

Practice Note 1: Memorialisation and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka

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The Community Memorialisation Project, Sri Lanka

About this note –

This series of practice notes, as part of the Community Memorialisation Project, is meant to provide an overview of memorialisation as a tool for reconciliation and transitional justice in post-conflict contexts, using the Sri Lankan experience as an example. The findings from individual and community memorialisation will provide grass roots level access to a range of issues and considerations that may have, or may in future, cause and trigger violence. These need to be addressed in a comprehensive way in the context of justice, psycho-social healing, reparations, reconciliation, race relations, rehabilitation, gender issues, security issues among others. This series by various practitioners, is meant for researchers, cultural activists, practitioners and policy makers in order to better understand key tools and opportunities for using memorialisation in post-conflict contexts, guidelines and principles on how memorialisation and its use in reconciliation can be practiced and draw on existing good practice for planning and programming in this area.

About the author –

Radhika Hettiarachchi is a researcher, curator and development practitioner. She is primarily engaged in the field of peacebuilding with an interest in memorialisation and oral history, as well as the arts as a means of creating space for civil society discourse on issues of gender, security, memory and reconciliation. She read English and Communications Theory at York University, Canada, and holds a Masters in Development Management from the London School of Economics and Political Science, U.K.

1. Background and context

The construction of history is intensely political and interventionist, and in Sri Lanka, the post-war nation building process remains largely masculine and State-centric. Within this context, the politics of participation determines who may claim a space at the 'peace table' with implications for representation, access and the capability to negotiate justice and security¹. Shutting out or marginalising certain voices or identities – ethnic, gender-based, social for example - could reignite the root causes of conflict. The Herstories Project and its successor – the Community Memorialisation Project – sit within this space, as a possible antidote to the loss of narrative and the incomplete construction of history.

Since the change of government in January 2015, the public space for conversations about justice and truth telling has been steadily increasing. The Government has also taken positive steps: the 19th amendment to the constitution that reinstated the independence of the Human Rights Commission; the extension of the Presidential Commission on missing persons; the appointment of civilian Governors in the North and East; and the release of nearly 700 acres of land in the North and East. The UNHRC Resolution on Sri Lanka tabled in September 2015 and co-sponsored by the Sri Lankan Government primarily focused on accountability, governance, human rights and reconciliation. It sparked the re-emergence of debates about the transitional justice processes best suited for Sri Lanka along with arguments over international judicial involvement, various modalities of truth or compassionate commissions, questions about amnesty and prosecutions. In light of these movements, civil society organisations and relevant Government institutions have begun to study theoretical and practical processes of transitional justice including reconciliation.

2. Why is memorialisation an important part of reconciliation?

'Remembering' honours the suffering, and acknowledges their personal losses while building connection between people through a fundamental sense of empathy that

¹ De mel 3

personal narratives elicit. Memory is subjective and fluid as it examines, reinterprets, and addresses the issues of the past, thereby helping the formation of new identities. In the six years since the end of the war, and the decades since other incidents of violence including the experiences of expulsion, riots and violence against Muslims and the JVP insurrections in the South, the idea of the victorious and vanquished has determined whose memories and remembrances are valid. The dominant narrative will have already altered, weakened and obliterated many alternative or personal narratives, which in itself, highlights the insecurity of private memories with the passage of time². Not documenting and archiving lived experiences provides the opportunity for people or the State to manipulate 'history' according to their needs and use it as a tool for divisive politics. As such, there is a grave need to document personal accounts and have such a body of knowledge publicly accessible, so that it can contest false narratives should the need arise, before the loss of memory and in a broader sense, identity and citizen histories.

At the end of the Sri Lankan civil war in 2009, the Government propagated a post-war nation-building narrative that was not only triumphalist, but also legitimised an increasingly nationalistic ideology. When the victors glorify war it legitimises certain truths and myths until they dominate the cultural and historical consciousness³. In the urgency to move forward with economic development, the Government may have also believed that reconciliation and justice was achieved with the end of open warfare.

Sri Lanka has a culture of silence and silencing: even the southern insurgencies of the '70s and later in the '80s have faded from public memory. Most Government-sponsored efforts to 'remember' have been limited to memorials focusing on military heroism with little regard for the many civilian experiences. Many monuments relating to the ethnic conflict or southern insurgencies have either been destroyed or not maintained. For example, the LTTE cemeteries were largely destroyed at the end of the war, taking with it, perhaps, the only physical record or witness to their lives and death; In the South the shrine to 33 students who were massacred in Embilipitiya, was not maintained and subsequently bulldozed over.

Currently, the country is in the midst of a reconciliation process, which aims to knit together the divided communities, and ethnic groups. This is a complex exercise, which demands inclusion of a host of groups with various interests; it includes the creation of a national and inclusive vision for the future, political and economic reforms, and significant attitudinal changes. Dealing with our past is a prerequisite for reconciliation and justice, as evidenced in countries with civil war and conflict experience such as Rwanda or South Africa. Given Sri Lanka's Buddhist-dominated socio-cultural and political consciousness, the South African or Rwandan processes influenced by Christian tenets of confession and forgiveness may not be compatible with ideas of punitive actions or accountability in achieving justice. However, in the context of healing, the act of telling, for all sides, is still an important step in the process of reconciliation and non-recurrence. In our own history, a lack of such processes in the 80s, 90s, 2000s may have contributed to the resurgence of deep-rooted causes of conflict and violence. It is therefore imperative that an organic process of community-based memorialisation is placed at the centre of the analytical framework, academic theorising, policy priorities and practitioner perspectives in order to make the 'everyday stories of ordinary people', part of the political processes of justice and reconciliation.

2 Thaheer et.al. 31-33

3 Liu and Laszlo, 15 and 8

3. How can the collection and archiving of oral history support memorialisation??

The lessons learnt archiving and sharing the Herstories Project in Sri Lanka and abroad showcase the impact oral histories could have on memorialisation and reconciliation. As an archive of personal histories that has attempted to challenge the 'single narrative': it highlights the symbolic or deliberate silences that extreme trauma may leave out of 'witness accounts' that a more personal narration can bring to the table; it contests the nature of 'truth' as a single, definitive narrative of history; it showcases how auto-ethnographic, open-ended storytelling can let the narrator 'control' the story and thereby provide a platform for a wider and more inclusive historical memory of events and incidents; it provides evidence to the value of sharing personal narratives as a catalyst for dialogue on reconciliation and remembering.

The Herstories Project (www.herstoryarchive.org)

'Herstories' is an archive of mothers' personal narratives collected between 2012-2013 in Sri Lanka. The project was one of the first memorialisation projects post-war and was built on the foundation that the word history itself highlights an inherent flaw in how we record it. Most histories in the context of militarised societies and conflicts, marginalises 'herstory'. Extreme physical and representational wartime masculinity has been extended to a 'hyper masculinity' in post-war public memorialisation and myth building. The 'hero', stereotyped and distilled into a set of idealised masculinities, dominates this narrative. Subordinate masculinities and femininities are marginalised or discarded entirely. By interviewing and archiving 285 mothers' narratives through auto-ethnographic techniques - unedited letters, 'trees of life' and 'memory mapping' using art and story-telling/writing, as well as through short video and photo-essays - from across the ethnic and geographical divides (Kilinochchi, Mulaitivu, Vavuniya, Kurunegala, Moneragala, Ampara and Batticaloa), this project attempts to fill the gap in memorialising the experiences of women in conflict. In doing so, the project challenges the master narrative while highlighting the dangers of propagating a single narrative in the context of truth and reconciliation. The original collection of mothers' oral histories are archived at the National Archives in Sri Lanka with surrogate collections at The Library of Congress archives in Washington and The Women's Library in London, as well as online.

A study, conducted by Brussels based think-tank MediatEUR, of 62 peace agreements between 2008-2012 showed that only 18 mentioned gender keywords, only 5 specified the role of women in political frameworks, only 3 included GBV and none carved out a role for promotion of women's originations⁴. What this indicates is that there is an inability for women to address their issues at the peace table as the politics of participation prevents women from voicing it. While each woman's experience is vastly different depending on her geographical location or her social group, it is also intensely subjective. If they are not given a platform to be heard, they will also not be included in formal mechanisms of peace or justice where decisions that impact their security and needs are made. It is especially important to consider in the context of formal processes or government-led commissions of inquiry, however well intentioned, that the forum and its primary agenda may shape the truth-telling process itself. It may determine the type of questions asked and the time allowed for gathering evidence, thereby setting the hierarchy of issues and needs.

While the project was being conducted in the North, South and East, the Herstories team also asked the volunteer storytellers to fill in basic open-ended evaluation form in their native tongue. Most women claimed that they had never been asked to record or tell their story and therefore never felt that their personal struggles were significant. The opportunity to unburden their pain was greatly appreciated, supporting the psychological benefit of providing 'an addressable other' in the process of grieving and

⁴ Reimann, 5

telling. The stories reflect serious socio-political, economic and human rights issues and for the women, this was an opportunity place it on record in their own words, which was perceived as important for justice. It showcases the self-actualisation that comes with authoring personal histories rather than it being mediated on their behalf.

The viewer feedback book placed at the exhibition locations in Sri Lanka and abroad demonstrates the way people engaged with the material. People perceived that storytelling was important to capture real events in real peoples' lives and sharing real stories supports understanding and reconciliation between communities. Herstories demonstrates that more open-ended story-telling and oral history collection with communities at grassroots level should be incorporated into truth, justice and memorialisation processes by all relevant stakeholders

As an archive that prioritises women's narratives that goes beyond a simple aggregate of facts and figures it raises questions: on how lived experiences and needs in the aftermath of war, displacement and resettlement may in reality, be different to existing policies and assumptions on gender and security; what impact militarisation and demilitarisation may have on women and families both in civilian and military contexts; and how gender might intersect with governance needs in transitional post-conflict societies. Bearing in mind that many other excluded narratives exist within the same time period, the impact on memorialisation and reconciliation evidenced by the Herstories Project, highlights the need for collection of 'outsider' narratives that include men, elderly, disabled, youth, children and even military families that may contest the 'hero' myth. Many 'truths' exist. They need to be aired; and in doing so allow the narrators to feel that their experiences are not just heard but also memorialised as part of history. The 'truth' may not matter as much as freeing one's own voice from that of another⁵

4. Key considerations for working on memorialisation

Recording stories - The process of story collection should be open-ended and voluntary. The individuals approached through community based organisations, should be made aware of the process, security challenges, the final output and purpose of archiving, and where it will be deposited. They should also be informed at the very outset that this is a voluntary process. Although time consuming, story collection should ideally be done individually, in a place the narrator is comfortable, such as his or her own home. Self-narration formats such as letter writing, based on very few prompts are ideal. Other forms of self-expression such as the use of art, memory mapping in community groups, theatre (especially with children), photo-essays where participants are able to select their visual story, and videography are useful formats for deeper exploration.

Archiving oral histories – Express permission should be sort for public usage of part of all of the personal narratives. When archiving histories physically it is important to deposit the collection at a national institution. If the originals are in the national archives, surrogate collections should ideally be kept within the communities that shared the stories as part of a dispersed archive as well as online for the use of future generations of community members, academics and researchers, and policy-makers who wish to draw from their findings.

Creating opportunities for dialogue and sharing histories - There is a lack of consensus among Sri Lankans at all levels of society on memorialisation and what such a process would look like. What, where, how and when we should memorialise, as understood

⁵ Bhaktin as quoted in De Silva, 62

and proposed by each community, should be documented and fed national debates on memorialisation. The fragility of politics in Sri Lanka brings in a multitude of actors who use history and remembrance to wage an ideological battle on nationhood and identity leaving very little chance for citizen-led narratives to come to light. Using personal narratives, arts and culture, it is important to 'take the stories back' to communities, in order to facilitate dialogue within and between communities on a collective process of memorialisation. It may also result in setting the groundwork for reconciliation between communities through empathy and understanding of hearing another's life experience. As part of this process, it is important to invite others who would like to share their own stories, add to the community narratives or use arts and culture to explore them further to engage in order to create civil society discourse and debate on the question of truth, memory and reconciliation.

Creating community-based memorials –it is important to encourage and empower communities to create memorials in public spaces accessible to all members. By preserving elements of individuals' memories, and elements of shared community history, through community owned, designed and built memorials, there may be an inter-generational transfer of memory, a space for reflection and a sense of history relevant to each region. These memorials may vary depending on the character, history, experiences of each region, and on how each generation reflects upon it. It is also necessary to be cognisant of the fact that communities are not homogeneous and engaging them will generate a variety of narratives that may be opposed to others within one community. It is important to reflect upon this, and make space for counter-narratives without marginalising groups or creating tension within communities. As such, this process should be facilitated in safe spaces with care and flexibility; working with individuals, groups and communities over a period of time, so as to ensure that memorialisation is a 'process' rather than a finished product, with multiple narratives and communities that need to co-exist.

Feeding into policy and practice – The lessons learnt and key findings about memory from the process of memorialisation must be shared with relevant national level institutions to support the creation of a 'National Memory Policy' at national and local levels bringing all relevant stakeholders together. Although this is a first step, this may impact how we retain our multiple histories, experiences and identities without an amalgamation into a single narrative, how we write and teach history, and how we build inclusive Sri Lankan identities. The debates and discussions then need to be extended to and be reflected in education policy, regional economic policies and broader governance mechanisms.

Managing real and felt security concerns and linking communities to support systems – Bearing in mind that there may be a danger and resistance from hostile actors within some communities to dealing with the past openly, and the act of remembering or creating space for all types of stories, it is important to protect the privacy of those not willing to share their names or step away entirely if there are perceived or real security challenges to some individuals. In addition, where there are concerns over issues of psychological challenges, it is advisable to link psychologists and psychosocial support networks to the process. There should not be any financial transaction or promise of material benefits and this should be made clear at the start. However, after the project is completed, it is possible and advisable to link individuals or communities to economic recovery programmes or education facilities or other support services as needed. Where security challenges exist, having a list of legal or human rights advisors that the team can call upon has proven useful.

Maintaining flexibility to ensure an evolving project structure that is responsive to external conditions- As stated earlier the act of telling will be perceived differently and

therefore addressed differently, if it is part of formal processes of transitional justice and not necessarily healing. The Herstories Project and the Community Memorialisation Project, conceptualised before formal processes have been clearly established, is designed to be flexible – based on how locally relevant, accepted, or culturally specific the context is at a community level. It is public but informal, and is meant to complement any process later formalised. A civil society led process is needed to complement formal processes as it has the structural flexibility to respond to grassroots needs. This flexibility extends to the type of stories people may volunteer – they may not be about the violent past; they may be positive stories of survival, helping one another, examples of co-existing or ideas about how to co-exist, given Sri Lanka's complex history.

Working through partnerships – building local CBO and district partner networks is essential to approaching village level story collection and dialogue. It is important to engage with these partners, to seek the best method of engaging community members. Although the Herstories Project was an entirely civil society led initiative, the current political situation, it is not only practical but also necessary to engage local government, transitional justice and reconciliation policy and implementing agencies within Government, as well as the military. The Sinhalese majority is uncertain and somewhat fearful about how transitional justice processes might impact war heroes – the 'image' of war heroes as well as the possible prosecutions for allegedly criminal actions. The military should therefore be engaged in memorialisation, not just through military families as Herstories Project did, but as a stakeholder in the country's historical narratives. However, bearing in mind that security is real but also felt, it is advisable to analyse the context in each district with CBO partners, in order to determine the risks and opportunities at the grassroots level.

Contributing to programme development and innovation - It is also important to develop new methods of monitoring and evaluating memory work for practitioners, as traditional log frames and frameworks will not adequately capture its impact. A 'developmental evaluation' methodology, which works through participant observation, regular cycles of rethinking and reflection processes and feeding it back into practice will need to be developed.

Creating communities of practice – regular engagement with CSOs, government institutions and other actors relevant to the process of transitional justice and reconciliation should be encouraged to create sharing and learning groups. As a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-religious country, it is important to support informal and institutional mechanisms of reconciliation, transitional justice and other associated fields (such as gender, education, psycho-social mechanisms for healing trauma, economic development), and build policies and programmes that support local memorialisation and healing.

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About the project –

The Community Memorialisation Project is a joint project of Search for Common Ground and The Herstories Project along with district partners - Viluthu Centre for Human Resource Development in Mannar, Prathiba Media Network in Matara and Women Development Foundation in Ampara.

- The project will capture individual and shared community narratives in order to prioritise and strengthen community owned memorialisation. Its primary objective is to facilitate an environment that acknowledges and preserves multiple histories, while encouraging empathy through inter-generational transfer and inter-regional sharing of memory to support peace and reconciliation in Sri Lanka.
- Building on individual stories the project team will work with the communities to share their stories and facilitate dialogue within their communities about why memorialisation is needed, why multiple narratives should co-exist, and how we remember, at the divisional level and between the participating districts. The process will focus on empathetic listening and acknowledgement.
- Through open dialogue, the communities will create communal spaces and memorials that facilitate multiple narratives and personal remembrance. The objective here is to encourage communities or villages to memorialise personal and subjective memories alongside inclusive village or location based narratives, at the grassroots level, even if they may be contesting narratives. Community owned memorials return control of the narratives to the grassroots level.
- There is clearly a need for a public engagement strategy, which will be based on web-based and social media based platforms to add, debate and engage with the stories as well as on questions of memorialisation. With the participants' permission, the project will share these life stories through a traveling exhibition, an online archive, and a physical archive at the national level, similar to its predecessor - the Herstories Project.
- The project will contribute to discourse and practice, through regular learning circles, sharing of practice notes, new processes of monitoring and evaluation tools devised for this project and recommendations for a memory policy, based on views and needs at a village or district level.

While the project will have a cathartic and empathetic impact on the participants sharing their life stories at an individual level, it will also facilitate their voices and needs to be heard, through its wide dissemination. The success of the project will be in attitudinal changes – about the need to hear and acknowledge the many personal truths that exist. At a wider level, it will contribute to how Sri Lankans memorialise and historicise our past, and to making processes of justice, truth and reconciliation inclusive.

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