



Against all odds: Transforming the role of “unpopular” victims

Theory and practice of transitional justice increasingly put victims and survivors of violence centre stage in dealing with the past processes. Acknowledgement, accountability, memorialisation and redress are considered vital to provide justice to victims, transform repressive institutions, restore social relations and promote fundamental values such as human dignity, diversity and equality. Quite often, however, a hierarchisation of victim groups takes place – with “popular” victims being the most recognised ones and “unpopular” victims being amongst the most marginalised groups. The reasons for this are manifold, ranging from structural causes, such as racism or cultural norms, to alleged collective guilt ascribed to one group or “victor’s justice” resulting from the denial of responsibility for massive human rights abuses by the (new) political elite – and the society.

Examples include the persecution and genocide of Sinti and Roma populations in Europe during World War II and their continuing discrimination afterwards, or the long-term internment of Algerian *Harkis* and their families in France. Both show the power of racism (and colonialism) intersecting with denial of guilt. Gay victims of the holocaust are an example of those rendered “unpopular” or “invisible” due to taboo and discrimination because of cultural norms, while Serb victims in Croatia are an example of those affected by “collective guilt” and “victors’ narratives”.

The workshop focused on the agency of “unpopular” victims as well as success and limiting factors to transform their role and status in dealing with the past processes and the society at large.

Organised by Centre for Nonviolent Action, Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft

Experiences:

- Emran Elmazy, Documentation and Cultural Center of German Sinti und Roma, Germany
- Aneta Vladimirov, Serb National Council, Croatia
- Termama Anak Agung Gde Ngurah, Taman 65, Indonesia (Bali)

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Insights

Overcoming victims’ hierarchisation – more specifically, the recognition, representation and inclusion of “unpopular” victims in a given society – does not only fill a justice gap, but can be considered an important indicator of a pluralistic and democratic society. However, it usually takes decades and certain democratic conditions to be in place to transform their status. Hence, time can play a positive role, but also become a stumbling block because discriminatory mechanisms, stigmatisation and denial might get entrenched in society and political culture.

Change starts at the local level and is brought about by strong advocacy from victim groups themselves, but also by pressure and solidarity from the rest of civil society. Joining forces, building alliances across borders and socio-political divides and reaching out to like- and unlike-

mindful stakeholders is crucial. These processes also require identifying the specific needs of marginalised, “unpopular” victim groups in order to provide them with adequate resources. At the same time, it is necessary to respond to victim groups that might advocate hatred and violence.

Safe spaces are essential for marginalised victim groups to freely express themselves, share their experiences and learn from each other. But in order to overcome marginalisation and victims’ hierarchisation and to find ways into formal politics, public spaces must be opened up through protests, artistic interventions, media and education. Hence, their inclusion is a multi-layered process which also requires learning how to engage with democratic politics.

Transforming the role and status of “unpopular” victims highly depends on the particularities of each context. It is therefore crucial for policy-makers and advocates to both understand local dynamics and apply lenses that include those of marginalisation, racism and colonialism as well as a rights-based approach.