

Navigating Non-Transition: Grassroots Victim–Survivor Mobilization and the Pursuit of Transitional Justice in Turkey and Morocco

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Abstract

This article explores the specific implications of paradigmatic transitional justice contexts for victim-survivor mobilization by bringing together two under-researched cases: Morocco and Turkey. In both countries, victim-survivor groups have emerged as active political actors amid violence and limited or non-existing transitional justice processes. Examining these cases reveals that structural conditions and dynamics in non-transitional settings profoundly impact victim-survivors' activism, shaping their transitional justice agendas and strategies. It also demonstrates that even in contexts characterized by impunity and limited political change, victim-survivor groups persistently advocate for justice, truth, and non-recurrence, linking their struggle to broader goals like democracy and peace, and innovating and adapting their strategies to navigate a challenging terrain. Drawing on field research with activists involved in the *Coordination Committee of the Families of the Disappeared and of Victims of Enforced Disappearance* in Morocco, and the *Saturday Mothers/People* in Turkey, this article provides insights into the complexities of transitional justice in paradigmatic contexts, emphasizing the pivotal role of grassroots actors in advancing transitional justice, even under adverse conditions. It emphasizes the need to shift the focus away from the state as the primary subject of analysis and instead centre on victim-survivors as strategic political agents. Victim-survivors' agency, needs, and aspirations should be prioritized to facilitate fundamental change, including community-driven transitional justice efforts.

Practitioner Points

- Organized victim–survivor groups in Morocco and Turkey have demonstrated effective strategies, such as sit-ins and memory activism, to advocate for truth and justice despite ongoing repression and political resistance.
- Even in the absence of official transitional justice processes, victim–survivors can play a crucial role in advancing transitional justice goals and in driving change by linking their demands to broader societal and political visions.
- Emphasizing the agency, needs, and aspirations of victim–survivors is essential in transitional justice efforts, highlighting the importance of community-driven initiatives and the strategic political activism of victim–survivor groups.

Keywords: paradigmatic transitional justice; civil society; protest; repression; resistance; victim–survivor groups

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1. Introduction: unpacking victim–survivors’ agency in aparadigmatic contexts of transitional justice

This article explores the dynamics of victim–survivor groups¹ efforts to advance the goals of transitional justice—namely truth, justice, memorialization, reparations, and guarantees of non-repetition (UN 2010; Thiagarajah 2016)—in the absence of a fundamental political transformation in Morocco and Turkey. Both countries have a long history of state violence—in the context of armed conflict and a repressive regime in Turkey, and an authoritarian regime in Morocco—and have experienced significant grassroots mobilization for truth, justice, and accountability. However, official transitional justice mechanisms have been notably absent (Turkey) or limited (Morocco), and demands for dealing with the past have been met with political resistance. While a truth commission was eventually set up in Morocco, the question of impunity remained off-limits. In Turkey, a lack of political will has prevented an overarching transitional justice framework. Most poignantly, neither country has undergone a substantial political transition towards democracy, and violence is ongoing, although it has shifted to other forms and, at least in the Moroccan case, is also arguably less widespread and systematic compared to the past. Yet, these two cases remain under-studied in transitional justice scholarship, as does the role of victim–survivors as political actors, in particular in ‘aparadigmatic’ cases of transitional justice (Destrooper et al. 2023) characterized by a lack of or limited political change and/or ongoing violence.

Drawing on the case studies of Morocco and Turkey, the article aims to explore and offer some ideas on the conceptualization of the specificities of victim–survivor mobilization around transitional justice in contexts of non-transition. More specifically, the article seeks to answer how aparadigmatic contexts of transitional justice shape the demands and strategies of victim–survivor groups, and which role victim–survivor groups can adopt in these settings. To this end, we examine and contrast two long-standing and impactful victim–survivor groups, tracing their trajectories from their foundation in the 1970s and 1990s until today: the *Comité de Coordination des Familles des Disparus et des Victimes de la Disparition Forcée au Maroc* (Coordination Committee of the Families of the Disappeared and of Victims of Enforced Disappearance in Morocco, CCFDM) in Morocco, that assembles the families of the disappeared across the political spectrum, and *Cumartesi Anneleri/İnsanları* (Saturday Mothers/People),² which has challenged state’s policy of enforced disappearance.

1 In both cases, the majority of our research participants preferred and more frequently used the term ‘victim’. However, we recognize that this terminology may not fully capture the intricacies of a complex identity and the myriad experiences associated with victimhood, and is fraught with challenges, such as connotations of passivity (Druliolle and Brett 2018; de Waardt and Weber 2019; Saeed 2016: 170). For these reasons, some individuals may prefer the term ‘survivor’, which places more emphasis on overcoming experiences of victimization and regaining agency. Preference for one term over the other varies across countries, groups, and even individuals—while some reject the term ‘victim’ as pacifying, others find it empowering (Hamber 2009: 41; Krystalli 2020: 2). To acknowledge these differing perspectives, while remaining true to the language and life-worlds of our research participants, we use the term ‘victim–survivor’ throughout this article. In line with our interlocutors’ self-perception, the term as we use it reflects a nuanced understanding that embraces different positionalities and recognizes the agency of victim–survivors. At the same time, we recognize that some individuals, including members of the movements that are the subject of our research, may not identify with either of these terms, and may prefer entirely different identity conceptions and labels. This is particularly important in relation to the Turkish–Kurdish case study, where—while indicating that the term ‘victim’ is most commonly used due to a lack of viable alternatives (Interview T21 2020; Interview T23 2020)—many of the research participants expressed complex and conflicting feelings about the term. In fact, although the Saturday Mothers acknowledge the victimization experience inflicted by the state, they do not identify as a victim or survivor group, nor do they use these terms in their public statements. Out of respect for their self-definition, we therefore avoid such labels in the sections that refer exclusively to the Saturday Mothers, but for analytical and comparative purposes use the term ‘victim–survivor’ in the rest of the article.

2 Saturday Mothers/People is the most common term used to refer to the group (see Ahiska 2020). Saturday Mothers (*Dayikên Şemiyê* in Kurdish) usually refers to the mothers whereas Saturday People is used to refer to the broader network of family members and activists who regularly attend the meetings and support their cause (Interview T21 2020; Interview T23 2020).

For the Moroccan case study, in total 36 semi-structured interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2024, all but one in person. As this paper focuses on one victim-survivor group, CCFDM, it mostly draws on seven interviews with former or current members of the association and its umbrella organization, the Moroccan Forum for Truth and Justice (FMVJ),³ complemented by six interviews with members of the Moroccan Association of Human Rights (AMDH),⁴ the Moroccan Organisation of Human Rights (OMDH),⁵ the Medical Association for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture (AMRVT),⁶ and the Equity and Reconciliation Commission. For the Turkish-Kurdish case study, 24 interviews were conducted in 2019 and 2020, both in person and online, with human rights advocates, practitioners, and lawyers based in Istanbul and Diyarbakır. This article builds especially on seven interviews with members of the Saturday Mothers/People, the Human Rights Association, the Diyarbakır Bar Association, and the Turkey Human Rights Foundation. All interviews were anonymized according to the participants' preferences.

The article contributes to the growing body of work on the role of victim-survivors in transitional justice and to the emerging scholarship on paradigmatic cases of transitional justice. While transitional justice has long been associated with clear-cut transitions (Quinn 2014: 68), scholarly attention has recently shifted to include cases of transitional justice in contexts of limited political change, ongoing conflict, or democratic backsliding (see e.g. Abdoueldahab 2018; Destrooper et al. 2023; Engstrom 2013; Hansen 2017; Herremans 2023; Stokke and Wiebelhaus-Brahm 2022). In this context, scholars have also begun to question the prospects of justice for victims and survivors (Destrooper et al. 2023: 12) and to point to the innovative ways in which grassroots actors pursue transitional justice in the wake of adversity and lack of access to formal mechanisms (Destrooper and Engstrom 2023: 220; Herremans and Bellintani 2023). However, transitional justice literature does not yet fully capture settings where there have been different stages and levels of transition, and where human rights abuses have never ceased. There is, therefore, a need for a nuanced approach to analyze the prospects, challenges, and opportunities that may arise when transitional justice is applied in conflicted societies (Hansen 2014: 111).

Over the past decades, transitional justice research and practice has increasingly foregrounded victim-survivors' needs and perspectives (Hamber and Lundy 2020; Firchow and Selim 2022; Ottendoerfer 2018; Park and Santos 2022; Robins 2011, 2012), focused on survivors as participants and agents in transitional justice processes (Evrard et al. 2021; Gilmore and Moffett 2021; de Waardt and Weber 2019; de Waardt and Willems 2022), and highlighted the role of grassroots actors and localized dynamics (Destrooper and Parmentier 2018; Fairey and Kerr 2020; McEvoy and McGregor 2008; Shaw et al. 2010; Gomez 2022; Otálora-Gallego and Monroy-Santander, 2024). As part of a growing interest in the role of civil society in transitional justice (Brankovic and van der Merwe 2016, 2018; Gready and Robins 2017; van der Merwe and Schkolne 2017), a number of scholars have also turned their attention to victim-survivors' collective capacity to organize and mobilize, and have started to conceptualize victim-survivor groups as civil society actors that both shape and contest transitional justice (Billingsley 2019; de Waardt 2012; Drulliole and Brett 2018; Gallagher 2021; Lefranc and Mathieu 2009; Navarro 2019; Robins and Gready 2023). Despite these valuable contributions, which have raised crucial questions and challenged dominant ideas of passive victimhood, overall, the political agency of victim-survivors still tends to be underestimated, and transitional justice still fails to fully capture their experiences as political actors (Baines 2015; García-Godos 2016; Robins 2017; Sajjad 2016). As a result, the role of victim-survivor organizations remains under-researched. This is even

3 Forum Marocain pour la Vérité et la Justice.

4 Association Marocaine des Droits Humains.

5 Organisation Marocaine des Droits Humains.

6 Association Médicale de Réhabilitation des Victimes de la Torture.

more problematic in the context of aparadigmatic transitions, where, in the absence of an official will, civil society, including victim-survivor groups, often has a particularly important role to play.

Analyzing and juxtaposing the case of the CCFDM in Morocco and of the Saturday Mothers in Turkey provides much-needed empirical insights to better understand the role of organized victim-survivors and their political agency in transitional justice processes in aparadigmatic contexts. We argue that the peculiarities of non-transitional/aparadigmatic contexts of transitional justice decisively shape the mobilization of victim-survivor movements, specifically their demands and strategies: The convergence of recurring violence and parallel erosion of democratic hopes has profound implications for victim-survivors' understanding of transitional justice. In cases where there is limited willingness to implement a comprehensive transitional justice framework, and the state targets those who advocate for change, victim-survivor groups have to devise innovative and persuasive strategies to gain visibility, navigate state repression, and garner support. The case studies highlight victim-survivor groups' effectiveness as transitional justice actors and their ability to carve out spaces for truth- and justice-seeking, even in the absence of an official transition.

2. Setting the stage: understanding transitional justice and victim-survivor mobilization in Morocco and Turkey

2.1 Contextualizing transitional justice: gaps, advances, and ambiguities

To allow for a better understanding of victim-survivor mobilization in Turkey and Morocco, the following section provides an overview of the history of violence and the politics of transitional justice in both countries. Although the transitional justice processes followed quite different trajectories, in both countries, many demands of victim-survivors remain unmet or have only been partially met.

2.1.1 Morocco: transitional justice ... or not?

Violence was inscribed into post-independence Morocco from the very beginning. As a result of an unconditional political course to secure the power of the monarchy, during the 'Years of Lead' (ca. 1956–99) thousands—the majority members of opposition movements or alleged dissidents—suffered state violence, including excessive use of force during protests, arbitrary arrest and detention, extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearance, torture, or forced exile (Loudiy 2014: 66, 72–7, 92).

The era of widespread human rights violations only ended in the early 1990s, when growing civil society pressure and changing geo-political circumstances led to a slow process of political opening. In 1999, a change of power from King Hassan II to his son Mohammed VI opened up further space to address past human rights violations and led to the establishment of a first commission to deal with the past, the *Instance Indépendante d'Arbitrage* (IIA),⁷ in August 1999, tasked with the compensation of victim-survivors. However, its narrow definition of victimhood and reparations, its limited timeframe, and the absence of truth-telling and accountability raised considerable critique (Loudiy 2014: 87f). These shortcomings as well as the regime's attempt to take this as final closure with the past served as a gateway for political mobilization of civil society and victim-survivor groups, who demanded a more meaningful transitional justice process (Vairel 2014: 144, 147–9). Consequently, a more comprehensive commission, the *Instance pour l'Équité et la Réconciliation* (IER, 2004–06),⁸ was created, whose mandate covered the years 1956 to

⁷ Independent Arbitration Commission.

⁸ Equity and Reconciliation Commission.

1999 and included the provision of a broad set of reparations and truth recovery (Dahir No. 1.04.42, Art. 9, 2004). The mandate however explicitly excluded any kind of criminal responsibility (*ibid.*: Art. 6).

The outcome is at least mixed: The IER answered many of the victim-survivors' demands and was largely victim-driven and -oriented. The majority of commissioners were survivors themselves, and the commission was directly modelled on proposals by the victim-survivor movement. The IER proved mostly successful in providing compensation and—to a lesser extent—a space for truth recovery, with seven public hearings held across the country. However, it did not bring about justice and accountability—neither were lines of responsibility established, nor were the guilty brought to justice (Slyomovics 2005: 40). A number of commemorative projects were established, but official memory culture remains characterized by an omission of the 'Years of Lead' (Belkziz 2018: 104–7). Until today, many of the IER's recommendations, including guarantees for non-repetition and institutional reforms, have not been implemented (ICTJ 2016; Hadji 2021). Most strikingly, the transitional justice process was not accompanied by a political transition. Behind a democratic façade and despite the post-Arab Spring political reforms, Morocco remained a semi-authoritarian regime (Loudiy 2014: 60–2). The last years have seen a growing restriction of the freedom of assembly and expression, an increase in repression, and shrinking space for civil society, with the regime clamping down on journalists and human rights activists as well as suppressing popular protest, such as the *Hirak* movement (Amnesty International. 2017, 2021a: 252f; Outaher 2018: 9f).

2.1.2 Turkey: promising departures, dashed hopes

In Turkey, the state has historically marginalized and repressed minorities, such as Kurds, Armenians, Alevis, and non-Muslims, who were seen as potential threat (Kaya and Whiting 2019: 94), and has targeted political dissidents through violent means. Although rooted in the origins of the Turkish Republic, the Kurdish conflict started in 1984 as an armed conflict between the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*)⁹ and the Turkish military forces. Following the 1980 military coup, and throughout the 1990s, enforced disappearances evolved into a systematic state policy, targeting Kurds and other dissidents (İHD 2024).¹⁰

The early 2000s were marked by the newly elected AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*)¹¹ government's attempts at EU membership negotiations (Pope 2012), including several reform packages expanding Kurdish rights. At the same time, civil society's work towards truth and justice started to gain momentum, resulting in numerous bottom-up initiatives for transitional justice. For example, in 2007, civil society established the 'Truth and Justice Commission for the Diyarbakır Prison' to shed light on the grave human rights violations committed against thousands of Kurdish political prisoners, and in 2010, a temporary 'Museum of Shame' was launched as memorialization attempt (Bakiner 2013: 705). This development coincided with unprecedented official efforts to acknowledge the past (Baser 2017). For example, in 2011, following a landmark meeting between representatives of Saturday Mothers and then Prime Minister Erdoğan, a parliamentary subcommission inquired into the death of Cemil Kırbayır in police custody (Interview T21 2020; Bianet. 2021). Although the subcommission only considered one case and its report did not lead to a criminal investigation or broader truth recovery efforts, this was an important effort to officially acknowledge disappearances. However, despite these promising steps, the government neither initiated a comprehensive process to deal with the past, nor delivered justice, truth, and accountability (Bakiner 2013: 706; Budak 2015: 20). The limited and

⁹ Kurdistan Workers' Party.

¹⁰ Human rights organizations identified 1,388 cases of enforced disappearance between 1980 and 2001 (İHD 2022), although the exact number remains unknown (İHD 2007) and is likely much higher.

¹¹ Justice and Development Party.

isolated official attempts at transitional justice remained pragmatic political manoeuvres (Jongerden 2018: 736).

The 2013–15 peace process at first opened up new space to discuss various approaches to transitional justice (Baser 2017). Yet, following its collapse, state violence reached new heights: Sheer numbers of civilians were killed, thousands forcibly displaced, and the state imposed months-long blanket curfews and a heavy military presence in Kurdish towns (Amnesty International 2016; Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2017; Rosenfeld 2016). Most civil society efforts around transitional justice gradually faded away and were ultimately silenced by increasing authoritarianism. Today, civil society initiatives still advocate for truth and justice, but, faced with constant police violence, oftentimes in more covert ways.

2.2 From repression to mobilization

Both in Morocco and in Turkey, victim–survivor mobilization can be traced back to the efforts of families of victim–survivors of state violence and a collective experience of victimhood, that have led to the founding of the CCFDM and the Saturday Mothers. Given their sustained role as drivers of victim–survivor mobilization until today, these two associations are of particular interest to gain insights into protest dynamics and agenda-setting of victim–survivor groups over time. In the following, both groups will be introduced.

2.2.1 The CCFDM

Faced with the imprisonment or disappearance of their loved ones and bound together by their shared suffering, families, and mothers in particular, were the first to organize, and soon got together under the umbrella of the ‘Coordination Committee of the Families of the Disappeared’ (CCFDM) in the 1970s. Open to families of the disappeared from across the political spectrum, the group represents the main groups of victim–survivors of enforced disappearance in Morocco (Comité de coordination des familles des disparus et des victimes de la disparition forcée au Maroc (CCFDM) & Association des parents et amis de disparus au Maroc (CCFDM and APADM 2008): 17). From the very beginning, the CCFDM entertained strong relations with and received support from the main human rights organizations in Morocco, the AMDH and the OMDH (Interview M1 2022; Interview M6 2022; Interview M8 2022; Interview M9 2022; Interview M10 2022; Interview M11 2022; Interview M12 2023), and cooperated with INGOs such as *Amnesty International* (Vairel 2014: 150; Interview M9 2022). It also forms part of international networks such as the *Fédération Euro-Méditerranéenne contre les Disparitions Forcées* (FEMED)¹² or the *International Coalition against Enforced Disappearances* (ICAED) (Interview M8 2022). Most of the CCFDM’s work and political action takes place in Rabat or Casablanca (with the *Place des Nations Unies* as main protest site), but the group has also organized and joined protests elsewhere.

Broader mobilization around transitional justice only began in the late 1990s when large parts of the victim–survivor community resisted the state’s approach to dealing with the past, considering the IIA a ‘whitewash’ (Interview M10 2022). The intensification of efforts around the victim–survivors’ cause culminated in the foundation of the FMVJ in November 1999, which assembled the different victim–survivor groups, including the CCFDM, under its roof, kicking off a large-scale mobilization of victim–survivors: The period from 1999 to 2004 was characterized by a multitude of protest events, an increasing organization of the victim–survivors’ struggle, and a growing influence on the state’s transitional justice policies, finally resulting in the establishment of the IER in 2004.

Unmet demands in relation to the IER’s work led the CCFDM to continue its struggle beyond 2006. However, the victim–survivor movement has lost much of its former strength

12 Euro-Mediterranean Federation against Enforced Disappearance.

and mobilization capacity. This can be explained by several factors: Firstly, a split in the victim-survivor movement occurred as result of diverging assessments of the transitional justice process (Interview M2 2022; Interview M7 2022; Interview M9 2022). While some victim-survivors were satisfied with the outcomes, others felt like the IER had not gone far enough. This has effectively led to two opposed dynamics: On the one hand, an increasing depoliticization, demobilization, and integration of victim-survivors into the state apparatus; on the other hand—although on a much smaller scale—an ongoing mobilization of some victim-survivor groups, including the CCFDM.¹³ As part of this development, the CCFDM's membership base has declined drastically (Interview M8 2022; Interview M9 2022). The integration of many of its former members into the state has resulted in a loss of skills, expertise, and leadership (Interview M9 2022). Secondly, transitional justice is no longer a priority for the state, but effectively considered a done deal, making it more difficult for victim-survivor groups to place their demands (Interview M2 2022; Interview M8 2022; Interview M9 2022). In fact, in more recent years, state authorities have hardly reacted to or taken up demands by the organization (Interview M7 2022; Interview M8 2022; Interview M13 2023).

2.2.2 The Saturday Mothers Movement

The Saturday Mothers/People are the most visible and systematically organized group challenging state violence and victimization and advancing transitional justice in Turkey. The movement came into being when the family of socialist Hasan Ocak, whose tortured body had been found in an unmarked grave, made a first press statement together with other families of the disappeared on 17 May 1995 (Duvar 2022). Inspired by the *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina and supported by human rights defenders and feminist activists, they started silent sit-ins in Galatasaray Square in Istanbul on 27 May 1995, marking the beginning of a decades-long campaign for truth, justice, commemoration, and non-recurrence of enforced disappearance (Koçali 2014; Karakuş 2022; Arcan 2023). Although Kurds were targeted most heavily, left-wing activists from other ethnicities were also disappeared, and the Saturday Mothers therefore include families from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Karaman 2023; Sezer Şanlı 2018).

Importantly, the Saturday Mothers emerged against the backdrop of a broader, vibrant political mobilization against human rights violations in the aftermath of the 1980 military coup, driven, amongst others, by a human rights movement led by the mothers of prisoners, the women-led *Arkadaşıma Dokunma* campaign,¹⁴ *İnsan Hakları Derneği* (İHD),¹⁵ and the Kurdish political movement¹⁶ (Ahiska 2020; Günaysu 2014; Orhan 2008). Founded in 1986 by relatives of prisoners, intellectuals, and human rights advocates, the İHD in particular played an essential role in the Saturday Mothers' emergence and continues to support their work until today (Interview T11 2019; Interview T15 2020; Interview T21 2020). The activists who initiated the sit-ins alongside the families were associated with these groups and movements, thus situating the Saturday Mothers' activism within a wider struggle against state violence (Günaysu 2014; Interview T15 2020).

13 In this context, it is important to note that the CCFDM's perspective is one of many perspectives on transitional justice in Morocco, and that parts of the victim-survivor community assess the outcome of the transitional justice process much more positively. The CCFDM has also been affected by the dynamic described, and conflicting assessments of the IER and of the need for continued mobilization have led to a transformation of the group over the years. The data presented in the article, particularly in relation to the aftermath of the IER and the groups' agenda, must be seen in this light.

14 Don't Touch My Friend.

15 Human Rights Association.

16 The Kurdish political movement refers to a variety of actors: individuals who took part in popular uprisings in Kurdish cities, activist groups, civil society organizations, the Kurdish women's movement, Kurdish political parties, and Kurdish armed groups. For more details on Kurdish political activism, see Gunes (2011) and O'Connor (2017).

Despite attracting hundreds of participants every week, in 1999, the group decided to halt the sit-ins due to heavy police violence, but continued to seek justice through national and international platforms (Arcan, 2023; Karaman 2023). In response to the Ergenekon trials, which for the first time held senior military officers accountable for conflict-related human rights violations (Sezer Şanlı 2018: 108), the Saturday Mothers resumed their sit-ins in 2009, gathering an even a larger crowd than before (Alici 2022; Günaysu 2014; Ocak 2012). That year, through a ‘boomerang effect’, the Saturday sit-ins also expanded to the Kurdish cities of Batman, Diyarbakır, Şırnak, and Hakkari (Daşlı 2024: 10).

3. Trajectories of resistance: navigating transitional justice from below in Morocco and Turkey

In both contexts, victim-survivor mobilization occurred in paradigmatic contexts of transitional justice characterized by a limited or absent transitional justice process coupled with a lack of fundamental political change. By first tracing the evolvement of demands and understandings of transitional justice, and in a second step examining the protest repertoires adopted by the victim-survivor groups, we will show that this has profoundly shaped victim-survivor mobilization. However, rather than just acting as inhibiting factor, this has also given rise to new forms of contestation and visions of justice, and opened up alternative spaces for enacting transitional justice.

3.1 Moving beyond transitional justice: tracing the demands and visions of victim-survivors

In both cases, the agendas of the victim-survivor movements evolved from existential demands to a broader agenda of transitional justice, including truth, justice, memory, and measures of non-recurrence regarding state violence. Faced with continuities of violence and a lack of political change, victim-survivors in both countries link their claims for transitional justice to broader visions of peace and political change and draw parallels between their own and more recent struggles and experiences.

3.1.1 Morocco: between partial successes and open demands

The early phase of activism of victim-survivors was characterized by existential demands rather than elaborate political visions and claims, as finding the disappeared and the liberation of political prisoners were paramount in a context of ongoing state violence (Interview M4 2022; Interview M9 2022; Interview M12 2023). Although the concern for the disappeared and truth recovery remained at the centre of their agenda, claims broadened over time, and by the late 1990s, there was a shift of demands towards transitional justice, including reparation, justice, and memory, and towards larger political visions (Interview M9 2022). Accordingly, alongside the other victim-survivor groups, the CCFDM began to mobilize for an independent truth commission to achieve truth, reparations, accountability, and guarantees of non-recurrence (CCFDM and APADM 2008: 6).

The IER answered some of these demands: The CCFDM praises the IER’s achievements in recognizing the victim-survivors’ suffering, in offering compensations, and in creating collective awareness for the ‘Years of Lead’ (CCFDM and APADM 2008: 6), and acknowledges the value of its recommendations (CCFDM 2006: 119f). However, the IER failed to address other primary concerns, leading the association to continue its struggle:

Today, some people are trying to persuade us to stop fighting and to stop ‘dwelling’ on unrealistic claims. [...] For them, the Moroccan state has already given a lot. Indeed, our struggle has led to concrete results, but we have not achieved our goals of bringing justice to the victims and eradicating forever these criminal practices of kidnapping, torture, and sequestration. (CCFDM and APADM 2008: 2)

Until today, unfulfilled demands relate particularly to truth recovery, justice, and memory (see e.g. CCFDM 2016; CCFDM and APADM 2008: 6, 20f, CCFDM and FMVJ 2009, 2022b, 2022c, 2023b): The CCFDM calls for adequate investigation mechanisms to recover the truth about all enforced disappearances, the preservation of memory sites, and addressing unresolved issues around reparations (CCFDM 2009, 2016; CCFDM and FMVJ 2023a, 2023b). Regarding justice, the CCFDM claims that this can only be achieved through ending the systemic impunity and demands ‘the removal of criminals responsible for serious human rights violations from office’ (CCFDM and FMVJ 2016) as well as the prosecution of the perpetrators (CCFDM and FMVJ 2022a; CCFDM and APADM 2008: 7). Naturally, after the official end of the transitional justice process, attention has also shifted towards the implementation of the IER recommendations and the advancement of reforms to ensure the non-recurrence of violence (see e.g. CCFDM 2009), such as the harmonization of national criminal law with international law criminalizing enforced disappearance, or the development of a national strategy to combat impunity (CCFDM and FMVJ 2023a, 2023b). Importantly, for most victim-survivors who continue to mobilize, transitional justice and their demands are linked to broader visions of change, especially democratization. CCFDM member Abdelkrim Ouazzane for instance stressed that the primary aim of transitional justice is ‘to move away from a non-democratic system, in other words, to build a democracy’ (Interview 2022) and Abdelkrim El Manouzi declared that ‘[t]he best reparation is the establishment of a real democracy, unity against impunity, the rule of law’ (Interview M3 2022).

Faced with a lack of political reforms and ongoing human rights violations, the CCFDM places its activism in a wider temporal landscape that transgresses the concern with the past. The following communiqué from 2022 shows clearly that the idea of continuity of violence motivates the CCFDM’s work:

We commemorate the anniversary of the National Day of the Disappeared this year in circumstances characterised by a dramatic decline in the field of human rights, a return to the Years of Lead, the suppression of freedoms, the enactment of laws to silence voices, the return of wholesale political arrests and unjust sentences. (CCFDM and FMVJ 2022a)

Driven by the goal that ‘what happened [...] will not be repeated’ (CCFDM and FMVJ 2022c), the CCFDM not only comments on current political developments but also declares solidarity with more recent struggles (see e.g. AMDH and FMVJ 2011). In 2017, for instance, the CCFDM organized a sit-in under the slogan ‘The Families of the Disappeared in Morocco ** The Families of the Hirak of the RIF COMMON DESTINY - CONTINUING FIGHT’, asserting that ‘what is happening before our eyes as a reproduction and continuity of the so-called Years of Lead’ (CCFDM 2017).

Confronted with democratic backsliding and the non-fulfilment of many of its demands, the CCFDM increasingly considers the transitional justice process a farce. In 2022, it stated that the entire process was an instrument to elude the truth and ensure impunity (CCFDM and FMVJ 2022b). Elsewhere, it refers to the IER as ‘pseudo transitional justice set by the authorities’ that ‘was conceived only for one purpose of political marketing’ (CCFDM and FMVJ no date). In line with this, while the core demands remained largely the same, the visions of how to achieve them changed, with more recent communiqués pitching the idea of a new independent truth commission (see e.g. CCFDM and FMVJ 2020a, 2020b, 2022b, 2023a; no date).

3.1.2 Turkey: unending struggles

Motivated by the hope of revealing the fate of the disappeared, truth has been the Saturday Mothers’ primary demand since the beginning. Likewise, the families have long been demanding justice, calling not only for the prosecution of the perpetrators but also for

delivering the remains of the disappeared to their families to allow them to mourn properly (Interview T16 2020; Interview T20 2020). Faced with a climate of ongoing impunity and denial of enforced disappearances, the group has also persistently called for the official recognition that the victim-survivors 'were taken into custody by state authorities, subjected to torture and disappeared' (Interview T19 2020). The Saturday Mothers have also routinely advocated for a truth commission (Evrensel 2011), which they understand as a vital precondition for societal peace and reconciliation. Guarantees of non-recurrence are another key demand (Interview T21 2020), and the Saturday Mothers have amongst other things urged for legal regulations to prevent and prosecute the crime of enforced disappearance and to recognize it as a crime against humanity, including the ratification and implementation of the *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance* and the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* (Amnesty International. 2021a, b). As one interlocutor explained: 'To create a healthy society that is healed from traumas, these events should definitely not repeat. The biggest reason of our persistence is this: that these losses should not happen again' (Interview T23 2020).

With the resumption of sit-ins in 2009, following the start of the Ergenekon trials in 2008, the sit-ins began to focus on more tangible justice demands (Göral 2019: 157), first and foremost the inclusion of the enforced disappearance cases into the Ergenekon investigations and the exhumations of mass graves (Bianet 2009). More people started to join the protests from democratic mass organizations, trade unions, and human rights groups, which led to the expansion of the movement's agenda to include an increasingly wider range of human rights demands (Sezer Şanlı 2018: 108).

The Saturday Mothers have also taken a strong political stance in relation to broader political issues such as the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish Conflict, the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, and different other forms of state violence. They articulate elaborate visions of peace that go beyond 'just the absence of war but also [include] the freedoms of expression and interpersonal harmony that foster social justice' (Karaman 2016: 393; see also Interview T15 2020; Interview T19 2020). Notably, when addressing current political issues, such as the recognition of the Armenian Genocide or the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish conflict, they draw parallels between their cause and those issues and address the continuity of state violence, showing the extent to which the aparadigmatic context of non-transition actually shapes the Saturday Mothers' agenda. For instance, in a sit-in on 30 January 2016, shortly after the end of the peace process, they simultaneously called for justice for Kemal Mübariz, who had been disappeared in Cizre in 1994, and for an end to the persistent war policies in the Kurdish region (Bianet 2016), thereby situating their demands as part of a larger ongoing struggle for justice and peace. The following quote from their press statement shows how strongly their activism is informed by the idea of recurring violence that places the present in the past:

In today's Cizre, the children, grandchildren of those whose houses were set on fire, who were slaughtered, who were disappeared in the 90s are forced to live in an atrocity atmosphere where law and humanity are suspended. (Bianet 2016)

3.2 Overcoming adversity: struggling for transitional in a challenging environment

Faced with a restrictive political environment and a context of ongoing violence, victim-survivor groups in both countries had to overcome several constraints: In Morocco, especially in the early phase of activism during the 'Years of Lead', mobilization took place under difficult circumstances and the CCFDM's activities were often met with interventions by the security forces (Interview M3 2022). While the Moroccan regime tolerated the protest behaviour of the victim-survivor movement to a large extent from the 1990s

onwards, it did at times crack down on more contentious protest actions. In most of these cases, protest events were only banned or prohibited, occasionally however, they were also repressed by security forces and activists got arrested and put on trial (Interview M7 2022; Interview M10 2022). Members of the FMVJ's Western Saharan section were continuously subject to harassment, surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and trials, before a court ordered the dissolution of the section in 2003 (ARSO 2003).

In Turkey, the Saturday Mothers have faced political violence since the early stages, and have continuously been surrounded by a heavy police presence during their sit-ins. Starting from August 1998, the police started dispersing the sit-ins and detaining mothers regularly, leading to a dramatic decrease in participation, and finally the discontinuance of the protests in March 1999 (Sezer Şanlı 2020: 45). However, also in more recent times the movement was targeted heavily by the state authorities through a ban of the gatherings in Galatasaray Square since the 700th week on 2018, as well as through judicial harassment and police violence (Cumartesi Anneleri 2023; Frontline Defenders 2021; Tosun 2024).

In both cases, therefore, the choice of strategies and repertoires of action of the victim-survivor movements must be understood in the context of an inhibiting setting of regime continuity, which required careful and strategic navigation, as well as a constant testing of existing limits and pushing of red lines. While giving rise to new forms of protest, in Morocco, this dynamic has at the same time led to an adaptation, and partly self-limitation, of protest repertoires, based on a careful calculation of potential repercussions from the side of the regime and the leeway available to the movement (Vairel 2014: 260f). In Turkey, the 2018 ban and intolerable levels of police violence have resulted in a temporary shift of protest repertoires: To continue the protests despite the ban, the Saturday Mothers reverted to reading their statements in front of the nearby İHD Istanbul branch, however suspending their signature sit-in format until they were back to where the sit-ins belong: Galatasaray Square (Interview T21 2020; Tosun 2024). Each week, a core team of mothers and activists persistently tried to walk to Galatasaray Square. Not only was this prevented by police forces, but members were sometimes even taken in custody. Repression has since eased again, and between November 2023 and May 2024, ten people were allowed to read the press statements in the square each week. On the 1,000th vigil on 25 May 2024, the ban was lifted, and the Saturday Mothers were able to gather in Galatasaray Square again without police violence.

In the following, we focus on several strategies that have been particularly defining of the struggle of victim-survivors for transitional justice in Morocco and Turkey and that were crucial to mobilize under difficult circumstances, without denying that other strategies, such as alliances or political opportunity structures, also influence and explain the outcomes of victim-survivor mobilization. In both cases, politicizing motherhood, sit-ins, and memory played a specifically central role to push for transitional justice while navigating a context of non-transition. To better understand the avenues of action available to victim-survivors to make their voice heard in paradigmatic cases of transitional justice, we will focus on these three categories and the commonalities between the two cases. However, evidently, differences in the groups' repertoires exist and not all strategies are equally salient or comparable across the two contexts. For instance, lobbying and negotiations with state authorities were key to realize demands in the Moroccan case, whereas in Turkey there was little direct engagement with state officials (see Section 2.1.2). It is also important to acknowledge that given the different structural and political conditions in each case, even when shared elements are identifiable, they vary in terms of their relevance, scope, and form.

3.2.1 Turning the private public: politicizing motherhood

Feminist scholars have shown that conflict can lead to a redefinition of existing power relations and gendered hierarchies and thus enhance women's agency, creating new

opportunities for empowerment and leadership (Ni Aolain et al. 2011; O'Rourke 2012; Björkdahl and Selimovic 2015). As in many cases of political violence where women's political participation has increased through civil resistance and public protests (Berry 2018; Zulver 2022), women, and mothers specifically, have been prominent in both Turkey and Morocco in advancing the struggle because of their relative advantage in navigating repressive contexts.

Although in the Moroccan victim-survivor movement women's role has faded in the background over time (Guillerot et al. 2011: 14f), women drove mobilization and protest actions in the early phase of activism (Interview M2 2022; Interview M3 2022; Interview M4 2022; Interview M5 2022; Interview M6 2022; Interview M8 2022; Interview M9 2022; Interview M12 2023), constituting 'the nucleus of the human rights movement in Morocco' (Interview M12 2023). In fact, mothers were among the first to publicly assemble and protest the disappearance of their children in the 1970s (Interview M8 2022). Female relatives not only kept in contact with the political prisoners, but also wrote petitions and letters, launched hunger strikes, staged demonstrations and sit-ins, lobbied state authorities, engaged with the press, or sought the support of international human rights organizations (Interview M3 2022; Interview M4 2022; Interview M6 2022; Interview M10 2022; Interview M12 2023; Belkiziz 2023; Guessous 2009: 77f). To this day, the role of mothers remains central to the CCFDM, as evidenced by one of the group's most widely used banners which reads, in large letters, 'For memory and against oblivion. Homage to the mothers of the disappeared in Morocco', surrounded by pictures of the mothers.¹⁷ Similarly, in Turkey, women—as mothers, sisters, daughters, and activists - have been at the forefront of the Saturday Mothers movement. Mothers, specifically, came to be at the group's heart and acted as driving force (Interview T15 2020; Interview T21 2020; Interview T23 2020), and despite coming together as a diverse group, the movement rapidly became known as Saturday Mothers.

In both cases, especially in the early days, an emphasis on motherhood helped the groups gain legitimacy, visibility, and credibility. As one interviewee from the *IHD Commission Against Enforced Disappearances Under Custody*¹⁸ attests: 'I think the reason why this spirit could spread so beautifully and so well lies in the phenomenon of the mother. For this reason, I call it the Saturday Mothers, because I believe that they are much more visible' (Interview T21 2020). More specifically, the success of the victim-survivor groups hinged on their ability to mobilize (public) emotions through motherhood: Indeed, the recognition of claims of victim-survivors depends significantly on their ability for 'affective communication' and on successfully claiming 'the moral value accrued to the vulnerable' (Chouliaraki 2021: 12). Suffering and trauma in particular have become powerful universal signifiers, evoking empathy and lending legitimacy (Fassin and Rechtman 2009). At the same time, motherhood (and maternal suffering) is a universally understood experience across society and contexts (Bal 2012: 119; see Wright 2016: 327).

Foregrounding these aspects has made the groups' struggle deeply relatable: 'It was mothers who mobilized for their children, quite simply' (Interview M6 2022). This provided a strong basis for wider society to empathize with their pain and support their cause (Interview T15 2020; Interview T21 2020; Interview T23 2020) and allowed the groups to tap into powerful connotations of the image of mothers searching for their children that had become globally known with the Argentinian Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (Can 2014: 140). By acting from and emphasizing their position as mothers and making their suffering public, the CCFDM and the Saturday Mothers successfully rendered the private political

17 See e.g. the CCFDM's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100072259370441> (referenced 1 June 2024).

18 This commission has been the main body that oversees the organizational and practical arrangements of the gatherings. It consists of both relatives of the disappeared and activists who have been part of the movement for many years.

(Baydar and Ivegen 2006): ‘women have played a major role in transferring the war or the fight for human rights from the personal or family level to the global social level’, as Abdelkrim Ouazzane put it (Interview M8 2022). Indeed, representations of motherhood in particular can lend moral weight and legitimacy to victim-survivors’ struggles (Helms 2013: 8, 10, 181; Taylor 1994: 293), serve as a powerful tool to shame the state into action (Belkiziz 2023; Helms 2013: 9), carve out space for collective action (Bejarano 2002: 136), especially in contexts of state repression (Bejarano 2002; Bouvard 1994; Taylor 1994). The peaceful public performance of maternal pain and self-sacrifice stands in stark contrast to the terror orchestrated by the state (Taylor 1994: 297) and appeals to universal and irrefutable values (Taylor 1994: 297). An activist leader from the Saturday Mothers describes how consistent public display of mothers’ pain helped garner support and empathy for the movements’ cause:

It has been accepted in the public opinion that the demands of Saturday Mothers are rightful. These are mothers, they are searching for their children or want their children’s bodies to be returned. Since it is a very fair demand, honestly, what they can do is only to shut down Galatasaray Square, nothing else. (Interview T23 2020)

By placing the lost lives of their children and their suffering as mothers at the centre of their protest, the asymmetry, unjustness and inhumanity of state violence is brought to the fore—‘in the visibility of the human or inhuman side of the forced disappearance, it is the women who give more visibility to the cause and with more perseverance and persistence in the struggle’, as one interviewee from Morocco emphasized (Interview M9 2022). Exposing the state’s failure to fulfil one of its very core responsibilities—the protection of life—is the ultimate critique of state legitimacy, sending a powerful message. It was both the identification with the mothers’ suffering, and admiration for their courage, determination, and tenacity in standing up to state violence that mobilized public opinion in their favour. However, the emphasis on the mothers’ loss, grief, and pain not only lent legitimacy to the groups’ struggle but, in the case of the Saturday Mothers, also helped to counter the state’s constant criminalization attempts, at least initially. As Baydar and Ivegen 2006:696 state:

[T]he name Saturday Mothers domesticates the sittings, renders them safe and harmless in the eye of the public. It turns public attention away from the political content of the protest to the private realm of emotions. That is, possible political outrage is instead channeled toward private sentiments toward a mother who lost her child.

In the early phase of activism in Morocco, womanhood even served as direct safeguard against imminent state repression and men were deliberately relegated to the background (Guessous 2009: 79). As a former CCFDM member recalls:

They played an important role because at the time in fact men did not speak out because they risked being detained too. So, it was the women who were at the forefront, [...] it was the women who took the lead in the struggle. [...] so women do not just denounce, they take on the whole burden of the struggle. (Interview M9 2022)

During a time when politics was a dangerous field to enter, women hence successfully exploited and subverted patriarchal understandings of femininity and a ‘maternal image that was already overdetermined by the state’ (Taylor 1994: 295) to make themselves heard and occupy public spaces (Slyomovics 2005: 154).¹⁹ Somewhat paradoxically, essentialist

19 That said, in neither of the two cases, this provided full protection against repression: In Morocco, female activists were still occasionally arrested (Slyomovics 2005: 162), and in Turkey, the mothers suffered police violence and were labelled ‘terrorists’ by the state despite the emphasis on motherhood (Karaman 2016).

perceptions of women as apolitical, passive, and innocent can thus become a way to assert women's legitimacy as social agents and public political actors (Helms 2013: 8, 160, 178–82, 185) and to increase their visibility in systems where alternative models of femininity are invisibilized and illegitimized (Taylor 1994: 294). In both Morocco and Turkey, rendering the private–public (see Bouvard 1994: 187f; Taylor 1994: 295f) and turning motherhood into a 'collective, political performance' (Taylor 1994: 293) have thus been powerful tools to organize and sustain collective action amid violence.

3.2.2 Spatializing resistance, amplifying impact: sit-ins

Both movements look back on a long history of sit-ins: In Morocco, even though this protest tactic saw an upswing especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s, sit-ins were taken up as early as 1977, when families of victim–survivors occupied a mosque in Rabat (Mouride 2000 : 53). Since then, sit-ins have been at the heart of the group's protest repertoire. In addition to regular bi-monthly sit-ins, they are organized at special occasions such as international commemoration and action days (see e.g. Maisterra 2016) or in response to political developments (see e.g. CCFDM 2017). In Turkey, the Saturday Mothers adopted weekly sit-ins in Galatasaray Square as their main protest strategy at the very beginning. Silence, non-violence, and its location have since been its hallmarks. Each sit-in is dedicated to the case of one forcibly disappeared person and comprises testimonies, updates on the judicial case, and a press statement. As a central method of non-violent struggle that works to protest symbolically and disrupt the system (Sharp and Paulson 2005 : 19, 42), sit-ins have multiple functions that are intertwined with the specific opportunities and risks of politics of resistance in politically inhibiting environments: Most importantly, they aim at drawing attention to the cause (Vairel 2014: 196, 202f). Given the clear-cut and easily reproducible format and accessibility, sit-ins function as an important means of protest especially in cases of mobilization over prolonged periods of time, such as in Turkey and Morocco. By holding sit-ins at the same time and place at regular intervals—the Saturday Mothers in Galatasaray Square and the CCFDM at the *Place des Nations Unies* in Casablanca—both groups have been able to increase their recognizability, sustain action over time, and create a sense of belonging (see Bosco 2001: 315–17). At the same time, drawing on a well-established and globally known protest format promises to boost public attention and create resonance with a broad audience. Indeed, starting from 2016, the practice of sit-ins as part of the CCFDM's protest register became even more routinized when the CCFDM announced that, following the example of the *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina, it was going to organize sit-ins in Casablanca every two months under different topics relating to truth and justice (CCFDM 2016). The Saturday Mothers have equally emphasized both their inspiration by globally known movements and the value of sit-ins in terms of public resonance and attention. As one of the initial activists explains:

Since human rights violations in Turkey were similar to those around the world, the methods of struggle should have been similar too. We thought we would look at the protests, those who drew most attention about disappearances, such as what Argentinian, Chilean, Guatemalan women did. Being in a place periodically and keeping the issue alive constantly is a useful method. It is something that would not carry any group's name or label, and that any one passer-by could say 'I should be with them too'. (Mater 1996: 4)

The spatial dimension is key in both cases: Through the occupation of public space and the use of large banners, sit-ins allow subversive actors to assert their presence in the political arena (see Bouvard 1994: 82) and guarantee maximum public visibility (see Vairel 2014: 195, 205) and attention, especially when taking place in key sites of power (see Bosco 2001: 314). Indeed, in Morocco, the holding of sit-ins at places of political significance, such as the headquarters of the National Human Rights Council or the Parliament (see e.g. Vairel

2014: 226, CCFDM and FMVJ 2022a), has been crucial to raise public attention and build political pressure. As highly symbolic places, in particular, former detention centres became central locations for sit-ins: The first officially organized sit-in in Spring 2000 took place at the infamous detention centre *Derb Moulay Cherif* in Casablanca, gathering over a thousand participants (Slyomovics 2005: 90f). Ever since, sit-ins in front of different (secret) detention centres have been regularly organized (see e.g. El Hamraoui 2010; Benargane 2016; CCFDM 2016; CCFDM and FMVJ 2022d), with demands often being directly linked to the locations themselves (see e.g. *Aujourd'hui Le Maroc* 2006). In Turkey, during sit-ins a large banner²⁰ is placed on the ground in one of the most public sites, Galatasaray Square, which over time has become a symbol of opposition inextricably bound to the Saturday Mothers' struggle (Can 2014: 153; Sezer Şanlı 2020: 53). As one of the central hubs of Istanbul, Galatasaray Square not only holds a unique position in the city's cultural, socio-political and economic life, but provides the opportunity for random passers-by to engage and increase the group's visibility (Baydar and Iwegen 2006: 699; Kocacıçak 2003: 78). Furthermore, as a subversive intervention in public space, that in (semi-) authoritarian contexts is (claimed to be) controlled and dominated by the state, and, in the case of the detention centres, as incursion in spaces surrounded by fear and silence for decades, sit-ins are not only a disruption of the established order and (temporarily) expose the cracks in the system, but are a crucial re-appropriation of space (see Bouvard 1994: 14, 253f; Vairel 2004: 186f), an enactment of spatialized resistance.

Additionally, sit-ins prove a relatively easy mode of action where other avenues for protest are closed or participant numbers are low, while still attracting the attention of both media and authorities (Vairel 2014: 201). Given the CCFDM's drop of membership and its increasingly marginal political position and its consequent inability to drive broad mobilization, sit-ins are an attractive alternative to other protest forms whose success depends on broad participation.

Crucially, sit-ins are also a way to circumvent repression: While demonstrations and marches require authorization and are thus often subject to bans by the authorities or illegalized in Morocco, sit-ins can be held without authorization (Interview M10 2022). In Turkey, the non-violent nature of the sit-ins made it more difficult, although not impossible, for the authorities to crack down on the protests and to criminalize the group, while enhancing the group's credibility and reliability:

They made themselves untouchable with this protest format. Not shouting any slogans, not shouting out, not destroying around, do you see what I mean? Only expressing their demands. And we've seen this: violence does not always open a path. In fact, this type of protests conveys much stronger messages, can have a much more transformative role. (Interview T23 2020)

Indeed, the use of violence towards non-violent protesters can cause a rebound effect by seriously undermining a state's legitimacy in public opinion while increasing support for the activists (Sharp and Paulson 2005: 406). Especially in repressive regimes, non-violent action powerfully exposes the violence intrinsic to the political system (Bouvard 1994: 253f). In addition, in both cases, the publicity of the locations chosen for the sit-ins and the heightened visibility of the protest format was hoped to offer protection from state violence (Can 2022: 2; Vairel 2014: 205).

3.2.3 The power of memory

Both in Morocco and in Turkey memory functions as a key site of struggle. In both cases, '[p]rotest practices and memory work resonate with each other: remembrance feeds the

20 The banner reads "Perpetrators Are Known Where Are the Disappeared?" (*Failler Belli Kayıplar Nerede*).

work of mobilisation and protest practices contribute to the constitution of memory'²¹ (Vairel 2014: 220). Both the CCFDM and the Saturday Mothers engage in what Gutman and Wüstenberg (2023) term 'memory activism', the 'strategic commemoration of a contested past' to effect change (Mandolessi 2023: 295).

In fact, both groups' protest repertoire is underpinned by symbolic, emotional, and performative elements: As highly symbolic and emotionally charged sites that are inextricably interwoven with the lived experience of suffering, in Morocco, former detention centres were the destination of so-called 'truth caravans', pilgrimages across the country (see (FMVJ, AMDH and OMDH no date; Tuquoi 2000; Vairel 2004: 187, 191). The sheer materiality of the sites of violence, whose existence was long denied by the state, exposes the truth about the past, lending weight to the victim-survivors' demands. The strategic linkage of space and truth claims is also evident elsewhere, with the CCFDM symbolically renaming the central place in Casablanca into 'truth square' for its bi-monthly sit-ins (Interview M8 2022). Both sit-ins and 'truth caravans' also heavily centre around memory practices, including vigils, public testimonies, human chains, displaying pictures of victim-survivors or lighting candles (Slyomovics 2005: 90f, Slyomovics 2012: 48), all of which can be understood as key elements of 'performances of victimhood' (Cronin-Furman and Krystalli 2021). Similarly, in Turkey, public testimonies are at the heart of the sit-ins, with the Saturday Mothers holding photographs of the disappeared to reinforce their message. Through 'commemorative vigilance' (Nora 1989: 12), they mark Galatasaray as the place where they meet their disappeared and anchor the memory of the disappeared in collective memory (Göker 2021; Sezer Şanlı 2018; Interview T23 2020; Göker 2021).

Evidencing the key role of memorialization in their protest repertoire, both groups have come up with formats exclusively dedicated to the remembrance of those disappeared: In Morocco, the victim-survivor movement established an annually 'National Day of the Disappeared' in 1999 (see e.g. CCFDM and APADM 2008: 30-34) which was held until 2006. In addition, the CCFDM also organized a yearly 'Night against Oblivion' (Interview M8 2022). In Turkey, the Saturday Mothers declared 17-31 May as 'International Week for the Fight against Forced Disappearances' and have organized various memory events during this period since 1996 (ETHA 2019).

In both cases, memory practices allowed to collectivize individual suffering and to turn it into political action. Abdessalam Adib, himself a victim-survivor of the 'Years of Lead', points to the importance of memory for creating affective links, support, and legitimacy:

Testimonies put a human face onto the past and they ensure that the past does not fall into oblivion. [...] Victims' testimonies [...] are moral weapons in the struggle against both impunity and oblivion. These stories are the most powerful tool in this struggle. These stories are heartbreaking, the names are different but the pain, the grief, and the suffering [...] is universal. [...] Events such as this one, caravans for truth organized in Morocco, mock trials, etc raise public awareness about the past and help victims and human rights' activists gain public support for their cause. (Adib 2020)

Importantly—and explaining the centrality of memory activism in the group's struggle—memory practices take on a special role in contexts where the state restricts efforts of dealing with the past. While central to exercising and stabilizing power, memory simultaneously holds the potential to contest it (Edkins 2006: 101). As such, memory activism has been found to be highly effective to achieve political outcomes in contexts of impunity (McGregor 2017: 552). After having been marginalized (Turkey) and erased (Morocco) from the public sphere for decades, public remembrance was key for breaking the silence,

21 Author's translation from French.

unmasking the violent nature of the state, and making victim-survivors' voices heard (see [Vairel 2014: 219f](#)). As one activist remarks:

[I]f the primary objective of disappearance is to make a person disappear, it also has the objective of making his or her memory and everything that was done there disappear. And so, the claim to memory was also important. ([Interview M9 2022](#))

Therefore, commemorative practices act as 'counter-memory' ([Foucault 1977](#)): They are central to allocating blame, re-writing history, and drawing attention to continuities of suffering, resisting and challenging the state's account of the past and its attempts to turn the page (see [Hachad 2018: 210, 215](#)). Faced with impunity and/or denial, testimony stands in as evidence to bolster the movements' demands while delegitimizing its opponents (see [Vairel 2014: 186](#)). As reaction to the IER's shortcomings, in 2005 symbolic alternative hearings were organized under the slogan of 'Testimonies in Complete Freedom for the Truth', during which victim-survivors were allowed to name perpetrators in contrast to the official hearings ([AMDH 2006](#)), thus providing victim-survivors with a chance to resist or add to the official discourse ([Belkiziz 2018: 97](#)). Similarly, in Turkey, memory practices have been key to denounce the lack of justice and accountability. By marking Galatasaray Square as a site of memory, 'one of Istanbul's most important spaces became haunted by the figure of the disappeared' ([Göral 2021: 83](#)), thus resisting the state's decades-long attempts at denying and silencing demands for truth and justice. In both cases, the victim-survivor groups hence successfully countered state-enforced absence (of the disappeared, of imposed silences, of their voices from the public sphere) with presence (of their bodies, of memories, of alternative truths) (see [Bouvard 1994: 81f, 254](#); see [Taylor 1994: 296f](#)), thereby 'exposing and challenging the very premises of the system itself' ([Bouvard 1994: 82](#)).

4. Grassroots mobilization and transitional justice in aparadigmatic contexts: lessons from Morocco and Turkey

This article has explored the specific implications of aparadigmatic contexts of transitional justice for victim-survivor mobilization by bringing together two under-researched cases in transitional justice scholarship: Morocco and Turkey. This area of research remains under-explored, despite its potential to comprehensively address the complexities and difficulties posed by non-standard cases of transitional justice characterized by ambiguity or ongoing violence, and the urgent need to foster context-sensitive grassroots-driven approaches. In both cases, victim-survivor groups have emerged as strategic political actors amid violence, repression, and limited transitional justice processes, who mobilize around their own transitional justice agenda, linking their struggle to wider visions of change. The study illustrates that even in the absence of clear political transitions and in cases of limited official political will to deal with the past, there are transitional justice initiatives driven by civil society ([Abdoueldahab: 25](#)), proving the importance of investigating such aparadigmatic cases. As we have demonstrated and as is still oftentimes overlooked, these efforts can notably be led by victim-survivor groups themselves. Answering to [Destrooper et al.'s \(2023\)](#) call for the urgent need 'to learn from these aparadigmatic cases how stakeholders conceptualise recognition, accountability and disruption in the absence of a transition' (*ibid.*: 12), this article has offered a deeper analysis of the genesis of two victim-survivor groups in particular and the evolvement of their transitional justice agenda and mobilization over time. While it is important to recognize the diversity of organized victim-survivor groups across different contexts, as well as not to see them as homogeneous entities, as different members may have distinct (and sometimes even conflicting) understandings of the same issues and experiences, the article offers valuable insights beyond the two case studies.

In order to live up to the core aspiration of victim-centred approaches to ‘respond to the explicit needs of victims’ (Robins 2011: 77, and see Alici 2022), and to overcome the often long histories of exclusion, marginalization and violence of victim-survivor communities (Robins 2017), it is crucial to put the agency, needs and aspirations of victim-survivors at the centre of transitional justice, including paying greater attention to ‘non-standardised transitional justice efforts, such as community-driven initiatives’ (Destrooper et al. 2023: 13). Amongst other things, this requires developing a better understanding of the role of organized victim-survivors in advancing transitional justice goals and their collective potential to challenge the conditions perpetuating their victimization. By putting the activism of victim-survivor groups and their ability to resist prevailing power dynamics at the centre of analysis, our study highlights the notable potential of bottom-up, community-driven approaches to transitional justice in aparadigmatic cases.

Drawing on the case of the CCFDM in Morocco and the Saturday Mothers in Turkey, we have shown that the structural conditions and dynamics of non-transitional settings can tremendously impact and shape victim-survivors’ activism on different levels; most notably in terms of their transitional justice agendas, the spaces and opportunities available to them, and the strategies they adopt: Faced with a context of impunity, denial, and limited political change, both the CCFDM and the Saturday Mothers have particularly emphasized the need for justice, truth, and guarantees of non-recurrence. The conceptualization of these dimensions as integral and non-negotiable parts of transitional justice that have yet to be achieved explains their ongoing mobilization, and, in the case of Morocco, the groups’ dissatisfaction with the existing transitional justice process. Notably, both groups have used transitional justice to advocate for broader societal and political change, linking their struggle to larger goals like democracy and peace, and critically intervening in current political developments. The evolvement and expansion of the movements’ demands to include broader visions of change is also an outcome of the confrontation with renewed violence and repression and the lack of democratization that have led activists to rethink the meaning and value of transitional justice, even where, like in Morocco, their demands have been answered to a certain extent and an official transitional justice process has taken place. This suggests that the linking of quests for transitional justice with broader political campaigns by grassroots actors (van der Merwe and Schkolne 2017: 229) might be particularly salient in aparadigmatic cases of transitional justice.

Importantly, the two cases offer critical insights into how victim-survivor groups strategically adapt and innovate their repertoires to advance their claims despite a challenging setting. The similarities identified suggest the existence of a set of strategies which victim-survivor groups (can) turn towards and tactically employ in restrictive aparadigmatic transitions to further demands for transitional justice. In Morocco and Turkey, especially the role played by women, sit-ins, and memory activism have allowed the groups to navigate the political landscape and make their voices heard. Turning the private political, and politicizing and collectivizing motherhood have been significant tools to access political spaces and gain support and legitimacy. Sit-ins have been a powerful tool for both consolidating the movements’ struggle and increasing their recognizability, reclaiming public space, and enacting resistance. Memory activism has been key not only to create affective links and legitimacy and turn individual suffering into collective action, but also to counter the state’s politics of silence and denial. However, this is not an exhaustive list of strategies and further exploration of the role of other action forms in aparadigmatic contexts is warranted. It is neither to suggest that the strategies identified in this article have not also been mobilized by civil society in paradigmatic cases of transitional justice—rather, we argue that they take on a special role in contexts where victim-survivor groups may face repression and political resistance. Likewise, further research should address a broader selection of cases of victim-survivor mobilization in contexts of non-transition and assess whether the identified patterns are also salient in other cases. Lastly, there is an evident need to study differences

across cases and analyse the outcome of different strategies in terms of the actual realization of demands (rather than just the opening of space for dissent). Our findings also suggest that there is a need for a (even) more nuanced understanding of how prospects for transitional justice shift under different structural and political conditions, including in the long run. The case of Morocco—initially hailed by many as a bookcase model of transitional justice in the Maghreb whose sincerity has increasingly come into the question over time—in particular shows the importance of more closely following the ebbs and flows of transitional justice processes in line with unfolding political and social dynamics, such as the opening and shrinking of civic spaces.

Finally, in both cases, victim-survivor groups have used transitional justice discourse to express resistance and adopted globalized protest repertoires such as sit-ins and memorialization activities, taking inspiration from other victim-survivor groups across the globe. This demonstrates that transitional justice has not only become a global norm adopted and spread by the international community and state actors, but also grassroots actors. While transitional justice scholarship should further explore the specific role of the diffusion of transitional justice norms and practices in paradigmatic cases, it should also pay more attention to the potentials and pitfalls of the use of globalized transitional justice registers for victim-survivor groups.

Overall, the insights gained from the two case studies provide valuable initial thoughts for better understanding and further exploring transitional justice's complexities and potentials in different scenarios and the role grassroots actors can play to advance transitional justice, even under challenging conditions.

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Conflict of interest

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Interviews (Morocco)

- Interview M1, Boubker Largou, *Organisation Marocaine des Droits Humains (OMDH)*, Interview with Author 1, August 2022.
- Interview M2, *Forum Marocain pour la Vérité et la Justice (FMVJ)*, Interview with Author 1, August 2022.
- Interview M3, Abdelkrim El Manouzi, *Comité de coordination des familles des disparus et des victimes de la disparition forcée au Maroc (CCFDM)/Association Médicale de Réhabilitation des Victimes de la Torture (AMRVT)*, Interview with Author 1, August 2022.
- Interview M4, Ahmed Haou, *Forum Marocain pour la Vérité et la Justice (FMVJ)*, Interview with Author 1, August 2022.
- Interview M5, M'barek Afekouh, *Forum Marocain pour la Vérité et la Justice (FMVJ)*, Interview with Author 1, August 2022.
- Interview M6, *Association Médicale de Réhabilitation des Victimes de la Torture (AMRVT)*, Interview with Author 1, September 2022.
- Interview M7, Abdelhaq El Ouassouli, *Comité de coordination des familles des disparus et des victimes de la disparition forcée au Maroc (CCFDM)*, Interview with Author 1, September 2022.
- Interview M8, Abdelkrim Ouazzane, *Comité de coordination des familles des disparus et des victimes de la disparition forcée au Maroc (CCFDM)*, Interview with Author 1, September 2022.
- Interview M9, *Comité de coordination des familles des disparus et des victimes de la disparition forcée au Maroc (CCFDM)*, Interview with Author 1, September 2022.
- Interview M10, Khadija Ryadi, *Association Marocaine des Droits Humains (AMDH)*, Interview with Author 1, September 2022.
- Interview M11, *Association Marocaine des Droits Humains (AMDH)*, Interview with Author 1, September 2022.
- Interview M12, Latifa Jbabdi, *L'Instance Équité et Réconciliation (IER)*, Interview with Author 1, February 2023.
- Interview M13, Abdel-ilah Benabdessalam, *Association Marocaine des Droits Humains (AMDH)*, Interview with Author 1, February 2023.

Interviews (Turkey)

- Interview T11, *Human Rights Association (İnsan Hakları Derneği) (Istanbul)*, Interview with Author 2, 14 September 2019.
- Interview T15, *Human Rights Association (Diyarbakır)*, Interview with Author 2, 27 July 2020.
- Interview T16, *Diyarbakır Bar Association*, Interview with Author 2, 30 July 2020.
- Interview T19, *Human Rights Association (Diyarbakır)*, Interview with Author 2, 7 October 2020.
- Interview T20, *Turkey Human Rights Foundation (Diyarbakır) (Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı-TİHV)*, Interview with Author 2, 7 October 2020.
- Interview T21, *Saturday Mothers/People (Istanbul)*, Interview with Author 2, 13 October 2020.
- Interview T23, *Saturday Mothers/People (Istanbul)*, Interview with Author 2, 17 October 2020.