

Season 6, episode 1 (November 2024)

## Victim Leadership and Mobilization in Turkey and Tunisia

**Tine:** Welcome to this new season of the Justice Visions podcast. I am Tine Destrooper and with me as a co-host today is Brigitte Herremans. And we're happy to be back with a number of really interesting speakers this season. Which, because we received so many messages about the conversations we had during the recent Justice Visions Conference, is a season that will focus on issues and conversations that we started to address during that conference, conversations about the participation in, or the mobilization around, but also often the resistance of victims, survivors, protagonists in the context of transitional justice. We wanted to use the podcast to try and continue some of these conversations online and with broader audiences.

**Brigitte:** Yes, and we're very keen to start the season with an episode on leadership and mobilization, which of course lies at the heart of our own research. In the work we're doing, we're often really stunned by the determination of victims to fight injustices and also to counter the normalization of violence and to mobilize for change. And because this period is so terrible and pitch dark, we also wanted to show - along the words of [Hannah Arendt](#) - that even in the darkest of times, we have the right to expect some illumination. And of course, this often comes from ordinary people who fight against their erasure and also the dehumanization they are confronted with.

**Tine:** And that dehumanization of people in the current conflicts in Palestine and Lebanon is obviously one of the contexts that we are thinking about and why we feel it's so important that we have a conversation about this issue of mobilization and resistance, which is happening even in the face of large scale international crimes, where we see that victims are often the ones who are driving resistance, who are the protagonists in demanding change. And we already focused an [episode on this topic of ongoing mobilization for human rights and failing accountability in Palestine and Israel](#). We did that last November, just after Israel had launched its ground invasion in Gaza. And unfortunately, the topic continues to be highly relevant today.

**Brigitte:** Yes, and one of the main issues we underlined then was, of course, the misrepresentation of the nature of the conflict and of the crimes and the way in which Israel's violations of international law are just often ignored or

justified and how civil society actors also continue their fight for accountability. And of course, the victimization of Palestinians is unprecedented, we've never seen such large scale crimes. And what people need most in these contexts, of course, is the recognition of their rights and particularly of Israel's responsibility and of the international community's complicity in these crimes.

**Tine:** Yes. And what we highlighted in that episode is really this steadfast resistance against occupation, against violence, of Palestinians or what we've called *sumud*. And that topic of *sumud* is also very crucial to the conversation which we will be having today, which is about clichés of ideal victimhood, but also how there's often a focus on survivors' helplessness, which is really quite pervasive across many contexts. So, in this episode, we really wanted to focus on cases where victims, survivors, protagonists are not just actively mobilizing against injustices and for a change, but in doing so are also challenging those entrenched stereotypes of the helpless victim.

**Brigitte:** And that is why we wanted to focus on Tunisia, where the Truth and Dignity Commission was a key element of the transitional justice process, investigating past abuses and also giving survivors a platform to speak out and to demand accountability for the decades of state oppression. And we'll also focus on Turkey, where victim movements such as the Saturday Mothers have been mobilizing for decades to demand justice and accountability for enforced disappearances and other crimes committed by Turkish state forces and paramilitaries.

**Tine:** And we're excited to have Dr. Sélima Kebaili and Dr. Güneş Daşlı. Sélima, you are a senior lecturer at the University of Geneva, teaching on gender and postcolonial studies, doing research on development, gender, political violence, especially in the MENA region and Europe. And Güneş, you are a research fellow, who just recently started at Loughborough University focusing on post-conflicts and critical justice theories and, also very important for the topic we will be discussing today, feminism, moral philosophy and social movements. And a reason why we wanted to have the conversation today with the two of you, apart from the fact that you presented on the same panel and that it was a fantastic conversation, is also because you're really both working on this issue of women survivors in transitional justice, women survivors in contexts of conflict, sometimes ongoing violence also. And so, Güneş, as a starter to the conversation, why the focus on women and women's leadership in justice struggles is so central in your work?

**Güneş:** Thanks Tine for the nice introduction. First of all, the Saturday Mothers for my research have been driving the informal TJ landscapes by demanding legal accountability and doing memory and truth recovery works in

Turkey since 1995, so almost 30 years and under very dire conditions where the conflict is still ongoing. And the mothers and women and the movements are the leading actors in justice struggles, which strikes me as a feminist researcher in terms of understanding what is beyond their activism and collective mobilizations and what we learn from them in terms of redefining and imagining justice in a desperate political situation.

**Tine:** And Sélîma, could you also explain a bit about why the notion or why the focus on women is so central to you? When we talk about victims' leadership in driving change?

**Sélîma:** On the ground, in the Tunisian context, it was a central concept because it was used by both victim organizations and international actors. So though I don't use it myself as a central concept, I have tried to analyze who is considered a leader and who is not. So for instance, we could hear a lot about the victim leaders, a term that was used to identify the female victims who would have overcome their trauma and became active in promoting transitional justice and encouraging all the women to testify either within the Truth Commission or in other spaces. Many women chose, for instance, I would say more discrete or individual forms of reparation, and they express their own forms of agency by doing so. However, because they did so outside the frameworks of institutional justice and transitional justice, they might not be recognized as leaders.

**Brigitte:** Could you maybe elaborate a bit on that notion also of participation or leadership that you just touched upon in this very highly formal context?

**Sélîma:** In the Tunisian process, the inclusion of women, so either in decision making or as victims was addressed through various measures, such as the creation of a women only sub-commission within the Truth and Dignity Commission, and a very important campaign led by UN agencies, which really helped raise female victim participation to 23%. If we rely on the number of cases filed, then this figure of 23% is quite positive compared to other transitional justice experiences. But if we consider the number of women whose cases reached the specialized courts of justice or who obtained reparations, then the proportion drops significantly. So I believe it's important to define exactly what we expect from transitional justice before assessing its effectiveness. And if the idea was to give women more recognition and reparation, then we should ask women directly about these effects rather than relying on participation rates. I use the word agency, political agency in my work, and I was very interested with how agency was put into the words that the victim would use themselves. And I believe that we might distinguish between different forms of agency being put in a word like victim, etc. But I'm

not sure in the Tunisian context that would be very accurate, for instance. Because we spoke a lot about the term *shabeed*, martyr, in Arabic, for instance, and I am not quite sure where exactly do we put the agency in this word *shabeed*, which was a word that was used by both female victims and by male victims. So in my own research, I have been particularly interested in how transitional justice as an international framework influences the construction of the victims statutes, specifically in Tunisia, because this is the category that actually was used by the international actors, national actors, and it was the category that was the most visible in the Tunisian transitional justice law. So for that, women also had to adopt this label to be able to, let's say, to adopt the language of victimhood, to account for the perpetrators as well, to make people recognize, or the institutions recognize that there were not only survivors: Someone did harm to them and it needs to be taken into account and people and institutions need to be responsible. And for that, I think they chose the word victim. But that does not mean that they don't consider themselves as survivors when it comes to their own agency.

**Tine:** Güneş, when we're talking about how victims, protagonists, survivors navigate identities, labels and certain maybe implicit assumptions about agency that are contained within those labels, how does that speak to the work that you're doing and women actually tapping into those different identities and opportunities in different contexts?

**Güneş:** I use the relational perspective in understanding political agency without predefining them as victims or as survivors or relatives, whatever. We use all these words in media. There's no formal mechanism in Turkey, but we are hearing this kind of labels and identities. The Saturday Mothers is a bit different from other maternal movements because it consists of also men and husbands and brothers and sons. So it's not all women, but it's so obvious and quite recognized that mothers initiated this movement in 1995 and they are the leaders in the movement still. So, when you see the pictures of the Saturday Mothers, you see the mothers sitting in front of the demonstration and this is kind of one part of the ritual, they keep all these mothers in the front. And then you can see backwards, like you see the men and other people in the midst of people. And after noting that, I think, yes, definitely there's that dimension of motherhood. But I think as a feminist researcher, I was very careful about it because we sometimes like jump into the quick conclusion of these mothers strategically using the notion of motherhood to kind of distribute their activism or to ask for recognition from broader society. Indeed, I ask these questions to the relatives in the movements, mothers, daughters and from the other generations, and they also told me: there's this aspect, but they never benefitted from it because they are not like preferable good mothers, according to the authoritarian state government, actually. So in

reverse, the governments always stigmatized them, like are they are bad mothers. They are just going outside crashing with police. It's not fitting to the stereotypes in Turkey. So, I'm not sure if they really benefit from this motherhood. But at the same time, of course, they use the language of emotions. I think in this aspect it definitely touches people more and this helps them to at least distribute their demands to broader audiences.

**Tine:** It's interesting how your describing this contestation of their identities as mothers. I did want to follow up with a question about whether if there are other ways in which you see these women tapping into, or refusing to tap into certain gendered identities or especially into the expectations that come with that?

**Güneş:** What was more striking, than just using motherhood or not, is that they're doing politics in different ways, which I called a feminist way of doing politics because actually they really choose some alternative language of doing politics, using very smooth language, caring for each other: They become caregivers to each other like a family, but they don't have any blood kinship. There are really very nonhierarchical organizations which they create. They decide everything together. They convince each other. And I think the relational aspect really helps me to see this kind of undervalued femininity in the politics we see. And of course, this also shaped their justice understanding, which is very inclusive. It's not only about them now, it's about the whole victims and it's about the democracy for Turkey. I think it's already like relationally developing in their justice imaginations as well.

**Brigitte:** It's nice to hear you touch on the idea of the justice imagination, which we very much appreciate. While you were talking, of course, you already fleshed out that idea of relational agency quite thoroughly, but maybe you could further reflect a little bit on how crucial this concept also is in understanding women's leadership in these grassroots justice struggles.

**Güneş:** I always keep my foci on enforced disappearances. It's very unique, very multilayered harm that women, survivors, victims experience. It creates lots of emotional burdens, violations, continuing grief, and as we call it, ambiguous loss. And from this perspective, I think this relational agency brings some extra, alternative views on how they cope with this kind of isolations in their collective movements, because this allowed them like ... For example, when they gather at Galatasaray square in Istanbul, this the place that every Saturday they get together and just read one story of the disappeared and then sit in silence. And I interpret this as kind of performative act to get together there and they kind of create their own political family which is bounded by solidarity, care and friendships, which I call relational values. And I think this

really helps them to increase their sense of togetherness and this empowers them, which I think might foreground the women's leadership actually. What I see is that this a relational aspect really makes clear for me how they're related to each other, but also to broader networks, with women rights organizations with politicians and interact in which many international actors they meet the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo from Argentina. So, I think they always keep this kind of relational focus in their relationships, and it's continuing in a very dynamic way.

**Tine:** This is also interesting, Sélima, in the context of the work that you have been doing, this notion of the creation of new spaces, right. And whether you call it political agency or relational agency, I'm curious to hear you talk a bit more about the establishment of different complementary or alternative spaces for seeking justice and accountability that are operating alongside the Truth and Dignity Commission.

**Sélima:** So in the Tunisian context, it was a very highly political process, it was politically instrumentalized, but it was also politically meaningful for many of the victims that participated and that wanted these identities to be recognized. In my research, more specifically, I show that at first female victims movements were actually highly political and driven by feminist projects, sometimes these projects conflicted. For example, secular feminists focused on gender-based violence, while others with Islamic backgrounds, let's say, wanted to highlight the repression they faced for wearing the veil, which was banned under the dictatorship in Tunis. So over time, these political identities faded within the larger transitional justice project, which considers women as a single group with supposedly common interests because of their gender. So my question was, how exactly can we speak about political agency when we need this kind of homogeneous structure of a sub-commission that is made for women as a whole. But even though women played an active role in transitional justice, we should ask really what they had to give up to be heard and to be included. And this idea, I believe, is very well reflected with the category of indirect victims that was used to describe the majority of the 23% female victims who filed their cases to the Truth Commission. So it was used to address the impact of the repression of men's opposition to the regime's political violence on mothers, daughters, sisters and wives. It was supposed to provide a form of recognition for women who, while not considered political opponents themselves, nevertheless suffered a variety of supposedly indirect effects of political violence. So that doesn't mean that just because you're included in the process and you recognize other victim that you can keep, let's say, intact, your own agency. So I believe in that sense, the notion of indirect victimhood is interesting because of the term *indirect*, which kind of creates a difference in the recognition when men are seen as direct victims that would

have suffered for their political actions, while indirect victims, mostly women, are shown in the background of male activism. And this label was used to identify most of the female victim in the Tunisian context.

**Tine:** We're nearing the end of the conversation. And Güneş, I certainly still wanted to ask you about one thing I've been thinking about throughout, which is the fact that in a lot of the critical transitional justice scholarship, there is a critique of TJ's strong focus on civil and political rights, for example, on issues of enforced disappearance. And when I hear you speak, of course, that notion of enforced disappearance is central for Saturday Mothers. But there seems to be this dynamic of broadening our own thinking about how we understand civil and political rights violations. You're talking in your work about the ongoingness of experiences, of loneliness. You're talking about ambiguous loss, about other forms of lived harm. And so I was curious to hear you talk a bit more about what you feel this work of the Saturday Mothers is telling us about how we could understand justice for civil and political rights violations in a different way.

**Güneş:** For sure for many victims, and this is also the case in Turkey, securing civil and political rights is a crucial step, definitely in recognizing state responsibility for past injustice. But at the same time, I think what I see they are very aware of it's not enough because it risks sidelining the broader social, economic, cultural issues and problems that are often deeply intertwined with conflicts and authoritarian regimes. This is the case also for the Kurdish conflict. So when it comes to the crime of enforced disappearance, yes, it causes many gendered forms of harm. And when I was doing the interviews, they were talking about, for example, the economical harm. Because many women lost their breadwinners in their houses, they lost their husbands or fathers and they suffered in poverty after years, even continuing. So it's not the one time harm that happened in the past. But this also creates cultural harms, for example for a Kurdish women in rural areas: they speak only Kurdish, not Turkish. So when they had to migrate to the Turkish cities, they had many issues in public institutions due to the lack of language. But it also created lots of problems in daily life, right? It's very multilayered harms. As you highlighted, it increased as loneliness and personal and social isolations and psychological burdens. But when it comes to collective mobilizations, I clearly found that it has a kind of healing impact for them because they create a safe space for them. So they feel the ownership that in this space they have the control and they are together because the ham of enforced disappearances really destroyed their family and sense of community. And then what they do is they re-create this togetherness, the sense of community, again, with collective mobilization and with this movement, I think this really helps them to reimagine and to redefine justice again, because they lost their justice hope.

When I was interviewing relatives, they were saying that every time I lost my hope, I go back to collective mobilization and my family, the big family in the movement, helped me again to bring hope again. And then I continue to struggle. Some of them use victim as an identity, but they always tell me: I'm not only victim. Yes, being relative of a disappeared is the inception of my political identity, but now I am a human rights defender, now I'm also political actor, now I'm also a lawyer. They always add multiple identities. Which also really create a resilience for them to continue their daily lives, normal lives, but also to demand justice for 30 years. It's really a long time to be motivated in their justice activism in Turkey.

**Brigitte:** Thank you. Güneş. You took us smoothly to our last question, the one that we really love wrapping up our conversations with, namely the one about hope and inspiration. And I would like to ask Sélima first: in the research that you are doing where you have observed this hope or where do you draw inspiration from?

**Sélima:** I like this question very much. I would say that's something that gave me hope and continues also to inspire me, despite everything, all the managerial language, all the institutional language of justice, women have always found ways to express their individual and collective identities, even when they were somehow, forced to adopt the language and norms of transitional justice processes, which tends to homogenize women, they still found ways to speak about what was deeply personal to them, to find ways to speak about sometimes their parents that they want to give some homage to. And beyond hope, which I view more as a political discipline than a mere feeling, my conversations with the women I met revealed that rebuilding identities after extreme violence is a very delicate and fragile process. It doesn't always require a grand gesture, as we may think, and often it unfolds through more modest everyday forms of reparation, like returning to work, reconnecting with others, and restoring a social life. So in essence, I would say that what inspired me the most, it's about how you can find also healing through ordinary forms of life.

**Brigitte:** Thank you so much. Güneş, would you like to finish on what gives you hope?

**Güneş:** I was thinking when I was listening to Sélima, I totally agree with her because it's really like very challenging, like in this authoritarian context and conflict context, to keep hope, particularly for justice. But it's also like the politics, for example, like there wasn't any hope in Turkey for any prospects for a peace process or post-conflict process. But this week, recently the government, a very ultranationalist and conservative government, said that



they're going to re-initiate the negotiation with the jailed leader of the PKK. It comes out of the blue and now all the discussions start, and it looks like this is a serious negotiation that is ongoing between the PKK and the government. So what gives me hope, maybe as a practitioner, also as a feminist activist, and during this time, I think they use really very creative methods, which are really great actually. The Saturday Mothers, for example, when there is a demonstration ban, police attacks and other things, they find new like modes of actions to navigate all these obstacles and use their multiple identities very strategically actually. So when they go to the European Parliament, they cite themselves as victim. But in other contexts, human rights defenders, in other contexts, women, mothers and not prioritizing anything but more in harmony and using and be more peaceful with all these identities, but not reducing themselves to one identity. I think this kind of very powerful approach and actions really give hope to us to imagine the justice and continue to work for justice.

**Tine:** Thank you so much, both. I think there is so much of what you just said, that we're also observing across a wide range of contexts. So I'm sure that it will speak to a lot of our listeners. And as we're wrapping up the episode, I'm very aware that we've only been able to touch upon a few of the topics of your work, so we'll definitely make sure to link to your further work in the show notes on JusticeVisions.org. And we will be back next month with a new episode. Thank you both so much.

**Güneş:** Thank you.

**Sélima:** Thank you.