted a different approach to "victim's rights" than in the U.S. context. Most reforms have aimed at improving victims' right to support, rather than infringing on the rights of offenders. Moreover, Sweden is a civil law country, with elements of common law procedures. The preliminary investigation follows an inquisitorial model, while the trial has an adversarial character. Lindstedt Cronberg (2011) has shown how the injured party's position in criminal proceedings has gradually weakened. Despite this, the victim (or *the injured party*, the term used in the judicial system) still has a relatively strong position compared to many other countries, for instance, by being able to submit evidence, join the criminal case as an auxiliary prosecutor, and pose questions to the defendant and witnesses (Antonsdóttir, 2018; Blixt, 2018).

The article centres on the oldest and largest non-governmental victim support organisation in Sweden, Victim Support Sweden. Victim Support Sweden serves as an umbrella organisation for affiliated local centres that provide emotional support, information, and practical help to victims. Victim Support Sweden guides local victim support centres in their work and is a strong advocacy organisation in its strive for victims' rights and needs. Victim Support Sweden has always had a close relationship with the state; Victim Support Sweden has relied on government grants, while the state has leaned on Victim Support Sweden for victim support (Gallo & Svensson, 2019). The government has explicitly stated that Victim Support Sweden helps in the compliance of the 2012 EU Directive (prop. 2014/15:77). Victim Support Sweden has also highlighted that the government would not be able to comply with the Directive's demands without the local centres' victim support.

This article aims to enhance the understanding of the human rights discourse and practice in the work of Victim Support Sweden, with a focus on the two initial and overarching articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). How has the concept of human rights developed and been defined and applied within the context of victim support? The analysis focuses on whether the discourse is reflected in actions. The following questions guide the empirical work: Are human rights principles reflected in Victim Support Sweden's advocacy work and practice? If so, how?

The article will show that, similar to many other European victim support organisations, human rights principles have governed the ideas of Victim Support Sweden since it was established in 1988. The organisation has emphasised human rights as "natural" entitlements (Dembour, 2010); it has taken human rights for granted and never questioned them. It has also consistently emphasised the

common and shared humanity of persons whether victim or offender. One striking result is the organisational coherence between how Victim Support Sweden has been saying and doing these principles. Before we discuss these results further something has to be said about Victim Support Sweden.

Victim support Sweden in its context

The major non-governmental victim support organisation in Sweden, now named Victim Support Sweden, was established in 1988 and quickly gained an influential position (Svensson & Gallo, 2018). The organisation followed the model of the National Association of Victim Support Schemes (NAVSS), which was founded in 1979 in England and Wales, with volunteers providing victim support and a coordinator managing the work (Dunn, 2010; Rock, 1990). In a short period of time, the organisation gained strong political influence and local support centres were established all over Sweden. Concurrently, reforms aiming to improve victims' participation and strengthen their role in criminal proceedings gained momentum. New legislation assigned the police and prosecution a number of duties towards the victim, particularly relating to information and support. One of the most remarkable reforms for victims of crime was introduced in 1994; it concerned a government Crime Victim Fund funded by a fee (approximately 80 Euro) paid by all people convicted of a crime punishable by a prison sentence. The fee must be paid regardless of whether the actual sentence is prison or an alternative measure. The fund finances activities by researchers, NGOs, and private/public actors aiming to improve the situation of victims. This fund came to be the primary financial support for the work of Victim Support Sweden. The annual financing for Victim Support Sweden's basic tasks, apart from specific time-limited projects, is around 10M SEK, which is equivalent to 1.1 million Euros (Brottsoffermyndigheten, 2019).

Victim Support Sweden's strong position was supported by a contemporary political shift in Sweden. After a long period of social-democratic rule, the political scene began to shift in the 1970s, and by the late 1980s, both neo-liberal and conservative ideas started to seriously influence Swedish politics. When a centre-right government was in office 1991–94 the development took off quickly, as the changing dominance in politics had paved the way.

The former social-democratic ideas about a strong state and a regulated market had been replaced by neo-liberal ideas of a free market, even in the socio-political sphere. In the early 1990s, many former state-run activities came to be run by private companies (for example centres for elderly care, schools and different forms of treatment facilities). In parallel, the government emphasised the importance of engaging NGOs and volunteers. Criminal policy, which up until then had been regarded as a part of social policy, came into focus, mainly moved forward by conservatives in the government, which included the Minister of Justice. Arguments about victims' needs and rights, conveyed by an NGO, quickly gained attention as they matched the emerging ideas in criminal policy as well as the ideas of voluntary work in NGOs. Victim Support Sweden also had a solid internal structure, which consisted of support to affiliated independent local victim support centres through shared training and national guidelines. Over time, Victim Support Sweden developed demands for minimum standards for the centres, and stricter control over the centres which acted in their name (Gallo & Svensson, 2019).

The history of Victim Support Sweden could be described in three phases: construction, consolidation, and restructuring (Gallo & Svensson, 2019). During the construction phase, 1988 to 2001, the pioneers built Victim Support Sweden, formed local centres across the country, and built an organisational structure with regional coordinators. In the consolidation phase, 2001 to 2012, Victim Support Sweden developed its role as an advocacy organisation for issues related to victims. The organisation now had a solid base and solid funding. The organisation now adjusted its internal work, for example, by specifying addressing different groups of crime victims. It also competed with other organisations for funding and influence. In 2001, Victim Support Sweden started a national helpline, which centralised victim support and moved some of the actual victim support to the office of the national organisation. During the consolidation phase, some local centres

merged or closed down. The restructuring phase was initiated in 2013. The national office had recruited more staff and the organisation as a whole had grown, become increasingly bureaucratised, and been structured in a new way. Studies of victim support in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, have shown a similar shift towards centralisation, professionalisation, and standardisation (Simmonds, 2013). Victim Support Sweden's restructuring and new way of working could be seen at the 2013 annual meeting where a decision was made to adopt the new document *Basic Principles for Victim Support Sweden*, which was explicitly based on human rights.

Victim Support Sweden is still Sweden's largest and most influential umbrella organisation and coordinates local victim support centres throughout Sweden. Today, approximately 75 independent centres are members of Victim Support Sweden. A few other victim support organisations do exist in Sweden, but none have the same wide coverage. The task for Victim Support Sweden, as the national umbrella organisation, is twofold: to coordinate the work of the local support centres through education, information, etc., and to do advocacy work on issues related to crime victim's needs and rights. The actual support to victims is provided by the local centres and they support approximately 70,000 victims yearly. According to the 2018 annual report, more women than men seek help at the centres and most victims have been exposed to assault, theft, molestation, and unlawful threats. Most victims are between 26 and 64 years old; the centres do not come into contact with many children. Victim Support Sweden is organised as a membership-based association, where the local centres are the members. Bi-annual decision-making meetings are open to all members while a board leads the ongoing work. Victim Support Sweden has an office with staff; the work is led by a secretary-general who acts in close cooperation with the national board. Although the number of paid staff has grown over the years, it is still limited to around ten people.

Methods and material

This study is based on rich material from Victim Support Sweden's archive. The material was collected for a research project funded by the Swedish Crime Victim Fund. Victim Support Sweden provided us with full access to its internal archive, with the exclusion of documents concerning the employees at the office. The archive holds an extensive collection of various documents from the start in 1988 until 2013, including annual reports, plans, letters, member magazines, informational and educational materials, as well as minutes from board meetings and working groups. These documents can be understood as the organisation's self-image, or collective memory, comprising the ideas that unite and institutionalise the organisation. Within the frame of our research project, and in collaboration with Victim Support Sweden, we scanned and digitised older documents which means that the whole archive from 1988 to 2013 is now digital (Gallo & Svensson, 2019).

This article will present how Victim Support Sweden has said and done human rights in its policy work. The discrepancy between accounts and actions is a great analytic strength of the study of people, cultures, and organisations (e.g., Khan & Jerolmack, 2013). As Khan and Jerolmack (2013) point out, we must be careful in using accounts as representations of real-life; accounts may not correspond with behaviour or can even contradict it. Even we, who have mainly worked with documents, have been careful of how we interpret their saying and doing. In Khan and Jerolmack (2013) work "saying" relates to interviews and "doing" to observations, which is common when studying people. Rock (2004) used the same concept in his study of victims' rights in the United Kingdom. In our study we focus on an organisation, and therefore we use documents from Victim Support Sweden's archive. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews in 2014 with previous and present secretary-generals and chairs of the national board, four interviews in total. Since its establishment, Victim Support Sweden has had two secretary-generals and three chairs. We interviewed all except the first secretary-general, who also chaired the board of the organisation for a brief period, as he passed away in 2001. These interviews are mainly used in other parts of the research project. For this article, they have merely served as a point of reference, but we use two

quotes as illustrations, from the chair who specifically highlighted human rights, and from his successor. The respondents have given their permission to attach their names to the quotes.

Most of the documents in Victim Support Sweden's archive describe its ideas, but some also show its actions. Copies of letters and their responses reflect the act of sending a letter, the programme and agenda for events reflect the event, and informational material relates actions taken in a campaign. These documents tell us something about the organisation's actions, not only what it has said. To study what Victim Support Sweden has *said*, we first studied the organisation's annual reports. Following on from that, we got more detailed information from other documents. In this way, we could both validate the information and understand its context. Knowing the discourse in the organisation, we followed the documents to find out whether it acted in line with its discourse. To understand what the organisation has *done*, we analysed primary sources written by actors in the organisation, both executives and employees. These documents, which included, for example, copies of letters sent to politicians, newsletters to the local centres, and material for external information or internal training, allowed us to balance and counter the picture put forward in the interviews and the annual reports. We analysed all data through a thematic analysis, which means reading the material and searching for sections that use human rights concepts or ideas, and that present reasoning connected to the content in articles in the UDHR. We used only arguments supported by several sources.

To narrow the scope of the study, we have focussed on the two initial and more overarching articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), where the key concepts and principles are presented.

- Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.
- Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms outlined in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or another opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Saying human rights

Over the years, Victim Support Sweden has expressed its basic values in a number of ways in all its documents. In annual reports, plans, and other policy documents the organisation tells how it aims to act, they say what is right to say in the name of the organisation. Thereby, we can understand the organisation's self-image and how it wants to relate to human rights by following these texts. A vague understanding of victims' rights appeared early in the organisation's history, but it did not explicitly use the concept of human rights until the mid-2000s. This is seen in, for example, recurring letters to the Minister of Justice, demanding equal support for victims and offenders, which is a question about being equal in dignity and rights. The first letter found on this issue was sent to the Minister of Justice 6 September 1988. Victim Support Sweden's early documents did not have so much of the character of policy documents, they merely reported practical issues around actions carried out. The very first annual reports claimed that the organisation's target was to open local victim support centres and described the organisation's activities; for instance, what meetings had been held. Starting in 1991, Victim Support Sweden defined its values and principles in separate policy documents and from this point the annual reports also explicitly list the organisation's basic values and how centres under this umbrella should act. In the 1992 policy document, one of the points highlighted is that "victims should be supported regardless of their age, gender, race, religion or social belonging". Still, the policy document was very rudimentary and most documents from the first years focused on practical arrangements and basic ideas, such as "a victim support centre should provide support for victims of crime through the help of fellow human beings", that appears in the 1993 annual reports onwards. While that statement refers to the practice in the local centres,

other phrases, such as “the organisation has no standpoint on religious or party political issues” positions the organisation in relation to other organisations.

Even though Victim Support Sweden did not use the concept of human rights explicitly from the start to describe its basic values, we can see traces of human rights ideas in the material, in particular from Article 1 of the UDHR and the ideas of human beings being equal and acting in the spirit of brotherhood. This is reflected in the ambition to give victim support as “fellow-human support”. The term implies an empathic symmetrical relationship where the supporter and those being supported share the feature of being “human” and is built into the idea of the way the victim supporters at the local centres are trained to act. This was stated right from the start, and reoccurs in several documents, not least those which instruct the volunteers at the local centres (for example in the policy document from 1993 and the very first *Handbook for Support Persons* from the same year)

In 1995, criminal law professor Hans Klette assumed the role as chair of Victim Support Sweden’s board. Human rights was a vital issue for Hans Klette. Under his leadership, Victim Support Sweden’s focus on human rights became more defined and explicit but without specifying how human rights could or should be understood. During his thirteen-year term (1995–2008), Klette worked to put Swedish crime victim policy and legislation in an international human rights perspective by relating to the international conventions and agreements, as well as to international examples and cases. Klette has, as a legal scholar, written about human rights in different contexts, for example in an anthology on victims of crime, where he reviewed key rights in legal cases and European agreements (Klette, 2004). Klette’s presentation of human rights is wide and descriptive, he does not take any stand on any specific point or problem. He continually claimed the importance of standing up for human rights, but always in very generic terms: as when he, throughout his term as a chair, emphasised the responsibility of society for crime victims in his editorials in the *Crime Victim Magazine*. Also in the interview for this study, Klette spoke in very general terms about human rights and the equal value of human beings:

We are fellow human beings of equal value who must work together to survive. That is what all ... if we concentrate, all human rights questions are a question about that.

In 1998, Victim Support Sweden set out minimum standards for its affiliated victim support centres. Still, practical issues, such as office space, hours of operation, and volunteer training, were in focus. The 1999 annual report represented a turning point for Victim Support Sweden. From now on Victim Support Sweden would express its basic values more explicitly. In the annual reports as well as in information sheets, education material etc. it is now stated that Victim Support Sweden is a complement to the public sector that should be given respect and be acknowledged by victims of crime as well as by public bodies and authorities. Being a “victim” was regarded as an experience, not as a characteristic. As the criminal justice system provided support for offenders, Victim Support Sweden claimed that victims also needed help. Without polarising between victims and offenders, Victim Support Sweden related to the existing support for offenders. This distinguishes the organisation from victim support organisations in the United States, which often portrayed victims and offenders as distinct and opposing groups and contended for tougher policies on crime (Elias, 1993). In the 1999 annual report, Victim Support Sweden (1999, p. 4) set out its basic values in bullet points and these are values that continue to be presented in the annual reports. The initial and overarching values were:

- Crime victims’ rights must be accorded the same priority as perpetrators’ rights.
- The criminal process should not add to the victims’ problems, i.e., “secondary victimisation”.
- Efforts to support crime victims should not be made at the expense of efforts to rehabilitate offenders

The basic values reveal a standpoint taken in a strong welfare state, where a solid and extensive public welfare system was taken for granted, and where the criminal policy had for a long time emphasised rehabilitation of the offender. The organisation did not position victims in opposition to offenders but claimed that victims should have the same access to support as offenders. They rather emphasised the

need for rehabilitation of offenders, partly to halt further victimisation, but also because of their view of offending too as experiences, or specific actions, not as a characteristic. By regarding all of the parties involved in the crime and victimisation as people experiencing a situation from different perspectives, Victim Support Sweden shows the emphasis on “all human beings”. It does not discriminate between offender and victim but claims that both groups have rights and thereby recognises their dignity. Both groups are ascribed reason and conscience, and the ambition is that all should act in a spirit of brotherhood as expressed in Article 1 of the UDHR.

In the 2003 annual report, Victim Support Sweden (2003, p. 5) added a fourth item and made it the primary point on the list:

- A society governed by the rule of law, that cannot protect its citizens from crime, has a moral obligation to give all the help and support needed for victims of crime so that they can return to the quality of life they experienced before the offence.

The 2003 bi-annual meeting took the decision on adding the sentence above. The same meeting decided to form a working group tasked with developing policy documents. Based on a suggestion from this group, and to align the organisation’s work with the International Statements of Victims’ Right to Service, the 2005 bi-annual meeting added a fifth short and concise item, which became the first of the organisation’s basic values (Victim Support Sweden, 2005, p. 3):

- Human rights are the foundation of all our work.

This item from now on would be of highest priority and appear in all general documents. These now five items would remain Victim Support Sweden’s basic values until 2013 (together with a list of practical issues) when the organisation adopted the document *Basic Principles for Victim Support Sweden*. In that document, Victim Support Sweden (2013, p. 1) states that:

Human rights are the foundation of our work. These apply to each one, regardless of ethnicity, skin colour, sex, language, religion, sexual orientation, cross-border identity, disability, political opinion or social position and states equal value and equal rights for all people.

In the statement, we can follow the words from Article 2 in UDHR. In the 2013 document, the values are no longer followed by practical issues, but by four key words – empathy, engagement, trustworthiness, and responsibility – which describe the approach a person representing Victim Support Sweden and the local centres should have (Victim Support Sweden, 2013). The key words signalled an essential step in the organisation’s development since it went from talking about how the organisation should be managed and organised to how people in the organisation should relate to each other, victims of crime, and others. In the interview, Sven-Erik Alhem, a lawyer and prosecutor who took over as chair of Victim Support Sweden in 2008, confirmed the organisation’s foundation in human rights:

A basic prerequisite for agreeing to be a candidate for the position was also the rule of law, human rights should be in focus. And that the injured party should never be strengthened at the expense of the suspect ... We must never rank people as suspects or victims, as one can quickly move from one to the other.

Doing human rights

Human rights values and principles are not only a discursive practice but also reflected in actions taken by Victim Support Sweden in its advocacy work. At first, Victim Support Sweden had the focus on “all” as “anyone,” which meant that it did not single out either victims or perpetrators, or specific groups of victims. In the early years, it distinguished itself from women’s shelters and made a point of being there for all victims. It strived to find a place in the organisational field, create more local centres, and to be acknowledged by politicians and authorities in the welfare

state. Its internal work was directed at the local centres, and the external work directed at the government – although also including state authorities, the Church of Sweden, insurance companies, and other large private companies (Svensson & Gallo, 2018). This work, internally and externally, represents the actions Victim Support Sweden took, i.e., it is possible to see that it also in practice is “doing human rights”.

The information Victim Support Sweden had spread internally and externally had the same messages. Letters to politicians and press releases in the first years discussed victims’ needs rather than victims’ rights. These documents also explained the development of the organisation, the need for volunteers to complement the work of welfare authorities, and the growth and number of local centres. In a letter, of which copies were sent to all Swedish police authorities in 1991, Victim Support Sweden states that:

To be a victim of crime implies several strains, such as feeling anxiety and worries about the incident. You can lose grip of your situation and be unable to act. Many ask, ‘will the thief come back?’

The letter clarifies the human and emotional aspects of victimisation and that victims of volume crime, such as burglary, can also be vulnerable. The underlying message is in line with Article 1’s second phrase: “They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” It also appeals to an understanding of the crime victim as an equal, one of us. This is a recurring theme in Victim Support Sweden’s information in the first years, emotion-laden descriptions that aim to enhance the understanding of any crime victim. This was, most often, combined with a phrase on victims as a forgotten group. As in a letter about funding, signed by both the Chair and the Secretary-General and sent to the Minister of Justice Gun Hellsvik, 28 October 1992, which states:

People who have been exposed to crime can need support from people with experience of working with people in crisis . . . Crime victims are often forgotten and have to process their experiences by themselves.

Different forms of consequences for crime victims have also been a central theme in Victim Support Sweden’s national training for volunteers in the local centres, which was developed and implemented in 1993. Victim Support Sweden hence claimed the message in Article 1 by highlighting the victim as a person, a person like you and me, with specific needs related to the specific situation of being victimised. There are also clear examples where Victim Support Sweden has promoted victim issues without compromising the efforts to rehabilitate offenders. The organisation has consistently recognised that victims and offenders can be the same people. One example comes from documents from an event where Victim Support Sweden in 2002 joined forces with NGOs supporting offenders and the Swedish Prison and Probation Service. Together, they organised a seminar titled “Perpetrator and Victim – Different Sides of the Same Coin.” In this seminar, the different parties’ perspectives were brought up and all shared the fight against criminality. Crime was here considered as a mutual problem, for the person being victimised as well as for the person committing the crime, and the organisations could unite in the efforts for prevention and rehabilitation for those involved. The themes discussed were for example that “offenders are victims too”, where the recurrent victimisation felt by people living a life of crime and poverty was brought up, and the need for all victims to be recognised, not only the ideal victims but also those not living ideal lives (Christie, 1986) .

In later phases, Victim Support Sweden has acknowledged the diversity among victims in its information to the general public. The differentiation has then been related to different social situations, but based on the victims as persons, and not related to the crime. In the defined categories, we can see reflections of UDHR Article 2:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without the distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

We will show some examples of how Victim Support Sweden has approached these categories. In 2007, Victim Support Sweden expanded its national helpline and offered “Support in your own language,” which was also the title of a brochure. In the brochure, the reader was told that Victim Support Sweden was there to support all victims of crime, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity. Victims of crime could be contacted by a volunteer in eight different languages, all common among immigrants in Sweden; Arabic, Persian, Russian, Spanish, Sorani (South Kurdish), French, Hungarian, and Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian. In the brochure, they also informed that they had information on their website in 22 languages.

In 2010, another brochure with the title “Break the silence” informed about violence in same-sex relationships. Supported by quotes from victims, the information in this brochure started with a text saying:

Violence exists in all classes, cultures, ages, and types of relationships . . . Violence exists just as often in same-sex relationships as in relationships between different sexes. Violence looks the same, is just as tough and follows the same pattern.

After that, the brochure presents facts about same-sex violence and special vulnerability for these groups. It ends with information about the national helpline and the possibility to contact the local support centres. Age is also in focus as Victim Support Sweden has made many efforts to reach children and young victims, and also the elderly. In 2013, Victim Support Sweden launched the campaign “Violence does not retire.” Other groups that have been in focus are victims with disabilities. For example, from 2010 to 2014, Victim Support Sweden led an externally funded project “Better support for crime victims with disabilities” together with a national umbrella organisation for disability organisations.

Victim Support Sweden’s focus on diversity among victims is also reflected in its coordination of the local centres. The operational plan for 2007 to 2010 highlighted that the organisation should “improve its competence in reaching diverse groups of victims” and “find methods to reach new target groups.” The plan highlights children and young victims, together with the development of the helpline in different languages. The plan for 2012 to 2014 specifically highlights disabled persons, LGBTQ persons, and children. Victim Support Sweden presented these themes at national meetings and in educational material for people active in the local centres. The organisation’s member magazine also included articles on these themes.

It is also possible to follow the same issues in Victim Support Sweden’s communication with political bodies. To take one example; in response to a government report on the social services in 2009 (SOU 2009:38), Victim Support Sweden highlighted young victims, women, migrants, elderly and disabled. On the issue of partner violence, it also pointed out that the specific needs of homo-, bisexual, and transsexual people were not considered in the report. This way Victim Support Sweden implemented what its said in relation to human rights through a variety of activities.

Conclusion and discussion

In this article, we have shown examples of how Victim Support Sweden has argued for human rights, as well as the actions it has taken in line with the overarching principles in the UDHR. We have also shown that Victim Support Sweden’s way of considering human rights has developed over the years. In the construction phase, when the pioneers built the organisation, we saw rudimentary statements of “all victims,” emphasis on equal access to support, and a general focus on each person as a human being. Later on, Victim Support Sweden started to state the needs and rights of specific vulnerable groups in line with the groups mentioned in the UDHR Article 2. In 2005, Victim Support Sweden explicitly started to claim that human rights were the foundation of all its work and the organisations strongest value. The organisation has had a very open definition and understanding of human rights. It has taken a standpoint similar to what Dembour (2010) calls “natural”, as it has taken human rights

for granted and never questioned human rights laws. It has also continually claimed the importance of everyone *having* rights, without demanding the *use* of the rights.

In practice, Victim Support Sweden has acted as it has said, and has both argued for victim support based on human rights and provided support in agreement with this. There is no evidence that a new discourse or way of working developed after 2005 when it explicitly began to mention human rights in its documents. Still, the more refined way of talking about as well as acting in line with human rights principles developed in parallel to the organisation. Often, when an organisation grows, practice catches up with its values. Human rights was, from the start, visible in organisation's practice, and as the organisation grew, human rights became an explicit value. As the organisation consolidated its position, it also developed ways to reach more specific groups of victims, as an alternative to the early years' emphasis on the less defined "all victims of crime."

Two aspects stand out as the most interesting results from the study; the consistency between saying and doing and the way Victim Support Sweden regards victims, offenders, and human beings in general. First, we have a surprisingly strong connection between saying and doing in Victim Support Sweden. It was expected to find at least some discrepancies, but the pervasive results showed that statements made were also reflected in action. This can be understood in two ways; it could be a case of the material we have had access to, or it could be a case of a strong and coherent organisation. In studies, such as Khan and Jerolmack (2013), of what people say and do, it is normal to find discrepancies. Our study is of an organisation, which makes it different. Even if an archive holds primary material collected in its contemporary context, there could be biases. We often, more or less consciously, actively select which documents will be left in the archive and which will not. The selection process starts right at that moment when the documents are created and written. For some documents, it is already known at the time of creation that they will be saved for the future. That is the case for annual reports and other more formal documents. There is also always someone who chooses what to write and how to write it. Ideas that have turned into action will probably appear in documents more often than ideas that remained only ideas. Other studies have shown that Victim Support Sweden has had a strong solid base for how to think about victims' needs and rights, as well as about how to provide support both inward in the organisation and outwardly. This is also what we find here when we notice the strong correspondence in saying and doing human rights (Gallo & Svensson, 2019; Svensson & Gallo, 2018).

The second most interesting result from the study is how Victim Support Sweden regards victims, offenders, and human beings. According to Wergens (2014), the Swedish victim movement's emphasis on care and treatment can be seen as a commitment to human rights, such as individuals' equal worth and dignity and the right to a fair trial. Throughout the years, Victim Support Sweden has had an understanding of victims as fellow human beings who have experienced crime. Despite the increasing influence of neo-liberal and conservative ideas in the Swedish political discourse, it has consistently regarded both victims and perpetrators as roles human beings can be assigned in specific situations, not just something individuals "are." This way, there is no problem acknowledging one person as both victim and perpetrator but in different situations. This can explain why Victim Support Sweden has argued that efforts to support victims should not be made at the expense of efforts to rehabilitate perpetrators. The results of this article hence contradict the common assumption that victim support organisations are inherently part of a neo-liberal and conservative political agenda. This highlights the need to counterbalance the domination of Anglophone literature in the field of victim support. Exploring new governance, such as Victim Support Sweden, in social-democratic societies can help us challenge well-established beliefs.

This article has focused on Victim Support Sweden as an advocacy organisation. One limitation is the small and elite interview sample and that we have only examined documents from the national organisation. In future studies, it would be interesting to focus on the local centres and their victim support. As we saw in the introduction, the state does, to a great extent, rely on the local centres to comply with the 2012 EU Directives on victims of crime. Interesting questions to ask are

how the state complies with human rights obligations through NGOs and if it would be possible without them.

Our study has identified ways in which a victim support advocacy organisation can claim “rights” for people as victims that directly connect to core human rights principles. As seen through the examples presented, victims’ rights and human rights are intertwined. It is not relevant to try to separate them as they are based on the same principles. When Victim Support Sweden acts in the name of human rights, it also acts on victims’ rights. The most evident thing that has been shown in this study is how Victim Support Sweden came to be more diversified in how it targeted victims of crime. While it started focusing victims as one large group covering everyone, it later came to acknowledge a diversity and highlight what is specific for certain groups.

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