

Public Consultation Paper  
For Ireland's Third National Action Plan  
Women, Peace and Security

***Memory, Trauma, and Conflict***

*Submitted by:*

*Rola (Hamed) Abu Zeid – O'Neill*

*Programme Coordinator, Lecturer, and PhD Student*

*Adult Continuing Education (ACE) - University College Cork*

War is not over when it is over, people, in general, and women, specifically, continue to suffer after the war is finished, in addition to other unforeseen consequences. The survivors or those who fled from conflict areas and political regimes, have their own memories and traumas that combine syntax them till their last days. It is very important to understand that memory is not just an individual, but it is ways of how people, society, history, and culture remember and are remembered. Memory is a flexible, permeable, and changeable. Collective memory then, is common understandings of the past shared by two or more members of a group. It is a shared knowledge and discourse of social frameworks with and within which individuals remember. C. Wright Mills (1959) states his sociological imagination theory in his book that “without use of history and without an historical sense of psychological matters, the social scientist cannot adequately state the kinds of problems that ought now to be orientating points of his studies” (Mills, 1959: 143).

More recently, collective memory has recently become a main focus in different fields of research (see Hirsch, 1981; Portelli, 1985; Hirsch, 2001). In general, Halbwachs's work *On Collective Memory* (1992) constitutes a main contribution to collective memory study. His work deals with identifying memory as distinct from history or autobiography, and he emphasises understanding collective memory through social frameworks (cadres sociaux).

Through his work, Halbwachs motivated collective memory as a field of research which is based on the social and political dimensions of commemoration.

According to Halbwachs, history and collective memory are resources of knowledge, but history becomes dominant and the main resource of knowledge about the past when traditions and social memory become weak, as a result, history has the 's opportunity to dominate and become a fundamental source of the past.

Patrick Hutton (1993) agrees with Halbwachs's approach, and suggested that today some historians are adopting Halbwachs's view of history as described in his book, *On Collective Memory*. Furthermore, historians are sharing the main assumptions of collective memory, and are assisting in collective memory in their works (Hutton, 1993: 73-90). He argues that "historiography in ancient times was investing in collective memory, which calls out the presence of the past" (Hutton, 1993 quoted in Esmeir, 2003: 36).

### ***Trauma:***

Trauma is an experience of violence, harm or wound. Claiming trauma by survivors is their demand of representation via their own language. Leigh Gilmore (2001: 6) raises the question of the relation between trauma and representation, especially language "that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency". Moreover, she raises the issue of sympathetic listeners and other extreme claims such as "without language, experience is nothing" (ibid). Furthermore, self-representation and trauma are related to each other.

According to Gilmore (2001), Gayatri Spivak in her article, "Three Women's Texts", writes about the "culture of confession" and the "culture of testimony" which she defined as "the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to less oppressed other" (ibid: 5). These cultures are combined with pain and tension when speaking out. Spivak mentions the resistance side of testimony by practicing it, by telling the subaltern's story. She explains that by: "it is well to keep that possible distinction in mind-testimony and resistance. The resistant subaltern may sometimes agree to be hailed to testimonial in the belief that resistance will thereby find effective consolidation" (Gilmore, 2001: 5). This means that the subaltern has a

right to remember, to tell her/his biography and memories, and that the public will know her/his story.

It is crucial to tell the life stories of these women and bring their self-representation and truth to the public. It is very important to highlight very personal and diverse experiences of asylum seekers and refugee women who arrived to Ireland, in addition to the various social and political changes that have taken place in their lives since. However, it is useful to examine the impact of the differences between various generations of those women, such as the impact of the new shelter (Ireland) on women and young women's lives, and how it has affected their understanding of being a refugee, and how their memories have shaped their understanding for the future.

Although we are using the term "collective memory", this "collective" is built on from different "individual" narratives, autobiographies and testimonies that are transferred from one generation to the next. These memories differ from each other according to the person's class, education, village origin and village hosting shelter. These women played many roles (mothers, wives, etc.), as they were 'forced' to be the emotional centre and power (source of strength) in the family, they often found themselves having to simultaneously manage their own anxiety while caring for others. Moreover, they had to cope with their loss of land and tradition, and some were taken from their traditional environments and lifestyles without the aid of new knowledge or skills, or any other support to help them manage their new life which, with devastating consequences. The re-settlement into an unfamiliar life has left many women depressed and unhappy, with deep feelings of loneliness and worthlessness.

### ***Memory and Identity:***

Although we are using the term "collective memory", this "collective" is built from different "individual" narratives, autobiographies and testimonies that are transferred from one generation to the next. These memories are different from one to the other according to their class, education, village origin and village hosting shelter. In agreement with Maurice Halbwachs (1992) when he argued that each group develops its own identity and past by looking at other groups and identities. I think that by distinction each group's identity which

includes master commemorative narrative and memory affects social, cultural and political behavior which separates it from other group's identity. But I believe there would be a real danger if one group focuses on its own narrative, memory and identity while denying other groups' rights to have their own narrative, memory and identity. I think that the function of remembering and forgetting are very close and connect in the construction of collective memory. This is the complexity of the recovering and re-covering of roots. So, I would argue that the construction of collective memory should not be based on or emphasize official historical documentation.

By analysing women's memories and bringing their stories to the public and the coming generations in order not to lose our individual and collective identities. It will present the past in order to recover our present, and contribute to a better understanding of the geographical, political, psychological, and humanitarian narrative of their forced displacement and exile.

### ***Memory is a Battlefield:***

Conditions of exile and memories of the past have had colossal effects on the social, religious and political life of asylum seekers and refugee women and their inhabitants. What are those social consequences? To what extent have integration, assimilation or alienation policies affected women in their new shelter where part of them now live? How does the socio-political history of their home-countries form their modern collective history? Is it "real", "invented nostalgia", or "reinvented history" of their home-countries that dominates their imaginations and their discourse as well? It is crucial that these women be sufficiently able to express themselves clearly, to elicit a breadth of experience, it was also important for the women to come from different families.

Asylum seeker and refugee women had to cope with their loss of land and tradition. In particular, they faced the loss of the economic resources, which influenced their lives and their self-esteem, refugee women today feel deprived of their skills and knowledge of land cultivation. Being taken from their traditional lifestyle without any replacement with new knowledge or skills, or any support to help them cope with their new life has been devastating.

### ***Effects on Women***

There are many impacts on conflict and loss of the 'house' on women, as house consider as a centre of safety, security, confidence, and worthiness, in addition that the house is the space which women feel is their own.

*Social Impacts:* Whether the women work outside the house or not, women devote a significant amount of their time and energy in unremunerated and often overlooked works in the home. When families are made homeless, women bear the brunt of rebuilding the home.

By becoming asylum seekers, refugees, or internally displaced persons, the woman loses what once was her pride, her secured place and kingdom. She has lost her world in a physical sense, and in a social sense, too, because she is no longer in charge but living in someone else's house or in hostels, and has to take on the subordinate status. Loss of the house means the loss of privacy and space often puts strain on the relationships between family members, which results often in the mothers feeling undermined in their role as a source of authority and emotional and material support for their children.

*Psychological Impacts:* being an asylum seeker, refugee, or IDP is an act by the sense of destruction it causes, both on physical and mental level, destroys all means of security. This sharply changes women's previous gender roles and requires them to face new challenges, carry the burden of rebuilding a new life outside her 'normal' culture. Moreover, women are left with unique burdens following the loss of the house and home.

Hardships in taking care of their own and family member's needs in Ireland, their feeling of despair, yet their need to be strong and calm down their children when they had no place to shelter or safeguard them. This loss of the only safe haven that the young boys and girls have known, of course affects them both deeply, but the gender ramifications of such violence are different, and far from being fully accounted for.

Moreover, this combined with nightmares of despair, helplessness, fear, insecurity, and responsibility to gather and to embrace a family without a shelter syntax. The emotional and psychological impact on family members is often directed towards mothers, and the trauma of dispossession can lead to family bitterness and breakup. Being an asylum seeker or refugee effect adolescent girls and young women severely, as at this age, girls tend to develop their own means of privacy, while their reality shows that the world around them becomes

unstable and no one is reliable anymore. Their parents cannot provide them shelter, and their sense of security is lost for a long time if not forever.