

Season 5, Episode 3 (January 2024)

Researching Survivors' Participation in Colombia

Welcome to Justice Visions. The podcast about everything that is new in the domain of Transitional Justice (TJ). Justice Visions is hosted at the Human Rights Centre of Ghent University. For more information visit JusticeVisions.org.

Tine: Welcome to this new episode of the Justice Visions podcast. My name is Tine Destrooper and as a co-host with me today is Brigitte Herremans. And here at Justice Visions we're just back from a short winter break, and we're excited to start a new year by continuing with the mini-series, which we kicked off a few months ago.

Brigitte: Yes, indeed, and ahead of our [International Conference](#) on Victim Participation, Mobilisation and Resistance in March, we have been exploring some of the topics that will be central to this conference.

Tine: Right, and so in an earlier episode, we were talking with [Brienne McGonigle Leyh](#) about some of the more institutional dimensions of victim participation in transitional justice. And as we also discussed back then that is, of course, only half the story, because victims participate and mobilize, especially in many forums, also non-institutional ones. And so what we wanted to talk about today is really how, jointly, those various experiences of participation, affect what the lived experience of victims is with regards to TJ. And we'll be talking about that today, but also in our next episode, because today we're focusing on Latin America. And in the next episode we'll be talking with practitioners and victims and activists from the Tunisian context.

Brigitte: Yes, we've planned two episodes on this topic because these contexts are so different. This is such a dense topic, and also because when we talk about how victims experience participation, this raises questions about how we as researchers, and especially maybe north-based researchers, engage with participants, with research methods we use and also which knowledge we validate.

Tine: Right. And that is mostly the focus for today is also how we do that research and what are the questions that we're foregrounding because that of course determines what we're finding, what we're acknowledging as transitional justice and as interactions with transitional justice.

And so we'll be talking about that topic with Dr. Sanne Weber, who is an assistant professor of peace and conflict studies at the Centre for International Conflict at Radboud University and who just recently published [Gender and Citizenship in Transitional Justice: Everyday Experiences of Reparation and Reintegration in Colombia](#). Welcome, Sanne.

Sanne: Thanks so much for having me.

Tine: Thanks for joining us. And Sanne, I just mentioned the book that you wrote, but I think a lot of people actually also know you from the article you did with Mijke De Waardt in the Journal of Human Rights Practice, which is called Beyond Victims' Mere Presence. And so my first, maybe very general question would be where or how you first observed, or how you have observed that dynamic that the article title seems to critique, of victims just being present without maybe having a lot of impact.

Sanne: My research was part of my a doctoral research in which I set out to study gender transformative reparations in two small villages in Chibolo in Colombia's Caribbean region. I worked with two communities of formerly displaced people who had returned to their land and were in the process of land restitution and reparations. And I actually didn't set out to study participation in the process. My goal was to use participatory methods to study gender-just transformative reparations. But I soon discovered that many of the community members that I was going to work with were not really interested in participatory research, and that had to do with the use of participation in the transitional justice or the reparation process. So, I'm talking here about Colombia's Victims' Law, a very well-known and also widely hailed reparations process, which combines land restitution with individual and collective reparations. And Colombia is also quite well known for promoting victim participation in innovative ways in its transitional justice mechanisms.

Tine: But from what you were saying, it sounds like there were several issues with this participation in the reparation proceedings?

Sanne: So in these communities that I worked with that was very obvious in state institutions implementing the Victims' Law really used the participatory framework, engaging the survivors or former IDPs in an endless number of workshops and trainings and committees and steering groups and all sorts of forums to make them participate in the design of the reparation plans that they were then going to receive. These meetings often involved drawing community maps or timelines or all that sort of more traditional participatory methods to identify the harms produced by the conflict and develop collective reparation plans. And so the funny thing was that although I set out to use participation as a method, it became an important topic in my research because people were just telling me: "Please don't make us go through more participatory exercises."

Brigitte: So did that make you change your own way of engaging with people?

Sanne: So I eventually opted for ethnographic hanging out with the community members, although I did undertake visual participatory research with women in the communities. And this had to do with the gender dynamics of participation in the state-led process. But through these ethnographic methods, I was present at many

meetings in which community members participated in the reparation process. So in that way, I ended up studying this participation process. And I discovered that in Chibolo people dedicated a lot of time to participating in the Victims' Law process. There were steering groups, there were committees for many different aspects of the Law, including the memory process, collective reparations, psychosocial reparations. And some people were also members of different committees, that were all meant to like, play a role and make them active participants in the reparation process. But the problem was that many different spaces and committees, they weren't really effective in producing the desired results, and there were then many additional training sessions and exchange workshops for these committees, often in Bogotá or other large cities. So in the end, this participatory process ended up taking a lot of time of the people participating in them, that were often the same people. So there was a lack of knowledge transfer. So people weren't aware what the leaders were doing, causing all sorts of suspicions by the leaders. And eventually the reparations plans that were developed were not implemented or very poorly implemented, partly because of the lack of budget and partly because of the difficult coordination with all the different state institutions that had to implement them. So, participation in this process had taken them a great deal in terms of time and effort, while they weren't seeing the results of their participation, which is why in the article we talked about, they were present, but their participation didn't actually lead to an effective reparation process being implemented according to the needs of the people that were designing them.

Tine: If I can just maybe just pick up on that idea that you just mentioned about these various forums being created. Because I'm curious to hear if you feel that the specific modalities of these various committees and other organs that you're just referring to have affected victims' experiences of participation in different ways.

Sanne: As part of the reparation process, there was also a collective memory rebuilding process. So, that is seen in Colombia as part of collective reparations. And I think between those two processes, the historical memory rebuilding process and the collective reparation process, there is an important distinction to be seen. So, I think in the historical memory process, people also participated in different forums. The state, also here, used different mechanisms, community meetings, the drawing timelines, etc. to rebuild historical memory. And people were really happy with that because there was a clear result in terms of historical memory booklets being produced, a documentary or sort of re-enacted film being produced. So, I think in that setting, the participatory mechanisms worked fairly well.

Tine: Do you have a sense of why that is?

Sanne: Perhaps in terms of memory building or truth-seeking, participation can be slightly easier because there's a clearer connection between what participation looks like and the results. So, you give your testimony, or you rebuild your memory and you see the result in a booklet, which is satisfactory, although obviously there's a lot of research also on the risks of participation in truth-telling and how this can be

retraumatizing. So it's not as simple as it sounds. It requires a holistic process, but I think the specific problem with participation in reparation mechanisms is that reparations are a very complicated transitional justice process. And especially if you talk about transformative reparations, as in the Colombian case, this requires the involvement of many different state institutions. And what happened in the Colombian case is that by creating steering committees that are supposed to in a way, promote the implementation of the reparation plan in very complicated institutional context that requires complex coordination between different state institutions at the local and national level. In a way, people were feeling that they were being given the responsibility to implement their own reparation plans. And I think that's a very adverse dynamic in which the survivors are given a responsibility that shouldn't be theirs, and also that they weren't trained for, because they weren't trained for citizenship skills, lobbying skills, how to navigate a complex institutional process. That's an important difference between how participation could work in different mechanisms. And I think in terms of participation in reparation processes there should be a clear limit to what participation is for and whose responsibility the actual implementation of reparation programs is. And it also has to do very much with power relationships and to what extent the participation of survivors is actually able to make impact, rather than just legitimizing a process that's in reality state-led. And I think this is something that is apparent in different processes in Colombia, where victims and survivors are asked to give their opinions or indicate their desires for - for example - also in terms of the territorial development plans. But the dynamic often ends up being that survivors are basically giving their wish list of all the things that they need for better lives. But then there is no real connection to what the state is actually able to deliver and in what time frame. So I think there's a real mismatch there that is easier to prevent maybe in a truth-telling or memory-building exercise.

Brigitte: We've been talking a lot about formal avenues for participation. How about informal initiatives. Were these in some way seen as a means to overcome some of the shortcomings and challenges of formal participatory processes? Or, was this less relevant in the domain of reparations?

Sanne: That's a really good question because of the dynamics of the formal participation mechanisms that were so time consuming and also little effective, so that people really lost the appetite for organising or mobilising and people literally said, "Well, I think I will just focus on my own life, my own project and my own farm because it's a waste of time to engage in other forms of organizing or mobilizing", whereas people used to have a much more a much stronger organisational tradition and history.

Brigitte: So this notion of participation in formal and informal avenues reinforcing each other was not really what you observed in the Colombian context?

Sanne: What is an interesting example perhaps, is how the Colombian truth Commission organized its participation. They worked together a lot with civil society

organisations, and civil society organisations in a way were a bridge between the formal state institution and the local more informal spaces. So, I think that could be a hybrid form of participation. I think that an important distinction to be made, which I have done in my research, is that informal spaces of participation are often popular spaces of participation, so the spaces that people themselves have created, for example, peasant and farmers associations that existed already before the reparation process. So I think that using those spaces also to engage people in a reparation process could be a much better way than creating so-called invited spaces where people are forced into a new form of participation that is new to them and unfamiliar, and which then makes them lose or at least weaken their popular spaces of participation. And a final comment, what the people in Chibolo did mention was the importance, still, of formal spaces, or at least formal transitional justice, in the sense that what is really important about the more formal process is the recognition by the state, because eventually it's the state's responsibility to redress the harm and transform the situation. Even though informal or non-formal spaces are very important and can have very important goal of rebuilding social fabric and recreating trust. I think for the people that I worked with, state-led processes were really important. That might differ very much according to the context and the form of victimization that people have suffered.

Tine: Sanne, a topic we've not really addressed yet is gender, but that it is a very important topic in your own research. And so I also wanted to invite you to maybe talk a bit more about how you feel gender or gender dynamics interact with the ways in which victims or people who have experienced violence experience participation, be that in formal or more hybrid avenues.

Sanne: My research takes place mostly in the Colombian countryside, where gender roles tend to be very traditional. And that means that most public participation in formal spaces, and also in the community is done by men. And this obviously also affects participation in transitional justice mechanisms. So this shows that really, when we talk about participation be it in research or in transitional justice mechanisms, real efforts should be made to involve women in an equally meaningful way as men. And in Colombia, what I observed is what a civil society interviewee of mine described as "*mujerismo*", which is like the sort of discursive practice of saying "and women should be able to or women should participate too." But this is a tendency that really stays at a discursive level and doesn't really go much deeper than that. So there's a focus on involving women in meetings, in participation spaces, but this goes not much beyond measuring their participation in numerical terms and not in the real impact they have. So it's not so much about changing power relations. And I think a really key aspect for that is organising women more effectively, because this can really serve as a way to channel participation in transitional justice, not just in terms of women's presence, but also really beyond that, right? How can you make sure that women are trained in organisational leadership and lobbying skills so that they can effectively participate in transitional justice and beyond?

Brigitte: So how did you tackle this in your own research, or in other words, how did that observation change your own methods?

Sanne: Participatory research is really a way of trying to overcome that obstacle by sharing the power between participants and researchers in the process. And it has a long history in Latin America, combining research also with activism and valuing grassroots knowledge. Also in my own research I saw how difficult it was to engage women and I used a photovoice process for that, that really made me discover that if you use different methods, you can really engage women in an effective way and collect a different type of story than the ones we are used to listen to in transitional justice. I ended up using these methods only with the women in Chibolo because of the dynamics I described in which most of the men were tired, like they experienced research fatigue with participatory methods, whereas the women did not. And so I used to a photo voice process with female IDPs within the communities. So, they used photographs to represent their daily lives, the thing they were proud of, and the obstacles to a better life, and this process allowed them to really document their own realities where they were experts on their own situation and their own experience, and this made it a lot easier for them to speak about their experiences as they had created the images. And I then interviewed them about the images and basically gave them the control over what they prefer to show and talk about, which also shifts the power in terms of what questions a researcher asks, because there might be a big gap between what I think is important and what they think is important for their lives. And this was for them, a really engaging process. And it really brought up some really I think, innovative ideas about what a reparation process could look like. And this sort of method wasn't used as much. I do see now that more and more, especially in Colombia, visual methods and creative methods are used a lot in research observing participation in processes, but also in general in truth and justice and reparation processes, and I see methods as diverse as stitching and embroidery, but also using drawings, making videos. So there are ways in which researchers are really trying to centre survivors in their research, which I think is a really good dynamic, although it also has different practical and ethical challenges.

Tine: Thanks a lot Sanne, and I think it works really nicely how you make that comparison between how our own participatory research methods interact with people's experiences of participation in those TJ processes, and in a way, I think it nicely closes the circle. So on that note, I think I'll just maybe throw in a last question that we ask of all our interviewees, or all the participants in this podcast, if you will, which is what you're observing in the research that you're doing on this topic of victim participation in TJ, that makes you hopeful.

Sanne: I think what makes me hopeful is that these last years there has been a lot of interest in the ethics and practice of field work in conflict and post-conflict settings. And I think it's really important that there is more thinking and writing about this because both in terms of the ethics of research and, in terms of the safety and well-being of participants, but also in terms of the challenges for researchers safety or

psychological impact. So there's been a lot of research about methods, but also about the actual how to do fieldwork and how things can go wrong. I think those are really important developments that are really evident the last maybe three to five years.

Tine: Thank you so much. And I think what you're describing also really very nicely feeds into our next episode, which will also be about lived experience of victims, but shifting the focus a little bit from what we've been talking about today, which is, you know, how do we approach this in terms of academic research and then more looking next month at what that actual experience has looked like in the Tunisian context, where we will be talking to participants, activists in that context. That's next month. But for now, Sanne, let me just thank you again for joining us. We will link to your book and to your [article with Mijke de Waardt](#) in the show notes. Thank you so much.

Sanne: Thanks so much for inviting me.