

Oral history as a method of promoting inclusive and gender-sensitive justice

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Abstract: In a context in which Syrians are divided by conflict lines and information wars with no clear pathway towards comprehensive justice and peace, oral history projects that are community based, gender sensitive, and victim centred can provide an avenue for justice and empowerment. In a conflict where women's voices and those of other marginalised groups are ignored or silenced, oral history can re-centre these experiences and voices, and provide a new perspective on the conflict and avenues for a solution. The Syrian Oral History Archive program powered by Dawlaty encompasses the voices of ordinary Syrians—with a focus on women and youth—and acts to recount both individual and collective recollections of the 2011 Syrian Uprising and the Syrian conflict thereafter. From its inception in 2016, the Archive has sought to create a mechanism and process which empowered Syrian communities and marginalised groups to tell their stories, influence the dominant narrative about the conflict, and shape the agenda around justice.

Keywords: Syria, SOHA, gender-sensitivity, marginalised group(s), conflict, transitional justice, oral history.

Note on the author: Salma Kahale was the Executive Director of Dawlaty for over six years, leading its work on inclusive justice, civic engagement, and campaigning with families and survivors of detention and disappearance. Salma is a Syrian feminist and social justice activist with over 15 years of experience in gender, youth engagement, and child protection programming and policy development. Salma's research interests include gender, justice, agency, and community organising.

Introduction

Ten years after the start of the Syrian uprising, military operations and political processes seem to have stalled and a transition to a peaceful and just society remains a distant hope. As the regime has regained control of large swathes of Syria and other actors entrench the occupation and control of various areas, gross human rights violations and war crimes not only remain unaddressed but continue to occur, carried out by the Syrian regime as well as all other de facto authorities. Debates and negotiations amongst international and national actors have rarely taken into account the experiences, views, and needs of civilians on the future of Syria and on justice, especially the views of women, youth, and other marginalised groups.

The lack of a political transition, and an inability to create national processes to deal with violations, has not stopped Syrian activists and civil society from seeking avenues for justice and accountability. Nor has it stopped efforts to create dialogue and peacebuilding across conflict lines. Civil society has an important role to play in promoting and seeking justice for Syrians, in the present and in the future. The Syrian Oral History Archive (SOHA) is one such tool for providing justice for Syrians, in particular those whose voices and experiences have been marginalised. SOHA aims to be a mechanism for symbolic justice on the individual and community level, by creating a space for acknowledgement, agency, and social dialogue. The Archive is also well positioned to inform other mechanisms for transitional justice, peacebuilding and reconciliation.

SOHA has begun to fulfil such a role, even with the limitations and challenges it faces in a complex and dynamic environment.

Syrian context

Politically and geographically divided

Ten years ago, Syrians chanted ‘one, one, one, the Syrian people are one’ as they marched for freedom and dignity across Syria. The heavy bombardment and fighting to quash the uprising have now subsided in many areas of Syria as the regime has made military gains, with the support of its allies. Yet, whilst the regime has regained control of many parts of Syria, the country remains divided under the de facto rule of a host of local and international powers. In addition to a military dynamic that seems unable to produce a clear ‘winner’, the political process seems equally unable to bring a resolution to the conflict. None of these tracks seems close to producing tangible progress towards fulfilling the aspirations of Syrians who marched in the streets for freedom only to suffer the brutality of war and repression.

Across Syria, living under the control of the Syrian Regime, Turkey, and its allied militia (the Syrian National Army), Hay'et Al Tahrir, and the Syrian Democratic Forces, civilians face a multitude of human rights violations and increasingly difficult living conditions. These include continued unlawful detention and disappearance, targeted assassinations, sexual and gender-based violence (in particular of women and girls from minority communities), as well as land confiscations and displacement. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with increasing sanctions and the economic collapse in neighbouring Lebanon, '[risk] refuelling the root causes of the conflict, which included deepening poverty and inequalities'.¹ Today, Syria is divided up into multiple areas of influence and the majority of Syrians have been displaced from their homes, neighbourhoods, and country. Throughout the conflict, Syrians have been increasingly restricted from traveling between different areas of Syria. Those who could leave for neighbouring countries have found themselves trapped there due to travel restrictions and an inability to get legal residency. The political divides, coupled with travel restrictions within Syria and to neighbouring countries, have further alienated Syrians from each other. This has led to a lack of knowledge about the experiences and perspectives of different communities, entrenching localised thinking and priority setting.

Representations of the conflict

The physical restrictions, coupled with systematic misinformation campaigns, have led one of the best documented conflicts in history to be filled with misunderstanding, misinformation, and mistrust. During the conflict, the regime and its Russian allies sought to reframe the conflict as a war against terror. They have conducted concerted campaigns online with bots and trolls, backed by Russian state agencies, to spread false information about humanitarian workers and chemical attacks.² In addition, while the fighting raged, the Syrian regime began efforts to rewrite and memorialise its version of the conflict. In 2016, Bouthaina Shaaban, the foreign policy advisor and spokesperson for the current president and his father before him, launched Wathiqat Wattan, an NGO (nongovernmental organisation) with a mission 'to preserve the national memory and save it from loss distortion and fraud, and to give the chance to Syrians to participate in writing the modern Syrian history'.³ There have also been examples of Syrian opposition activists and their allies tampering with videos and conducting misinformation, albeit nowhere near the systemic level of the regime

¹ Commission of Inquiry (2020: paragraph 29).

² Syria Campaign (2017).

³ Wathiqat Wattan (2020).

and its allies. Within the broader media framing, much has been written about ISIS' savvy use of the media.

Representations of the conflict in international media and policy circles have shifted over the years from an early focus on protests to a focus on geopolitics and warring parties, especially on the regime and ISIS. Civilians, women in particular, were brought up as victims of the conflict. Their agency, experiences, desires, and the potential role they could play in deciding the future of Syria or developing strategies around justice or ending the conflict were marginal. Opposition delegations to political negotiations were created through the support, influence, and pressure of external actors, much more than through on-the-ground presence or representation of a certain constituency.

The marginalisation of women

While there have been efforts by many Syrian and international organisations to document violations of human rights and to develop transitional justice plans and mechanisms, the methods of documentation and focus have often lacked gender-sensitivity and victim-focus.

Women have played leading roles in their communities and on a national level during the conflict, yet their experiences and voices have been marginalised by Syrian and international actors alike. Since the very beginning of the conflict, local women's groups, such as the Dammeh women's collective in Zabadani which negotiated with state security for the release of prisoners, played an important role and women leaders included two founders of the revolutionary coordinating structures, Razan Zaitouneh and Suheir Atassi. There was strong coalition work, including the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (SWIPD), which was founded in 2014 by a diverse group of Syrian women activists with a history of political and social organising, demanding a seat for women at the highest level of the peace talks. Research by Syrian and international feminist groups has highlighted how women's groups across Syria have played and continue to play an important role in peacebuilding and justice in their communities.⁴

Women's groups continue to perform a vital role in challenging authoritarianism and oppression, yet they are faced with 'criticism and sometimes ridicule from the communities. Women fear from taking part in these activities as a result of the continued marginalization of women, as politics is considered a man's domain.'⁵ The marginalisation takes place at the level of national and international institutions.

⁴ Ghazzawi *et al.* (2015).

⁵ WILPF & Dawlaty (2020: 45).

For example, the SWIPD was downsized and distorted to create an advisory board to the then UN special envoy Staffan De Mistura, the Women's Advisory Board—which did not fulfil the aspirations of women to be involved in decision-making processes.⁶ Ms Zeitouneh and her colleagues were forcibly disappeared inside Syria, whilst Ms Atassi was sidelined and actors such as Dammeh are not acknowledged for the real power they hold in their community and their experience of politics and negotiation is downplayed or ignored.

Tens of organisations and thousands of activists have worked to document human rights violations throughout the Syrian conflict in an effort to bring justice to victims, particularly in the form of prosecutions. The work has often focused on the documentation of killings, detention, and other human rights violations, in which gender analysis is generally limited to the number of women who faced these violations or a specific focus on sexual violence and the violations against 'women's honour'.⁷ Many actors, particularly international and Syrian feminist organisations, have sought to broaden the scope of documentation, analysis, and approaches to justice; however, this is met with the attitude that 'there is a certain "right way" to achieve accountability and viewing measures other than trials as "soft justice"'.⁸

Syrian and international feminist organisations have been working to elaborate the additional and different impact of the conflict and of human rights violations on women and to bring that analysis into the debate on justice and accountability in Syria. Pre-existing discriminatory laws and patriarchal culture have led to women being disproportionately impacted by authoritarian practices and violence.⁹ For example, detention is experienced differently by women, whether as detainees who face targeting as hostages, sexual violence and torture, or societal stigma after release,¹⁰ or as relatives of detained and disappeared persons who face harassment and exploitation in their search for a loved one, or legal complications to custody, freedom of movement, and property rights due to discriminatory laws.¹¹ Human rights reporting by feminist organisations on the impact of sieges and bombing of health infrastructure analyse the impact of these forms of collective punishment on women's participation as well as their health, in particular reproductive health.¹² In addition to expanding the scope of the violations and harm that is analysed, feminist organisations have also tried to expand the discourse and strategies on justice, building on

⁶ UN Women (2016).

⁷ SNHR (2020).

⁸ Kabawat & Travesi (2018: 6).

⁹ Dawlaty & WILPF (2020).

¹⁰ Nassar (2015).

¹¹ Dawlaty & Women Now for Development (2018).

¹² Badael Foundation *et al.* (2016).

women's lived realities and drawing on their understanding of concepts of justice, security, and peace.¹³

The state of justice

When the protests in Syria started, many human rights and democracy activists and organisations were focused on developing transitional justice plans. Syrian activists and organisations especially were determined to learn from neighbouring countries, such as Iraq and Lebanon, and to ensure that accountability, reparations, and institutional reform measures were ready, context specific, and Syrian led. Workshops, studies, and surveys with Syrians were implemented to develop a framework for 'the day after'. These plans were often envisioned as national processes, taking place after a clear transition, though they lacked a gender-sensitive lens and community buy-in. As the conflict wore on, the fall of the Syrian regime or the signature of a peace agreement that led to a transition have become more distant, the exercise of planning for such a day became less relevant, and new strategies have had to be developed to fulfil the desire for justice.

As a transition eludes Syria, justice efforts have largely focused on three tracks: case building for prosecution, victims organising, and memory preservation. Many efforts are now focused on case building to hold individuals from all sides, as well as the Syrian regime itself, accountable for crimes against humanity using international mechanisms, like the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and national courts where universal jurisdiction applies, such as in Germany, France, and Sweden. As prosecutions begin, some justice actors have been working to ensure that gender-sensitivity is mainstreamed and sexual and gender-based violence is prioritised in accountability efforts.¹⁴ A criminal complaint by the European Court for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR) has successfully resulted in incidents of sexual violence being indicted 'as acts of crimes against humanity committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against the civilian population in Syria, not—as before—merely as individual cases under German criminal law'.¹⁵

Other efforts have focused on supporting victims of detention, disappearance, and other crimes to organise and advocate for their demands. These include the founding of several groups of families and survivors of detention and disappearance, such as Families for Freedom, the Caesar Families' Association, the Association of Detainees

¹³ Ali (2019).

¹⁴ IIIM (2020: 13).

¹⁵ ECCHR (2021).

and the Missing of Sednaya Prison, and the Coalition of Families of Those Detained by ISIS. Victims' organisations, many led by women, have succeeded in entering policy and advocacy discussions that were often reserved for male lawyers or human rights defenders.

International and Syrian civil society organisations, artists, and academics have also worked on memory preservation and remembrance efforts, sometimes through the prism of justice but also with the goal of building an understanding of the conflict amongst a Western audience or amongst Syrians themselves. Efforts to document the testimonies of Syrians have often aimed to tell their story to an outside public in the hopes of spurring action on the conflict, often with the lens of recounting the revolution. These include literary endeavours such as the 2012 book *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution* by Samar Yazbek and Wendy Pearlman's 2017 *We Crossed a Bridge and It Trembled: Voices From Syria*. A groundswell of movies and documentaries have told the story of Syrians during the conflict and through their displacement, such as *The Return to Homs*, *Last Men in Aleppo*, *The Day I Lost My Shadow*, and *For Sama*. Many of these movies have received accolades abroad but remain largely unseen or consumed by Syrians themselves.

Others efforts are more scholarly in nature, aiming to highlight experiences of refugees to their new compatriots in Europe or Syrians from different areas to each other. These include the *Syrian Oral History Project* by the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide studies that aims to create documentation for scholarly study, understanding of Syrian refugees by European host societies, and a body of knowledge for accountability work.¹⁶ Syrian civil society organisations have sought to preserve the collective memory of the conflict for Syrians as well, including the Citizenship League which has published a series of books with citizen's testimonies, along with the publishing of testimonies of Syrian mothers from across Syria to 'allow different perspectives to present examples from different regions suffering from the same condition, regardless of the political position'.¹⁷

In a context in which Syrians are divided by military and information wars with no clear pathway towards a comprehensive justice and reconciliation processes, there is a need for efforts to encourage Syrians at large but especially those who have suffered human rights violations to speak about their experiences, demands, and needs for the future. There is a need for their experiences to be heard and acknowledged, not only by their fellow citizens in other areas but also by others within their own communities. Oral history projects that are community based, gender sensitive, and victim centred can provide that space, as well as providing an avenue for justice and empowerment,

¹⁶Ungor (2020).

¹⁷Syrian League for Citizenship & Besme International Group for Humanitarian Assistance (2017).

or potentially creating a basis for reconciliation. In a conflict where women's voices and those of other marginalised groups are ignored or silenced, oral history can re-centre these experiences and voices, and provide a new perspective on the conflict and avenues for a solution.

The Syrian Oral History Archive

When Dawlaty was founded in 2012, one of its core pillars was to advocate for and prepare for the development of Syrian-led, context-specific transitional justice processes. Dawlaty's mission is to enable Syrian civil society partners, marginalised groups, and young men and women to achieve democratic transition in Syria. This included the development of a transitional justice process to address the violations of forty years of dictatorship and the conflict that followed. We also hoped to engage in a historic opportunity to redefine the basis of the social contract in our country. For a transitional justice process to be transformational it needed to be Syrian led with the ownership and engagement of our own communities, especially those that have been historically marginalised.

Dawlaty sought to build knowledge and awareness within communities, especially amongst young activists, so that they could not only participate in transitional justice processes but to also help shape and lead them. With partners, Dawlaty investigated how various mechanisms could be applied in Syria based on local conditions and history.¹⁸ It conducted research with young people, reporting on how they understand and can engage with transitional justice and what their priorities are in that regard.¹⁹ With Badael, a partner Syrian civil society organisation, it developed a manual to train civil society activists on transitional justice. However, by 2015, as the conflict entered a new phase with the Russian intervention in Syria, it was clear for Dawlaty that a different kind of engagement with Syrian youth and communities was required in order to build knowledge, capacity, and networks for justice. A justice that may be many years off. This led to the development of what is now known as the Syrian Oral History Archive (SOHA).

In 2016, Dawlaty began working with Syrian civil society partners to collect oral history testimonies of Syrians from marginalised communities in different areas of Syria. Dawlaty defines marginalised communities as social and geographic groups, as well as victims of human rights violations, that have been historically disenfranchised

¹⁸ Dawlaty & No Peace Without Justice (2014).

¹⁹ Saleh & Al-Taleb (2016).

and have not been represented in or participated in decisions about their own lives, communities, and country. Dawlaty and its partners sought to bring the realities of marginalised groups into mainstream and dominant histories and discourses of the Syrian conflict, to influence the justice agenda with the experiences and demands of these communities, and to empower them to advocate and help shape the agenda for peace and justice in Syria.

Today, Dawlaty has collected over 400 audio testimonies of which 310 will be available through a publicly available online platform, with varying levels of permissions and access. As part of its first collections, Dawlaty and its partners have collected the stories of women relatives of detainees, and young people aged between 18 and 24.

Methodology

While Dawlaty's methodology has changed over the last five years, as the situation and our learning have evolved, there have been several guiding principles that have grounded our work and our approach.

Identifying under-represented and marginalised groups

In selecting communities that we wanted to work with together with our partners, we reached out to individuals and groups that are insufficiently visible or under-represented, such as young people. In 2016, through their work with the community, Women Now for Development identified women relatives of detainees, the issues they face, and their priorities as under-represented in peace and justice discussions, including in women and peace forums. Another partner organisation approached us about documenting the experiences of Palestinian refugee youth during the conflict. Collaboration with partners who work with communities forms a core part of our work and guides our prioritisation of themes or communities on which to focus.

Working with communities

Dawlaty worked with partners to identify individuals from the relevant population with whom we could work to develop the themes, collect the testimonies, and develop outputs. In addition, young people who participated in our civic engagement activities were invited to take part in the Oral History programme and were trained on transitional justice, memory work, and oral history interviewing skills and concepts, as well as on psychological first aid and self-care. The young interviewers worked in groups to identify topics and events they wanted to explore, which in turn guided the identification and interviews with young narrators. Interviewers and narrators were also

engaged in reviewing outputs and developing awareness-raising and advocacy activities inspired by their testimonies.

Immediate results for communities

Dawlaty worked to join the collection of stories with ongoing projects that provided more immediate results for communities. This helped us overcome fatigue regarding justice. Activities included supporting report writing, advocacy, and movement building with the communities whose stories we are documenting. In 2019, based on the testimonies that they collected and their personal perspectives, young interviewers developed recommendations on youth, peace, and justice which they presented at a roundtable event with Syrian organisations working with youth. Women relatives of the disappeared, narrators, and interviewers participated in events based on their testimonies, including a brainstorming workshop with civil society and artists, theatrical storytelling events with the public, report launching events in their communities, and advocacy trips to Geneva. Early on, these efforts inspired the launch of Families for Freedom, a women-led movement of families of detained and disappeared persons.

Filling the gap of representation

As much as possible, given security and logistical restrictions, we have sought to fill the gap of representation in which the views and needs of people across conflict lines are gathered. Due to the repressive environment in government-held areas, as well as initial hesitation amongst some groups working on justice to engage civilians in those areas, there is an under-representation of people in regime-controlled areas, as well as areas controlled by radical groups, in much of the literature on justice. Dawlaty and its partners collected testimonies in seven different communities in Syria, including in two communities in regime control, as well as in several different areas of Lebanon and Jordan. While most of the stories were collected in Arabic, some of the stories collected in the North East of Syria were narrated in Kurdish.

The archive is by no means representative of the varied experiences of Syrians, even amongst our target population, but it is not complete. We continue to identify ways in which to work with communities across Syria, so that in our effort to contribute to a new narrative we do not create new patterns of exclusion. Here, however, there is a tension between our efforts to be local, specific, and community based, while at the same time creating an inclusive and representative process. This in part can be addressed through strong collaborations with organisations and groups with strong relationships and expertise working with specific communities.

Collaboration

We have sought to partner with organisations with specific expertise in relevant areas or have a strong footing within the community targeted. While we expanded into new communities with which we had not worked before, the process of gathering testimonies, collaborating with communities on knowledge production and advocacy, was at its strongest when working with a partner who had the trust of communities and a strong understanding of how best to engage them. Dawlaty will continue to make collaboration with other community partners a pillar of collecting, archiving, and developing outputs for justice.

Limitations

There are clear challenges and limitations for an Oral History archive with an aim of working on justice while the conflict is still—as defined—ongoing. Community-based oral history projects, including SOHA, aim to have a longer term relationship with their narrators, as opposed to a study or a human rights documentation endeavour. In addition, ‘in the case of the creation of archival oral history collections, the principle of giving voice to a person or group often implies attributing them a form of authorship by explicitly mentioning their names’.²⁰ However, due to the war, displacement, and security concerns, we were often unable to keep in touch with narrators. In addition, we are unable to give individual authorship of testimonies to narrators. Even in cases where we received permission to use the testimonies in full, we have often opted to anonymise the testimonies, especially as a number of the areas in which we have worked have been retaken by the Syrian regime.

Interviewees who speak about more recent events not only run the risk of reliving their trauma, but also of revealing incriminating evidence that could lead to retaliation. In post-conflict zones, this calls for extreme care in the process of selecting, informing and keeping contact with narrators and in the subsequent handling of the data.²¹

Collections

Youth voices: young people shaping transition, citizenship, and identity

The word ‘displacement’ means tragedy. It is a tragedy on all levels of human life, and changes a person’s life. ... Displacement comes and destroys all your plans and changes them. It destroys your reality and makes it bitter and painful. I was not considering

²⁰ Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 28).

²¹ Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 31).

leaving my village or migrating unless, for example, there was something that would improve my life and my future. And even if ... it would be for a certain period and I would then go back ... one's home and his family and country are very precious to them.
(24-year-old man, Daraa)

The youth collection includes 194 stories by young people between 18 years and 24 years old collected between 2016 and 2018. Young interviewers worked in groups within their communities to identify specific incidents that they wanted to ask narrators about, such as the chemical attack in Ghouta, the bombing of the local market, interruption to education, or engagement in the armed conflict. Testimonies focus on youths' experience of the conflict, elaboration on a specific incident or theme that was identified by the youth interviewers of that community, and the narrator's understanding of concepts such as justice, responsibility, and diversity, as well as how they see themselves in that process. The youth collection will be launched in 2021, highlighting such themes as the disruption of education, involvement in armed conflict, displacement, as well as disruption of social and economic development. What the testimonies communicate are feelings of safety, belonging, alienation, and deprivation of personal agency that youth experience as they relate to these violations. These testimonies allow us to go beyond narrow interpretation and impact of violations, as well as bringing these issues out of a humanitarian/youth development framework into a justice framing.

Stories for empowerment and justice: women relatives of the detainees and disappeared

A man was detained once he went to ask for his cousin. No one knew his whereabouts. So, when I saw that no one wanted to go with me, I went by myself to the security branches ... all of them. (32 years old—Aleppo)²²

Dawlaty and its partner, Women Now for Development, collected 213 women's personal stories as family members of detained and disappeared persons between 2016 and 2018. The stories of wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of persons who are detained or disappeared in Syria were collected in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. As elaborated in the report 'Shadows of the Disappeared: Testimonies of Syrian Female Relatives Left with Loss and Ambiguity' published in 2018, the testimonies highlight the process of searching for a loved one that women engage in, as well as the harassment and exploitation they face in this process. They detail economic deprivation, social and psychological stress, and social alienation that women face as a result of the violation, especially when it is coupled with gender-biased legislation and a patriarchal society. In addition to understanding the challenges women face, the testimonies

²²Dawlaty & Women Now for Development (2018: 28).

provide insight into the methods of resilience, coping, and regaining agency that women have.

Narrators and interviewers, many of whom were also women relatives of disappeared and detained persons, played a leading role in promoting the stories and demands of women. The report, 'Shadows of the Disappeared', was launched in local communities from which the stories were collected. Local leaders and civil society activists in Rural Aleppo and Idlib listened to and engaged with women narrators and activists as they shared the report results and discussed local dynamics and needs. Narrators attended the telling of their stories in Beirut to a Lebanese audience by actors. One of the greatest achievements of the project was the emergence of the Families of Freedom movement, inspired by a workshop that brought together narrators, activists, and cultural actors, which centred the testimonies. The women of the movement have become a prominent voice on the issue of detention and they have inspired other family and survivor groups to form. When we started gathering testimonies in 2016, there was fear and stigma related to speaking as female relatives of detained and disappeared persons. Today, their presence as stakeholders in any advocacy or consultation has become all but required.

SOHA as a tool of achieving gender-sensitive, inclusive justice

After the strike, some of the children became sick for a week because of the dust, and some students were absent for weeks due to the state of panic and terror in the students and parents. (26-year-old male, Daraa)

A woman cannot protect her daughter. They are taking girls against their parents' wishes. Daesh says 'you either give her to us as such, or something bad will happen to you. (25-year-old woman, Yarmouk camp)

They took me out, and I asked them 'where are you taking me?' and they said 'don't be afraid, we're going to the student union security.' Of course, I knew this was a lie. They walked me outside and took me through the university gate. Of course I didn't know where I was going, and I was handcuffed and held. Next thing I knew, I was at the State Security branch in Latakia. They took us to the branch, and of course the reception was beatings and insults, and atrocious methods and tactics. (24-year-old man, Deraa)

From its inception, the Syrian Oral History Archive sought to create a mechanism and process which empowered Syrian communities and marginalised groups to tell their stories, influence the dominant narrative about the conflict, and shape the agenda around justice. In discussions with community partners and experts, we identified oral history as a tool that would allow for communities to engage with justice in the context of an ongoing conflict, building capacity and creating space for organising and

dialogue, whilst also trying to avoid the fatigue and backlash that may result from discussions of a future transitional justice process that has not materialised.

Empowerment

My story is not just my story. It is a widespread phenomenon. There are mothers who are in prison and their children have become orphans. My story is not just a personal matter, I am telling it to raise awareness for every mother who lost her husband and for every grandmother raising orphans. My message is also to every brother who has left his sister and her children to handle things alone. (34-year-old woman, rural Damascus)

Community-based oral history projects have the ability to empower individuals and communities, through speaking, being heard, and feeling acknowledged. Particularly for individuals and communities that have been historically marginalised, finding a space to tell personal stories can provide a semblance of justice and possibly, even healing. ‘Oral history as a form of transitional justice is the practice of empowering victims of war by providing them with the opportunity to voice their experiences in the form of a spoken dialogue that is documented in a durable form.’²³ Having one’s story documented and forming part of a broader collection of stories, available in a public archive, can be a powerful acknowledgement of the experiences that this individual and community went through.

Community-based oral history can provide an opportunity for victims and communities to speak about their experiences and gain acknowledgement in a way that is more empowering and holistic than formal mechanisms, such as truth commissions. Truth commissions can have political aims or a limited scope that does not create space for all the experiences, as well as local identities and meanings that impact on grievances and understandings of justice.

Scholarship has increasingly highlighted the limitations of institutionalized top down forms of transitional justice, as such trial and truth commissions, in terms of helping individuals and communities to overcome a violent past. Their criticisms point generally towards their limited value for thick social construction, their potential to re-traumatize victims and to not account for all their acknowledgement needs, or their lack of inclusion of all justice stakeholders.²⁴

In working with local youth, SOHA created space to reflect on local incidents in the conflict that were important to the youth in those communities. The archive aims to create a process through which narrators and their communities are empowered to tell their stories, in all their facets and all their complexity. Eschewing human rights

²³Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 22).

²⁴Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 11).

documentation approaches which focus on some of the most difficult experiences of that person's life and engages them as victims, the Archive wants to engage these individuals on their overall experience of the conflict, the violation(s) they have faced, their methods of coping and regaining agency, as well as their engagement with the concepts of justice. However, the aim of SOHA was not solely empowerment at an individual level, but also at a community or communal level. Narrating your own story, while contributing to a collective story can help individuals and communities reassert agency.

Informing justice & transitional justice efforts

The cause of unemployment is firstly, the fact that factories here have closed. There isn't one factory working. Secondly, the cause of unemployment is that we thought the revolution would progress ... the regime would fall. It turned out not to be a revolution or anything, the rebels did this and work here. ... There were buses for them, and they get paid at the beginning of every month. You go 12 hours here and 12 hours there. Young men and people, where did they start going but to the leaders of military factions. People started being paid 50,000 or 60,000 (SYP). A young man, for example, gets paid 60,000 for the first month, and then another for another month and a third. He gets married and has children by the end of the year. (25-year-old man, Yarmouk refugee camp)

My son's arrest has had serious repercussions on our family on every level, psychologically, financially, emotionally. Every aspect of our lives has been turned upside down. I became a more solitary person. I stopped visiting acquaintances and friends. I only go out to the market when I need to buy something and I go straight home afterwards. Our life is no longer what it used to be. We are deeply depressed and we keep to ourselves and no longer socialize with neighbours and relatives. His older brothers left to Jordan and my two youngest sons also left out of fear. One emigrated to Germany. That miserable day when a big wave of refugees left for Europe, he left with them. We used to beg our children not to wander far away. Even my husband never steps out of his shop anymore. There is no sense of safety and security in this place. Even in my own house, I feel afraid. (45-year-old woman, Daraa)

From its outset, Dawlaty and its partners decided that the archive and testimonies were not aimed to be used for legal procedures. However, we sought to influence the scope of what is defined as justice, who gets to define it, and what remedies and mechanisms are developed to achieve it. In particular, through engaging with female relatives of detained and disappeared persons, Dawlaty and its partners sought to expand the scope of discussion on detention to include families, to understand the gendered impact of that violation and to bring attention to the voices and needs of that population. Our oral history programme was developed, not only as its own justice mechanism or intervention, but also a tool that would inform other processes.

Oral history can provide us with more nuanced, particular, and subjective understandings of justice than traditional consultation processes and can bring more meaningful insights to the design of its mechanisms. There have been many surveys, pieces of research alongside consultation processes, to elaborate what Syrian civilians view as justice or their needs and priorities. Often, these consultations can offer an idea or snapshot of these people's priorities and attitudes at a certain period of time, in specific circumstances. In our experience of working with young people on the ground, specific incidents that happen around the time of an interview can influence people's attitudes towards such concepts as justice, revenge, and reconciliation and thus make those kinds of consultations less reliable. However, 'Oral History has significant potential to shed light on the localized and often intangible justice needs of those affected by a conflict and the dynamic processes shaping them.'²⁵ It can provide space for experience sharing that goes beyond predefined identities and violations that the surveyors have identified and allow us to understand the local, complex relationships that form their understanding of conflict.

In the context of a frozen and long-term conflict, community-based initiatives such as SOHA can also inform or move peace processes and negotiations.

There is an inability for women to address their issues at the peace table as the politics of participation prevents women from voicing it. While each woman's experience is vastly different depending on her geographical location or her social group, it is also intensely subjective. If they are not given a platform to be heard, they will also not be included in formal mechanisms of peace or justice where decisions that impact their security and needs are made.²⁶

In a context in which detention was often left off the agenda by all parties, SOHA created a space for women relatives of the disappeared to speak about their experiences and demands and to organise together, eventually leading to their more formal engagement in discussions with stakeholders.

Memorialisation

In the beginning, we didn't know what it was that we were hearing. It was a truly unforgettable day. As I said, at dawn they started shelling, shelling. ... Very heavy shelling. I mean, in every neighbourhood a missile landed, and this missile is what we cannot forget, it just shakes buildings and shop windows. Windows of shops would shake. The situation was truly horrible. We are here and we don't know what to do. We hid in the corridor at first, then we hid in a closed room with no windows, fearing they might

²⁵Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 21).

²⁶Hettiarachchi (2016: 4).

strike again. They told us: they might hit again the same night. We hid in one room and then in the corridor, thinking it was safe. We would feel all the doors of the apartment just shaking from the bombing! It was a day I know how to describe! (20-year-old woman, Irbeen)

Oral history can be a tool for justice in itself, by providing symbolic or historical justice, an acknowledgement of the experiences of victims and communities that have lived through the conflict. Symbolic forms of justice ‘are understood as those localized and non-judicial measures that aim at reparation, acknowledgement and community healing through the recognition of victimization, the establishment of moral accountability and facts, as well as remembrance’.²⁷ The importance of symbolic justice is in its focus on victims, where accountability measures often focus on the perpetrators. ‘Oral history datasets can be considered as a symbolic form of justice in their own right, allowing silenced, marginalized or subaltern narratives of the past to be propagated against the backdrop of hegemonic interpretations of the past.’²⁸ The existence of a public collection of testimonies from individuals and communities whose experiences are ignored or actively suppressed and misrepresented can be a powerful acknowledgement and contribution to justice.

SOHA aims to work with narrators, community groups, and cultural actors to ensure that the collective memory of the Syrian conflict is built by Syrians, based on truth telling and recognition of marginalised communities’ experiences, and that it aims to create mutual understanding. Art and culture provide tools to bring to light stories and have conversations that are otherwise difficult. We will work with community and cultural actors to engage narrators in telling their stories to their communities and other communities across Syria, in neighbouring countries and further abroad. Dawlaty has worked with Syrian and Lebanese artists and cultural organisations, using art, storytelling, theatre, and installations to tell the stories of women relatives of the disappeared and the experiences of youth in the Syrian conflict, as well as the story of civilians in Eastern Ghouta.

Oral history accounts can provide an antidote to traditional forms of memorialisation, whether the hyper-masculine wartime heroes, selective and elitist narratives shaped by who are most articulate and with access to speaking and publishing platforms. ‘The perspectives of articulate survivors who are able to frame their testimonies didactically ... tend to have a disproportionately large bearing on public narratives.’²⁹ In addition, war memorialisation is often dominated by masculinist memorialisation, focusing on soldiers and war heroes, or even on ‘superstar’ activists

²⁷ Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 12).

²⁸ Rauschenbach *et al.* (2016: 56).

²⁹ Neumann & Andersen (2014: 13).

in the case of a revolutionary struggle. ‘The “hero”, stereotyped and distilled into a set of idealised masculinities, dominates this narrative. Subordinate masculinities and femininities are marginalised or discarded entirely.’³⁰ A collective, public archive creates new spaces to acknowledge and elevate subordinated and marginalised voices and experiences that cannot compete with the ‘hero’ discourse.

Conclusions: oral history as a part of, not instead of, justice

Memorialisation and acknowledgement are a part of justice. They do not replace nor circumvent the need for other mechanisms, such as reparations, accountability, and institutional reform. ‘Community “truth-telling” initiatives are clearly limited because they have limited ability to uncover previously unknown information from outside agencies, obtaining some form of official recognition or recompense, or in pursuing accountability.’³¹ In addition, community-based efforts that occur without a frame of transition or a guarantee of safety can have limited impact, as fear of retribution or prosecution can hamper truth-telling and community dialogue. A focus on community discussions and localised efforts can also reduce the conflict to a community conflict or a ‘civil war’ as the Syrian conflict is commonly misnamed. In pursuing community-based approaches, we must look at how broader systems and apparatuses, as well as national and international actors, operate at the local level and impact on individuals and communities; rather than allowing them to become invisible.

In a frozen conflict, a divided geography and fragmented and displaced population, oral history provides us tools to support marginalised individuals and communities, especially those that have faced human rights violations to engage with and seek justice. It provides opportunities to empower individuals by creating space for them to speak and to have their story acknowledged as part of the collective story and memory of the conflict. It can be a tool to create inclusive memorialisation of the experiences that Syrians went through, providing symbolic justice and opening the way for other forms of justice in due time. Given all the limitations of a context in which a transition to a more peaceful and free society is distant, a community-based oral history approach is an important component of a broader effort for justice and a tool that helps us to push the bounds of what justice is possible to achieve and for whom.

³⁰ Hettiarachchi (2016: 4).

³¹ Lundy & McGovern (2005: 44).

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