

Palestinian women of Syria mobilising to influence knowledge production

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The voices of Palestinian women of Syria are often silenced in knowledge produced in humanitarian research and practice. ‘Speaking back’ sessions provide crucial insights into these women’s experiences and their relevance for discussions on rights mobilisation.

Forced migrants are often asked to share parts of their lives with journalists, researchers and humanitarian professionals. Knowledge production is part and parcel of humanitarian practice: humanitarian actors endlessly collect, share and analyse testimonies from marginalised peoples in order to access funding and distribute aid. However, research participants’ wider stories and experiences are often silenced. They are seldom asked to take part in these processes and have little influence over how their words, voices and images are framed. Few researchers have actively engaged in how to empower participants from marginalised communities to act as consultants and experts that inform dialogues on knowledge production about their own communities.¹

As authors, we cannot write as a collective ‘we’: Khadija and Amouna² identify as stateless Palestinian cis women from Yarmouk, displaced from their homeland, Palestine, and their birthplace in Syria. They participated in an oral *herstory*³ project that documented how history is remembered by four generations of women of Palestinian heritage that were born

in Syria.⁴ As the Danish lead researcher, Mette collected the digital oral recordings as part of her PhD thesis. Mette was last in Yarmouk in 2012 and Khadija and Amouna escaped in 2014; Khadija has since been granted asylum in Germany, while Amouna and her children remain internally displaced in an UNRWA camp in Syria. Khadija and Mette met in 2018 in Germany and Mette continues to connect online with Amouna. While there is much that separates us, there is also much that connects us: we identify as cis women, loved places in Syria we used to call home, and have been unable to return for a decade.

Long before the women who participated became involved in this research project they were active in mobilising for their rights to cross borders, to access education, for protection and family unification, and for recognition as Palestinians. For example, the women held pro-democracy protests, organised education for their children and set up health and food facilities while living under siege, arranged dignified funerals and attempted to support in documenting the numbers of people who

died from systematic starvation in Yarmouk. But these actions did not come across in NGO reporting and academic studies. The historical silencing of stateless Palestinian women of Syria makes us acutely aware of processes of marginalisation, stateless communities and female perspectives in forced migration. Today, the ongoing war in Syria affects stateless Syrian-born Palestinian women in multiple and complex ways.⁵ As authors we came together to ask: how can stateless Palestinian women gain access to influence knowledge production informed by their experiences?

“No substitute for experience”

Khadija and Amouna’s grandparents fled from northern Palestine to Syria during *al-nakba*⁶ and later settled in Yarmouk, an unofficial refugee camp in Syria which nonetheless housed 16 different UNRWA facilities such as schools, clinics and cinemas. Yarmouk was established in 1957 and prior to the eruption of conflict in 2011 was home to 160,000 refugees; the largest Palestinian community outside of Palestine.⁷

In 2014, an iconic picture brought Yarmouk to the attention of the world, depicting thousands of people queuing for food on a bombed-out street. This may be how many people know Yarmouk today, undermining the central role of ‘little Palestine’ – as Yarmouk was nicknamed – to Palestinians in Syria and to the peaceful resistance at that stage in the armed conflict.⁸ The picture was also featured on the cover of FMR’s issue on the Syria crisis.⁹

But unlike others who were seeking refuge outside Syria at that time, Palestinians attempting to escape to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey had been pushed back since 2012. This experience of being pushed back to Syria is difficult for others to comprehend, including Mette, despite her being actively involved in documenting these pushbacks. As Khadija explained:

“There is no substitute for experience. No matter how many stories Mette would record, write down and translate or how many times she would listen to the story of al-nakba, the ongoing nakba or the siege of Yarmouk, she would never really understand and those who would read [about it] wouldn’t either.”

‘Speaking back’: creating space to explore complex stories

Central to the oral *herstory* project was what Mette coined ‘speaking back’ sessions. At the outset, the participants contributed to designing the research before their stories were recorded. The ‘speaking back’ sessions then allowed them to more fully explain their experiences, as they would listen to their own recordings and make comments or correct any misunderstandings. During these sessions, the women were also provided with written translations to confirm whether the written accounts were true to what they had said and meant.

According to Khadija, this allowed the participants to “show ourselves as dynamic, developing people affected by our complicated lives and circumstances”. One of the examples relates to the difficulties of sustaining and evolving family relationships during conflict. As an anti-regime activist, Khadija initially cut ties with her father, who had stayed in Syria and was allegedly supporting the Assad regime. But over the years her experience was that asylum authorities, NGO workers and activist researchers failed to understand that, despite her father’s political viewpoints (whether genuine or feigned), their relationship also had room for love and for making peace. She believes that the representation of her experiences in humanitarian reporting also contributed to reducing her human complexity:

“To me, there was something that went wrong there. Our words are frozen in time because at one point speaking back had to end and words had to be printed in reports, articles and dissertations. But I need space to be allowed complexity and I don’t feel UN reports or academic research [...] show this.”

‘Speaking back’ enabled participants to bring nuance to seemingly conflicting thoughts and feelings. Like Khadija, Amouna also had conflicting feelings about how she and her heritage was remembered – in this case, concerning her birthplace, Yarmouk. Of course, Yarmouk is also a place that carries fond memories. Listening to her own recordings, Amouna recognised that nostalgic yearning towards the place she used to call home can be misinterpreted. She connected this to UNRWA’s plans

to reopen Yarmouk, led by the Syrian regime and its stakeholders:

“How can we make a new temporary home in the rubble of Yarmouk, when we know all the evil things that happened there? [...] Whoever thinks they can recreate Yarmouk is a fool and just wants us back in a lockdown where they can control us in camps.”

Amouna’s words resonate with what activists and researchers have been calling for: ‘camp abolition’. She emphasises the tendency of UN agencies, international NGOs (INGOs) and State authorities to reproduce camps as the only place where stateless Palestinians could live, and urges forced migration researchers, practitioners and policymakers to keep camp abolitionism on the agenda. A nostalgia for past homes should not be used to romanticise encampment.

Involving research participants

Alongside the ‘speaking back’ approach, the research participants were involved in the research in other ways. For instance, Mette and the participants had a shared understanding of how the techniques used during the recording, translation and analyses worked. Large parts of the analysis were jointly conducted with the participating women. Most participants highly valued learning more about how data is encrypted, translated and anonymised, and how software tools are used to organise themes. All research participants were given their own notebooks, to write down notes they might want to come back to later or to keep for themselves. Participants who found it difficult to write could record their personal notes digitally; an option that necessarily involves ensuring that participants know how to keep this data safe, for instance via encryption and anonymising names, places, age and gender.

Participation as integral to rights struggles

People are often led to believe that participating in research can lead to a change in their circumstances. And while recording oral histories and sharing experiences might have therapeutic effects, most often the destinies of the Palestinian women of Syria remain unchanged or in some cases worsened

by humanitarian research. The possibility that knowledge production alone – for humanitarian planning or academic research – can fundamentally effect change is limited. But continuing to seek out creative ways for research to be conducted, authored, discussed in meetings or workshops, and published can ensure greater dignity for marginalised communities and can be integral to how rights struggles evolve and progress.

In this project, ‘speaking back’ and other participatory approaches did influence the research outcomes and helped to reveal important nuances and complexities that would otherwise have been missed. Yet it did not change power asymmetries between the researcher and those being researched, particularly due to the need for many of the participants to be anonymised due to their circumstances, and the lack of institutional recognition of their contribution. Most importantly, it showed that while Palestinian women of Syria are actively involved in rights struggles, regrettably their efforts are seldomly taken seriously by policymakers or highlighted in research or practice.

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1. For example, Dance J, Lory and Johnson L (2019) ‘Ideal Dialogues with Immigrants of Color in Sweden and The United States: A Participatory-Ethnographic Approach’, *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research*, 13, pp. 169–186.
2. Khadija and Amouna are pseudonyms for the authors.
3. The term *herstory* emphasises that it is a person who identifies as *her* who is the her-storyteller (*hakya*). The recorded stories contain narratives about her, her life and other women. This includes male, State, children’s and organisational stories.
4. Stendevad M E L (2022) *Palestinian Women of Syria Speaking Back. Portraying Stateless Female Diaspora*, Doctoral dissertation, The University of Leicester
5. Erakat N (2014) ‘Palestinian refugees and the Syrian uprising: Filling the protection gap during secondary forced displacement’, *International Journal of Refugee Law*, doi 10.1093/ijrl/eeu047
6. *Al-nakba* is the Arabic word used to refer to the historical event of the Palestinian people’s eviction from Palestine and the war from 1947–1949. It translates as ‘the catastrophe’.
7. bit.ly/unrwa-yarmouk
8. Al-Khatib A (2021) *Little Palestine (Diary of a Siege)*, Films de Force Majeure, Bidayyat for Audiovisual Arts, Doha Film Institute bit.ly/little-palestine
9. www.fmrreview.org/syria