Women Now
For Development
النساء الآن للتنمية

Women Safe Spaces
as Facilitators for Justice Visions in the Syrian Context

Research paper based on a participatory project designed and implemented in 2021-2022
by Women Now for Development in partnership with Impunity Watch

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Acknowledgments

We are deeply indebted to all project participants, who helped shape our understanding of women's experiences of conflict and human rights violations in Syria. Their perspectives, expertise, and theories have enriched feminist knowledge production and expanded our vision of gender transformative justice in Syria and of what constitutes healing, care, accountability, and a positive peace. We dedicate this research study to them and to all the women inside and outside Syria who are alleviating the suffering brought by war through life-affirming initiatives. Despite the challenges, they are contributing to the struggle against systemic oppression and leading the way in developing inclusive mechanisms that can deliver peace, justice, and freedom to their communities and generations to come.

About Women Now for Development

Women Now for Development (WN) is a feminist, women-led organisation dedicated to deepening and strengthening women's role in ensuring a democratic future for Syria. Established in June 2012 by the renowned Syrian author and journalist Samar Yazbek, it is now the largest women's organisation in Syria, reaching thousands of women and girls annually inside Syria and in neighbouring countries. It offers integrated programmes encompassing protection, empowerment, feminist consciousness-raising and leadership. WN also works on feminist research and knowledge production, as well as advocacy and campaigning at the local and international levels. The organisation's research and advocacy are primarily focused on:

1. Documentation and collection of women's experiences and testimonials
2. In-depth qualitative and quantitative research and analysis
3. Local and international awareness-raising campaigns about women-led activist movements, feminist civil society initiatives, gender-based violence and women's living conditions in Syria.

Executive Summary

This paper aims to study justice from the perspective of a select group of Syrian women. It aspires to (re)define 'safe spaces' and explore whether Women Safe Spaces (WSS) can be viewed as venues that give rise to different perspectives on justice and facilitate transformative effects.

Feminist-facilitated WSS can provide participants with a modicum of protection, helping them connect with other women with similar experiences and share anecdotes, express opinions, challenge one another, and receive and provide support more readily. The safe space allowed project participants to transform their thoughts and consciousness and helped cultivate dialogues that developed into critical discourses on human rights violations endured in Syria and women's experiences of the conflict. This culminated in different understandings of what healing, restoration, and the changes required entail, ultimately helping participants better understand what constitutes justice(s) and deliberate over potential mechanisms for achieving it. Participants reiterated that justice could only be achieved by challenging social norms and traditions that contribute to gender inequalities. Changing discriminatory norms and traditions demands the provision of spaces that allows relevant conversations to take place, and where conversations are grounded in day-to-day occurrences, including everyday violence. Some participants interpreted justice as a holistic and multidimensional process that includes political accountability, social justice, and women's equal participation in politics, the economy and decision-making in general.

In this sense, the provision of safe spaces is a crucial requisite for developing and constructing justice mechanisms, as these venues support marginalised and silenced communities in carrying out the preparatory work needed – connecting, confiding, building solidarities, and collectively strategizing. Project participants emphasised that when designed through a participatory, inclusive, and gender transformative framework, WSS can support women's access to justice by:

- Providing a modicum of protection from the male gaze and patriarchal norms, as well as aggression from members of other dominant groups, whose presence often hinders Syrian women's freedom of expression.
- Providing a platform for Syrian women to express themselves freely – a necessary prerequisite for developing sophisticated dialogue that encompasses personal trauma, violence, and justice, as well as ways to achieve it.
- Helping dismantle stereotypes and misconceptions about the self, thereby ultimately strengthening women's resistance and supporting them in reclaiming, redefining, and reassessing who they are.
- Helping participants understand violence from a historical and systemic perspective rather than a compartmentalised one.

Participants' opinions on how policymakers, donors, and other stakeholders can support their access to justice:

1. Provide women with the support needed to organise locally driven and longer-term campaigns that advocate for their visions of justice.
2. Provide supportive environment and safe channels where women can share their needs and demands with other stakeholders.
3. Integrate gender-sensitive approaches and include women and minorities in all spaces tied to questions of justice (conferences, workshops, organisations, judicial proceedings, etc.).
4. Support locally-driven justice processes and mechanisms that suit the needs and aspirations of Syrian women and their context(s).
5. Consolidate participatory programmes dedicated to feminist consciousness-raising, justice, human rights, and gender-based discrimination. Ensure that these programmes are inclusive and reach a broad segment of society, particularly disadvantaged women residing in refugee/IDP camps.
6. Provide women-led initiatives with financial and technical support, including empowerment and awareness-raising.
7. Support women's political empowerment and political education through advocacy efforts and initiatives.
8. Empower women economically and support their access to the labour market.
9. Support the direct meaningful participation of women in judicial proceedings instead of merely their indirect representation.
10. Support women's access and meaningful participation in decision-making and political processes.

Researching Women Safe Spaces and Justice Processes

2

2.1 Introduction

Despite individual and collective efforts to document the widespread human rights violations and international crimes that have been committed in Syria since March 2011, attempts to bring about accountability and justice have faced numerous and complex challenges. Among the limitations frequently cited by Syrians, particularly marginalised women, are the lack of meaningful participation in justice processes and the discrepancy between their perceptions of justice and the international justice initiatives taking place (Ali, 2019).

With years of experience working with Syrian women at the grassroots level, Women Now for Development (WN) is focused on exploring the nuances of transformative justice approaches. This is a broad framework that views systemic oppression as the root cause of harm and aims to tackle its different forms and manifestations, which it considers an essential component of accountability and healing (The New York State Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2021). While the term 'transformative justice' is being increasingly used in feminist justice discourses pertaining to Syria, there has yet to be an in-depth exploration of what mechanisms and efforts can contribute to addressing the conditions that produce violence and harm. Transformative justice mechanisms have been defined as grassroots and community-led (Gready et al, 2010), but further research should focus on what these mechanisms entail and how they contribute to achieving justice for populations that have experienced mass human rights violations.

This paper explores the perspectives of the women who took part in a virtual WSS project designed and implemented by WN in partnership with Impunity Watch (IW) in 2021. Adopting feminist theories and methodologies including in-depth interviews and participant observation in a virtual WSS, it will examine what WSS mean to participants, if and how these spaces help facilitate different visions of justice, and how policymakers can further support such visions.

2.2 Positionality

WN's establishment was inspired by the 2011 peaceful Syrian uprising, which led to the flourishing of a wide array of unprecedented civic activism. As a locally embedded feminist organisation, WN works with Syrian women and adolescent girls striving to fight back against systemic oppression through the provision of holistic, community-driven, feminist programmes. Many of WN's team members are survivors of human rights violations and international crimes, including arbitrary detention, torture, forced displacement, and chemical weapon attacks, among others. At the same time, many are human rights and justice advocates for themselves and their broader communities. In this respect, WN strongly believes that people subjected to crimes and human rights violations are very often the most important and authentic sources of knowledge. Therefore, WN emphasises the need to develop alternative methods and strategies for knowledge production to help strengthen the meaningful participation of Syrian women in the pursuit of justice.

2.3 Women Safe Spaces: International Development Practice vs. Grassroots Movements

In the context of international development practice, WSS refers to social safety nets that work to mitigate women's exposure to violence and abuse and to prevent and respond to violence experienced by women in humanitarian settings (United Nations Sexual and Reproductive Health Agency, 2015). With the term now commonly used by international aid organisations, these social safety nets are often understood as shelters that provide emergency and essential assistance or services that enhance women's social, economic, and mental well-being (Stark et al., 2021). However, WSS, as both a concept and practice, preceded the definition established by international organisations, as explorations and interpretations of women-only safe spaces can be found in various grassroots feminist movements.

In the 1970s, feminist movements in the United States utilised women-only spaces to congregate separately and co-create new understandings of womanhood through consciousness-raising and collective healing (Gökarıksel et al., 2021). For many Black feminist advocates specifically, safe spaces constituted a necessary medium for resistance and were not merely seen as safe, but also as arenas that served as "prime locations for resisting Objectification as the Other" (Collins, 2008, p. 111). Safe spaces have provided Black women with opportunities to resist and dismantle "controlling" (or stereotyping) images of Black womanhood and explore the overlapping oppression experienced on the basis of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation, among other factors. Such stereotyping

is produced not only by the dominant ideology but also by Black-American institutions (Collins, 2008). These spaces may not be formally and/or explicitly designated 'Women Safe Spaces', often taking different forms, including extended family networks, churches, and community organisations (Collins, 2008). They serve as places where women work collectively to transform negative lived experiences into political language and action (Lorde, 1984).

Conversely, organisations operating in humanitarian settings commonly depoliticise WSS, thus rendering them abstract and effectively drifting away from feminists' radical and context-driven understandings of safe spaces. Most humanitarian organisations, for instance, tend to emphasise a top-down protection component to safe spaces, which contrasts with the feminist empowerment perspective and the transformative purpose of safe spaces that had first been posited by grassroots activists (International Rescue Committee, 2020).

Feminist scholars from different disciplines have written about the multifaceted forms of violence experienced by women in both public and private spheres, as well as the role that safe spaces can potentially play in enhancing women's political and civic participation. The day-to-day violence that women are exposed to, including at home, in work settings, in public spaces more broadly, and in online spaces, often shapes how they engage and interact with others in these arenas (Lewis et al, 2015). Such experiences of multiple forms of violence, including harassment, assault, silencing, and objectification are consequential in shaping the lived experiences of women and girls and in creating a state of consciousness for women in which they are overly vigilant (Condon et al., 2007). Violence and discrimination against women and girls may result from interpersonal encounters, but they can also arise from institutionalised practices and social norms that favour men and boys (Deller, 2019). In the research paper 'Safe Spaces: Experiences of Feminist Women-Only Space', women participants described the function of safe spaces as providing "safety from" certain behaviours and verbal interactions, which in turn enables them to feel "safe to" interact with one another more readily, and "engage, debate and interact – aspects which are considered fundamental to full civic engagement" (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 5).

In conclusion, safe spaces can provide women with temporary safety from misogyny, including different forms of violence and harassment, verbal and written abuse, antagonistic views on feminist politics, as well as subtle forms of aggression that also restrict women's speech and behaviour (Lewis et al., 2015). Consequently, when designed on principles of feminist inclusivity, compassion, and reflexivity, these spaces have allowed participants to feel safe to "be themselves" (Lewis et al., 2015). This entails more freedom to express their emotions, build connections and solidarities, explore power relations, as well as learn and grow intellectually (Thompson, 2017), all of which are critical components for the meaningful participation of women in civic and political life.

2.4 Women Now for Development and Safe Spaces

WN's own utilisation of WSS began in the context of an emergency – heightened conflict and the collapse of state services. Prior to 2011, Syrian women faced overlapping forms of political, social, economic, and psychological oppression, among others, which have been exacerbated by the experience of war and intensified militarisation (Universal Periodic Review of the Syrian Arab Republic, 2016). Due to Syrian women's increased marginalisation as a result of the conflict and the lack of support and protection services, WN, in collaboration with local councils and women communities on the ground, began establishing WSS to help bridge the capacities of some of the most disadvantaged Syrian women inside Syria, as well in the Beqaa region of Lebanon, and to a more limited extent, in Turkey. It has also co-created and developed various mechanisms in accordance with the changing and challenging political, economic, and social contexts inside and outside of Syria.

The WSS mechanism was developed year-by-year as a means for holding collective discussions in a relatively safe environment, at first in WN's centres and eventually through online platforms. WN's experiences have shown that participation in WSS are certainly not always free of violence and trauma. The organisation's centres have been under the constant threat of Syrian and Russian aerial bombardment and attempts by armed groups in control of different areas to shut them down. At times, operating a civil society initiative committed to social change (such as a WSS) or engaging with one turns the person doing so into a target rather than serves as a safe haven. In addition to physical threats, psychological discomfort and violence resulted from insensitive approaches, a lack of awareness on particular issues and/or identities, prejudices, and manifestations of different power dynamics between facilitators and participants, as well as among participants themselves. Instead of claiming that WSS are ready-made safe environments, WN conceptualises them as ongoing processes of creating arenas removed from the male gaze and certain social and political power relations, as well as places where facilitators and participants work collaboratively to challenge patriarchal and other hegemonic norms, including internalised ones. Lubna Al-Kanawati and Rabab[1], two veteran members of WN, who led the establishment of safe spaces in Eastern Ghouta and Northwest Syria, respectively, explain why safe spaces were established and the paradoxical safety that they provided:

1 Name has been changed for security reasons.

"The collapse of services and daily encounters with death, which was beginning to spread, brought about an urge to live and a need to feel that you're doing something, not just waiting to die. This was perhaps the most significant reason for creating a place that you feel connected to, in which you feel safe and alive, because death was all around you. [...] Even though the activities were very basic, so many women would come to spend time with others. Sure, they wanted to learn, but most importantly, they wanted to talk to one another, learn about what was happening to others, and feel that they belong somewhere."

(Lubna Al-Kanawati, Deputy Director, WN)

"The idea of safe spaces or centres on the ground is that they really were places where girls and women could convene and feel a sense of privacy, given that these spaces belonged to them and no men were present. This was a space where they could think as they please and do what they like. I can even say that it was a space that made them feel safe despite the conditions that we were living under back in Maarat Al-Numan. When there would be sessions on awareness or another activity, they would come despite the shelling. For them, it was an escape from the reality that we were living in."

(Rabab, Centre Manager in Northwest Syria)

Structural and institutionalised inequalities that entail discrimination against Syrian women, which have worsened as a result of the conflict, have led to stereotyping and limited representations of Syrian women in both local and international contexts. Women are often viewed as powerless victims in need of protection. These problematic representations have stripped many Syrian women of their agency and denied them the complexity of identity and recognition for the multiple roles they have played as political activists, human rights defenders, professionals, community-builders, first-responders, and heads of households, among others. This controlled image-making has severely limited the ability of women, particularly the more vulnerable among them, to meaningfully design and construct the political and justice-related processes that affect them and their broader communities. Syrian women, and especially those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds and remote areas, are not often deemed by policymakers as political agents and knowledge producers. As a result, their experiences, opinions, and theories are deprioritised in the discussions around the development of political solutions and justice mechanisms. Consequently, these mechanisms are designed for them rather than positioning Syrian women as the visionaries, creators, and owners of the processes relevant to the future of their country.

In light of the above and contrary to the limited understanding of WSS adopted by most international organisations (and some local ones) and policymakers, WN considers these arenas as political spaces for identifying and cultivating common ground among diverse groups of women, building resistance, and enhancing movement-building processes. When designed with a feminist framework and code of conduct, these spaces offer women the opportunity to convene, share experiences, build solidarities, and explore ways of addressing the different risks and forms of violence they face. Mitigating fear of judgement and harm, they serve as sites that can significantly help women break their silence, challenge unjust power dynamics, and politically strategize, as well as collectively dismantle the hegemonic representations that have been imposed on them.

"We were part of the broader context, interacting with all that was happening around us, present in life and contributing to it. From the moment the participants leave their house, then go to the centre, and finally get back home, they interact with what is happening around them. Even if a participant is there for an Arabic literacy session, she cannot but experience the shelling, face restrictions and repression from authorities, and experience the dire difficulties of life, the lack of services, and restrictions on movement, among other factors. And then women would talk to each other about these experiences and struggles, and these discussions are, at the end of the day, both feminist and political."

(Lubna Al-Kanawati, Deputy Director, WN)

Beyond the hardships and severe restrictions imposed by extremist armed groups on the ground, WN also faced challenges stemming from social taboos around discussing topics such as bodily rights, sexual and reproductive health, adolescence, and the rights of adolescent girls, to name a few. Besides these societal issues, obstacles such as forced displacement were an additional challenge, as the teams in Idlib were forcibly displaced to other parts of Northwest Syria and struggled to convince the local community to accept WSS similar to those that had originally been set up elsewhere. Thus, an ongoing process of engagement between facilitators and participants, among participants themselves, and among participants, facilitators, and the broader community, was needed. Lastly, difficulties around the meaningful inclusion and integration of women and girls from hard-to-reach segments of the population, such as certain age groups and persons with disabilities, also arose.

"After being forcibly displaced, we relocated to a completely different area with a very different social environment. We faced challenges garnering societal acceptance, given that we were a WSS and an organisation whose members consist mostly of displaced people from elsewhere in the country. Being accepted in a new area was a big challenge. Moreover, we moved at a time when the conflict was escalating. This led to a lack of stability. So, we faced a form of discrimination. For my part, I feel that we have not been able to properly reach women and girls with disabilities. Although some do come to the centres for vocational training, we have yet to find the right mechanism for properly including them."

(Huda[2] , Centre Manager in Northwest Syria)

Despite these enormous challenges, WSS have fostered the development of local narratives on violence. More concretely, participants linked the violations they experienced to deeper root causes, which informs their perspectives on justice, as well as personal and societal change. Such narratives could develop in part because of the dialogical nature of the conversations that took place in WSS. This involves listening to other participants' points of view, embracing/ welcoming different viewpoints, and exploring an idea in connection to other ones. This approach stands in contrast to the dialectical thinking utilised in debates and courtrooms, which involves pitting ideas against each other in order to test the strengths and weaknesses of each argument (Dafermos, 2018). This is not to say that heated debates, arguments, and conflicts did not take place within WN's spaces. Rather, it is intended to highlight that the materialisation of new, counter-hegemonic narratives is owed to the learned ability to listen carefully, consider the effects of experiences and positionality on an individual's thought processes, and be willing to hear the multitude of perspectives and voices on the matter. Ultimately, it also demands reconciling, rejecting, and synthesising in the pursuit of intellectual progress. In this respect, WN has come to understand the importance of safe spaces as places where women, especially the more marginalised among them, can develop, share, and foreground their own perspectives, a lacuna in many justice initiatives.

2 Name has been changed for security reasons.

2.5 Scope of Project

For this programme, WN organised a virtual Women Safe Space for 22 Syrian women residing in marginalised areas, including Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey. The various human rights violations experienced by these women were considered key criteria for selecting participants. Many of the women selected had fled to Turkey or Lebanon – where they reside in informal tented settlements – or were forcibly displaced inside Syria. Moreover, some were former detainees and survivors of various forms of gender-based violence. The project aimed to support Syrian women survivors of conflict-related violations, particularly those who have endured structural violence, such as the gendered impacts of forced displacement, as well as social and economic deprivation, to engage in discussion, organise, develop their skills, and help realize their potential. It also aspired to assist survivor groups and networks in pursuing advocacy efforts crucial for a more comprehensive and feminist understanding of justice in the Syrian context.

Since its inception, the project has aimed to consolidate discussions around political and socio-economic rights, diverging from the often compartmentalised 'training workshops' that deal with matters such as 'human rights' and 'gender-based violence' in an abstracted and depoliticised manner. It did so by providing space for discussion through collaborative feminist-facilitated learning sessions and discussions over nine months. These sessions incorporated a wide array of topics and opportunities for networking, as well as disseminating participants' experiences. The project also provided Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), art sessions, and technical and financial support (through micro-grants) for some participants with community-based initiatives.

2.6 Methodology

Two methods were used for the data-collection of this study: in-depth interviews and participant observation. Twenty-two women participated in this project, which went on for nine months. Most of them were committed to all the activities. Fifteen participants accepted to be interviewed. Their ages range from 25 to 41 years of age. Four of them are based in Lebanon, eight are based in Turkey, and three reside in Syria. The participants work in a range of fields, including journalism, political and economic research, political activism, project management, protection, and communications (with humanitarian organisations). All of the participants' names have been changed for security reasons. The researcher responsible for this paper, Ruby H.N, participated in the different sessions to build rapport with the participants, better understand the nature of the learning sessions, gauge women's interactions with one another, and note the themes that emerged from the discussions.

The data-analysis was grounded in a qualitative approach focused on analysing the themes and concepts that emerged during the data-collection.

Moreover, in order to inform the empirical findings of this study, the researcher conducted a literature review on feminist methods and theories about safe spaces, as well as critiques of criminal accountability. Building on this feminist literature, the study draws on a gender transformative conceptual framework and our own empirical findings. In the last stage of the first draft of this paper, the researcher developed recommendations for policymakers and other stakeholders on how to support women's access to justice based on women's perspectives. The second researcher, Mona Zeineddine, reviewed the paper and supplemented it with her knowledge of transformative justice and WSS from a feminist perspective.

What is a Safe Space for Participating Women?

3

Before examining how WSS can potentially serve as mediums for facilitating perspectives on justice, it is important to understand how participants view and define safe spaces. One prevalent definition is that safe spaces are places where rights are claimed and protected and concepts concerning rights are discussed and explored:

"A safe space is where I can learn more about women and their rights. It's also the space that allows me to build strength and feel that I might be able to take back my rights, as well as other women's rights."

(Mais, a participant based in Lebanon)

"A safe space is one that protects your rights. As a person who has lived in Syria and Lebanon, I can say there were no safe spaces. I never had an experience in which I felt there was a safe space."

(Hasna, a participant based in Lebanon)

For some participants, a safe space does not only enable intellectual and cognitive development but also allows for personal growth and building bridges between women from different backgrounds:

"A safe space is a place for disclosure, meaning communication, really. It's where you have relationships with those outside of your community. I met young women from all backgrounds and different religions within safe spaces."

(Mariam, a participant based in Syria)

Given that the vast majority of participants reside in Syria and neighbouring countries, some holding refugee status and others displaced persons, they regularly experience wide ranging forms of violence from governing authorities, as well as from individuals both inside and outside of their local communities. The presence of such violence and the ensuing feelings of fear and discomfort hinder participants' ability to meet women from different areas or social backgrounds. It also means they feel less safe openly discussing personal histories, including traumas, and other sensitive topics, such as their political convictions.

"There are many battered women in crisis, suffering from problems related to their mental and physical health. I felt that they spoke with a lot of comfort. I noticed that most women were waiting for the sessions so they could open up and speak out about what they were feeling and experiencing. These are things you otherwise can't really share with just anyone. This is when you realise that this is a safe space indeed."

(Enas, a participant based in Turkey)

Many reiterated the lack of venues that provide the necessary modicum of protection to share such views. Participation in a safe space 'broke a barrier' for some participants:

"We are in the North of Syria, and there are young women in areas under the regime's control, while others live in areas under the control of armed groups, so there's a kind of diversity. [...] One session after the other, we started to say things we had resolutely kept secret, things we had never had the space to talk about. After the first day, I felt the barrier breaking, and we started to share more private things as the sessions progressed. This shows how much we need a safe space to speak. We have many things inside of us that we can't express."

(Roula, a participant based in Turkey)

The concept of 'breaking the barrier' is often invoked in the Syrian context, most notably when citizens discuss the first time they took part in mass protests when the uprising began in March 2011. The barrier, here, refers to the 'barrier of silence' that had prevailed for many decades under the Syrian regime's authoritarian rule and was finally broken for some with the start of the uprising. However, violence and authoritarianism persisted and were amplified in many ways, manifesting themselves in various forms. As such, Syrian women, among other marginalised groups, face oppressive forms of silencing that dominate their public and private lives. Consequently, 'breaking barriers' is not a linear process or a one-off experience, but rather a series of continued, sporadic occurrences that exist on a spectrum, encompassing both monumental threats and the smaller micro-risks.

Furthermore, participants recognised safe spaces as diverse spaces offering opportunities to meet others from outside of their usual social networks. However, they viewed them as places for disclosure, thereby requiring the development mutual understanding and trust. Some stressed that a safe space is free from the judgement of others and is predicated on a commitment to privacy, ensuring participants that breaking the barrier is a trust-based action contingent on confidentiality:

"I consider a space to be safe when I can say whatever I want with no fear or hesitation – where I can share everything that I can think of, feel, or believe, any of my political leanings or anything I want to say with no fear or pressure. This to me is a safe space. There's a sense of privacy. I mean, nobody is going to leak what has been said here."

(Randa, a participant based in Lebanon)

A safe space can serve to protect participants from the kinds of overt violence that provoke fear and intimidate marginalised communities. This includes racist, misogynistic, and homophobic acts, among others, but also more covert, subtle judgment and micro aggressions from members of dominant groups and outsiders. Safe spaces allow participants to speak without hesitation more readily, engage in dialogue without deliberating how members of dominant groups will react to what they say, and express opinions about members of dominant groups without having to justify or apologise for them. Moreover, they are spaces that are often conceived as having a set of rules and regulations to guide interactions, bearing in mind that power dynamics exist among participants and that words must be deliberately chosen so as not to cause harm or offend other participants.

"For me, a safe space is where you can express yourself and your opinions and beliefs without being hurt with words or face prejudice."

(Randa, a participant based in Lebanon)

Moreover, participants defined a safe place as one where mutual support is given on personal and professional matters and a place to express solidarity, collectively discuss, and share solutions. Beyond disclosure, given that the participants were sometimes subjected to similar violations, they used this opportunity as a means to exchange experiences of pain and harm, and to then provide support for and express solidarity with one another. They also offered each other personal advice, made referrals to service providers within certain localities, and collectively strategized new paths forward:

"I worked in a few safe spaces for women, and they were very important. As you know, our society does not provide a safe space for women, and women need safe spaces to discuss their problems in detail and come up with solutions."

(Lama, a participant based in Turkey)

"As I mentioned recently, I shared my personal experiences, and many young women also shared theirs. After every [community] initiative that I set up, many things would happen to me, including bullying campaigns that targeted me. I see this space as somewhere I can disclose everything and receive a lot of positivity. We would talk to each other about whatever is happening in our lives."

(Roula, a participant based in Turkey)

A Feminist Critique of Criminal Accountability

This section aims to put forward a general feminist critique of criminal accountability before delving into women participants' perspectives on justice. This overview is presented to better assess the shortcomings of the primary focus of justice and accountability efforts in Syria. The critique, when combined with the views of the participants on justice, will help pave the way to a more comprehensive understanding of the gaps that need to be addressed for future considerations of justice mechanisms pertaining to Syria.

Local Syrian and international entities that formally designate their work as justice and accountability efforts pertaining to Syria have largely focused on documentation, investigation, and litigation initiatives. This includes collecting evidence of the crimes that have been committed and building judicial case files for criminal investigations, with the common goal holding individual perpetrators accountable. Due to the challenging political climate that has prevented the creation of an international criminal tribunal for Syria or the referral of the crimes committed in Syria to the International Criminal Court, witnesses and survivors of international crimes, local civil society organisations, and international litigating organisations, have resorted to national level jurisdictions based on the principle of universal jurisdiction (Human Rights Foundation Centre for Law and Democracy, 2022).

Universal jurisdiction is a legal principle that provides a state with jurisdiction over international crimes even when the crimes had taken place outside of the state's territory and neither the victim nor perpetrator are nationals of the state (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, 2022a). Criminal accountability initiatives that take this route have brought about some tangible albeit limited outcomes, most notably with the 'al-Khatib' trial at the Higher Regional Court in Koblenz, Germany – the first trial of individuals implicated in state-sponsored torture in Syria held anywhere in the world (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, 2022b). The 'al-Khatib' trial ended in January 2022, with a life sentence for the main defendant Anwar Raslan, the former Head of the Investigation Department of Branch 251 (also known as 'al-Khatib' Branch) of the Syrian General Intelligence Service. Raslan was found guilty of co-perpetrating torture, 27 murders, as wells as sexual violence, among other crimes committed in Branch 251 (European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, 2022c). Some of the criminal accountability proceedings held within the framework of universal jurisdiction have incorporated participatory elements, as seen with victims' active participation as joint plaintiffs in the 'al-Khatib' trial, which granted them certain procedural rights (Finnin, 2020).

The hitherto outcomes of the criminal accountability processes pertaining to Syria have helped raise a question regarding the existing mechanisms: is criminal accountability the only imaginable mechanism for justice, and does it achieve justice for all survivors and those affected by the conflict more broadly? Perspectives that are often not meaningfully incorporated in the development of justice mechanisms are those of communities marginalised on the basis of gender, socio-economic status, geographic location, and educational attainment, among other factors (Ali, 2019). When soliciting the priorities, needs, and demands of such communities, it becomes apparent that there is a discrepancy between their views and the outcomes that court-based adjudication can potentially bring about. This is due in part to jurisdictional limitations, what constitutes an international crime and how individuals and communities at large are affected by crimes, and the limitations of bringing structural systemic changes solely through criminal prosecutions (Women Now for Development, 2020).

In addition to the limitations concerning court jurisdictions and geopolitical realities that restrict who can be prosecuted, and who can access courts and participate as a witness or plaintiff, there is also the key issue of the scope of actions, behaviours, and injustices that are being addressed (Nagy, 2008). By prioritising criminal accountability and legalistic approaches, which tend to focus on extreme physical violence and extraordinary atrocities (genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and torture), more 'ordinary' violence experienced by women, such as intimate partner and domestic violence, which ensued from the heightened militarisation built on socially unjust systems, is often dismissed (Nagy, 2008). This is not to deny the enormity of international crimes or the need for their distinct categorisation. Rather, it is to argue that detaching egregious crimes from the continuum within which they fall and the power structures that have produced them does a disservice to the wide spectrum of other violations and injustices committed or experienced (Henry, 2014), some of which may not even fit in a legal category. In addition, the prioritisation of civil and political rights in criminal accountability efforts has often relegated structural violence and social inequalities to a lesser status (Nagy, 2008). Social and economic violence, which encompasses a wide range of harmful actions, disproportionately impacts women and is often 'privatised' and depoliticised by transitional justice mechanisms in favour of mass atrocities of a more political nature, such as torture (Ni Aolain & O'Rourke, 2010).

Furthermore, feminist legal scholars have argued that the criminal justice system's concept of equality before the law has often led to the dismissal of the ways in which an individual's privileges and disadvantages can influence their circumstances within society, and ultimately impact their access to criminal justice mechanisms and the outcomes they can hope to achieve through them (Germain & Dewey, 2013). Disadvantages may stem from a person's gender, class, ethnicity, geographic location, and sexual orientation, among other factors. For example, Syrian survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in detention centres, particularly female survivors, face overlapping forms of violence and discrimination within social, economic, and political spheres and in both their private and public lives (Mehrez, 2020). They are often subjected to social discrimination (stigmatization), financial setbacks, forced displacement, and other acts of gender-based violence (including crimes in the name of 'honour') (Mehrez, 2020). Consequently, many female survivors of SGBV refrain from disclosing their experiences and do not turn to judicial institutions because of fear of reprisals (Syrian Road to Justice Campaign, 2020). Moreover, due to their vulnerability and lack of specialised support and protection services for individuals pursuing more formal justice avenues, many female SGBV survivors also avoid criminal justice procedures out of fear of reliving their experiences or exacerbating existing trauma (Syrian Road to Justice Campaign, 2020).

While some scholars have posited that participation in criminal trials and testimonies can help survivors heal and find closure, others have questioned this hypothesis (Demir, 2019). This is not to dismiss the potential for restoration through trial participation for some survivors, but to challenge the assumption that merely taking this path is a likely lead to healing and that survivors have the same needs (Aldana, 2006). There is insufficient evidence that criminal trials have a therapeutic effect for survivors, and there are several reasons for this (Stover, 2011). Indeed, court proceedings are often not trauma-informed, and testimony presented before a criminal court is not designed to be a cathartic experience, as witnesses and plaintiffs are only allowed to recount certain – often limited – parts of their experience:

> **"Storytelling is controlled by the rules of evidence and procedure, and it is fragmented and frequently interrupted. Witnesses are rarely permitted to tell the court their stories in their own words, and prosecutors and defence lawyers often focus exclusively on confirming factual evidence, such as the chronologic order in which the offence was perpetrated or the size and colour of the room in which it took place."**
>
> **(Henry, 2009, p. 125)**

Beyond the lack of empirical evidence to support the argument, the idea that participating in a trial can serve as a one-off therapeutic solution for survivors and those affected by conflict more broadly draws scepticism at a conceptual level (Henry, 2009). Healing and restoration for individuals and societies that have undergone conflict is an arduous and complex process. It requires long-term, multidimensional forms of support, a range of mechanisms, and crucially, the provision of material resources and frameworks centred on the needs and demands of the affected community.

How do Women Participants Conceptualise Justice?

5

For many survivors, justice cannot be reduced to a court verdict. Rather, it requires a process of empowerment, transformation, as well as opportunities to foreground personal truths and guarantees of non-recurrence. Justice efforts that seek to transform the conditions that have led to gender injustices require "mechanisms to address the structures and institutionalised inequalities that allow violence against women to persist" (Boesten et al, 2015, p.4). Such approaches recognise conflict-related violence as existing on a continuum and predating violent conflict. Moreover, they seek to dismantle structures, such as patriarchal norms and traditional gender stereotypes, which overlap with other forms of oppression and affect all genders, albeit differently (Boesten et al, 2015). Long-lasting change requires context-driven and locally informed approaches (Mullinax et al, 2018), and as such, understanding how women, particularly the more marginalised among them, conceptualise violence and justice is essential for building participatory, inclusive, and gender-transformative mechanisms to achieve justice.

For many participants, justice constitutes social, economic, and political processes outside the scope of criminal accountability. While most did not dismiss trials as potential justice avenues, they advocated for a plethora of other ideas and initiatives that go beyond the prosecution of individuals. Justice entails rights being meaningfully protected and guaranteed rather than formalities restricted to written doctrine. For some, it is a social contract that is drawn up through a process of consciousness-raising whereby rights, duties, and responsibilities of citizens are defined, and where regulations that ensure that rights are protected are put place:

"I believe justice is about securing my rights and for my rights to be equal to those of everyone else in society. It means that my rights are guaranteed and that I'm not discriminated against. This entails working as I please and doing what I like without being looked down upon, taken advantage of, and no one being favoured at the expense of my rights. Justice is achieved when we have awareness, when everyone is aware of their roles and responsibilities, and when there are rules. It requires awareness and rules that uphold it. Justice, for me is, being able to enjoy my rights and perform my duties. This should be done without pressure or fear and threats. It also means that I am not restricted and confined, that is, that no one takes decisions on my behalf."

(Randa, a participant based in Lebanon)

Women participants also spoke of issues tied to the absence of civil documentation papers and how this negatively impacts women on multiple levels, whether as displaced persons or refugees, in accessing their Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights, or in cases of marriage, divorce and child custody. As such, women linked the realisation of justice with an entity that is able to guarantee these matters and this aspect of citizenship. Moreover, others emphasised the intersection of citizenship and equity among ethnic and religious communities in Syria.

"Now, for justice to be achieved, the first thing that we need are reference points. I mean currently there is no system or state [in Northwest Syria], there are no legal bodies that could actually be re-established. Consider personal status. In cases of marriage, divorce, or child custody battles, we are always in trouble. The same is true identity cards, which do not exist. In order for a governing body to achieve justice and democracy, it needs to establish regulations for these matters."

(Enas, a participant based in Turkey)

"My mother is not Arab, so it took a long time to register our documents. My mother is Kurdish and we know what it's like to be Kurdish in Syria. So I always demand that there be equality and no discrimination between the groups, whether they are Arabs, Muslims, Christians, etc., there should be equality between all."

(Roula, a participant based in Turkey)

Furthermore, participants' choice of words advocated for a gender justice that goes beyond legal equality in general, and more specifically, beyond formal equality between men and women. While many among them recognised that equality before the law is an essential component, they equally emphasised that other institutions and factors in society must be transformed in order for justice to be realised. Participants reiterated that justice requires social change, which could only be achieved by challenging social norms and traditions that contribute to gender discrimination. Changing discriminatory norms and traditions requires the provision of spaces that allow for relevant conversations to take place and where conversations are grounded in reality and day-to-day experiences, including those involving violence:

"Justice, for me, is achieved when women become equal to men in everything and can take what is theirs because it's their right, without being abused, discriminated against or persecuted."

(Fairouz, a participant based in Turkey)

"Justice is when we talk about taboos and about changing social norms, practices, and traditions that are unjust to women. This is part of our work in achieving social justice. When we work on the ground and change society, we make real change - when we have space to reflect on our cultural heritage, knowledge, and all the things that we carry with us. This means that we reflect and assess what isn't just and presents false concepts of women and gender in general. We change our cultures when we talk about songs, books, and films that are unjust or reinforce problematic images, and when we work towards changing that."

(Rima, a participant based in Turkey)

Moreover, justice entails changes at different levels, encompassing the smaller units and levels of power in a society, such as the family. It also involves socialising individuals with rights-based concepts at early stages in life in an atmosphere where everyone enjoys the right to free speech, where nuance is not shied away from, and where contradictions are allowed to arise.

"This is a very big question. In Syria, I feel that we have a problem with the 'seed', meaning the family. Society is produced by the family before the workplace and the public sphere. But the whole issue begins from this small place. How is a child being raised and what concepts is its head being filled with? What is being delivered, and what is being veiled? I feel that the most important thing is to start at this level. We need to work more on this issue and introduce concepts such as freedom, justice, and equality into our lives from a very young age. In addition, there should be freedom of expression, meaning that speech is not limited or restricted."

(Salma, a participant ased in Turkey)

Participants also often differentiated between social norms that contribute to gender discrimination and laws that are gender-discriminatory. Some participants interpreted justice as a holistic and multidimensional process that includes political accountability, social justice, and equal economic opportunity. Moreover, there was recognition that such a change needs to take place gradually, and not in a top-down authoritarian manner. According to the participants, justice also entails women's equal participation in politics, the economy, and decision-making in general:

"In my opinion, justice must be achieved on multiple levels. This is not the case in Syria, and much remains to be done for this to be achieved. Justice is when there is political accountability, but we also require social justice, which has not even been partially achieved as of yet. With classism, the collapsing economy, and the lack of fairness in employment, it all seems very hard to achieve. Realizing justice requires change at the social and political levels that is done gradually, not in an authoritarian manner."

(Hasna, a participant based in Lebanon)

"The concept of justice is broad. For me, there are many types and conceptualizations of justice. One aspect of justice is related to human rights and is concerned with the application of the law. But will justice be applied to everyone in our country? And will judges issue verdicts fairly? Or will their verdicts be born out of personal and self-interest? Justice, for me, means being able to participate as much as a man, whether in taking political, economic, or other consequential decisions regarding this country [Syria]."

(Lama, a participant based in Turkey)

How Can WSS Support Women's Access to Justice?

Raise awareness concerning the scope of gender-based violence and injustices

Participants frequently stated that WSS can be places to learn more about the broad scope of gender-based violence, the different ways that it is manifested, and how it affects women. WSS were described as important mechanisms for learning concepts that help better comprehend discrimination and violence against women, as well as the role of women's agency in combatting it.

"Safe spaces help women determine whether they are being abused without knowing it. Indeed, sometimes things that are done to us that may be considered normal because they've become so normalised. It becomes routine; we don't even feel like it's violence. Like sometimes we feel that it's just a recurring normal reality rather than what it is: violence. So, our awareness of this has increased as has society's awareness that we as women have a role to play."

(Samia, a participant based in Turkey)

Expand understandings of justice and its broader structural underpinnings

For some, WSS provided an opportunity to share different perspectives concerning justice, a concept whose interpretations may have been more limited before. Participants described a change in how they understood the concept of justice, recognising that it is built on certain methods and processes and placing heavier weight on the processes rather than the outcome itself.

"Let's not talk about justice. Instead, let's say that in the effort to develop correct conceptions concerning justice, its processes, and its methods, safe spaces are places where women can be taught these concepts effectively. Since they are new ideas, it's a useful learning space."

(Rima, a participant based in Turkey)

Provide support to women survivors, particularly ones participating in criminal accountability procedures

Some participants also stressed the importance of WSS for female survivors of conflict-related human rights violations who are also participating in criminal justice procedures. Participants emphasised the importance of WSS for survivors as places where they can discuss and unravel the difficulties and challenges tied to criminal procedures, as well as create a sense of solidarity and unity among them. They recognised the safe space as a necessary requisite for women's participation, as without it, women would not be able to comfortably share and consequently, their active roles would be limited.

"If we say that safe spaces are important, then they must be made available to survivors. Since we're talking about women [survivors], these spaces are very important for allowing women to deal with court cases and other tiring aspects of life. These spaces can be places for much needed support, solidarity or unity."

(Rima, a participant based in Turkey)

"For sure, safe spaces are important because a woman needs an environment to embrace her. If that doesn't happen and she doesn't feel comfortable and safe, she won't be able to share anything and won't have a role."

(Randa, a participant based in Lebanon)

Enable women to share experiences and develop solidarity and resistance

Participants explained that WSS provided an opportunity to share opinions and experiences, to engage through dialogue, and to access new concepts and ideas. There was a strong emphasis on the importance of speaking, but also listening to one another. Participants explained that dialogue was part of the development and learning process, and also constituted a form of resistance.

"As a woman, I have been suffering from persecution all my life. Let's just say I want to speak at a level where I can express myself or express my opinion and say what I want. The lack of space and freedom for us to state our opinions and listen to the opinions of others is one of the problems that women face. Safe spaces provide women with an opportunity to express themselves so that they can learn or develop. So, I feel that this space is very necessary and important because we are moving to the stage of learning and developing as women. I mean, it is a form of resistance."

(Nour, a participant based in Syria)

Enable women to come up with strategies for mitigating violence through community-based approaches

Moreover, some participants drew the link between learning new concepts and access to justice and rights. Importantly, participants also emphasised the significance of receiving financial and technical support for existing or new grassroots initiatives. As such, participants noted that they were able to operationalise the concepts and knowledge acquired through community initiatives.

"Participating in the sessions is a part of this process, meaning my access and the access of other women who participated. We've learned things here and went out to implement them in our personal and professional life. This is very important, and I think these experiences should be made available on a much larger scale, with more women given the opportunity to be part of spaces where they can learn and speak."

(Leen, a participant based in Syria)

Some participants saw that WSS can be a part and parcel of justice efforts in Syria, as they offer women the chance to produce their own mechanisms that reflect their needs, recognising that justice can vary from one region to another. One the one hand, this entails a space that is hospitable to women constructing their own perspectives on justice and that allows for a plurality of interpretations of justice. On the other hand, it also involves funding and providing material resources they can use to create their own initiatives and projects that respond to the dire needs of their communities to work on mitigating harm, and to push for needed social changes, allowing for the operationalization of justice perspectives produced within the WSS.

"A safe space can be a justice-supporting mechanism if it allows women to generate their own mechanism that defines justice. If they were able to put out a mechanism and a vision, meet, and mobilise, that would be great, because the idea of justice is old but renewable. Every region has its own conception of justice that works for them, so I don't know what justice for Syria would look like."

(Lama, a participant based in Turkey)

Limitations and shortcomings of Women's Safe Spaces

Beyond the benefits of WSS, participants also elaborated on perceived shortcomings. The primary perceived shortcoming is the limited size and scale of feminist spaces. While women acknowledged that safe spaces could facilitate change, they simultaneously expressed concern that some of the most disadvantaged Syrian women are not able to participate in these initiatives, as many do not have sufficient internet access and/or simply do not know about these projects.

While many saw value in bringing women from different backgrounds together, they also worried that this could, in some circumstances, generate an imbalance. Pronounced power dynamics and divergent needs and priorities could lessen the positive impact that WSS are supposed to have. Bearing in mind the many perspectives on justice in Syria, several women stressed the need for a plurality of safe spaces that cater to women from different communities.

Moreover, participants were critical of WSS as justice-promoting mechanisms in the absence of clear outcomes and when the ideas and narratives that are developed in WSS do not reach stakeholders and affect their decision-making processes. They also emphasised the lack of clarity regarding operationalising concepts and developments from WSS in the participants' communities.

"But how can I ask what the effective role that safe spaces can play, if there are no clear outcomes from these spaces that will reach decision-makers, places where justice operates, and courts, among other places. I have a question, what will link the safe space and tangible results on the ground?"

(Rima, a participant based in Turkey)

Women emphasised the dire need for more funding and material resources for grassroots initiatives that are developed as a result of the safe space, as well as pre-existing ones whose leaders want to enhance them based on new knowledge acquired. While the needs are urgent, women residing inside Syria face many obstacles related to funding due to the diminishing resources and given Syria's de-prioritisation as a country in crisis and security policies that restrict funding channelled inside Syria.

In Focus: Deconstructing Gender-Specific Injustices

During discussions, participants frequently described injustices and violence faced as forms of overlapping obstacles that hinder them from reaching their potential. For them, these structural barriers are rooted in gender inequality reflected in social norms as well as economic and political power relations. The discussions that took place during learning sessions allowed women to share details of their day-to-day struggles, unravel the nuances of gender-based violence, and enabled them to develop a context-driven intersectional feminist narrative (though not necessarily naming it as such). This mutual learning method between the facilitators, participants, and the broader team, led to a better understanding of the root causes of violence, and how different systems come together to create overlapping forms of discrimination, resulting in experiences of oppression for marginalised Syrian women that are greater than the sum of their parts (sexism, racism, classism, etc.)

Women elaborated on the burdens that they faced with the proliferation of new identities such as 'forcibly displaced' and/or 'refugee' status, which have exacerbated their experiences of sexism, particularly given the absence of laws that meaningfully protect women from SGBV in Syria and neighbouring countries:

"Women suffer greatly from social and legal injustice. Generally speaking, no one in Syria or Lebanon feels safe on the political and social level. The other day, I was harassed by a young man, and I took his bag and went to the police station to file a complaint against him. The policemen mocked me and demanded that I return the bag, or else I would be accused of theft. How shocking the situation was."

(Hasna, a participant based in Lebanon)

"Being a Syrian woman refugee in a society that is not accepting of Syrians means you are even more impacted. You will be subjected to additional injustices and violations because you are a woman. People assume that you are easy to exploit. I mean sexual exploitation, pressure, and injustices in the workplace. You feel there is twice the surveillance on you because you are a woman."

(Rima, a participant based in Turkey)

When discussing the injustices faced in their everyday lives, some participants referred to the lack of policies supporting women in workplaces, especially mothers, as core injustices. Others spoke about negative experiences in relation to employment opportunities:

"Now injustice is mostly what we're experiencing. For job opportunities, there are no equal opportunities. You always find favouritism."

(Mariam, a participant based in Syria)

This approach of sharing knowledge and experiences helped women conceptualise justice as a set of processes that work to end structural inequality and the discrimination suffered by women domestically and in the broader community, as well as in political and economic arenas. At this juncture, WSS play an important role in raising awareness about socio-economic and political issues that disproportionately affect women. Many participants, for instance, stated that the gender and gender-based discrimination learning session helped them in deconstructing common misconceptions around essentialised notions of gender and realising that gender is socially constructed and not an inevitable part of our biological sex. The notion of gender as a learned and performed identity accrued through education, socialisation, and family, among other factors, encouraged women to challenge stereotypical gender norms:

"Most of the sessions, in general, have really affected me, but the most important element was gender and gender-based violence. I felt that I really changed my view on women's inferiority in our customs and traditions, and I felt that I make changes wherever I am."

(Fairouz, a participant in Turkey)

Moreover, the different sessions and ensuing discussions helped demonstrate to participants the importance of women's social, economic, and political participation by virtue of challenging the stereotypical gender roles that usually constrain women in different spheres:

"[The sessions] were complementary to each other and all revolved around the idea that there should be no differences between males and females. There should not be an exclusion of women in politics or the economy, nor socially, meaning that women should have a role in all three. And when we speak of gender, for example, and assess what women do in daily life, and participants give examples from real life. When girls are given examples from real life, women seem to play roles which are often not supposed to be theirs."

(Randa, a participant based in Lebanon)

Furthermore, the discussions that took place among participants encouraged them to think of justice from different standpoints and to consider the various contexts, perspectives, and circumstances of individuals when trying to understand what justice means to them:

"Maybe with transformative justice or intersectionality, the issue became clearer for me. I mean, it created the idea that I must understand an issue in the context in which it is taking place rather than as something that doesn't appeal to me. The concept of justice can be relative, meaning justice for me is not the same justice for to another person in different circumstances."

(Nour, a participant in Syria)

Complementary Programme Components

8

8.1 Psychosocial Support and Artistic Creativity

In addition to the learning sessions and ensuing discussions between participants, an important component of the project was the weekly provision of Mental Health and Psychological Support (MHPSS) to participants. This was provided both in the form of group psychosocial support sessions and one-to-one therapy sessions, which were given upon request. This component is imperative and formed an integral part of the project, as many participants had endured various conflict-related violations and a wide spectrum of gender-based violence. Although the learning sessions and discussions did not delve deeply into particular events and/or the specificities of the human rights violations endured (as would be the case in a criminal investigation interview), participants were to some extent confronted with recollecting very difficult lived experiences and discussions on sensitive matters. This carried risks of them reliving their trauma and potentially experiencing other psychological stressors. A Syrian feminist psychologist with in-depth knowledge on the Syrian context was appointed to guide and facilitate the sessions. The psychologist's skills and knowledge on themes relevant to female survivors allowed her to build rapport with the participants and provide context-driven and specialised therapy. The sessions helped alleviate the psychological factors negatively impacting women's general well-being, as well as hindering their ability to pursue life projects and realising their potential more fully, including their ability to participate in civic discussions.

Moreover, it was important to hold group psychosocial support sessions in addition to individual sessions to provide the opportunity for collective healing and of sharing experiences with the ultimate goal of restoring individual wellbeing and working to transform problematic social and psychological realities that have exacerbated women's experience of conflict. Group sessions were structured in a way to help identify the gendered aspects of participants' experiences and support them in seeing their experience within a broader social, economic, and political context. Because there are certain ways in which women are often socialised that can undermine their sense of self, as well as their sense of entitlement to self-expression and right to have their needs met, explicitly identifying the broader patriarchal context and potential influences on these factors could help to reduce the impact that social discrimination (stigmatization) has on women's responses to trauma and other psychological stressors on a deeper level (Mehrez, 2020). Participants were also encouraged to identify how their own experiences have been gendered. By telling their own stories and framing them within a feminist, gendered perspective, participants found, to some degree, that they were able to release a sense of guilt, shame, or lack of control.

Monthly art sessions were also facilitated by an art instructor to help participants experiment and create with easily available material. These sessions were included purely for the purpose of self-expression. Participants were encouraged to experiment with different art media, allowing each of them to find the best means for self-expression. They also took part in activities that help release emotions such as frustration and anger. It also provided outlets for metaphorical storytelling and building narratives about their experiences, memories, dreams, or aspirations. Ultimately, this component was about opening up participants' minds to new possibilities and ways of being.

8.2 Support for Grassroots Initiatives

An aspect of the design of the feminist safe space project was the provision of technical and financial support to participants' grassroots initiatives, whether these initiatives were launched before or after they joined. Through this support, participants were able to operationalise ideas and conceptions acquired in projects within their own communities, often focusing on the nuances of gender-based violence and issues that disproportionately impact women. Many showed an interest in the need for tackling violence in its multifaceted forms, breaking it down into various categories and conceptualising it within distinct social institutions and structures.

"Our goal was to shed light on the affliction of women during the war, as well as to highlight the strength of women through the article on the change in gender roles. We also wanted to highlight the problems with the healthcare system that disproportionately affect women. We were trying to combat all forms of violence, which increased during the conflict. We are trying to combat social violence, violence committed by the armed factions or the regime, domestic violence, forced displacement, and the violence committed against female activists and journalists. We also sought to tackle both physical and psychological violence. We did not address legal violence; although there was an interest in this, time did not allow it."

(Samira, a participant based in Turkey)

Participants mentioned how discussions that had taken place over longer periods of time slowly led them to strengthen the methods of their grassroots initiatives. They drew the link between their work on the ground and the broader goal of mitigating the harmful impacts experienced by women, discrepancies within social service systems that have been functional during the conflict, and further restricts women.

As such, one initiative focused on the women in Daraa, their changing gender roles and the human rights violations they faced, and barriers to women's access to healthcare. Other initiatives focused on issues that disproportionately impact women, such as combating illiteracy, which helps alleviate women's experiences of loss, disappearance, forced displacement, and HLP violations. It also makes their pursuit of justice considerably less difficult. In addition, there was a focus on offering civic awareness sessions and raising awareness about gender-based violence, as well as providing psychosocial support, which many, having benefited from psychosocial support during this programme and others, viewed as an important aspect of their own healing processes,

"We are giving civic awareness-raising programs and psychosocial support for women in the community. My initiative has come out of a personal experience of empowerment, which I underwent when I did several awareness-raising programmes and psychosocial support sessions. The purpose of my initiative is to empower women in different ways with the aim of helping them play a bigger role in society, and it is based on my own experience of change. We always talk about violence committed against children. In order to dismantle gendered norms, I engage in conversations about them, whether with my husband, two boys, or my broader community, including other women."

(Layla, a participant based in Lebanon)

Recommendations: Women's Opinions on How Policymakers, Donors, and Other Stakeholders Can Support Their Access to Justice

9

I. Provide women with the support needed to organise locally-driven and longer-term campaigns that advocate for their visions of justice.

"Advocacy on the ground is an ongoing process, unlike the one-off ones that you never hear from again. I think that advocacy campaigns need to be continuous and that we should continue to speak out until we achieve what we want, even if it takes time."

(Mais, participant based in Lebanon)

II. Secure a supportive environment and safe channels where women can share their needs and demands with other stakeholders.

"Having a supportive, encouraging environment. There are many things that determine whether we can reach [stakeholders] from these safe spaces. The safe space itself needs to be an outlet for women to be able to speak their minds, have their opinions be heard, and be decision-makers."

(Enas, a participant based in Turkey)

III. Integrate gender-sensitive approaches and include women and minorities in all spaces related to justice (conferences, workshops, organisations, judicial proceedings, etc.).

"Ensuring gender inclusivity in all areas concerned with justice, that is, in all activities, seminars, workshops, trials, and in all processes of change. The inclusion of women from across the spectrum, as well as minorities, is a starting point. If we're talking about local organisations, the concept of gender may be a new one to them, and here, we can carry out interventions to help correct gender concepts and introduce terminologies to ensure that women are included in these places."

(Rima, a participant based in Turkey)

VI. Support locally-driven justice processes and mechanisms that suit the needs and aspirations of Syrian women and their context(s).

"Emphasising the need for interventions to be appropiate for the context is important. We should not simply bring in experiences from other countries and insert them into our culture, as after ten years, this strategy has been proven to fail. I think for international NGOs, studying interventions appropriate for the context and guaranteeing the presence of women is crucial."

(Roula, a participant based in Turkey)

V. Consolidate participatory programmes dedicated to feminist consciousness-raising, justice, human rights, and gender-based discrimination. Ensure that these programmes are diverse and inclusive, reach a broad segment of society, and particularly disadvantaged women residing in refugee/IDP camps.

"Double down on efforts to implement a larger number of similar programmes, as one is not sufficient to target the broadest possible segment of society. This is necessary for helping more women to learn more about justice, human rights, discrimination against women. I have realised that there is large gap between us and women who do not have enough knowledge about human rights, justice and discrimination."

(Lama, a participant in Turkey)

VI. Provide women-led initiatives with financial and technical support, including empowerment and awareness-raising activities.

"Financial support for when there are initiatives. Initiatives are raising awareness among women and the knowledge is spreading to some extent through economic initiatives or political empowerment or workshops of sewing and embroidery. We are circulating the terminologies that we have learned. When women are speaking and sewing, sometimes initiatives can be turned into awareness-raising sessions. Many initiatives are contributing to awareness raising and empowerment."

(Hasna, a participant based in Lebanon)

VII. Support women's political empowerment and political education through advocacy efforts and initiatives.

"We now understand what advocacy means, what an initiative means, and what rights mean. Through civil society initiatives, we are now capable of speak about our rights. They support awareness-raising and empowerment."

(Randa, a participant based in Lebanon)

VIII. Empower women economically and support their access to the labour market.

"Rest assured that you will not be able to support women's participation if you do not empower them within the labour market. When a woman is able to compete in the labour market, she will then have a role and a say. She will be able to decide."

(Roula, a participant based in Turkey)

IX. Support the direct meaningful participation of women in judicial proceedings, instead of merely their indirect representation.

"When women begin to understand justice concepts, they will immediately demand them. This will happen when these legal institutions include women to a greater extent. For example, if there are opportunities to participate in trials taking place in Germany, we should see women also participate and talk about our cause. This way, we would not see only men participating and speaking on the behalf of women. The idea is to operationalise the role of women, not just keep talking about it."

(Leen, a participant based in Syria)

X. Support women's access and meaningful participation in decision-making roles and political processes.

"You should attract people who are really capable of leading. You can offer them courses and train them to engage in political, social, and economic work. There are, for instance, women who are truly models for women's leadership. We can target them, provide them with courses that train them, and they can then launch their own projects and really enhance their roles."

(Mariam, participant based in Syria)

Conclusions

Drawing on the empirical research and the literature review, this section will synthesise the relationship between the women's posited understanding of safe spaces and conceptualisations of justice, with a view to assessing if and how safe spaces serve to facilitate their visions of justice. The prominent takeaways from women's interpretation of safe spaces are that these are places where rights are claimed, analysed, and explored, which helps to challenge and expand concepts such as human rights, gender, and violence, among other critical topics. Such explorations are vital for developing a nuanced and context-driven understanding of these concepts, linking them to deeper social structures, and collectively deliberating ways to heal, as well as work to change the patterns and behaviours that produce and perpetuate systemic injustices. That safe spaces also provided opportunities for personal growth and building bridges between women from different backgrounds, especially with constraints that limit women's movement such as displacement, the lack of safe spaces, and closed borders. This not only expanded women's social and support networks but also broadened perspectives on the female experience of conflict and violence, thereby enriching their conceptualization of a just society.

The breadth of participants' discussions, ensuing intellectual exploration, interpersonal connectivity, solidarity building, and self-reflection, were made possible by the level of protection provided by the safe spaces, including the absence of the male gaze, as well as attitudes and a range of aggressions often stemming from men and other dominant groups. A co-created set of rules around respecting one another's opinion despite disagreement and being conscious of positionality and power relations, was established and continuously reiterated. Participants came to a mutual trust-based agreement that what is disclosed in the safe space would remain in it. Moreover, trauma and other psychological stressors were mitigated through the provision of MHPSS to participants, especially through group sessions, which allowed participants to collectively discuss how to deal with psychological issues. This enhanced level of comfort allowed women to 'be themselves', alleviating trauma, triggers, and vigilance, thereby creating an environment conducive to listening to the other and establishing constructive yet challenging discussions – an important condition for the development of ideas and states of consciousness.

Moreover, since the WSS was held virtually, we were able to connect women from different backgrounds and locations, which would have been more difficult to do in a physical space. It also allowed us to bring different feminist, Arabic-speaking experts to facilitate the learning sessions, which helped to further contextualise knowledge and support the development of critical narratives in the native language of the participants, further strengthening capacities in political articulation. Additionally, WSS played a role in developing a vocabulary and a way of thinking that are only beginning to emerge in the Arabic language. Many women have difficulty articulating their knowledge and experiences because of linguistic barriers and the general lack of access to resources on intersectional feminism, gender, and feminist literature from the Global South, among other literature. While Syrian women have the knowledge, they sometimes struggle to communicate it, as the language for this knowledge in Arabic is very limited and not easily accessible. The WSS's learning sessions recognised women's different experiences and knowledge. They also offered a place for women to connect and share anecdotes but also filled gaps in the knowledge that may have otherwise remained untapped. It provided a space to develop tactics on how to address and overcome challenges, pains, and barriers to justice. Personal connections were built, and participants often showed solidarity with one another after discussing personal experiences.

Such exploration and expansion are vital for understanding the nuances of the violence they have experienced, how and why it is manifested in different social institutions, and how that has made female experiences of war more taxing, and ultimately indicative of what needs to be addressed when formulating mechanisms for justice. It led women to think about justice methodologically and contextually, bearing in mind the social, economic, and political processes that constitute it. As such, women differentiated between forms of legal discrimination and other forms of violence, how they intersect to bring about gendered violence, and how this violence is amplified for women from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, and refugees, among others. Justice for the participants was the rethinking of social norms that contribute to the suffering of women, and it was a holistic process encompassing political accountability, social justice, and equal economic opportunity. For some participants, the WSS is a justice-supporting mechanism because it offers a space for women to produce other mechanisms that reflect their needs, express their opinions and perspectives, provide safety and support often missing in private and public spaces, and raise awareness about a multitude of critical topics.

These opportunities are often missing in trajectories of criminal accountability, which deprioritise violations that don't constitute an egregious crime or revolve around political and civic rights. Moreover, they often understand violence from an ahistorical and detached perspective, depriving female experiences of conflict and violations, and those of other marginalised communities, of deserved complexity and limiting the effects of justice outcomes, both as deliverables and in terms of their capacity to transform conditions. It is important to have spaces to develop appropriate approaches and discourses that serve the interests of women and address their priorities rather than assuming that justice corresponds to trials. The different components of the project – feminist learning sessions, MHPSS, artistic creativity, financial support for initiatives, and the other services offered – should not be perceived as alternative mechanisms for justice, but rather as part of the justice process itself.

Given the precariousness of the situation for vulnerable Syrian women, and the fact that, to date, most national and international political and judicial mechanisms and processes are not locally driven and hence do not meet the needs, demands, and strategies for justice as imagined by Syrians. Feminist-facilitated safe spaces are providing unique opportunities for women to challenge the status quo and the top-down approaches of these processes. They also allow for feminist knowledge production, in its various forms, to discuss the overlapping historical structures which shape women's lives and often go missing in formal knowledge and judiciary mechanisms.

It is critical to note, however, that these feminist endeavours are operating on a very small scale and with limited capacities They are facing daily challenges because of restrictions, a lack of access, and diminishing resources. If stakeholders are to comprehensively support locally-led justice processes, they must provide ample, long-term, and flexible resources to WSS and the broader forms of women-led community initiatives that are slowly working to mitigate violence, restore, and transform conditions. It is important not only to scale up in resource provision, but also to scale it out as well. This means supporting the vast plethora of initiatives across Syria, as each geography has its own particularities, priorities, needs, and demands. Moreover, stakeholders and decision-makers should build formal processes and mechanisms based on local women's recommendations. This includes comprehensively integrating gender-transformative approaches to existing and future formal justice and accountability initiatives (along with other formal tracks, including political ones) and incorporating the feminist knowledge developed in WSS to inform processes about the complexities of overlapping historical systemic oppression, its effects on the female experience of conflict, as well as its effects on other marginalised communities.

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