



# **A Holistic Approach to Survival: Transforming Research Strategies in Contexts of War and Conflict Zones**

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## ABOUT WOMEN NOW FOR DEVELOPMENT

Women Now for Development (Women Now) is a feminist, women-led organisation dedicated to deepening and strengthening women's role in shaping a democratic future of 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, through three integrated programme areas: Protection, Empowerment, and Participation and Leadership programs. Women Now also works on Research, Advocacy and Campaigning at the local and international levels. The organisation's research and advocacy are primarily focused on feminist knowledge production such as: documentation and collection of women's experiences and testimonials, in-depth qualitative and quantitative research and analysis, and local and international awareness-raising campaigns about women's rights, women-led activist movements, feminist civil society initiatives, gender-based violence and women's living conditions in Syria.



## ABOUT KNOWWAR

The research project KnowWar (Knowledge Production in Times of Flight and War – Developing Common Grounds for Research in/on Syria) is a cooperative project between the Syrian Center for Policy Research, the Department of Development Studies at the University of Vienna, the NGO Mousawat, the Centre for Development Studies at Birzeit University, and the Centre for Peace Research and Peace Education at the Alps-Adriatic University of Klagenfurt.



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## A Holistic Approach to Survival: Transforming Research Strategies in Contexts of War and Conflict Zones

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### ABSTRACT

By foregrounding Syrian women's readings, analyses, and strategies of research, we propose 'a holistic approach to survival' as a transformative research strategy under the conditions of mass displacement and war. Using research experiences of Women Now for Development, a feminist organisation from Syria, we demonstrate how such a transformative strategy relies on creating a collective space of reflection between (field) researchers and interview partners. Due to shared trust and closeness, women were able to create spaces of resistance that rendered the existence of counter-narratives possible, as can be impressively demonstrated in the case of the Syrian initiative Families for Freedom. Knowledge producers united around issues such as forced disappearance and foregrounding of women's voices in public debates. Pain was turned into action, and the collective led the process of research and defined its purpose and strategies.

### KEYWORDS

Feminisms,  
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### Introduction

A striking image of women holding up framed portraits of their detained and disappeared loved ones is repeatedly displayed on the social media accounts of *Families for Freedom*<sup>1</sup>; a Syrian woman-led movement demanding freedom and justice for affected family members. Emerging organically in 2018, the group has mobilised various Syrian communities to preserve the memories of family relatives who were forcibly disappeared or detained by the Syrian regime, extremist

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/SyrianFamilies>

Islamist groups, armed opposition, or Kurdish-self-management forces since 2011, demanding justice and freedom for all.

The multifaceted effects that disappearance has on families forced to live with loss and ambiguity is documented in a joint report by *Dawlaty*, a Lebanon-based Syrian civil society organisation<sup>2</sup>, and *Women Now for Development* (WND), a leading feminist Syrian organisation<sup>3</sup>. Published in 2018, their research report<sup>4</sup> – which was originally planned as an oral history project – set the ground for further community mobilisation, out of which *Families for Freedom* was born. The project not only contributes to providing a much-needed space for voicing collective demands for justice by Syrian women, but it also serves as an example of a research endeavour starting from the bottom up. As such, it is a unique instance in which research has a transformative role that serves the endurance of the Syrian struggle for justice and freedom, and is employed as a strategy of survival in times of war and conflict.

Inspired by this report and other research by WND that utilise a gender justice approach<sup>5</sup>, the authors of this paper are interested in analysing how research can serve as a transformative strategy for the communities it addresses and emerges from. In this paper, we propose what we term ‘a holistic approach to survival’ as a transformative research strategy. We argue that such an approach is necessary to adopt in a context of war such as Syria, as it re-establishes the link between research and the unequal, unpredictable, and violent conditions of knowledge-making. Moreover, we take the position that terms, concepts, and frameworks of analysis need to be in tune with the communities and social initiatives/movements they address – which they are often inspired and developed by – before being circulated within the realm of knowledge-producing institutions such as NGOs, international organisations and academic centres (Choudry 2015, Choudry and Kapoor 2013, Collins and Bilge 2000, Erakat and Saghieh 2016). Therefore, our paper foregrounds Syrian women’s readings, analyses, and strategies of research under the condition of mass displacement and war.

More specifically, our paper offers a unique perspective on the production of knowledge under conditions of war and conflict through highlighting the experiences of *Women Now for Development’s* team in and outside Syria. Moreover, the paper is the outcome of a collaboration between WND and *KnowWar*, a research project based at the University of Vienna analysing the politics behind knowledge production during war and conflict. The authors of this paper embody different positionalities and radically varied access to privileges. What we share, however, is a commitment to critical research ethics and a radical questioning of how knowledge is produced, which we strive to situate always in relation to power and privilege.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://dawlaty.org/en/>

<sup>3</sup> See <https://women-now.org/>

<sup>4</sup> *Shadows of the Syrian Disappeared: Testimonies of Female Relatives Left with Loss and Ambiguity* (2018) <https://women-now.org/shadows-of-the-syrian-disappeared/>

<sup>5</sup> See *Syrian Women’s Readings of the Present, Future, and Associated Concepts* <https://women-now.org/syrian-womens-readings-of-the-present-future-and-associated-concepts/>

As we reflect on the (im)possibilities of research in contexts of mass destruction and war, we confront two challenges that we explore below. First, we have found that translating available feminist theories into relevant and applicable tools of research in Syria misses key aspects of knowledge production during wartime, rendering the tools incomplete and somewhat inadequate. Second, developing a transformative analysis of power that centrally positions the voices, experiences, and strategies of those involved in research, while being confronted with the toll of the protracted war in different parts of the country, was challenging due to the constantly shifting power relations and on the ground circumstances. Both challenges reflect the shortcomings of available research tools and support us in making our claim for a transformative research strategy that includes the principles of transforming pain to power, as well as building research from the bottom to the top with the goal of constructing a shared 'we'.

### **Feminist and decolonial interventions in researching war**

Mainstream social science research approaches designed for conflict and war zones reduce the importance of research methodologies and epistemologies to the challenges of fieldwork (Campbell 2017, Goodhand 2000, The Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences 2017, Wood 2006). They discuss challenges and best practices when accessing the field, assessing the security situation in specific areas, taking care of the safety of the researchers and the communities involved, evaluations of research by local actors and meeting their expectations, considering the possible effects research has on local communities, and anonymisation of collected data. To implement (self)reflection during the field research process, the principle of 'do no harm' (which includes careful selection of local researchers and researched communities, reflecting on power relations between researchers and interlocutors, 'cultural' sensitivity, flexibility in choosing one's methodologies) is applied (Goodhand 2000). While this principle has been adopted for decades in critical literature on NGOisation and the humanitarian industry in war and conflict zones (Hugman, Pittaway and Bartolomei 2011, Wibben 2016), we find it inadequate, not only in accounting for power relations between researchers and researched, but also because it ignores the ways in which this power inequality informs the very kind of research that can emerge from such inequality.

Moreover, the imposed division of labour within the knowledge industry is investigated by feminist philosophers and activists, such as Sara Ahmed (2000). While she grounds her analysis of power relations during processes of encountering *the other* on prominent postcolonial questions such as *Who can speak?* (Spivak 1988) and *Who speaks here?* (Mohanty 1991), she supplements these debates with an epistemological question. Asking *Who is knowing here?* (p. 61) Ahmed places the act of encountering so-called subjects of research at the center of her analysis. By introducing the concept of "stranger fetishism", she emphasises that the ability to come closer to people and to get to know them is structured around an already predetermined mission of conducting a specific kind of research.

The stranger is produced as a category within knowledge, rather than coming into being in an absence of knowledge. The implications of such a rethinking of the relationship between knowledge and strangers are far reaching: it suggests that knowledge is bound up with the



formation of a community, that is, with the formation of a 'we' that knows through (rather than against) 'the stranger' (p. 55).

Further contesting the relationship between "those who know" and "those who are known", Ahmed points to a crucial contradiction: "The stranger comes to appear as a figure of speech at the same time as it is rendered impossible. The stranger hence becomes a figure for that which has been made impossible by the necessity of translation" (p. 59).

Hence, like the examples mentioned at the beginning of this text, knowledge production entails close relationships with research subjects for a specific moment in time and for a specific purpose. These relations are, in Ahmed's words, "created in order to be destroyed" (p. 59). Put differently, researchers know about certain contexts only through coming closer to the stranger, often entering communities as 'strangers' themselves. But while the strangeness of the researched object is maintained in place, the strangeness of the researcher becomes transformed through the act of translation to a broader audience. The translation of the stranger into the language of the knowing community ("making the stranger appear within the familial", p. 57) therefore always implies, as Sarah Ahmed argues, a move "from an ontological lack to an epistemological privilege" (p. 60). A holistic research approach serving survival departs from this duality, as the stranger is at once also a community-member, interested in research for her survival, and not for knowledge production for the sake of knowledge production itself.

Returning to the argument that the possibility of speaking to each other and the labour that needs to be invested in building up relationships already gets absorbed by the task of producing knowledge to be translated for a specific audience (mostly outside the contexts of those communities researched), Ahmed turns to feminist ethnography to highlight the challenges of overcoming the *impossibility* of encounters. While she acknowledges the achievements of feminist research, she critically investigates whether feminist methodologies can produce a different kind of knowledge. Returning to feminist ethnographic literature of the 1990s, Ahmed answers this question by pointing to the impossibility of this endeavour. Drawing on the reflexive turn in anthropology, she shows how the attempts to undo power relations through sharing authorship, working with research partners rather than informants, and being authorised by and speaking for those researched, remain (to a large extent) within the dichotomy of getting closer to translating rather than getting closer to acting, creating, resisting, and surviving. "The redefinition of the 'informant' as an 'equal partner' hence works to conceal the power relations that still allow the gathering together of a document. In other words, the narrative of overcoming the relations of authorisation in traditional ethnography constitutes another form of authorization" (p. 64).

At the end of her analysis of *stranger fetishism*, Ahmed makes the point that we have to work against "the assumption that we can transform the 'being' of strangers into knowledge" (p.74). In order to move beyond mainstream attempts of getting closer in solidarity and action to merely create knowledge, we need to contest such assumptions that are (re)created in academic circles.

Through an intersectional approach that investigates how overlapping systems of power produce marginalised positionalities, radical feminist authors thus direct their attention to the entire system of academic knowledge and its neoliberal production industry, often connecting this

critique to (historical) analyses of global capitalism (Ahmed 2012, Mohanty 2003 and 2013, Chatterjee and Maira 2014). Feminist theorists have also analysed how the imperial military machine depends on the creation of a specifically gendered war language in order to produce a system of meanings that naturalises the violence of war (Cohn 1993), emphasising the epistemological privilege embedded in imperial meaning-making frames, especially in war discourses. Others have taken the critique further, arguing that gender inequality itself is a root cause of war. By employing intersectional lenses, feminist authors have convincingly argued that, to understand women's experiences of war, one must place gender in its context of power relations. Moreover, they propose that the overlapping systems of inequality make war's violence a continuum, and not a phenomenon that is neatly contained in any conflict's official start and end dates (Cockburn 2010).

This contribution has major ramifications for knowledge production under conditions of war, because it insists on examining the complex intersections of systems of inequality and phenomena of war (such as displacement, dispossession, poverty, etc) when seeking to make a claim to knowing or conceptualising a subject's gendered life (Tabar and Meari forthcoming, Duhacek 2016). In other words, one cannot simply isolate gender as a main lens of analysis and knowledge production, as is a prevalent practice in so many of the forms of knowledge produced about Syria (Tabar and Meari forthcoming). Rather, one must place it within larger intersecting systems of imperial relations, and economic, social, and psychological violence. As we will demonstrate below, this is the approach that is practised by *Women Now for Development*, and which hence has a transformative character for the women engaged in this research.

Decolonial-feminist positions take this powerful critique further and point to the fact that, in the tradition of Western knowledge production, mainstream research approaches, strategies and ethics are part of imperial and colonial relationships (Al-Masri 2017, Datta 2018, Decoloniality Europe n.d., Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith 2008, Keane, Khupe and Seehawer 2017, Salaita 2014, Zavala 2013). These approaches, which are based on the concept of modernity/ coloniality, would amount to affirming these very relations of domination in knowledge production. As the Argentinian decolonial thinker Walter D'Mignolo argues, modernity can thus be understood as an epistemological frame that is inseparably bound to the European colonial project (2007).

For the last decades, decolonial perspectives further strengthened the focus on research strategies by aligning with social struggles that aim at transforming racist, sexist, and colonial relations of power (Denzin, Lincoln and Tuhiwai Smith 2008). Research topics, research questions, field research, the evaluation of collected data and the utilisation of research results should be developed and implemented together with resisting communities and movements, and serve their political needs, as many decolonial authors argue. This practice not only intends to break down fundamental power relations, but also shows that research itself can become an instrument in the search for social alternatives to colonial modernity (Zavala 2013). In this sense, research ethics revolve around the political necessities of social and political collectives. The ethics of research would thus become a collective political responsibility.

As we will demonstrate, the holistic approach to survival that *Women Now for Development* employed as part of re-creating opportunities of developing transformative research, relied on creating connections between women who are exposed to war crimes and violations. Through these connections, women were able to create spaces of resistance such as *Families for Freedom* that made the existence of counter-narratives possible. In contrast to Ahmed's concept of stranger fetishism, knowledge producers united around issues such as forced disappearances and the foregrounding of women's voices. Pain was turned into action, and the collective led and defined the research strategies and purpose.

### Shifting analytical perspectives: from the bottom up, from pain to power

In their analysis of extracting pain narratives of researched "Native", "ghettoized" and communities of "overstudied Others" (p. 223) by mainstream social science research, Tuck and Yang (2014) build on the work of bell hooks (1990) to point to the fact that such narratives are obliterating the question of how pain can be transformed into action and resistance.

As long as the objects of research are presumably damaged communities in need of intervention, the metanarrative of social science research remains unchallenged: which is that research at worst is simply an expansion of common knowledge (and therefore harmless), and that research at best is problem solving (and therefore beneficial). This metanarrative justifies a host of interventions into communities, and treats communities as frontiers to civilize, regardless of the specific conclusions of individual research projects (p.244).

What it means to cultivate knowledge under conditions of violence and urgency, while hoping that documenting crimes can be used for claims of justice in the future, has been collectively discussed in two facilitated focus group discussions conducted between mid-November and mid-December 2020 with the (field) researchers involved in two of WND's projects. These research projects are *Shadows of the Disappeared: Testimonies of Female Syrian Relatives Left with Loss and Ambiguity*<sup>6</sup> and *Syrian Women's Readings of the Present, Future, and Associated Concepts: On Identities, Gender Roles, Violence, Peace and Justice, and the Possible Futures in Syria*<sup>7</sup>. Four women participated in the first focus group discussion (hereafter FGD I) and seven in the second (hereafter FGD II). Online discussions of approximately 90 minutes each were conducted along a semi-structured questionnaire. The central points of the discussions included a reconstruction of

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<sup>6</sup> *Shadows of the Disappeared* was designed and organised together with another Syrian initiative, *Dawlaty*. A total of 52 women relatives of forcibly disappeared persons were interviewed about the social, psychological, financial, and economic impacts the enforced disappearance has on their lives. The interviews were conducted in different parts of Syria (in Idlib, Aleppo and in Swaida and Daraa governorates), as well as in Lebanon and Jordan. The project was funded by the Swedish women's rights foundation *Kvinna till Kvinna*. The full report can be downloaded at <https://women-now.org/shadows-of-the-syrian-disappeared/>

<sup>7</sup> For the *Syrian Women's Readings* project, a total of 57 women were interviewed, most of whom had become (internally) displaced persons and were living in various parts of the country, but others also in Turkey, Lebanon, and several European countries. After having trained seven female field researchers from Raqqa, Hasakeh, Idlib, Damascus, Buka (Lebanon), Gaziantep (Turkey) and Germany, the interviews focused on women's analyses of identities, their approaches to changes in gender roles, their analyses of violence, and their understanding of concepts of justice and peace in Syria. The full report can be downloaded at <https://women-now.org/syrian-womens-readings-of-the-present-future-and-associated-concepts/>



the research process and its goals, as well as the significance of a feminist self-understanding for this very process and its methodologies.

In this paper, we are not able to provide a comprehensive analysis of the war and its societal implications.<sup>8</sup> The ongoing war in different provinces of the country and the specific warfare that has so far turned some 13.3 million people into (internally) displaced persons are a basic context within which WND's two research projects took place. With the division of the country into zones of power controlled by different warring parties, as well as the restructuring of life after fleeing Syria, mainly to neighbouring countries, a complex reality of varied conditions of survival and horizons of experience for communities emerged. Knowing these conditions intimately and having lived through them proved to be foundational for the WND's (field) researchers.<sup>9</sup>

Further, after over a decade of war in Syria, the demands of the revolutionary protest movement in 2011 for an inclusive democratic political system and socio-economic justice appear like shadows from a distant past. Without the hope of a just and inclusive peace, the social, political, and economic destruction of communities by the ongoing war is an even more erosive process. However, this process can be challenged, even in research projects, by creating a collective space of reflection and by carefully building a collective 'we' by marginalised women from Syria. Mouna<sup>10</sup>, one of the field researchers who was forced to live under siege for four years in Al Ghouta and was then forcibly displaced, made this clear:

We keep saying that 'we' as Syrian women, we keep using the 'we' because, although there are a lot of things that are related to our individuality, we still have many worries, challenges, and concepts in common. This alleviated the defeat I had been bearing until recently. I had retired from everything and wanted to get away from everything because I was personally defeated. Doing this research made me realize that there are other Syrians who are defeated as well, and they are expressing the fact that they are defeated in a similar way. Giving people a voice was a very important tool.

How, despite the war, a collective space of reflection as marginalised women from Syria can be created in feminist research projects without merely speaking *for* the women interviewed, and what social and political scopes can be re-established in such projects *despite the defeat*, is what we examine below. Due to its holistic approach, which can serve the continuation of the struggle for justice and freedom, we understand such a research strategy not only as a transformative one, but also as one which is necessary for survival.

## Beyond research infrastructure

A basic prerequisite to understanding WND's research projects is that the women researchers do not first have to explore a known 'field' which has to be investigated. As an NGO, WND was, and is already, deeply engaged in communities' lives through the different women's centres

<sup>8</sup> For more information see the reports by the *Syrian Center for Policy Research* <https://www.scp-syria.org/category/publications/policy-reports/>

<sup>9</sup> For more on this, see below.

<sup>10</sup> For security reasons, we only use the researchers' first names and abbreviations with capital letters, respectively.

established over the last few years.<sup>11</sup> Thus, WND staff members and researchers are not entering a so-called research field, but are already embedded within it; they are consistently interacting with girls and women at the community level by carrying out activities such as protection, psycho-social support, economic empowerment, women's political participation, and vocational training, as well as advocacy for the rights of displaced women and their communities in Lebanon.

At the same time, war also fragments the 'field', including cutting communities off from each other, causing further challenges for the research, and underlining the importance of research conducted by the community itself; as N.H. states: "Although I am Syrian, I am not aware of the contexts created in Syria in the last 10 years. Having field researchers who are based in the areas of the interviewed women will enrich the research and add their perspectives to it". Indeed, most of the centres' staffs are themselves displaced women from Syria who have experienced similar violations, trauma, and distress situations to those of the women and girls who participate in the centres' activities in Lebanon. This is also true for most of WND's researchers. Such a shared horizon of experience includes a fundamentally different self-understanding as a researcher in her relation to the interview partner. Recognising such a relationship of closeness and (scientific as well as political) responsibility not only individually, but also integrating it systematically into the research process, constitutes, from our perspective, the basis for a holistic approach.

Still, this holistic approach is not consistently made available or accessible in all research conducted by the WND team. For example, in some conflict sites in Syria, WND centres have been closed or shelled by Syrian regime forces, such as in Al Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. In addition, in other locations, such as northeastern Syria, political conditions and restrictions did not enable the setting up of centres or conducting activities with and for women. In such cases, the WND research team uses alternative mechanisms to support participating women: for instance, hiring a psychosocial supporter (a Syrian woman) to assist the field researchers conducting the interviews, and referring the women interviewed to other local centres that can provide some support, depending on their needs. We see these support mechanisms as part and parcel of a transformative research strategy that aims to always prioritise the community's needs.

### **Shared horizons of experience and the reconstruction of a 'we'**

What we are trying to capture analytically with the dialectic of closeness and responsibility is based on the experiences of survival in war zones most of the (field) researchers in the two projects had to go through in their lives. On the one hand, their own experiences of loss, pain, violence and trauma created an intimate relationship to the interviewed women, based on a shared experience. On the other hand, the interviews also proved to be an enormous psychological burden, precisely because they refreshed the interviewer's own experiences. When, on top of that, interview situations become existentially threatening due to military operations, as was the case in the area around Qamishli or the province of Idlib, the terrifying experiences are transported into the

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<sup>11</sup> The women's centres that were originally established in various areas of Syria had to be closed due to the war. Currently, WND's centres are exclusively based in Lebanon.

immediate present. Sulnar, one of the field researchers of the FGD II, described these situations and the difficult responsibility as researcher that she wrests from the war in the following words:

You and B.G remind me of the tough psychological situation during the Turkish attack [the invasion by Turkish armed forces in the north of the country in 2019]. I was living a strong internal conflict before the attack when we were only hearing about threats by the Turkish authorities to attack. I was thinking of the obligation to do my work for the research, with a big question about my safety if the attack happens, and about if I will stay alive or not. All the border area was being bombed at that time, which is one kilometre from my village.

Once I went to one of the bombed villages for a report and was trapped behind a wall for an hour because of a sniper who could see me if I moved. So, the interviewees and I lived through tough times. They talked about 10 years of war and destruction and found themselves in front of a new moment of not knowing what will happen to them with the possible Turkish attack. There was a displaced woman from Afrin, who asked me: "Where could I go now if a new war takes place? [...] I cannot return to Afrin, and I know no one here." The same with a woman from Raqqa.

We faced the challenges and did our best to finish all interviews and deliver them on time.

By providing professional psychological support for the (field) researchers, WND was able to deal with some of the multiple stresses. This support became an important instrument for joint reflection.<sup>12</sup> Crucially, interviewing other women experiencing similar conditions was key in strengthening one's own survival, as well as becoming part of a collective 'we'. B.G from FGD II elaborates on this:

Because of shelling, the whole situation in Idlib was so difficult [...]. Having Hanan Allakoud. [a woman psychologist] with me after each interview was very helpful, I really needed her, to tell her about all the bad things that I faced. During many calls between us, we kept silent for minutes, listening to the explosions of barrel bombs. It was terrifying, and we have to admit that the war made us feel much older. In addition to that, I was displaced in the middle of the project period, I moved to the city of Idlib and had decided to continue doing the interviews [...]. During the work, I met a lot of people, and I learned from them how to be stronger. Many of them had losses in their families, had missing relatives, but still, they were very patient and strong.

While the studies explained all the difficulties in conducting research under war conditions and "delivering [interviews] on time", the very act of research changed from being only a task to be finished, into a tool serving the building of a collective 'we', as N.H. explains:

The [WhatsApp] group might be the most important part for me. All of the researchers were in difficult situations, even the ones in Lebanon, Turkey, and Europe, and sometimes, we felt that we are not doing a job, but something related to us personally, and we want to do it together because we felt that it might have a personal, social or political effect.

In addition, together with support from the research team – involving the division of tasks such as transcriptions of interviews, emotional support and joint assessment of situations rapidly changing on the ground – the psychological counselling created a frame that made it possible to

<sup>12</sup> Comment by WND: Finishing the interviews regardless of the war condition was a decision taken by many field researchers. However, the lead researcher from WND asked the field researchers many times to stop the interviews, for their safety. In the end, WND respected the field researchers' decision and understood it as a resistance mechanism by the field researchers.

conduct the interviews at all. Furthermore, establishing a space where the interviewed women can practise their right to tell their own stories under all circumstances, as Muna put it in the FGD II, made clear how the field researchers in both FGDs understood their own scientific work as a form of political responsibility: to keep the women's memories and narratives alive and disseminate these knowledges; otherwise, their causes, demands, experiences, and rights would be ignored and they, together with their communities, would be forgotten in Syria as well as internationally.

By creating counter-narratives based on lived realities of marginalised women and by, among other things, confronting the propaganda orchestrated by the Syrian regime and further warring parties, the production of such knowledge became part of a struggle against forgetting *and* of the (field) researchers' own struggle for survival.

This relationship of closeness and responsibility was also constitutive for the interviewees in both projects. In the *Shadows of the Disappeared* project, for the women interviewed, being able to talk about their own experiences and being heard, included breaking through the silence on these experiences as women relatives of the forcibly disappeared.<sup>13</sup> By establishing a support system for the interviewees, WND created the basic frame that made this possible. In addition to psychological support, the women interviewed were offered other support services, such as childcare during the interviews and a referral system. Manal from the FGD I commented on this:

After the women told their stories, sometimes we realized that they had very urgent needs, and we had a referral system, even in Idlib (although we did not have the same resources as we have in Lebanon). Some of the women got medical, relief, psychological or legal referral. We were able to extract these four points from the interview, and they started being able to know about the possible services provided in the area. At the same time, the organizations that we were referring to started knowing us through the women.

By providing different support services, the burden of speaking about her own experiences as a relative of a disappeared person, as well as the burden of listening to these survival strategies while considering her own experiences of forced disappearances, could thus be systematically integrated into the research process, as Anas in the FGD I made clear:

There might be a feminist activist who could work on the project without any institutional support, but that could not be sustainable on a long term, because there were needed costs, and needed trainings, in addition to the possibility of offering referral and support by WND. As an example, when the interviewees needed psycho support, we were able to offer referrals, so without institutional resources there might be motivated people who will open the door but not be able to continue if they do not have strong contacts that provide good and effective referrals, so they might open the wound and keep it open. We said in the beginning of our meeting: the researchers, the persons who would do the work, need to have high skills in listening, be flexible to deal with interviews being cancelled, modify the appointments, ask many times about the allowance agreements, and be able to provide psychological support could do this project.

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<sup>13</sup> While there are several Syrian initiatives working on forced disappearance, WND's approach to focus on women relatives of the forcibly disappeared persons was unique and, hence, has been creating the space for the women to be heard in Syrian communities, as well as internationally.

The support services created the overall frame to establish a collective space of reflection for both the interviewers and interviewees that basically could enable a careful reconstruction of a collective 'we' as marginalised women from Syria as well. In the case of the *Shadows of the Disappeared* project, such reconstruction of collective identities and agencies as a social, symbolic, and political process was encouraged by group discussions organised for the interviewees in WNDs women's centres in Lebanon. To share their experiences, as well as their pain and loss with each other, allowed the women, as Anas put it in the FGD I, to develop an atmosphere of solidarity. With the further support of WND, the participants then decided to establish a political initiative to fight for the release of all detained and disappeared in Syria, now well-known as the Families for Freedom.<sup>14</sup>

Such a path, from individually breaking through the silence on forced disappearance by being interviewed, to organising a struggle against these crimes, can neither be designed on the drawing board nor declared as an objective of a research process. However, through using a transformative research strategy, spaces of collective reflection and support, and reconstructing agencies (based on a common understanding of power and dominance relations as well as the researchers' compassionate ability and willingness to listen) can be systematically integrated into research processes. Whether these spaces will be further extended to (re)organise a struggle for justice, as in the case of the *Families for Freedom*, depends mainly on the research participants involved in such a contradictory endeavour.

## A holistic approach to survival

Conducting research in war zones requires permanent flexibility and the ability to adapt to rapidly changing conditions on the ground. To find a safe space for interviews, to deal with interruptions or cancellations of meetings, or to transfer data safely, to name just a few tasks, were daily challenges the field researchers were confronted with. On the level of research strategies and objectives, to be flexible included being able to change aims of the project when necessary. While both projects focused on women's lived experiences, the Syrian Women's Readings project had a clearly defined objective: to provide first-hand insights of marginalised women's conditions and strategies of survival, as well as their approaches to changes in gender roles, their analysis of violence, and their understanding of concepts of justice and peace for Syria. To be able to intervene in different (international) debates on these issues, the production of such knowledge should make voices of Syrian women accessible, and thus serve to fight against forgetting as well. This should lay the groundwork for efficient – as Maria, the CEO of WND, called it in the FGD II – advocacy work by WND as well as other Syrian organisations and initiatives.

The original objective of the *Shadows of the Disappeared* project was slightly different. By collecting stories of women relatives of disappeared persons, WND originally intended to

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<sup>14</sup> Further information on the activities of Families for Freedom can be found on their website, see <https://syrianfamilies.org/en/>



contribute to an oral history archive that would be established by different Syrian organisations. Manal reflects on this objective as follows:

Our initial plan was to save these stories and archive them, but we always had this question in our mind: what is next? Even the interviewed women, they appreciated that they could tell these stories and that we are going to archive it, but they always asked about a tangible impact or act.

The broader idea of establishing a Syrian oral history archive dates to 2016<sup>15</sup>, when Syrian oppositional initiatives started to discuss ways to counter the Syrian regime's narratives on the war. By making stories of everyday survival accessible, such an archive was envisioned to primarily serve the fight against forgetting and could also lay ground for the prosecution of crimes against humanity and war crimes perpetrated by the regime, its allies and further warring parties. According to Maria in the FGD I, two important points should also be learned from the experiences of another struggle against forced disappearances after the Lebanese civil war in the 1980s: on the one hand, the importance of building relationships between the families of the disappeared and, on the other, the right of all disappeared persons to be treated equally. Based on that, working on forced disappearances in Syria should include all warring parties (the Syrian regime forces, extremist Islamist groups, armed opposition factions and the Kurdish self-management forces), although more than 90 per cent of forced disappearances are blamed on the Syrian regime. In the research process, both considerations also served to create an atmosphere of trust.

Furthermore, by bringing in their own ideas of what else can be done, the interviewees started to redefine the original objective of the project during the research process, while, at the same time, WND was able to deal with this reformulation flexibly and openly. Providing a space for adapting and reorienting the research by the participants themselves underscored the importance of such a space as a space both researchers and interviewees are responsible for developing.

From a transformative research perspective, the two research projects illustrate how research in war zones can be designed and organised without being reduced to a collection and scientifically controlled evaluation of interviews for a strictly defined research goal. Based on closeness and responsibility, the development of collective spaces of reflection, support, and reconstructing of agencies points to the transformative potential of research even under conditions of expulsion, flight, and war – as Mouna mentioned:

What we are researching is not a case, but something that we pay the price for every day and on all levels of our lives, since 10 years ago until now.

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<sup>15</sup> More information regarding the idea of a Syrian Oral History Archive can be found in the report *Shadows of the Disappeared*, p. 12. <https://women-now.org/shadows-of-the-syrian-disappeared/>

*University of Vienna*). Furthermore, we would like to thank the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) for financially supporting this research via its funding of *KnowWar*.

## Notes on the contribution

***Women Now for Development (Women Now)*** is a feminist, women-led organisation dedicated to deepening and strengthening women's role in shaping a democratic future of 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, through three integrated programme areas: Protection, Empowerment, and Participation and Leadership programs. *Women Now* also works on Research, Advocacy and Campaigning at the local and international levels. The organisation's research and advocacy are primarily focused on feminist knowledge production such as: documentation and collection of women's experiences and testimonials, in-depth qualitative and quantitative research and analysis, and local and international awareness-raising campaigns about women's rights, women-led activist movements, feminist civil society initiatives, gender-based violence and women's living conditions in Syria.

***KnowWar (Knowledge Production in Times of Flight and War – Developing Common Grounds for Research in/on Syria)*** is a cooperative research project between the *Syrian Center for Policy Research*, the *Department of Development Studies at the University of Vienna*, the NGO *Mousawat*, the *Centre for Development Studies at Birzeit University*, and the *Centre for Peace Research and Peace Education at the Alps-Adriatic University of Klagenfurt*. Based on reconfiguring solidarities in conflict and war zones, *KnowWar* rests on the following pillars:

- to research solidarities in and between marginalised Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese communities in Lebanon,
- to work out a concept of solidarity economy under conditions of armed conflict in Syria and colonial occupation in Palestine, and
- to conceptualise epistemologies for transformative research strategies.

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