

Reconceptualising Exile through the Lived Experience of Human Rights Defenders

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Global Campus
of Human Rights

This report was commissioned in the context of the Reconceptualising Exile programme, a joint initiative implemented by the Global Campus of Human Rights and Right Livelihood in 2022-2026. The overall project pursued three objectives:

1. It supported individuals with proven experience in research on and/or advocacy for human rights who live in exile so that they can continue to be effective in their work.
2. It built a transnational support structure for these human rights experts and defenders.
3. It devised and disseminated learnings from this project in order to help disarm exile as a weapon against human rights experts and defenders.

The first two objectives were implemented through a fellowship programme for a selected group of human rights defenders, which further included a series of workshops and trainings that also engage a wider network of exiled defenders. The third objective was addressed through research and dissemination of research findings, including this report.

The initiatives under this third objective are deeply informed by the work with the group of fellows and the substantive priorities they set for a reconceptualization of exile, in particular through a dedicated research workshop held in April 2025 in Berlin with the fellows and the authors of this report.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how exile reshapes the identities, practices, and protection needs of human rights defenders (HRDs). Drawing on 18 life-history interviews with exiled HRDs and three expert consultations, the research explores exile not merely as a condition of displacement but as a dynamic space of reconfiguration, where activism, belonging, and safety are continuously negotiated.

Using a qualitative, intersectional approach, the study identifies patterns of continuity and rupture in HRDs' activism across geographies, with attention to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and socio-political context.

Findings reveal that exile transforms both the risks and modalities of human rights work: HRDs often experience renewed agency through transnational advocacy and digital mobilisation, yet face profound challenges related to legal precarity, socio-economic marginalisation, and emotional exhaustion.

Institutional protection mechanisms, while vital, remain largely reactive and unevenly accessible, particularly for grassroots and intersectional activists. The analysis argues for a reconceptualisation of exile from a protection-centric framework to one recognising exiled HRDs as political actors whose exile produces new forms of civic engagement, solidarity, and resistance.

Ultimately, the report calls for policy and institutional responses that move beyond temporary safety to enable sustainable, dignified, and participatory forms of exile, acknowledging the exiled defender not as a passive beneficiary of protection but as an active agent in the global human rights ecosystem.

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To all those who continue to resist, and to begin again, to all those who followed the dream, knowing the way back might not exist,

This work is dedicated!

The authors

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACHPR	African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights
AI	Artificial intelligence
AU	African Union
CIVICUS	CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CSO	Civil society organisation
CoE	Council of Europe
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council (UN)
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
EU	European Union
FRA	European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights
FLD	Front Line Defenders
HRC	Human Rights Council (UN)
HRD	Human rights defender
IACHR	Inter-American Commission of Human Rights
IACtHR	Inter-American Court of Human Rights
ICORN	International Cities of Refuge Network
ISHR	International Service for Human Rights
KII	Key informant interview
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning, and others
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OAS	Organisation of American States
OHCHR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PAR	Participatory action research
UPR	Universal Periodic Review
UN	United Nations
UNDR	United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Setting the Scene

In the early decades of the 21st century, the world witnessed a profound and sustained erosion of democratic governance and civic space. Indicators from global monitoring bodies show that civic freedoms are under threat in nearly every region.

Freedom House (2023) recorded the 17th consecutive year of global democratic decline, with more countries seeing declines in political rights and civil liberties than gains. The CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation (CIVICUS) Monitor (2023) reported that 72% of the world's population now lives under closed or repressed civic spaces, where freedoms of association, assembly, and expression are severely constrained.

This global contraction of civic space has not only silenced communities but also placed human rights defenders (HRDs) at extraordinary risk. The consequences are stark. Front Line Defenders ([FLD], 2023) documented the killing of at least 300 HRDs across 28 countries in 2022, bringing the past decade's death toll to nearly 3,000.

Amnesty International's 2022/23 global report highlights how HRDs are increasingly criminalised under vague national security or counterterrorism laws, surveilled digitally, or subjected to smear campaigns that delegitimise their work. For many HRDs, this hostile environment culminates in a painful decision: to flee their homeland to preserve their lives and continue their advocacy.

Exile has traditionally been understood as a condition of punishment and banishment, carrying stigma, rupture, and dislocation. Edward Said (2000) famously described exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place” (p. 173).

Yet, contemporary realities complicate this view. Exile is not only a story of trauma and marginalisation; it can also be a space for resilience, reinvention, and transnational solidarity. Many exiled HRDs find ways to rebuild activism across borders using digital platforms to mobilise, forming diaspora coalitions and engaging international institutions.

These practices illustrate that exile can function simultaneously as a site of loss and innovation, reshaping activism into new, often more global forms.

The international community has formally recognised the importance of protecting HRDs. The United Nations (UN) Declaration on Human Rights Defenders ([UNDR], 1998) affirms the right of individuals and groups to promote and protect human rights and obligates states to create conditions for their safety (UNDR, 1998; United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1999).

Regional mechanisms reinforce these commitments, such as the European Union (EU) Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders (Council of the European Union, 2008) and Organisation of American States' (OAS) resolutions (e.g. AG/RES. 2991 (LII-O/22)) highlight the duty of states to safeguard defenders at risk, including those in exile.

Despite such frameworks, protection gaps remain acute. Freedom House's report *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach* (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021) documented how authoritarian regimes engage in transnational repression, extending threats across borders through surveillance, family intimidation, and even physical attacks (Schenkkan & Linzer, 2021).

Exiled HRDs often find that host countries offer only partial support: asylum systems are slow and restrictive, integration programmes are underfunded, and social stigma is persistent.

This research seeks to reconceptualise exile by foregrounding the lived experiences of HRDs who have been forced abroad. It explores how exile, rather than being a static condition of victimhood, is a dynamic process shaped by activism, intersectionality, and transnationalism.

Intersectional analysis is a crucial component in this research: women defenders; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer/questioning and others (LGBTIQ+) activists; Indigenous leaders; and minority activists often encounter overlapping forms of discrimination, both in their home countries and in exile (Crenshaw, 1991). These experiences shed light on how identity mediates vulnerability, resilience, and belonging.

By integrating these perspectives, the study develops a multifaceted conceptual framework of exile that better reflects the complexity of HRDs' realities.

1.2. Statement of Purpose

This research aims to reconceptualise the notion of exile by foregrounding the lived experience of HRDs in exile. Drawing an interdisciplinary socio-political framework, the research employs three theoretical constructs – activism, intersectionality, and transnationalism – to explore the multifaceted nature of exile and to differentiate between its various forms.

Through this approach, the research aims to explore how the processes of marginalisation, stigma, and discrimination shape the experiences of HRDs in exile while also recognising their agency and resilience.

This proposed research will build on and extend the current literature on exile studies.

Additionally, it will outline the need for an adequate analysis of the social, political, and cultural factors that shape the concept of exile. By identifying a cross-regional sample of exilic experiences, the research will identify and categorise the different forms and patterns of exile, including diaspora, displacement, voluntary exile, and forced exile, then it will elaborate a conceptual framework for analysing these processes.

By analysing the dynamics of the constraints that hinder activism among HRDs in exile, this research will provide a more nuanced understanding of the forms exile can take, reconceptualise it, and review the challenges HRDs in exile face. In doing so, it also delineates the roles of various actors in each form of exile, concluding relevant policy implications for actors and institutions to stop and reverse existing restrictions that stand against full engagement of HRDs in exile and provide an enabling environment for activists, which requires separate future research.

The research adopts a human rights-centred and trauma-informed methodology that is inclusive, participatory, and informed by the principles of do no harm and gender equality, with special consideration to be given to the mental health and resilience of exiled HRDs.

A key objective of this research is to challenge and expand the colloquial negative connotations of exile, which are often associated solely with marginalisation and stigma.

By reconceptualising exile, the research seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the practical challenges HRDs encounter, as well as the protection mechanisms of HRDs at risk, at three critical junctures:

- 1. The decision-making process and conditions leading to leaving the home country*
- 2. The transitional phase of relocation*
- 3. The arrival in the host country, engagement pathways, and reconfiguring activism*

Ultimately, the research aims to reconceptualise exile not as an end or a static condition, but rather as a dynamic process, and provide actionable policy recommendations for civil society actors, support and protection mechanisms, and global and regional actors and institutions, particularly in Europe.

These recommendations are intended to guide reforms that will stop and reverse the restrictions impeding full engagement and participation of HRDs in exile, as well as ensure their safety and protection.

1.3. Research Questions

The primary question this research seeks to answer is:

How do the experiences of HRDs in exile challenge and reshape traditional understandings of exile as a political and social condition?

Secondary questions:

1. To what extent do intersectional factors (including gender, sexual orientation, Indigenous identity, and others) affect the experience of exile?

2. How do elements of stigma and marginalisation by host communities affect the experiences and activism of HRDs?

3. In what ways and under which conditions can exile be experienced and perceived as a site of transformation, opportunity, and political rebirth?

1.4. Methodology

This research adopts a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework rooted in collaborative inquiry and empowerment. PAR positions HRDs not merely as subjects but as co-researchers who actively shape the research process, ensuring that their lived experiences, insights, and priorities are central to both knowledge production and potential advocacy outcomes. This approach reflects a commitment to honouring the agency of exiled defenders.

The core of the data collection is 18 biographical life history interviews conducted with exiled HRDs, capturing in-depth personal narratives that trace the trajectory of HRDs' lives before, during, and after exile. These interviews explore formative moments, key decisions, experiences of activism, and how identities and strategies evolve over time. The 'before, during, and after exile' structure of this report reflects a life-course and process-oriented approach to displacement and is supported by biographical narrative methods that examine how rupture, transit, and resettlement reshape identity, agency, and activism over time.

Although this study draws on 18 in-depth biographical interviews with HRDs in exile, only 13 are cited by name (pseudonym) or directly quoted in the report. The remaining five participants requested heightened confidentiality due to ongoing security risks in their countries of origin or host contexts. In accordance with ethical research standards and the principle of do no harm, their narratives are not individually attributed or quoted.

However, insights from these five interviews were fully integrated into the analytical framework and comparative findings. Their experiences informed the thematic coding, strengthened the cross-regional analysis, and contributed to the understanding of structural patterns shaping exile, activism, and protection. Their voices are thus present throughout the report, even if not explicitly visible.

The study was further enriched by:

- Case studies, which focused on selected HRDs or groups to explore specific contexts, such as particular host countries, activist movements, or intersectional identities (e.g., queer HRDs, Indigenous defenders, etc.).
- Digital ethnography, given that much of exiled HRDs' activism now takes place online. This component involved analysing online spaces, social media activities, and virtual campaigns to understand how digital platforms serve as tools for political participation, solidarity, and transnational advocacy under surveillance or legal threat.

Key informant interviews (KIIs) with actors such as non-governmental organisation (NGO) representatives, legal experts, policymakers, and diaspora leaders who engage with HRDs in exile. These interviews provided a structural and institutional context for understanding the support mechanisms and obstacles HRDs face.

The participants in the life history interviews were selected using purposive sampling, with attention to diversity in geography, form of activism, legal status, and intersectional identities. Selection was conducted through professional and community networks, referrals from partner organisations, and snowball sampling among HRDs in exile. This process ensured the inclusion of individuals representing different movements, regions, and types of displacement (See Annex 1).

The criteria guiding selection included:

- Form of activism (e.g., journalists, feminist activists, environmental defenders, LGBTIQ+ and minority rights advocates);
- Representation across gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other identity markers;
- Variation in host country contexts (democratic vs. authoritarian, global north vs. south, and both cross-regional and interregional relocation experiences); and
- A balance of well-known HRDs and lesser-known actors to avoid elite bias.

The research also includes a desk phase to analyse the traditional connotations and understandings of exile and map current policy debates on the topic, legal frameworks, and discourses on HRDs in exile at international and regional levels. This complements the life history interviews, ensuring that lived experiences are situated within broader institutional and geopolitical dynamics.

For transparency, AI tools were used in a limited way, mainly to support transcription review and light language editing. All analytical choices, coding, interpretation, and ethical decisions remained fully researcher-led, in line with the study's participatory and do no harm approach.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1. Traditional Perceptions of Exile: Exile as Rupture, Loss, Punishment

Scholars have described exile as a distinctive socio-psychological problem where the exile crisis is presented as a rupture in the individual's cultural past, geographical environment, and attachment to their society and nation, varying in intensity depending on the individual's history and the strength of his/her socio-political commitment, and causing a psychological trauma that might be comparable to a bereavement (Muñoz, 1980).

Similarly, Zinn (2005) described exile as a concept marked by a deep sense of loss, even abandonment, and by a feeling of removal from those things essential to the ordering and meaning of one's own self and community, as well as by a sense of loneliness, even in the midst of abundance.

The loss associated with exile takes many forms: loss of homeland; severing from family and friends; the fate, and for some the choice, of becoming a wanderer, always moving and never at rest; a deeply felt state of alienation; and, finally, despair arising from the inability to return to the place or state from which one has departed or been forcibly removed. Taken together, these qualities evoke only a fraction of the effects engendered by the presence, whether factual or symbolic, of the status of exile.

Patterson (1994) further expanded this understanding by framing exile not merely as a form of punishment but as an existential condition. Drawing on texts by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, and Brodsky, alongside less thoroughly examined figures such as Florensky, Shestov, Tertz, and Gendelev, he moved beyond exile as a political and geographical fact to explore its spiritual and linguistic dimensions.

In doing so, he sought to understand the interconnections between exile and identity, identity and meaning, and meaning and language (Patterson, 1994). According to him, the problem of meaning in human life is a problem of homelessness, and returning from exile is returning meaning to the world. Reflecting on his experience as an exiled sociologist studying an Iranian exile community, Shahidan (2000) explored the quintessentially political nature of sociology in exile. He defined exile as simultaneously punishment and refusal and argued that this dualistic relationship shapes the exiled academic practice.

In ancient times, exile functioned as a juridical measure against those considered threats to the polis (city). In her book *In Exile and the Poetics of Loss in Greek Tradition*, Sultan (1999) examined ancient Greek narrative, primarily Homeric epic, but also lyric and tragedy, alongside modern Greek folksong, in particular the so-called Akritic cycle. Focusing on themes of heroic travel and return, she portrayed exile as heroic suffering embedded in the tragedy of separation. Forsdyke (2005) went further and explored the cultural and political significance of ostracism in democratic Athens.

In contrast to previous interpretations, they argued that ostracism was primarily a symbolic institution “whose meaning for the Athenians was determined both by past experiences of exile and by its role as a context for the ongoing negotiation of democratic values” (p. 2). This punitive nature of exile was also traced in Roman and medieval contexts, where banishment worked as a means of silencing and exclusion.

Similar to Patterson, Kazanjian (2013) also considered exile as existential. Moreover, to describe the exilic condition, many scholars have employed the concept of liminality. Being neither here (Great Britain as a place of exile) nor there (Latvian exile society as a substitute for a nation) characterises the life of one of the most notable Latvian existentialist prose writers, Zari š (who wrote during the period of 1926-1965). Egl ja-Kristšone (2015) described liminality in exile as involving perpetual becoming, blending identities, and a constant negotiation between cultures.

In this sense, exile can be described as a state of estrangement from one’s own culture and a condition of living between worlds, neither entirely at home nor fully assimilated into the culture of the host country. Kristeva (1991), in her reflections on the foreigner, echoes that and portrays a foreigner as one who faces permanent displacement and highlights how exile destabilises concepts of identity and belonging: “He is a foreigner, he is from nowhere, from everywhere, a citizen of the world, cosmopolitan. Do not send him back to his origins” (p. 14).

Ashley and Walker (1990) have also framed exile as a form of dissidence that involves alienation and uprooting from one’s family, culture, or language. Weil (2001) posed the dilemma of exile as concisely as it has ever been expressed.

“To be rooted”, she said, “is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul” (p. 43). Yet Weil (2000) also recognised that most remedies for uprootedness in an era marked by world wars, deportations, and mass exterminations are almost as dangerous as the conditions they purportedly seek to remedy. Among these, the state, or more precisely, statism, emerges as one of the most insidious, since the worship of the state tends to supplant all other human bonds (Said, 2000).

In all these accounts, exile is not only a means of punishment but also an existential condition of exclusion and suspension, where the exiled subject exists only at the margins of cultural frameworks and never at their core. Yet, these existential conditions, implications, and manifestations are central to modern scholarship.

Said (2000) frames it as life led outside habitual order, “[i]t is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew” (p. 186).

He also described it as “the unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (p. 173). However, in his reflections on exile that he wrote just three years before passing away, he also highlighted the paradoxical productivity of exile as it offers a vantage point to critique nationalism, authority, and cultural essentialism.

Arendt (1943) also wrote about her experience of statelessness, framing exile as a radical deprivation of rights that reduced her to bare life outside the political order and stripped her of political belonging.

Another interpretation of exile by scholars portrays it as not only a condition but also a critical possibility. Exile was characterised by Greenman (2014) as “a tragically inevitable fate” (p. 186) where he suggested that separation and alienation are endemic to human existence. This also echoes many philosophical traditions and literature linking exile to the condition of never fully belonging to the world.

For example, Bhabha (1994), in the context of his discussions of hybridity, developed an argument that exile generates in between spaces, where identities and cultures are reconfigured. This resonates with Pratt (1991) in her discussions about contact zones.

According to Pratt, contact zone refers to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in the context of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths, as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (p. 34). These readings that move beyond traditional perspectives on exile that portray it solely as punitive still acknowledge rupture and loss as core elements of exile.

What can be drawn from these readings and perspectives is not a rejection of traditional understandings of exile but a recognition of the dichotomies that structure them. Exile has long been theorised through competing framings, oscillating between narratives of punishment, loss, and rupture, a profound severing from one’s past, culture, and homeland, and accounts that emphasise dissidence, critical reflection, and hybridity. Rather than treating these as separate or competing interpretations, it is more productive to understand exile as a space that collapses and exceeds these binaries. Loss and creation, rupture and reconstruction, alienation and affiliation coexist within the same experience. Exile, therefore, destabilises identity while simultaneously generating new modes of belonging and political consciousness.

The estrangements it produces transform both personal and collective understandings of home, whether remembered, reimagined, or suspended, which remain inseparable from the violence of alienation yet not reducible to it.

2.2. Definitions and Distinctions

Exile vs. Diaspora vs. Migration

While the concepts of exile, diaspora, and migration hold a significant place in the study of displacement and population mobility, they each represent different historical, political, and cultural frameworks of manifestation and implication.

Each carries a particular dimension of displacement across borders, ranging from the traumatic experience of loss and rupture associated with exile to the collective memory of diaspora and the dynamics of migration. Although these three notions share similarities and may have overlapping features, their analytical distinctions are essential for a more nuanced understanding of the various aspects and manifestations of displacement in contemporary studies.

Exile is associated with rupture, loss, and alienation from one's culture and homeland as a result of several political conditions, ranging from political persecution to wars, to attacks on certain marginalised groups within a community, and often results in trauma and coercion.

Scholars like Bolzman (2002b) have emphasised that the hope of return, when it becomes possible, is usually embedded within the experience of exile, which positions it as temporary, though often it is not. Some scholars have framed it as an existential and legal precarity. Said (2000) has described it as an unhealable rift that creates a fracture between the exiled and their homeland. In this sense, exile has often been framed within scholarship as a personal and political condition characterised by alienation, trauma, and longing.

Moving from understanding exile to understanding diaspora, it is worth noting that differentiating between exile and diaspora is not as straightforward as it seems, as the quest for a definition of diaspora appears to be a complex one due to the plurality of historical experiences, trajectories, and agendas (Sidero, 2008).

In Sheffer's (2003) influential definition, diaspora is described as a social-political formation, created as a result of voluntary or forced migration, whose members regard themselves as having the same ethno-national origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host countries.

In other, more recent definitions, diaspora refers to any form of distant nationalism, including groups struggling for self-determination. In the early to mid-twentieth century, it referred to specific cultural groups such as Jewish and Armenian peoples (Cohen, 1996). By the turn of the century, the term was used more broadly to signify an exiled group of people, voluntarily or forcibly, who shared a sense of common identity and long-term connection to their homeland.

Ethnicity or nationality does not disappear from such a definition but rather is perceived as entangled with other dimensions important for the formation of identities and communities, such as gender, class, religion, etc. (Clifford, 1994). Anteby-Yemini and Berthomière (2005) describe the following:

During the 90s, many typologies were proposed to understand and describe diasporas. For example, Medam (1993) proposed a typology based on the degree of cohesiveness and the dynamism of the diasporic organisation. In this perspective, they differentiate "crystallised diasporas" and "fluid diasporas" based on the degree of unity and dynamism of diasporas. The "crystallised diaspora" in this typology refers to diaspora communities with strong, stable boundaries, often centred on a shared homeland, ethnicity, or religion (Medem, 1993).

These groups emphasise roots, tradition, and the reproduction of essentialised identities and boundaries. The "fluid diaspora" according to Medam (1993) emphasises hybridity, movement, and the ongoing negotiation of identity. Here, boundaries are porous, identities are malleable, and belonging is seen as contingent, multiple, and always in process.

For another specialist on this question, Bruneau (1995) posits that the typology must be based on the diasporic organisation. He defined three major types of diasporas: the entrepreneurial diasporas (i.e., Chinese or Lebanese); the religious diasporas (i.e., Jews or Greeks); and the political diasporas (i.e., Palestinians, Tibetans). (paras 9-11)

Other scholars have more explicitly introduced a political dimension that had been underrepresented in earlier diaspora literature. Seven years after the publication of his book, Sheffer (1993) proposed a distinction between diasporas without a state of origin, termed stateless diasporas, and those with a state of origin, defined as state-based diasporas.

This typology makes it possible to describe the fluidity of organisational forms within ethnic groups over time. Responding to this territorial perspective, Cohen (1997) proposed a typology based on empirical observations, identifying four types: labour diasporas (e.g., Indians), imperial diasporas (e.g., British), trade diasporas (e.g., Chinese, Lebanese), and cultural diasporas, such as those from the Caribbean.

While these categories may appear to be neutral, including on gender, they are interpreted in the context of dynamically changing global norms and are thus highly politicised. It is this politics of categorisation that enables politicians to artificially separate people by means of imposing these categories; they divide (forced) migrants from citizens of nation-states and contribute to classifying members of categories through distinct legal privileges.

Differentiations of (forced) migrants are often based on push and pull factors, stipulating distinctions between voluntary and forced migration and therefore between good refugees as those deserving protection and bad migrants or economic refugees as those unworthy of aid. Despite the fact that contemporary diasporas are marked by their heterogeneity, diasporic communities located in democratic nation-states do share a commitment to struggle for enhanced citizenship rights for themselves, often lobbying Western governments to defend their human rights.

As Butler (2001) emphasises,

the term “diaspora” is under-theorised in the literature vis-à-vis the relationship between diasporas and their homelands; many other aspects of this relationship have yet to be examined (Cohen, 2008). The relationship between diasporas and transnationalism, especially among ordinary women, has only rarely been the focus of research (one example is Moghissi, 1999). (Noor, A, p. 2)

In his book *The Diasporic Condition: Ethnographic Explorations of the Lebanese Diaspora in the World*, the Lebanese-Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2021) discusses how diasporic individuals often navigate multiple identities shaped by their cultural heritage and the new environments they inhabit.

Hage notes the importance of a transdisciplinary approach in studying diaspora, combining insights from sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines. He emphasises that while sociological analyses of migration often focus on explaining the social causes and dynamics of migratory phenomena, his approach leans more towards understanding the plural modes of existence within diasporic communities. He argues that studying Lebanese diasporic culture offers an opportunity to explore alternative forms of existence, despite their modern capitalist context, which challenges traditional anthropological focuses on exotic or primitive cultures.

Hage (2021) introduces the concept of the diasporic condition, characterised by a multiplicity of realities and identities that are simultaneously lived and experienced by diasporic subjects. This condition is not limited to those who have physically migrated but extends to anyone enmeshed in the transnational networks of the Lebanese diaspora.

The lenticular nature of this existence refers to the layered and overlapping realities that diasporic individuals navigate. Hage also delves into the complexities of the diasporic experience by challenging traditional notions of ambivalence. Their research explores how diasporic individuals often live within a framework of dualities, such as the desire to migrate versus the desire to stay, or the pull between modernity and tradition.

Traditionally, the concept of ambivalence has been used by scholars to describe the internal conflict that diasporic individuals experience. For example, a person might feel torn between the desire to embrace the opportunities of a new country while also longing for the comfort and familiarity of their homeland. Hage argues that this model of ambivalence is insufficient to capture the full scope of the diasporic experience.

Instead of being simply torn between two oppositional forces, many diasporic subjects manage to inhabit both realities simultaneously, described as a form of fragmentation, where an individual's identity and existence are not split but are rather composed of multiple, coexisting realities (Hage, 2021).

This fragmentation has significant implications for how we understand culture and social belonging. It challenges the idea that identities must be coherent or that belonging to a culture requires a singular focus. Instead, it posits that cultural identity can be fluid, multifaceted, and context dependent. For example, a diasporic individual might feel fully at home in multiple cultures, drawing on different aspects of their identity depending on the situation. This factor can lead to a richer, though more complex, cultural life. Hage also connects this idea of fragmentation to the broader experience of modernity.

In an increasingly globalised world, the ability to navigate multiple realities is not just a diasporic condition but a modern one. The fragmented subject, then, is not an anomaly but a reflection of the modern condition, where multiple identities, affiliations, and realities coexist and interact.

The concept of anisogamy was also introduced by Hage in his aforementioned book (2021), as a framework for understanding the relationships and interactions between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. It highlights the power dynamics and inequalities that can exist in these relationships. This historical backdrop provides a foundation for understanding the community as a real and dynamic entity.

Hage refers to Anderson (1983) in the context of discussing the concept of imagined communities, which Anderson famously articulated in his seminal work, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson's idea revolves around how communities, particularly nations, are socially constructed through shared narratives, symbols, and collective identities, even when members may not have direct interactions with one another.

By referencing Anderson, traditional notions of nationalism that often overlook the complexities of diasporic identities are criticised. This exemplifies how individuals can maintain connections to their homeland while simultaneously engaging with new cultural contexts, thus complicating the simplistic narratives of nationalism.

Hence, as a conclusion, diaspora is often referred to as a broader and more collective phenomenon that encompasses groups with a mutual history and collective memories of homeland, alienation in host societies, and a sustained common identity. Diaspora in practice includes not only immigrants, workers but also refugees and exiles, and other groups that develop transnational links and attachment across multiple locations. Clifford (1994) frames it that diasporas are not only about displacement, but also about the creative reconstitution of identity, often producing hybrid cultural forms.

Migration, on the other hand, is broader and the most general category as it encompasses any movement of an individual or group across borders, whether permanent or temporary, forced or voluntary.

Kuhlmann (2018) described it as including a broad spectrum of mobility, ranging from labour migration, educational mobility, family reunification, asylum seeking, and other forms. Other scholars went further, like Castles and Miller (2009), who considered it as a defining nature of the modern world driven by conflicts and inequalities. In contrast to exile and diaspora, migration does not necessarily involve alienation, trauma, or collective identity, and it is often a socio-economic process that may or may not take diasporic forms.

Hage (2021) also explored the concept of migration as more than just a physical movement but as an existential pursuit and called it existential mobility. This idea refers to the sense that migration is not just about relocating geographically but about investing oneself in a journey that is hoped to bring growth, opportunity, or some form of fulfilment.

Hage uses Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of illusion to discuss how migrants are engaged in a sort of social game, where the stakes are the prospects of bettering one's life. This engagement is driven by the belief that the migratory path will lead to some valuable outcome, whether that be economic success, personal fulfilment, or social prestige. This touches on the paradoxical tension that many migrants experience: the desire to move forward and expand one's horizon versus the equally strong desire to stay connected to one's home and origins.

The concept of the refugee is deeply intertwined with those of diaspora, exile, and migration, yet it also carries distinct legal, social, and experiential dimensions.

Refugees are individuals who are forced to flee their country due to persecution, conflict, or violence, and their experiences often overlap with those of exiles and members of diasporas. Refugees are typically defined by their forced displacement and the need for international protection, distinguishing them from voluntary migrants.

However, the boundaries between refugee, migrant, and exile are often blurred in practice, as individuals may shift between these categories or embody aspects of several at once. The use of the categories refugee and migrant to differentiate between those on the move and the legitimacy, or otherwise, of their claims to international protection has featured strongly during Europe's migration crisis and has been used to justify policies of exclusion and containment (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018).

Refugees, especially those who remain abroad for extended periods or across generations, can become part of a diaspora, developing a collective identity and sustaining transnational ties (Shuval, 2000). While refugees, exiles, and diasporas share experiences of displacement and loss, their legal status, motivations, and relationships to both homeland and host societies can differ. Refugees may become economic actors and community builders in their new countries, contributing to the formation and evolution of diasporic communities (Lindley, 2009).

In this sense, the distinction between the notions of exile, diaspora, migration, and refugee cannot be considered of a static and fixed nature; rather, these categories transform and evolve over time and space. As Bolzman (2002a) described it, exiles may become a part of diaspora when their legal and political situation changes or when their conditions of forced displacement evolve into permanent settlement. Additionally, these very connotations change as individuals experience shifts in how they relate to time, space, and the possibility of return. Similarly, successive migration waves may evolve to become diasporic groups, with each new generation reconfiguring links to their homeland or host land. This idea is enhanced by the fact that migrated groups are not always homogeneous and are shaped by different conditions of leaving homelands, varying timing and conditions of displacements, and different forms of reception in host countries.

Thus, globalisation has blurred the features of categories and labels related to mobility, enhancing transitions between them. However, this diversity makes traditional narratives of exile as loss, diaspora as collective memory and nostalgia, and migration as a socio-economic phenomenon, oversimplified and insufficient. Understanding the overlaps and distinctions of these categories is therefore essential for grappling with the human experiences of transnational mobility.

Forced vs. Voluntary Exile

The differentiation between forced and voluntary exile is best understood not as a binary opposition but rather as a continuum, as much contemporary scholarship rejects oversimplified categorisation and suggests instead an interplay of choices, conditions, challenges, and coercion that shape displacement.

While exile is often portrayed as an experience of forced migration and alienation from homeland that encompasses trauma and political persecution, its boundaries with voluntary migration are often blurred and require a more sophisticated conceptual framework.

Forced migration and exile are both characterised by trauma and coercion. Many existing historical and contemporary examples of forced exile have highlighted its political dimension. Abidde (2020) recounts the story of Oba Akitoye of Lagos, who was forced into exile under colonial interventions, and Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian intellectual who fled the country that was under authoritarian rule after escaping imprisonment.

Similarly, Assensoh (2001) described the experiences of many African intellectuals who were forced into exile by political repression, framing their conditions as both voluntary and forced, shaped by survival as well as agency.

Razan (a pseudonym), a Syrian intellectual and writer who was involved in this study, also escaped the country following advice from her neighbours that she needed to leave to protect her safety after receiving threats. She was neither imprisoned nor directly forced into exile; however, the predictable and drastic evolution of events in Syria after 2011 under the rule of Bashar al-Assad gave many Syrian activists and intellectuals a clear sense of the country's future, one defined by protracted conflict within an extremely hostile environment marked by systematic state repression as well as violence perpetrated by non-state actors.

Rana, like the case of other intellectuals, chose to leave the country in 2014 to secure her safety and freedom, yet, since then, she has not been able to come back. These examples emphasise that exile is not only a mobility or a form of displacement but a political action that transforms cultural and intellectual landscapes. Furthermore, the voluntary-forced continuum as migration impacts access to safety, rights, freedoms, as well as citizenship opportunities for HRDs and intellectuals coming from oppressed contexts.

Some scholars, like Bakewell (2021), argued that these distinctions are embedded in legal and political conditions and consequences. While refugees are entitled to receive international protection under asylum mechanisms, those who are deemed voluntary migrants are often excluded from these frameworks.

Erdal and Oeppen (2017) went further to explain how the dichotomy obscures the complex and multifaceted reality of displacement, where individuals may take the decision of migration as a result of economic crisis, political repression, or familial obligation.

Similarly, Zolberg (1989) argued that in some cases even voluntary migration happens in a systematic and structural context of constraints, leaving the line between compulsion and choice blurred. However, this ambiguity has a profound political implication.

For example, in Iran, Syria, several states of Latin America, Ukraine, and many African contexts, political repression has forced many intellectuals and HRDs into exile, and their departure has weakened domestic cultural production while contributing to transnational activism, as shown in the case of Razan, who is now a renowned writer in Sweden and across Europe.

This movement is another example of how exile intersects with the phenomenon of brain drain, as homelands are losing bright minds and key figures in political life, activism, academia, art, and literature.

The distinction between forced and voluntary exile is hence best understood as a spectrum rather than a rigid dichotomy. While exile is often clearly forced, it can encompass features of agency, as individuals can choose exile over risks, imprisonment, and repression.

Acknowledging the continuum between these two categories allows for a more sophisticated understanding of the lived experiences of individuals in exile, whether they are human rights defenders, intellectuals, artists, or political activists.

2.3. Understanding Protection Frameworks and Their Limits in Mobility

Anchored in a coherent yet complex set of legal and institutional frameworks, the international protection of HRDs reflects both normative commitments and clearly defined state responsibilities.

Central to this framework, the 1998 UNDR affirms the responsibility of states to implement and respect all of its provisions, including the obligation to take all necessary measures to protect individuals from violence, threats, retaliation, adverse discrimination, pressure, or any other arbitrary action resulting from the legitimate exercise of the rights set out in the Declaration.

In addition, the UNDR emphasises the role of states in ensuring, promoting, and supporting the creation and development of independent national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights, such as ombudsmen or human rights commissions.

Article 1 of the UNDR identifies HRDs as individuals or groups who act to promote, protect, or strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Other articles of the UNDR provide that the promotion and protection of human rights should be through peaceful means (see, e.g., Articles 12(1), 12(3) and 13), inferring that HRDs should not engage in violence. The term through peaceful means is not to be equated with through [or by] lawful means, particularly as some national laws are oppressive and contrary to international law, meaning that conduct might be unlawful within the meaning of national law while remaining lawful under international law.

The definition in the UNDR reflects those used by human rights experts, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders (2024) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) (2023b). It is important that the status of an HRD does not require any form of registration (International Service for Human Rights [ISHR], 2024).

Other instruments have also ensured that states shall recognise, protect, respect, and fulfil the right to promote, defend, and strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms (hereinafter the right to defend human rights) at the national, regional, and international levels (IACtHR, 2023b; UN Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC], 2001, 2006; UNGA, 2014; UN Human Rights Council [HRC], 2013; ISHR, 2024).

States shall recognise, protect, respect, and fulfil all of the human rights and fundamental freedoms that enable and are conducive to the exercise of the right to defend human rights (Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, 2018; IACtHR, 2018; IACtHR, 2023a; Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2000; HRC, 2016; ISHR, 2024), including the rights to:

- freedom of assembly (UN, 1948; UN, 1966a; UN, 1965; African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights [ACHPR], 1981; OAS, 1969; Council of Europe [CoE], 1950; ISHR, 2024; UNGA, 2018)
- freedom of association (UN, 1948; UN, 1966a; UN, 1966b; UN, 1979; ACHPR, 1981; OAS, 1969; CoE, 1950; IACtHR, 2009; UNGA, 2018)
- freedom of opinion and expression (UN, 1948; UN, 1966a; UN, 1965; ACHPR, 1981; CoE, 1950; ISHR, 2024)
- participation in peaceful protest (UN, 1966b; OAS, 1988; International Labour Organisation, 1948)
- develop and discuss new human rights ideas (UN, 1998; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, 2011)
- self-determination (UN, 1945; UN, 1966a; UNGA, 1960)
- privacy (UN, 1948; UN, 1966a; OAS, 1969; CoE, 1950)
- receive and use funding (UN, 1998; Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, 2013; Inter-American Commission of Human Rights [IACHR], 2015)
- participation (UN, 1966a; OAS, 1969; HRC, 1996; Parliamentary Assembly of the CoE, 2018; Office of the CoE Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018)
- access to information (UN, 1948; UN, 1966a; ACHPR, 1981; OAS, 1969; CoE, 1950; UN, 1998; HRC, 2013)
- safe and unhindered access to and communication with international and regional human rights bodies and organisations (UN, 1998; UNGA, 1966; UNGA, 2008)

Complementing these frameworks, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), articulated in its Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (2014) that the effective protection of the dignity, physical and psychological integrity, liberty, and security of human rights defenders constitutes a prerequisite for the realisation of the right to defend human rights.

It further stresses that a safe and enabling environment depends on the realisation of a range of other fundamental human rights necessary for human rights work, including the rights to freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association, participation in public affairs, freedom of movement, private life, and unhindered access to and communication with international bodies, including international and regional human rights mechanisms.

At the European level, the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders (Council of the EU, 2008) similarly emphasise practical protection measures, such as observation, emergency assistance, and relocation support provided through diplomatic missions. In parallel, the 1951 Refugee Convention codifies access to basic rights and the principle of non-refoulement (UN, 1951). However, in practice, these legal and policy frameworks often collapse when the human rights defender is in transit.

Together, these instruments form a multi-layered architecture of protection, spanning international law, regional mechanisms, and national human rights institutions. They collectively underscore that states are the primary duty-bearers responsible for ensuring that HRDs can carry out their work without fear of reprisals. Yet, as highlighted by the ISHR and monitoring bodies, these frameworks frequently falter when HRDs are in motion—whether seeking refuge, transiting between jurisdictions, or operating across borders. Because protection mechanisms are typically tied to territorial jurisdictions and institutional

presence, a defender who moves beyond these boundaries often experiences fragmented or delayed access to legal remedies, reporting channels, or emergency protection.

Understanding protection frameworks through the lens of mobility thus exposes their jurisdictional and procedural limits. While the normative strength of these instruments remains intact, their operational reach is constrained by state sovereignty, bureaucratic lag, and uneven regional cooperation.

The challenge is not the absence of protection norms but rather their incomplete portability and inability to follow HRDs as they cross physical and legal borders. Addressing this gap requires reimagining protection as a transnational responsibility, where institutional collaboration, relocation mechanisms, and cross-border accountability together uphold the universality these frameworks promise.

2.4. Understanding Identity in Conditions of Exile

In this research, identity is approached as a dynamic, relational, and historically-situated process, produced through lived experience, social interaction, and structures of power.

This analytical choice is both theoretical and methodological. It draws on long-standing critiques within sociology, anthropology, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies that caution against treating identity as a fixed or self-evident category, especially in contexts marked by displacement, violence, and political rupture.

In exile, identity is also shaped through external constraints and classifications, including legal status, bureaucratic categorisation, racialisation, gender norms, language, and expectations around integration and belonging. For many HRDs, these pressures intersect with political histories, trauma, and ongoing transnational threats, making identity both a site of vulnerability and a resource for agency.

Accordingly, this report focuses less on identity as an attribute and more on processes of identification, namely how people name themselves, how they are named by others, and how these dynamics shift across time and place.

Following Hall's (1996) seminal intervention, identity is understood here not as an already-accomplished fact but as a production that is always in process, constituted through difference, memory, and representation rather than rooted in stable origins. For Hall, identities are formed through, not outside, difference and are therefore contingent, positional, and subject to continual transformation. This understanding is especially relevant to exile, where forced separation from place, community, and political context destabilises previously held identifications while opening space for new ones to emerge.

At the same time, this research is informed by Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) critique of the unreflective use of identity as an analytical category. They caution that identity is often employed as a catch-all term that obscures more than it reveals, flattening complex social processes into static labels. In response, this study shifts the analytical focus from identity as a noun to processes of identification, categorisation, and belonging.

Rather than asking what an identity is, the analysis asks how, when, and under what conditions particular identifications become salient, contested, or strategically mobilised by HRDs in exile.

Feminist and intersectional scholarship further grounds this approach. Drawing on Butler's (1990) work on performativity, identity is understood as something enacted and reiterated through social norms, legal regimes, and political constraints, rather than as an expression of an inner essence.

Intersectional theorists such as Anthias (2001) emphasise that identities are never singular but are produced at the intersections of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, legal status, and political positioning.

These intersections are not static; they are reconfigured across contexts, particularly in moments of displacement, transit, and resettlement. In exile, for example, legal precarity may become more salient than professional identity, while racialisation or gendered expectations in host societies may reshape how HRDs understand themselves and are perceived by others.

Crucially, this research treats identity not merely as a descriptive attribute but as a political and relational outcome of exile as a lived process. Exile disrupts established identity anchors, such as citizenship, professional recognition, language, and community legitimacy, while simultaneously producing new subject positions, including exiled activist, diasporic advocate, or transnational HRD. These identities are not freely chosen; they emerge through negotiations with host-state institutions, funding structures, protection mechanisms, and social environments that both enable and constrain agency.

Methodologically, the decision not to impose a predefined definition of identity is aligned with the PAR framework and the use of biographical life-history interviews. Allowing identity to emerge inductively from participants' narratives avoids re-inscribing normative or externally-imposed categories that may not reflect how HRDs understand themselves. This process is particularly important in a trauma-informed context, where rigid classifications risk reproducing stigma or silencing ambivalence, contradiction, and transformation. Participants often narrate identity as fragmented, ambivalent, or strategically adapted, shifting between activist, survivor, professional, parent, migrant, or exile depending on time, space, and audience.

In this sense, identity in this research is conceptualised as relational, processual, and contingent, shaped by power relations before exile, destabilised during displacement, and reconfigured in host societies. Rather than serving as a background variable, identity becomes an analytical lens through which broader questions of agency, marginalisation, belonging, and political continuity in exile can be examined

2.5. Introducing Activism, Transnationalism, and Intersectionality

While traditional perspectives on exile often highlight loss, punishment, and rupture and portray the exiled as a victim of political and cultural dislocation and territorial alienation, contemporary studies on exile and displacement are reframing exile as a site of agency, where new forms of belonging can emerge and the exiled individual can reconfigure mobilisation, activism, and identity. Hence, activism, intersectionality, and transnationalism can provide critical lenses to rethink exile and move beyond simplistic frameworks of coercion and trauma to reconfigure exile as a generative political and social condition.

The concept and meaning of activism, as well as what it entails, remain contested within social movement research. This ambiguity stems from the concept's inherent contingency and its wide-ranging forms, meanings, and scales of contention. Central to this debate is whether activism requires participation in an organised entity, such as a political party, social movement, civil society organisation, or informal network, or whether it can be individualised and manifested through everyday practices and lifestyle commitments. Because activism embodies such a multiplicity of actions and interpretations, it is crucial to situate it within the specific social, cultural, and political contexts in which it occurs (Selim, 2023).

According to Horton and Kraftl (2009), activism is perceived and imagined as a practice that has the following characteristics: it is organised, collective, intentional, and agentic, connected to a preferably already named and known movement that makes significant noise and fuss.

Activism is also rarely considered a secluded or hidden phenomenon but rather an extroverted act that is involved in generating public events (Svirsky, 2010).

Scholarship adopting this perspective (e.g., Juris, Pleyers, 2009; Oinas, Onodera, & Suurpää, 2018) has enabled us to observe that civic engagement among the younger generation is not declining; rather, it has evolved into various forms: everyday consumption (Navne & Skovdal, 2021), affective bonds (Horton

& Kraftl, 2009; Abdou & Skalli, 2018), and creative expressions (Laine, Suurpää, & Ltifi, 2018; Mai & Laine, 2016). Beyond the realm of formal institutional politics, this study acknowledges the intimate relationship between the stories of everyday life and the broader narratives that shape and inspire large-scale social movements (Ewick & Silbey, 2003). (Mai, 2024, p. 58)

Dimitrakou and Ren (2025) further explain in their research:

Ethnographic investigations of the everyday responses to oppression offer another vantage point on the dialectic relationship between responses and their political potential. Concepts such as “everyday resistance” (Scott, 1985), “quiet encroachment” (Bayat, 2000), “implicit activism” (Horton & Kraftl, 2009) and “resilience” (Katz, 2004) have been mobilised to expand the understanding of politics beyond established formats of collective intervention and action. To do so, these analyses have traced political possibilities available to people excluded from institutionalized or formalised formats of political engagement, such as public protest or unionising. (para 34)

Further, Szekely (2024) also examines the following regarding gender:

The social movement literature also suggests that once mobilised, gender shapes participants. Surveying work on women’s participation in social movements, Zemlinskaya (2010) notes that although gendered hierarchies and divisions of labour excluding women from leadership roles often persist even in progressive social movements, patriarchal assumptions about gender also allow women to mobilise when men cannot. Work on women’s roles in the American civil rights movement demonstrates that women’s community ties often meant that they filled a meso-leadership role between upper leadership and those who could potentially be mobilised into the movement (Robnett, 1996). At the same time, though, their roles as leaders often went unacknowledged (Barnett, 1993), sometimes leading activists to articulate and mobilise around their grievances as women in much more explicit ways (Thorne, 1975). (p. 627)

While there is attention to how local initiatives become national and, eventually, international, there is less understanding of how a distant and broad-based political movement becomes embedded in the local milieu of activism that demands academic attention.

Scholars working on “immigrant politics” focus on the political actions undertaken to improve the migrants’ own social, economic, or legal situation in the host country. They are known for their studies of the struggles of undocumented migrants, mobilisations against racial discrimination, or migrant workers’ movements (e.g. Garbaye, 2005; Koopmans, 2004; Nicholls, 2013, 2019; Siméant, 1998). All these endeavours may be regarded as a particular aspect of the migrants’ political participation in the host country—something we refer to as “political participation.” They have, however, been considered so specific as to deserve special treatment. Scholars working on “political participation” concentrate on the migrants’ political participation in the host country’s mainstream politics. Their research deals mostly with immigrants’ voting behaviours, but some of their studies also include less conventional forms of political participation, like involvement in social movements or civil society organisations [(CSO)] (e.g. Gabrielli, Gsir, & Zapata-Barrero 2017; Però & Solomos 2010). (Bentz & Guyot, 2021, para 11)

Activism is a very central aspect of exile in the contemporary world, and many scholars have shown us examples of how exiled communities mobilise to resist authoritarianism back home, and how this contributes to maintaining ties with homelands, and even advocate for their rights in host countries. Activism, in this sense, can transform activism from a condition of marginality to a platform of political mobilisation, with exiled HRDs leveraging international organisations, networks, and media to amplify their causes (Lindholm, 2021). Scholars like Butler and Athanasiou (2013) demonstrated how precarious displacement can give rise to collective action where the experience of marginalisation and vulnerability transforms into a resource for mobilisation. Rather than understanding activism as supporting or

leading social struggles, the definition of activism pursued in this research conceives it as an open-ended process and stresses the role of investigation in relation to practices within the social situations to which activism addresses itself.

Transnationalism provides another lens to challenge non-centrist frameworks of exile studies. Many scholars have discussed transnationalism. Vertovec (2009) argues that transnationalism has become a dominant paradigm used to describe how social, political, and economic processes and practices transcend national borders in an increasingly interconnected world. Studies of transnationalism have demonstrated the importance of cross-border ties in shaping and sustaining remittance-based economies, cultural practices, and civic engagement in the home country (e.g., Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001; Guarnizo, Portes, & Haller 2003; Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt 1999; Smith & Guarnizo 1998).

Lentin (2006) analyses transnationalism as a “link of immigrant groups living in developed countries with their respective sending nations and hometowns”, their actions may even have the potential for empowerment, insofar as they generate the ability to mobilise international support and influence events in both homeland and host country. (Noor, 2014, p. 2)

Koinova (2018) then elaborates:

Concurrently with concerns about terrorism, conflict scholars became preoccupied with diasporas and exile having detrimental effects on domestic conflicts by radicalising from abroad (Collier & Hoeffler, 2000; Kaldor 2001; Koinova 2011), maintaining conflict networks (Adamson 2005), conflict-prone institutions (Shain 2002), fundraising for radical factions (Hockenos 2003), and taking arms and joining local warfare from abroad (Perritt 2008). (para. 5)

Other scholars stand in contrast to this argument, claiming that whether their actions take the form of lobbying, remittance-sending, or acts of violence, exile groups’ efforts to create change may determine the success of homeland opposition movements and efforts to resolve internal conflicts. Transnational perspectives suggest that exile is not only about loss and rupture from homeland but simultaneous presence in multiple spaces.

In the book *The Diasporic Condition*, Hage (2021) referred to Derrida’s (1997) book *Politics of Friendship*. The reference occurs in a discussion about the concept of friendship among the Lebanese diaspora. Hage relates a conversation with a Lebanese migrant, Waheed, who comments that there are no friends here, meaning in the US-Venezuelan space where he lives. This statement is compared to a famous phrase attributed to Aristotle, O my friends, there are no friends, and yet was later analysed by Montaigne (1580/2003), then much later taken up and dissected by Derrida (1997) in their *Politics of Friendship*.

Waheed’s statement is not intended as a philosophical declaration but rather reflects a specific diasporic sentiment. While Derrida’s interpretation of Aristotle’s phrase deals with the complexities and paradoxes of friendship in a philosophical sense, Waheed’s comment highlights the perceived lack of genuine friendships in his current environment, contrasting it with the situation in Lebanon, where he believes friends were really friends.

Furthermore, the author explores the concept of diasporic lenticularity (Hage, 2021). The term lenticularity is derived from lenticular lenses used in photography, where different images can be seen when viewed from different angles. In the context of diasporic existence, this concept is used metaphorically to describe the way diasporic individuals inhabit multiple realities simultaneously.

This critiques the traditional mono-realistic view of being, which assumes that individuals exist in one place at a time and rely on memory to connect with other places. Instead, it demonstrates that diasporic subjects often experience themselves as existing in multiple places at once, with each

location influencing and intruding upon the other. This “flickering” between realities—such as between their homeland and the place they have migrated to—forms a central part of their identity and existence (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Lenticularity also shifts the focus from analysing individual diasporic subjects to understanding the broader diasporic condition as an environment composed of multiple intertwined realities. It suggests that the fragmented and ambivalent nature of diasporic subjects is a reflection of the way they inhabit and navigate multiple, often conflicting, realities simultaneously (Hage, 2021). Similarly, Levitt and Schiller (2004) portrayed this as simultaneity, where individuals sustain lives and political actions that cross borders.

Yet, activism and transnationalism remain very broad concepts and need to be connected with the gendered and often racial matrices in which these processes are embedded (Moghadam, 2005). The past and the lost home remain an essential part of women and their identity (Ghorashi, 2003). In this sense, transnationalism can be considered as a “multidimensional phenomenon which differs, among other variables such as class, religion, ethnicity, also most importantly, according to generation and gender” (Salih, 2006, p. 45).

The concept of intersectionality, coined by Crenshaw (1989), emerged as a response to inequalities and inadequacies of theoretical frameworks that used to treat gender and race as separate categories and dimensions of analysis. Crenshaw argued that black women were rendered invisible when discrimination was highlighted solely along a singular axis. Thus, intersectionality highlighted how overlapping systems of discrimination and oppression, such as classism, sexism, racism, and heteronormativity, interplay in complex ways. Since then, this concept has become an important analytical tool in feminist and critical social theory that allows scholars to understand how multiple axes of power and identity interact to shape lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, intersectionality has evolved into a foundational analytical and epistemological framework across feminist and critical social theory, enabling scholars to interrogate how multiple axes of power structure lived experiences and social hierarchies (Collins, 2000; Bilge, 2013).

Intersectional thinking has been further extended by Fraser (1997, 2000), who emphasised the dual dimensions of justice: recognition and redistribution. Fraser has criticised the frameworks that only privilege one of these two dimensions, suggesting instead an integrative framework that takes into consideration how economic and cultural structures of inequality amplify one another. Similarly, Yuval-Davis (2006) and Anthias (2012) have argued that intersectionality should not be limited to identity politics but understood as a transversal tool that situates subjects within shifting social, geopolitical, and historical contexts.

Applying this lens to the study of exile reveals not merely that exiled individuals face multiple forms of discrimination, but that exile itself is structured intersectionally. The ways in which exile is lived, narrated, and politicised are mediated by positionalities such as gender, class, sexuality, race, and legal status—categories that interact across both the homeland and host contexts.

Intersectionality, in this sense, allows for the analysis of exile not as a singular condition of loss but as a relational and stratified social process embedded in transnational power geometries. It exposes how protection mechanisms, legal frameworks, and diaspora politics privilege certain subjectivities over others, shaping who becomes visible as a legitimate defender and who remains marginalised within exile communities (Bauböck, 2017; Nyers, 2019).

For example, intersectionality foregrounds how the labour of activism in exile is unequally distributed: women HRDs often bear the hidden emotional, reproductive, and care burdens of advocacy networks, while men may more easily access public and institutional platforms. Queer and racialised exiles encounter not only the threat of repression from their home states but also the racialised bordering practices and moral hierarchies of host societies (El-Tayeb, 2011). These dynamics

demonstrate that exile cannot be disentangled from broader systems of global inequality and that belonging, recognition, and political participation are differentially accessible (El-Tayeb, 2011). Exiled HRDs may experience compounded disadvantages due to intersecting identities. For example, Syrian academics in exile report marginalisation in employment and research opportunities based on the intersection of nationality, language, and gender (Khuder & Petri, 2023). Similarly, disabled individuals who are also part of ethnic minorities or are women face unique barriers in accessing rights and protections (Beco, 2017).

This approach moves beyond earlier frameworks that treated exile as a uniform experience of rupture or nostalgia.

It situates exile within interlocking regimes of power, including gendered citizenship, racialised migration governance, and neoliberal economies of precarity. Intersectionality thus serves here as both an analytical lens and a methodological orientation, one that compels attention to how structural inequalities travel across borders and become reproduced within the very spaces of refuge and activism.

As Fraser (2009) has argued through the notion of *participatory parity*, justice in transnational contexts requires not only protection from persecution but also the conditions for equitable participation within exile communities themselves.

Furthermore, intersectionality is equally an important lens to understand activism in exile. While HRDs in exile engage in mobilisation and struggles against authoritarian regimes back home and for their rights in host countries, they also engage in collective efforts against patriarchy, sexism, and other manifestations of identity-based discrimination. For example, Gideon (2018), drawing on the case of Chilean exiles in the United Kingdom (UK), looked at the experiences of exiles through a gender lens and argued for the need to recognise the gendered nature of spaces of political activism in order to highlight the contribution made by many Chilean women to life in exile. They suggested that using a gender lens sheds light on the multiple ways in which many women were indirectly the victims of abuse under the military regime and how this impacts their mental health and wellbeing. The analysis also provides new insights into how forced migration impacts gender roles and norms among those living in exile (Gideon, 2018). This echoes Fraser's (2009) insights on participatory parity that suggested that activism in exile aims to create situations where all voices are heard and recognised, including those of marginalized communities within exile communities. Intersectionality calls for a holistic, whole-of-person approach in legal and policy frameworks, recognising that rights violations often occur at the intersection of multiple identities. This approach can help address gaps in protection and ensure more substantive justice for exiled HRDs (Moreno-Lax, 2021; Bond 2021).

These three lenses of activism, intersectionality, and transnationalism reconceptualise exile as a condition of agency. While activism clarifies how individuals in exile engage politically against oppression, intersectionality allows us to gain a more sophisticated understanding of identity-laden dimensions of exile and activism.

Furthermore, transnationalism emphasises the means individuals in exile rethink citizenship, reimagine belonging, and reconfigure identity beyond limitations of time and space. As a result, these notions enable a new reading of exile as both a site of oppression, and of resistance to oppression and neocolonial structures, and open pathways to reconceptualise exile as a critical site of global politics in the 21st century.

2.6. Why Traditional Frameworks Are Insufficient

From Arendt's (1943) notions of statelessness as stripping away of rights to Said's (2000) description of exile as unhealable rift, exile has been often portrayed by scholars through the language of rupture, loss, and trauma that displaces and embeds. While these frameworks remain necessary and foundational, they have become limited and no longer sufficient to describe the lived experiences of exiled HRDs in the 21st century.

The insufficiency does not stem from a lack of theory but from the persistence of conceptual dichotomies—between exile and belonging, forced and voluntary movement, displacement and emplacement—that no longer reflect the complexities of contemporary mobility for activists.

Rather than constituting a critique of earlier frameworks, this chapter seeks to dismantle these dichotomies and trace the continuities that link categories often treated as discrete. Exile, migration, and diaspora are frequently theorised as separate phenomena, yet, in practice, the boundaries between them are porous. Similarly, the binaries of forced versus voluntary exile rarely hold in lived experience. Protection mechanisms, however, continue to rely on these rigid classifications, leaving many HRDs in precarious in-between spaces that escape formal recognition.

Another persistent dichotomy in the literature is between victimhood and agency. Exiled individuals are often portrayed solely as victims of loss, yet exile can also become a platform for renewed political agency. Many HRDs, rather than being silenced, have reconfigured their activism through diaspora networks, digital spaces, and transnational alliances. Said has himself hinted at this paradox, highlighting exile's ability to generate critical perspectives.

Further limitations arise from the flattening of intersectional experience. Women in exile are often treated as a homogeneous group—without utilising intersectionality—obscuring differentiated experiences of exclusion, including marginalisation within male-dominated activism networks or exposure to gender-based and sexual violence in diasporic contexts. Queer exiled HRDs, in addition to discrimination mentioned, usually experience stigmatisation. While theoretical tools to address these multifaceted vulnerabilities exist, they remain under-integrated, and protection mechanisms often overlook them, keeping many HRDs navigating identity-laden forms of marginalisation without adequate access to support and recognition.

Finally, globalisation and technological transformation have unsettled earlier assumptions about distance and belonging. Exile, in this sense, is no longer primarily a condition of separation from the homeland, but one of simultaneity, in which HRDs live abroad while continuing their activism and enduring transnational repression. Thus, understanding exile today needs to acknowledge both the opportunity and the risk associated with its transnational terrain.

In this sense, reconceptualising exile means weaving these strands together: To not discard them but to situate them within a more fluid, relational understanding that reflects the dynamic, intersectional, and transnational realities of contemporary human rights work.

3. ANALYSIS

This chapter draws on life-history interviews and KIIs conducted between July 2025 and September 2025 with 18 HRDs and 3 practitioners working on protection and relocation.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling via protection mechanisms, universities, and civil society networks from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Eastern Europe, East Africa, Latin America and also diaspora communities in the EU and North America.

The HRD cohort spans journalists, lawyers, cultural workers, community organisers, and researchers. Interviews were conducted in English and Arabic, and, where necessary, interpreted. All quoted material from interviews has been lightly edited for clarity and length without altering meaning.

All personal names used in this chapter are pseudonyms. To mitigate deductive disclosure, some identifying details (e.g., city names, institutional affiliations, precise dates) are composited or time-shifted and country references occasionally generalised while preserving analytic integrity.

Risk-reduction measures included encrypted communications, the option to withdraw at any time, off-record segments, and secure storage of recordings and transcripts on encrypted drives with role-segmented access. Where participants requested it, direct quotations were reviewed for accuracy and risk prior to inclusion.

The study adheres to a do no harm approach; when tension arose between descriptive richness and potential re-identification, protection took precedence.

The three-phase framework (before, during, and after relocation) draws from interdisciplinary scholarship in forced migration, exile studies, and life-course analysis, which conceptualises displacement as a process rather than a single event.

It is further informed by biographical and narrative research methods that trace how political rupture, transit, and re-settlement shape identity, agency, and activism over time. Given the purposive sampling of at-risk HRDs, findings are analytically generalisable but not statistically representative. The chapter privileges process tracing and pattern identification (e.g., timing of exits, evidence governance, platform risk) over prevalence estimates.

3.1. Departure: The Decision to Leave

A. The Stories of Departure: Fear, Repression, Survival Strategies.

They attacked the foundation, took the keys, pulled the hard drives, and on the evening news called the reading room a front for foreign agendas. That night I slept elsewhere; by morning the lease was gone. Staying would only make other people carry the cost of my work. (Interview with Farid, July 2025)

Under this kind of demonstrative coercion, Farid's first moves are procedural: routes home are altered; personal devices are decoupled from domestic space; paper files shift to neutral custody; the digital archive is mirrored beyond the jurisdiction; public output is reduced to zero while a lawful corridor is assembled. The criterion for motion is not emotion but spillover, whether remaining will predictably export harm to staff and kin.

Even if you buy ice cream, you must put it in the monthly report and begin every post by branding yourself a 'foreign agent'. It kept piling up until public life was possible in form, impossible in fact. (Interview with Danylo, August 2025)

The foreign agent disclaimer locates Danylo's experience in a regime where legality becomes a trap. Obligations multiply: ritual self-stigma on every communication; bureaucratic records that make daily life difficult; and calls at dawn from venues cancelling screenings for compliance. Collaboration acquires derivative liability, hosts risk sanction for facilitating a labelled speaker. The exit is engineered quietly with clean devices; duplicated drives lodged with a third party; an invitation letter kept warm and ready; visibility suspended while movement is timed to inspection cycles and designation updates rather than to a private threshold of endurance.

More and more, they don't want to deal with China. Invitations fade, panels disappear, sometimes you're asked to sign that you won't seek asylum if you're threatened at their event, even at a UN week. (Interview with Wei, August 2025)

The corridor for Wei is pathway dependent. Programmes are refusing candidates directly from China, and conveners are displacing the duty of care with waivers; even ostensibly safe fora are introducing conditions.

Readiness becomes the method: passports and notarised permissions current; letters with multiple hosts pre-negotiated; first destinations chosen for legal safeguards and digital-security support; public output tapered before and after the crossing; and the evidentiary core already held outside the jurisdiction when travel begins.

Rules travel with men, not institutions. When the same plainclothes officers from the prosecutor's office started arriving at different doors, I knew the rule. Three days of clothes, location histories off, programme suspended, leave before the next list is printed. (Interview with Laleh, July 2025)

For Laleh, compulsion arrives by repetition rather than spectacle: visits that recur, questions that narrow, lists that circulate. Remaining visibly present would draw employers, landlords, and relatives into risk they did not choose.

I kept writing, but it was like crossing a field of tripwires. In our Arabic newsroom 'systems' had to become 'policies,' and editors read four or five times for compliance, not for clarity. An acquittal didn't change the field; the smear just stepped into the stairwell. (Interview with Rana, July 2025)

The editorial register marks Rana's terrain: constraint becomes textual before it becomes carceral. The threshold is crossed when pressure migrates into household spaces, school corridors, and leases. The response follows a familiar order: make routines less legible; separate identities and devices; move archives to safer custody; lower surface area while the transition is arranged.

Tomorrow I scan everything: passports, school records, and hand the archive keys to a friend abroad. After that, we stop carrying phones home. Then I will try for a Schengen slot at a consulate two borders away. (Interview with Lucía, July 2025)

Lucía's daybook adds the cross-border choreography: scans and off-loading in the morning; permissions shifted to an external custodian; geolocation disabled; a neutral suspension note drafted; a letter queued to issue within forty-eight hours; staff instructed (no devices home, no fixed routes, carry only what you can). Two days later, the corridor opens; and the evidence is already elsewhere.

If they seize the office, they shouldn't be able to seize the story. Split the files, strip the names, encrypt, and keep the narrative distributed. (Interview with Karim, July 2025)

For Karim, departure is organised around evidence governance. Case files link victims to staff, staff to offices, offices to homes; the countermeasure is designed to duplicate custody, de-identified working sets, encryption, and shared stewardship so any single seizure yields fragments, not a narrative. Leaving is the jurisdictional condition for continuation.

We can't host debates that make us responsible for the audience's speech. Please understand, it's compliance. (Interview with Tariq, July 2025)

Tariq's refusal letter shows the venue becoming law by other means. Private cultural spaces that once absorbed reputational risk now decline on administrative grounds, shrinking public space faster than decrees. The departure date becomes the first no from a long-standing partner; the response is technical and quiet, secure a host with due-process credibility, synchronise travel to intake and renewal calendars, and reduce output until the pivot is complete.

They said my identity was a 'category', Hazara, so every checkpoint could be a file. Leave now, or wait to be processed as a case. (Interview with Omid, July 2025)

Omid states the identity calculus plainly. A minority name becomes a policing filter; rent grows fragile; relatives receive visits.

Movement is staged: one adult first; parallel documentation for dependents; first host choice driven by credible reunification and immediate access to services that allow work to resume without exposing kin.

The practices – laid out in six layers – that make these exits possible are consistent across settings and are best named plainly, since they structure the scenes above even when not foregrounded.

The first layer is operational obfuscation with predictable commutes abandoned; known addresses rotated or vacated; and geotagging and memories functions disabled. Several interviewees noise-mapped a week of movements to identify the most inferable patterns and then deliberately broke them. Devices are rebuilt clean before travel; work and personal identities are compartmented; two-factor authentication moves off SMS; metadata is minimised. Where risk is higher, HRDs run decoy accounts to soak up probing, keep parallel SIMs and travel numbers so new movements do not reconnect to old graphs, maintain air-gapped masters with redacted synced sets for daily work, and adopt sealed-sender channels for sensitive exchanges.

The second layer is evidence governance. Custody is split by design: master files encrypted with keys held by different people; working copies de-identified using standard redaction templates; large archives sharded so seizure in one site yields partials rather than a coherent narrative. Several keep a dead-drop bundle of scans, affidavits, reference letters, key evidence, pre-positioned with a trusted custodian abroad for instant transfer on raid or closure. Karim's maxim, *they shouldn't be able to seize the story*, is both principle and plan (Interview with Karim, July 2025).

Third, document sequencing and administrative timing occurs. Passports (including for dependents), notarised permissions, pre-agreed affiliation letters, and concise statements of purpose are maintained as a rolling micro-dossier usable across humanitarian, cultural, academic, or work routes with minimal reformatting. Moves are synchronised to administrative windows for programme intakes, extension points, status conversions, because unsynchronised departures reproduce a cliff-edge months later. A recurring two-host model pairs an immediate placement for safety and continuity with an early-planned second venue for medium-term regularisation.

Visibility management is the fourth step. During the transition, public output is reduced to the minimum required by duty of care; contentious panels are deferred; and keys are rotated after arrival. Where transnational pressure is credible (as in Wei's sphere), re-entry to visibility is staged, local gatherings first, then regional fora, then high-profile platforms, each step preceded by a review of host protections and coalition dynamics.

Fifth, care protocols for family and teams are developed. Protection is a collective practice: call trees and quiet-hours rules prevent panic cascades; split-knowledge arrangements ensure no single person holds all names or maps; school-facing letters are drafted in advance to explain temporary absences; families adopt consent protocols, what to disclose, to whom, and when, so protective silence is not experienced as abandonment. Omid's staged movement formalises that ethic under identity-based risk.

Finally, there is a pre-departure mitigation of predictable frictions. Banking de-risking and paperwork bottlenecks are anticipated by segmenting accounts (personal vs project), routing small working funds through stable third-country institutions, flattening transaction patterns (fewer, larger, scheduled payments) to avoid automated flags, and aligning travel to medical needs where chronic conditions exist (baseline prescriptions and doctors' letters in the go-bundle; first hosts near specialist care). These are part of making departure executable, not post-hoc adjustments.

Read together, the scenes and the practices make a precise claim suited to this analytic part. Fear is not a mood but a reasoned assessment of how harm will be inflicted if one remains. Repression is the script that renders visibility punishable, in a single blow or through a lattice of small cuts.

Survival strategies are the professional routines by which a public life is carried across a legal frontier without drafting families, colleagues, and neighbours as unwilling shields. The airport corridor, the muted feed, the folder of scans, the deliberate quiet around travel, and the slow restart of speech in a new legal grammar are not epilogues; they are the first acts of continuity under altered conditions.

B. The Conditions That Forced Decisions: Shrinking Spaces, Repression, Family Safety, etc.

The same scenes that set departures in motion also show why remaining became untenable. Each condition is introduced through the person who lived it and then analysed.

By the end, it wasn't one threat; it was routine. A fifth 'compliance review' that stripped meaning from the text, another form asking for my mother's name, the school calling to 'verify details,' and the landlord suggesting we end the lease early. None of that is an arrest; together it makes staying unsafe and unworkable. (Interview with Rana, July 2025)

Rana illustrates how ordinary work was turned into a chain of compliance risks. Publishing remained lawful on paper, and events were not formally banned; yet mandatory disclaimers, repeated identity checks, and last-minute wording reviews created multiple points for discretionary interference. The newsroom read for compliance, not clarity; the same questions moved from office to school hallway and then to the rental office. Under these conditions, the timing of departure followed institutional timelines, inspection dates, labelling updates, reporting deadlines, because those were the moments when exposure reliably increased for her and for those sharing her address. Remaining would not have shown resolve; it would have shifted predictable costs to editors, landlords, and family members who had never chosen public risk. Leaving, by contrast, removed the immediate basis for sanctioning those intermediaries and ended the stream of verifications tied to her household.

We were not told 'don't speak'; we were told we would be responsible for everything anyone else said if we hosted. A panel became a risk form, a screening became a liability, and partners who supported the work said 'not now' because they could be held responsible for audience questions. No ban was needed; the space had already narrowed. (Interview with Tariq, July 2025)

Tariq shows how cooperation itself was recoded as liability. Labels attached to people, but sanctions and reputational damage fell on the infrastructures that platformed them (e.g. cinemas, galleries, campuses, publishers). Hosting could be classified as facilitation; audience Q&A reframed as political activity; editorial work reduced to risk control rather than meaning. Invitations that once signalled trust turned into questionnaires. Opportunities closed without decree, and each remaining platform became more visible and less protectable. In this setting, the responsible choice was to interrupt spillover before programmers, curators, technicians, and editors began to face penalties for enabling speech. Relocation accomplished this by suspending high-risk appearances and breaking the chain through which venues were penalised for providing a platform.

Laleh describes how the same logic entered the domestic space and became personal. The pressure did not arrive as a single event; it repeated: a ministerial veto after layout, a second late-night call for extended-family details, a landlord's advice to end a lease early. Predictability, not volume, forced the decision. Professional work and family safety could no longer be kept in the same place. Exit at this point was preventive, taken before a formal case, because the routine already indicated the likely next step and those least able to move were being drawn into the process. Preparing the move in parallel with reorganising archive custody reduced the risk of household exposure and evidence capture.

Karim adds the online–offline bridge. Coordinated reporting and doxxing produced a printable packet of addresses, screenshots, and IDs that officials or private actors could carry to the door. Platform concerns

were forwarded; posts were cited as indicators during visits. In that reality, treating the absence of a formal charge as safety was a mistake. The practical response was to move before devices or archives could be seized and to restructure custody so that any single seizure could not reconstruct case histories or networks.

At checkpoints the uniform was only part of it; the surname did the rest. When your name is in the category, any conversation can become a file. We were not comparing opportunities abroad; we were preventing outcomes we have already seen in this country. (Interview with Omid, July 2025)

Omid makes the identity calculus explicit. Where minority status has a history of violence, a recognisable surname combined with public work creates a direct and foreseeable path to harm through selective enforcement and verification. The question shifts from *how long can I manage this?* to *how long before my family carries it?* Movement is brought forward while documents are valid, archives intact, and a reunification route exists, because the alternative is to wait until a decision is effectively made for the household.

The language we heard was ‘safety management.’ A multilateral week that should have opened a door now asked for a waiver promising not to seek asylum ‘if anything happens.’ Another programme said they don’t take participants directly from China. You realise the corridor is closing both at home and in the places that used to open it. (Interview with Wei, August 2025)

Wei shows that narrowing was not only local. International partners began to mirror domestic caution: invitations withdrawn under risk management, refusal to include participants directly from certain jurisdictions, waivers that stripped events and fellowships of protective value. These moves did more than reduce visibility abroad; they removed lawful routes that had previously allowed work to continue in place, such as visas linked to invitations or status tied to fellowships. When external support reproduced the same risk calculations that closed space at origin, staying and working quietly ceased to be viable.

Across these accounts, the common element is tempo. Editorial reviews, inspection cycles, labelling updates, venue checks, and consular windows formed a timetable HRDs could anticipate but not control. The same timing appeared internationally when invitations were reframed as risks, programmes postponed, or waivers imposed. Identity-based suspicion hardened as examples were copied; family exposure increased with each routine contact that normalised the next one. The sensible time to depart was therefore the point at which two things were still possible: to control who bears risk and to protect the integrity of the work before archives were compromised and before collaborators and relatives carried the consequences.

C. Theoretical Reflection: How These Narratives Challenge Ideas of Voluntary Migration or Passive Exile

The empirical patterns established in the previous subsections unsettle the categories most commonly used to describe movement. From a distance, departure can appear to be a personal choice among alternatives. From within patterned pressures, administrative accumulation, delegated enforcement through venues, domestic encroachment into family life, digitally-mediated stigmatisation, transnational gatekeeping, and identity-based targeting, choice is shaped by structures that organise exit as the least harmful option. Voluntariness is present only as constrained agency: the capacity to decide under conditions that make continued presence ethically and operationally untenable.

First, the perception of voluntary migration and distinction from forced displacement assumes that staying remains a viable alternative. The conditions described map onto liminal legality, formal tolerance without substantive recognition, in which ordinary acts are reclassified as compliance events and discretion saturates routine life (Menjívar, 2006). Conscientious adherence to rules does not reduce exposure; it multiplies the sites where infraction can be alleged. As hosts

internalise compliance logics and withdraw platforms, and as identity-based suspicion makes delay unsafe for kin, the counterfactual ‘could have stayed’ loses analytical meaning. Movement that appears a choice is, in fact, the administrative culmination of inspections, reviews, cancellations, and refusals that progressively convert presence into liability.

Second, the idea of passive exile is misaligned with how agency is exercised under constraint. De Genova’s (2002) notion of deportability shows that governance needs not expel to control; it can rule by inciting relocation through administrative means. In this configuration, the continuity of human rights work depends on moving before archives are seized, collaborators penalised, or relatives drawn into verification routines. Exile functions not as an aftermath of displacement but as the administrative precondition for continuing human rights work under a different legal grammar. This resonates with the politics of mobility literature, which emphasises that movement, the pacing of permits, and the sequencing of renewals co-constitute what practices are possible (Squire, 2011). Crossing a border is better read as a re-siting of action than as its termination (Squire, 2011).

Third, time is a central instrument of compulsion. Walters (2002) highlights how authorities govern not only *where* belonging is recognised but *when*. Inspection cycles, designation updates, venue checks, and consular windows produce a timetable HRDs can anticipate but cannot shape. Hage’s (2021) analysis of temporariness in diasporic life captures the institutionalisation of an extended present that never resolves into belonging, while Honwana’s (2012) waithood names how such waiting structures life chances. When departure is synchronised to these calendars, because the next review predictably increases exposure, the decision does not only retain the form of choice but carries the content of compulsion. Time, governed institutionally, undercuts the fiction of voluntariness.

Fourth, the ethics of risk distribution reframes what it means to act. Butler’s (2004) distinction between general precariousness and differential precarity clarifies that harms are unevenly allocated. In the patterns observed, remaining would transfer foreseeable costs to editors, programmers, landlords, children, and older relatives, leaving interruptions that transfer. Agency is expressed not by enduring at any price but by controlling who bears the price. Under these conditions, exit is an ethical intervention that halts collateral harm; it is active in purpose even when reactive in form.

Fifth, the transnational field is not an external corrective. Gatekeeping by conveners and programmes, refusals to include participants directly from particular jurisdictions, liability waivers that neutralise protection, and cancelled panels justified as risk management mirror domestic narrowing rather than offset it (Squire, 2011). The result is a two-sided constriction: domestic procedures render presence unworkable, while international intermediaries withhold shared risk. Thresholds of forced movement can thus be reached without a spectacular act of expulsion; the coupled systems produce displacement that is procedurally regular and presumably voluntary yet analytically forced.

Sixth, the identity axis makes the language of choice thinner. In settings marked by prior violence against minorities, a recognisable surname combined with public work becomes a ready-made category for discretionary enforcement. The mechanism is not an exceptional suspension of law but the diffusion of discretionary lawfulness into checkpoints, schools, leases, and routine calls. Where identity and public work intersect in this way, delay predictably shifts risk to those with the least mobility. An ethics of care, oriented toward preventing foreseeable spillover, is incompatible with the notion that staying and leaving are fungible options.

Two clarifications follow for the study's analytic frame:

- 1) Forced displacement should be treated as a process outcome, produced by interacting domestic and transnational mechanisms, rather than as a single moment. This outcome directs assessment away from event-centred tests (Was there an arrest?) toward patterned indicators: accumulation of compliance demands, venue-based delegated enforcement, predictable domestic spillover, removal of lawful in-place routes, and identity-linked exposure operating on schedules.
- 2) The voluntary/forced binary should be recast as a continuum of constraint diagnosable in practice. A practical diagnostic is whether remaining would require (a) transferring foreseeable harm to non-consenting others or (b) abandoning core professional standards (for example, compelled euphemism or self-cancellation). Where either condition holds, exit is analytically forced.

This reframing keeps the analysis aligned with lived evidence without anticipating later sections. It neither romanticises endurance nor overstates rupture. Instead, it recognises situated agency under constraint: departures compelled by structure and oriented to the continuation of public life without exporting its costs. The next section considers how, once movement occurs, practices of advocacy are reorganised under new legal and social constraints.

3.2. Transit and the Experience of Displacement

A. Introduction: Transit as a Governed Temporality

Exile, as experienced by HRDs, is rarely labelled across trajectories of departure, transit, and integration. Rather, it is lived as a permanent transit marked by uncertainty. Hage (2002) framed this as temporariness, which demonstrates how the transit can become itself a condition rather than a stage.

By centring the lived experiences of HRDs involved in this research through life history interviews and drawing on reports and analyses of legal frameworks, support mechanisms, and regional contexts, we examine in this chapter the experience of transit as a part of the HRDs' exile process. The chapter is structured around three sections: the first examines the in-between condition of limbo; the second analyses the multi-layered burdens of uncertainty; and the third reframes transit as a political condition.

B. The In-Between Condition: Legal Limbo, Emotional Detachment, Navigating Unfamiliar Systems

For many HRDs, in particular those involved in this study, the experience of exile does not start with the physical displacement but the entry into the limbo in-between zone, where they are neither citizens nor recognised refugees, neither inside the law, nor outside it. As an Iranian, I have no place to go. My bank accounts might close soon. I've been to the EU, political institutions, and organisations, and asked for a long-term visa just to be safe, but I never received a response (Interview with Laleh, July 2025). The case of Laleh highlights a term initially framed by Menjivar (2006), known as liminal legality, which can be understood as a form of presence that is formally tolerated but substantially unrecognised.

Kirill, a Russian LGBTIQ+ activist and filmmaker, narrates his life story and how his life was impacted by a short-stay visa: I couldn't stay anywhere more than 90 days. I didn't want to go back to Russia, but because of health issues, I had to (Interview with Kirill, August 2025). His story emphasises the temporariness as well, and how it is embedded in legal systems, where even tools that are meant to protect human dignity and rights and save lives – like the humanitarian visa and temporary protection orders – regenerate uncertainty by design. This approach echoes Turner's (1969) notion of liminality, but, unlike in rituals, exile has the potential to end with reintegration.

Farid from Afghanistan underscored the irreversibility induced by liminality and temporariness. Exile for me has a main characteristic, you are forced to leave, but you can't go back, he says (Interview with Farid, July 2025). In the legal imagination, migrations often involve three stages: departure, settlement, and return. Yet, in practice, for exiled HRDs, the option of return is not always on the table and is often associated with persecution and risks, making the in-between, itself, a destination.

Samatar experiences the in-between through the bureaucracies of recognition. Samatar, a Somali HRD, recounts, You have to start from scratch. You don't have certificates, or you lost them. They will ask you for IELTS, for documents, and for proof [of things] that you've lost. And if you don't have them, you won't be considered (Interview with Samatar, July 2025). This experience resonates with the structural paradox that Anthony Good highlighted in his study of 2007, that relocation systems often demand evidence from those whose displacement has stripped them of it (Good, 2007).

The affective toll of instability was also described by Rana, the exiled Syrian: I moved from house to house and have never been able to call a place home (Interview with Rana, July 2025). This is what Agier (2011) frames as camp mentality when he discussed the displaced life, which is a condition where every dwelling is temporary, and every belonging is provisional.

Reflecting on the experiences of the HRDs involved in this research, the in-between can be framed as a condition produced by the gap between normative protection systems and lived exclusions. While states ratify conventions, HRDs remain suspended in legal limbo, which, in return, emphasises transit not as a bridge but as a form of controlled estrangement and a political technique that recognises HRDs provisionally while denying them belonging.

C. The Burdens of Uncertainty and Precarity: We Live in a Luggage

If liminality describes the form of transit, precarity describes its impact. Precarity is a multi-stranded concept, associated with a set of terms, including precarious, precariousness, precarisation, and the precariat, that make a historical argument about capitalism, pronounce a shift in class relations, and predict novel social movements and political struggles. These concepts underscore that temporary and informal work, in its myriad manifestations, is the predominant mode of livelihood in the late 20th to early 21st centuries (Bourdieu, 1998). Precarity emerged as a central concern in academic research and writing in the early 21st century. It made its way into academic discourse partly as a response to political mobilisations, particularly those that took place in Europe against unemployment and social exclusion. Philosopher Judith Butler's writing is a cornerstone for the growing body of literature on precarity. Butler (2004) draws a critical distinction between precariousness and precarity. She sees precariousness as a generalised human condition that stems from the fact that all humans are interdependent and therefore all are vulnerable. In her scheme, precarity is different precisely because it is unequally distributed (Kasmir, 2018/2023). Precarity is experienced by marginalised, poor, and disenfranchised people who are exposed to economic insecurity, injury, violence, and forced migration. Further, social value is ascribed to some lives and bodies, while it is denied to others, and some are protected, while others are not (Kasmir, 2023).

Karim is an Egyptian HRD who fled to Beirut, Lebanon in 2022 after several arrests and years of legal harassment for his role in documenting human rights violations committed by the Egyptian state. At the beginning, he believed Beirut would be a short stop between his old home and future home, and a cultural refuge while he could make it to Europe, where he was expected to follow his graduate studies. Instead, Lebanon became a trap. He found himself in bureaucratic paralysis. Not being able to get a residence permit resulted in his inability to apply for a visa from Lebanon, inability to move in and out of the country, and risk of deportation back to Egypt or being banned from re-entering.

I thought I was in a transit phase, but instead transit became my life. I waited for months for papers that never came, and I couldn't legalise my stay. I was just stuck in a country that, although it opened its arms for me when I was at risk and had no place to go, it made me feel invisible and immobile (Interview with Karim, July 2025).

His words describe the impact of precarity. The legal limbo of the in-between manifests as vulnerabilities, including temporary housing, informal work, and struggling to survive through inflation, along with the associated anxiety. His survival depended on some informal consultancies, often paid less than formal ones, precisely the kind of insecure livelihood that Bourdieu (1998) defines as central to late precarisation. This was not exceptional in the case of Karim. In fact, it is very common for an HRD in transit phases to accept informal, temporary, underpaid work to secure basic needs. When the war of 2004 between Israel and Lebanon started, Karim was there, in Beirut, which was heavily bombed for 60 days:

The sky was red. All I was thinking about is what if I die? My family will not know. Egyptian authorities would say I fled, and Europeans would say I am not yet their responsibility. It was then that I understood that my life had no weight. Some lives are protected; others are not (Interview with Karim, July 2025).

His reflections resonate with Butler's insights on precariousness and precarity. Butler argues that precarity is socially distributed. In the case of Karim, he was precarious in ways that did not apply to other foreign nationals who hold powerful passports and were evacuated from Beirut. His body was not deemed worthy of protection, not even of protection mechanisms that were established to protect HRDs at risk.

Isn't the war in Gaza or Lebanon considered a 'sufficient risk', he added (Interview with Karim, July 2025).

When he arrived in Berlin in mid-2025 after being granted a scholarship, he carried only exhaustion. Berlin was supposed to be a fresh new start. But I'm tired, very tired to the extent where I feel completely drained. Lebanon exiled me twice (Interview with Karim, July 2025). His story highlights that exile is a process of precarisation, not a singular phase or a one-time rupture, and that each phase multiplies vulnerabilities.

The story of Omid is also one of precarity and uncertainty, marked by the scattering of his family and his suspended life in Italy after his evacuation from Afghanistan in 2021.

We are now divided into four countries. I am in the US, my mom in Kabul, my sister in Italy, and my brother in Iran. Every time we want to do a family conversation, we need first to check time zones (Interview with Omid, July 2025).

For Omid, virtual family reunions became a project of coordination across borders and time zones, exemplifying Hage's ideas on diasporic partial presence where subjects are always connected but never together. Omid further spoke of his two years of transit limbo in Italy. Even though he was quickly granted asylum compared to many other Afghans, he lived in a refugee centre where his days were shaped by waiting – waiting for documents, residence permits, more information about his future plans:

The process felt endless, although it was fast compared to other cases. I was waiting for the next. Next request, next document, next permission...I studied Italian without knowing if I would stay there or not. All my plans were provisional (Interview with Omid, July 2025).

Omid's insights echoed Honwana's concept of waithood. The term was first introduced by Singerman (2007) and Dhillon and Yousef (2011) in relation to youth in the Middle East but gained prominence in policy discourse following the publication of the book *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change and Politics in Africa* by Honwana (2012). Although Honwana explains the concept

of waitthood as an uncertain period in the transition from childhood to adulthood where many young people struggle to secure formal sector employment that can assure the attainment of social markers of responsible adulthood, the notion can be used in the context of transit to describe the uncertain period of transition between the decision of departure and the full integration into the host community, when it is possible (Honwana, 2012).

My home is my bag, says Danylo, a Russian HRD interviewed in this research, which captures the precariousness and uncertainty of constant movement (Interview with Danylo, August 2025). This image reflects the essence of exile: a perpetual mobility where possessions remain packed and location is always temporary. This image also echoes how De Genova (2002) described the border spectacle, in which migrants are constantly reminded of their provisionality and never allowed to settle into ordinary rhythms of belonging.

While international mechanisms acknowledge these struggles, they can unintentionally reinforce them. Many of the current protection programmes, for example, offer short-term temporary relocation, limited to three months, requiring the defenders to return to the very contexts where they have faced persecution, sentencing, or violent attacks. During a KII conducted within the context of this research, a member of a team leading one of these mechanisms that offer short-term relocation, emergency grants, and psychological support, admitted that their mechanism is not able to address long-term situations of risks at the moment.

This lack of capacity highlights one more time that the gap between temporary support and durable integration is systemic. This echoes the idea of Lorey (2015) on precarity as a mode of governance in which uncertainty is deliberately maintained to manage populations. In the case of HRDs, living in a luggage captures this multidimensional reality: belongings are half-packed, futures are suspended, and identities are fragmented.

The stories of HRDs involved in this research reframe precarity and uncertainty not as a side-effect but as a political and economic technique, ensuring that transit during exile, while remaining survivable, is never secure.

D. Transit as a Political Phase: The Governance of Time and Belonging

Scholarship has often imagined relocation as a journey consisting of departure, transit, and arrival, often associated with reintegration in host communities. Yet, for HRDs, transit is a dominant condition of uncertainty often reinforced by states and international organisations, unintentionally in most scenarios.

Camila, an indigenous HRD from Nicaragua, was forced into the limbo of exile while going back home through Amsterdam airport after a UN mission. At the airport, they told her she had no authorisation to get on the plane. Her story exemplifies what Walters (2002) frames as the sovereign power of time, which is the ability of authorities not only to police borders but also to regulate when and how belonging is restored. Camila's expatriation was not only physical but a systemic and bureaucratic denial that, in the end, turned a trip of a few days into permanent exile.

Protection programmes are not excluded from the normalisation of transit as indefinite. During the KII with an HRD protection mechanism, it was stated that their programme is designed for those with prospects of return. Fassin (2012) frames this as a humanitarian reason or a moral economy in which the aid is given but only on a temporary and conditional basis. Safety that is supposed to be provided, in this context, becomes temporary.

The story of Wei, a Chinese HRD, further reveals this reality. Wei relocated to Europe after his partner was detained, only to find that his safety is repeatedly dependent on short-term support and fellowships, and a precarious visa.

This form of exile exemplifies what Squire (2011) described as politics of mobility where not just space but tempo is regulated, with each renewal reinforcing the temporariness of his presence.

Building on these insights, in this research, transit is understood as a weaponised temporality rather than solely existential, where HRDs are kept in managed suspension, their futures controlled by uncertain timeframes and bureaucracy. The in-between of Bhabha (1994), which once meant cultural hybridity, for HRDs in exile has become juridical hybridity, a condition of controlled and forced non-belonging. In this sense, the transit expands to become central to the politics of exile, and a political technique that offers survival without settlement, temporary safety without rights, and mobility without belonging (Bhabha, 1994). Recentring transit as governance allows us to go beyond understanding exile as a rupture and a static phenomenon and reframe it as a condition of suspended belonging, where HRDs do not live in arrival but rather perpetually in between.

3.3. Integration and the Paradoxes of Belonging

Integration is usually portrayed in exile literature and policy frameworks as the final phase of exile, where displacement resolves and the exiled individual acquires legal, political, and civil rights; stable employment; housing; and rebuilds their social circles, culturally reintegrating and learning the language of the host community. In 2024, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) included local integration among its durable solutions, along with resettlement and repatriation.

However, in practice, integration is still the least developed of these three solutions and often marked with exclusion rather than inclusion. For HRDs in exile, the paradox is even more profound as the same host country that offers them legal safety may withhold political legitimacy and opportunities to resume their activism.

Drawing on life history interviews, desk research, and institutional reflections, this section aims to reconfigure integration as a paradoxical process by examining three dimensions. The first is how conditions shaped by cultural barriers, stigma, discrimination, and legal precarity shape the lives of HRDs.

The second is how HRDs transform in exile, and the third is the contradiction between the continuum of social exclusion and the acquisition of legal citizenship.

A. Living in Host Countries: Language Barriers, Legal Status, Racial Discrimination, and Stigma

A recurrent pattern observed across interviews is that the hardships of relocation and exile do not end with arrival at the final destination. Instead, newcomer HRDs begin to face a new package of challenges and barriers that undermine their ability to belong. These barriers usually cluster over four dimensions: language, legal status, racial discrimination, and stigma.

This is the first time I meet an Afghan with a master's degree who speaks English fluently (Interview with Farid, July 2025). This is what the German teacher of Farid commented when he met her. This memory, recalled by Farid, still hurts him. These words reveal how language is infused with racialised expectations.

Many participants in this research shared how being a non-native speaker of the host country's language was considered a proof of cultural inferiority. This echoes the idea of Bourdieu (1991), who argued that language functions as a form of symbolic capital, unequally distributed, and its deviation reinforces structures of exclusion.

Furthermore, the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights' ([FRA] 2017) *EU-MIDIS II* survey found that 45% of South Asian migrants reported discrimination in host countries due to their language or their accent.

Similarly, Eurostat 2023 reported that due to limited availability and costs, only 61% of adult refugees in the EU are enrolled in language courses.

A second dimension discussed in this section is legal precarity as systemic exclusion. Laleh, the Iranian HRD, recounts how fragile her legal status is. *Visa, residency, and income are all connected. If you miss one, you will probably miss the other*, she says (Interview with Laleh, July 2025). Her words illustrate civic stratification. As explained by Morris (2003), this term means a system in which legal statuses of citizens and non-citizens function less as pathways than layers of precarious belonging.

Across the EU, 32% of first-time asylum applicants in 2022 waited over a year for a decision (Eurostat, 2023). Long waiting times force HRDs into liminal spaces where their protection is suspended and their activism undermined. Even once protection is granted, renewals of residence permits may remain conditional, including on factors such as income or housing requirements that HRDs, who are already displaced and stigmatised, struggle to meet.

Rana recounts how stigma followed her even after she was recognised as a refugee in Sweden: *My identity was questioned even after asylum. I felt here like my words have less value* (Interview with Rana, July 2025). Schinkel (2018) in her critique of immigrants' integration as a practice of differentiation, emphasises that inclusion is often tested rather than secured.

For Ketty, even though her exile was intra-regional, and she speaks Swahili, the situation was not better.

In Nairobi, someone told me 'you're one of us, but also not'. I was a foreigner, even though we share borders, and culturally we are closer to each other than a white European is to one of us. It is as proximity made the distance harsher (Interview with Ketty, July 2025).

This is the paradox of regionalism, another layer of complexity added to the experience of exile. While African Union (AU) instruments such as the Kampala Convention of 2009 on internally displaced persons (AU, 2009), and the East African Community protocol of the free movements of persons frame regional free movement and integration as a goal, xenophobia in Kenya has intensified, particularly against Burundian, Somali, and Congolese migrants (Betts, 2021; East African Community, 2009).

These accounts are not just individual misfortunes, but they are different manifestations of discrimination. Language is weaponised as a cultural inferiority marker, legal status stratifies belonging, and stigma and racialisation recycle marginalisation of exiled HRDs.

B. Change of Activist Identities and Rebuilding New Forms of Activism

Integration of HRDs in exile is not only a socio-economic readaptation but also about reconfiguring and resuming activism in exile. Across desk research and interviews conducted, the recurrent themes that emerged were shifting from grassroots and local mobilisation to transnational advocacy, the tension between local marginalisation and international exposure, and the hybrid activist identities reshaped in exile.

Kiril, the Russian LGBTQ+ activist in Austria, recounts that he cannot do what he used to do before when he was inside Russia, yet he continues on the same agenda reconfigured for his place. Similarly, Wei reflects,

In China I never used the word activist, but in the Netherlands I have to. Exile made me fluent in human rights terminology (Interview with Wei, July 2025).

This sentiment echoes Keck and Sikkink's (1998) analysis of transnational networks in which they demonstrated how exiled activists leverage new vocabularies to sustain their activism. Likewise, Scholars at Risk (2022) has found in 2022 that over 70% of relocated HRDs continue their activism but in advocacy forms such as online campaigns and international lobbying.

Tariq, on the other hand, explains the ambivalence of visibility. While he used to operate in a clandestine way in Tunisia, in Paris he is joining pride parades.

In Tunisia, I feared the police. In Paris, I fear the glance of other Arabs who consider me a shame (Interview with Tariq, July 2025).

His reflections echo Yuval-Davis's (2011) discussion on the politics of belonging, in which they emphasised that belonging is not negotiated only in host societies but also in diasporic communities, which may reinforce moral conformity.

Camila, the indigenous HRD exiled in Switzerland, highlighted how being internationally recognised as a UN expert did not translate into a smooth integration while discussing global recognition vs local exclusion:

My biggest problem until now is housing. The support remained in the political arena, but survival was left to me alone. I am also a mother, and I am taking care of my children. And in Switzerland, my children and I are facing institutional discrimination as well as discrimination from the local community (Interview with Camila, July 2025).

The case of Camila exemplifies Fraser's (2009) distinction between recognition and redistribution. While HRDs in exile may gain symbolic recognition and visibility, they often lack material support to sustain their daily lives with dignity.

The paradox of identity transformation here emerges from the reality that exile, although it offers HRDs freedom and safety from repression, also severs them from the immediacy of grassroots struggle. Their priorities shift, and surviving exile becomes one of them. In this sense, their activism becomes more globalised, hybrid, and mediated. A resource and loss at the same time.

C. The Contradiction Between Legal Citizenship and Social Exclusion

The paradox highlighted here is probably the harshest: even when exiled HRDs acquire the citizenship of the host country, they remain socially excluded. Hence, citizenship, which is considered a pinnacle of integration, does not secure belonging or a perceived end of exile.

Here in Berlin I know many HRDs and writers from MENA who acquired the citizenship, aside from their ability to move freely out and in the country, nothing has changed for them, and they are still facing same discrimination and have less access to opportunities, much less than someone born and raised here, much less than someone who migrated from another European country and has a light skin (Interview with Karim, July 2025).

Omid echoes Karim: *I feel alone all the time, though I have friends, no one can understand my pain. Citizenship won't heal this* (Interview with Omid, July 2025). The words of Karim and Omid resonate with Arendt's (1943) argument that rights are meaningless without a community that guarantees them.

Rana takes the conversation to a further level when she recounts how she was offered classes and workshops but never a job: *I felt like they wanted us to stay busy but not to belong* (Interview with Rana, July 2025). This thought explains how the integration programmes are tokenised in a way that makes migrants perpetually in process but never fully included.

Hugo, who works within a European relocation programme, described: *We are good at the emergency phase, getting defenders out quickly, covering the first months. But we are not equipped for the long-term. After that, they are often left in limbo* (Interview with Hugo, July 2025). Sabine, from an international organisation working with refugees across Europe, echoes Hugo:

We see HRDs arrive with high professional backgrounds, but the host societies reduce them to refugee cases. The same state that grants asylum also closes pathways of meaningful participation (Interview with Sabine, September 2025).

These reflections align with Anderson (2013) on boundaries of citizenship, which, although they may be legally granted, symbolic boundaries remain policed. In the same sense, a FRA (2017) survey demonstrated that 38% of naturalised migrants in EU countries still report discrimination. Hence, citizenship is not an end solution to exclusion, and to ensure that HRDs are positioned as active political agents rather than passive beneficiaries of protection, citizenship must walk in parallel with dismantling structural racism and valuing minorities.

In comparing different countries, studies often seek to account for the success of immigrant integration, or lack of it, in a small number of grand ideas, such as nationally specific models of integration, which attempt to provide overarching explanations for cross-national differences and similarities (Alba & Foner, 2018).

However, a balanced assessment of integration policies in North America and Europe reveals that neither region offers a fully successful model; both systems are marked by paradoxes, exclusions, and persistent inequalities. Civic integration policies shape migrants' pathways to residence and citizenship in Europe and North America.

These policies invite or oblige migrants to learn the customs and language of their new country of residence. Either by inculcating migrants with certain skills and knowledge or by barring certain migrants from accessing national territory and citizenship, civic integration policies are instruments through which states purport to shape their nations (Hardisty et al., 2021).

Both North American and European integration frameworks are shaped by historical, political, and institutional factors that create barriers as well as opportunities for inclusion. While North American models (such as those in the US and Canada) often emphasise rights-based integration, focusing on legal equality and anti-discrimination (Sheykhali, Fouad, & Zankih, 2024), these ideals are undermined by persistent structural inequalities and racial hierarchies that limit genuine belonging for many immigrants and minorities.

Research highlights that neither region's approach can be explained by a single grand narrative or model; both are shaped by complex, historically rooted institutions and social dynamics that produce mixed outcomes. Integration policies in both contexts vacillate between emancipatory and exclusionary aims, often reproducing national, cultural, and racial boundaries rather than dismantling them (Bottero, 2023).

Comparatively, North American systems (Canada, US) emphasise rights-based integration, which frames belonging through access to legal equality, anti-discrimination protections, and civic participation rather than cultural conformity. In this model, integration is grounded in universal rights and institutional safeguards, such as constitutional protections, anti-racism legislation, and equal opportunity frameworks.

While these approaches tend to allow greater pluralism and public recognition of difference, they remain uneven in practice, and structural inequalities and racial hierarchies continue to shape access to full belonging, particularly for racialised communities and refugees. While many European states emphasise civic integration translated into language tests, cultural courses, and loyalty oaths (Joppke, 2007), these approaches to integration only reinforce the idea that when inclusion is conditional, belonging cannot

be reached. Integration in this sense is not annexed to exile, only a reconfiguration of it, and a process of negotiating presence under conditions of structural exclusion. Bonjour further (2020) analyses this:

“While the comparison between the colonial situation of yesterday and the immigration situation of today is very illuminating”, it cannot and should not “mask the essential difference, difference in nature, between these two cases.” Indeed, while racial hierarchies persist in contemporary European and North American social structures and informal state practices and discourses, they are no longer laid down in law nor in official state ideology, as was the case in colonial contexts (Hajjat, 2012). However, as in colonial governance in the past, contemporary civic integration policies regulate—and in doing so reproduce—national, cultural, and racial boundaries. The paradoxes inherent in colonial governance likewise continue to characterise civic integration policies today. (para. 2)

3.4. Exile, Activism, and Political Agency

Policy frameworks and conversations often treat exile as a point of arrival: once an HRD is out, the political story comes to an end. Reflections and insights gathered during this research, in addition to a growing body of comparative evidence, show us the opposite.

Exile is continuously reconfigured, in a way that tactics and interventions shift (from street to digital spaces, policy work, and research), scales leverage (local issues reframed for global arenas), and infrastructures diversify (transnational advocacy networks, municipal residence). However, digital platforms, essential for transnational mobilisation, also increase exposure to risks like digital harassment, surveillance, and in some cases coercion and transnational repression by home state authorities and their proxies abroad.

At the same time, digital spaces that enable cross-border organising also amplify exposure to surveillance, harassment, and coercion by home-state authorities and their proxies abroad. This section distils recurrent themes from interviews and aligns them with desk research.

A. How Activism Is Reconfigured in Exile

Across interviews, KII, and desk research, it has been concluded that exile does not put an end to activism, but it modifies its repertoire.

HRDs who were mobilising and organising protests back home or monitoring courts in their countries, pivoted toward policy advocacy at the UN or EU levels, shifted into research or strategic litigation, or simply began combating xenophobia in their host countries through campaigning.

Kiril explained this when he shared that exile made him reconfigure his activism to his place, while keeping the same agenda. This shift is not an anecdotal drift. In fact, annual panoramas from FLD and Protect Defenders show that HRDs who escape risks in their home countries often continue their activism in new ways, often anchored by EU relocation themes, city residencies, fellowships and academic placements, that allow them to sustain their activism.

Across the narratives collected, exile does not mark the end of activism but its reconfiguration. HRDs who once engaged in direct mobilisation, organising, demonstrations, monitoring courts, documenting violations, redirect their energy into forms of advocacy that operate across borders and institutions. The common thread is not disengagement but adaptation: activism reimagined to fit new jurisdictions, new publics, and new risks.

1. From street mobilisation to dossier-driven advocacy

In exile, activism often shifts from physical protest to what participants called advocacy by file. HRDs such as Karim, Ketty, and Farid described transforming documentation into advocacy dossiers: compiling case files, affidavits, and verified timelines designed for shadow reports, Universal Periodic Review (UPR) submissions, or international complaints mechanisms. What began as digital security routines, encryption, redaction, and chain-of-custody logs became advocacy infrastructures enabling legal admissibility and credibility. In this sense, evidence governance, as Karim described it, is not only a protection measure but a new repertoire of transnational activism.

2. Narrative translation and policy reframing

Wei captured the double movement of activism in exile: In China, I never used the word activist. In the Netherlands, I have to. (Interview with Wei, August 2025). This linguistic shift reflects a deeper political translation. Exiled HRDs learn to reframe testimonies from moral appeals into legal arguments, aligning them with institutional formats, policy memos, sanction proposals, or human rights due diligence frameworks. Activism becomes multilingual in both a literal and conceptual sense: a constant act of translation between the languages of lived experience and the languages of policy and law.

3. Strategic litigation and venue selection

Where domestic courts are closed, exiled HRDs redirect their struggles into transnational legal fora. Strategic litigation becomes a means of pursuing accountability without proximity. HRDs collaborate with lawyers and NGOs to file communications before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), ACHPR, or UN treaty bodies, or to use universal jurisdiction in host states. The decision of where to act is tactical, based on standing, evidentiary thresholds, and the likelihood of producing a public remedy. Lucía's pre-departure habit of mirroring archives abroad evolved into a litigation-ready practice; her evidence was already positioned for admissibility before she crossed borders.

4. Municipal diplomacy and city-level activism

Cities have emerged as critical nodes of political agency. Several interviewees, including Tariq and Camila, found that municipal structures, refugee councils, cultural programmes, and residency fellowships might offer platforms for advocacy. Through initiatives like the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN), local authorities host HRDs as city residents, turning municipalities into sites of symbolic recognition and practical solidarity. This city diplomacy translates human rights discourse into local policy, such as sanctuary ordinances, declarations of solidarity, or public events that keep issues visible even when national institutions remain indifferent.

5. Sectoral and institutional co-production

Cultural, academic, and artistic institutions serve as new advocacy spaces. Exhibitions, performances, or research collaborations become political interventions under the guise of culture. Kiril, the Russian LGBTIQ+, now curates film screenings that double as advocacy events. Similarly, academic partnerships enable HRDs to convert testimonies into research outputs, policy briefs, teaching modules, or archives of record. This institutional co-production transforms exile from a condition of marginalisation into one of mediated visibility.

6. Diaspora brokerage and coalition building

Exiled HRDs frequently act as brokers between home country movements and international actors. They coordinate between victims, journalists, lawmakers, and NGOs, managing information flow and calibrating exposure. Several participants described synchronising advocacy actions—across time zones,

coordinating a press release, parliamentary question, and UN submission on the same day—to maximise traction while minimising risk to those still inside the country. Exile, in this sense, becomes a relay rather than a rupture.

7. Corporate accountability and economic leverage

A growing subset of activism targets corporations rather than governments. Using corporate due diligence and responsible business frameworks, exiled HRDs engage investors, shareholders, and oversight bodies to pressure companies implicated in surveillance, censorship, or exploitation. These campaigns draw on European due diligence legislation, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) guidelines, and tech platform grievance mechanisms, expanding the geography of accountability beyond state borders.

8. The digital terrain: between amplification and exposure

Digital platforms are now both a lifeline and a battleground. HRDs in exile rely on social media, encrypted messaging, and online publishing to sustain transnational mobilisation, but these tools also expose them to surveillance, doxing, and harassment by state-linked actors. Kiril and Rana both recounted incidents of digital infiltration that forced them to rebuild online identities under pseudonyms and adopt layered communication protocols, public channels for advocacy, sealed-sender back channels for coordination, and air-gapped drives for evidence. Activism thus migrates into the digital realm, where visibility must be constantly negotiated against vulnerability.

9. Care and safety as political practice

Another transformation concerns the ethics of care. Exile activism can be collective and protective, governed by protocols that distribute risk rather than eliminate it. Call trees, encrypted backups, and consent-based disclosure agreements become movement governance tools. As Omid reflected, Protection is a way of working. These practices ensure continuity across geographies and time zones, turning safety into a shared political responsibility.

In exile, success cannot be measured by mass mobilisation. Instead, impact is procedural and cumulative: a hearing secured, a resolution tabled, a sanction triggered, a refugee granted status, a city adopting a human-rights declaration. This procedural activism, low-visibility but high-impact, redefines what political agency looks like under constraint. Taken together, these practices show that exile does not depoliticise; it reorganises.

The repertoire shifts from spectacle to structure, from immediate confrontation to systemic intervention. What appears as silence is often a form of strategic repositioning, where voice is translated into admissible evidence, sustainable networks, and institutional outcomes.

Municipal and sectoral infrastructure reinforce this continuity. ICORN now includes 92 cities of refuge that have hosted (at the time of this publication) over 350 exiled journalists, writers, and artists from all over the world, and have provided them with support with over 100 annual freedom of expression events, offering involved participants an opportunity to continue activism from exile.

HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement's Activism in Exile programme (2019 to present) provided capacity-building training for over 150 HRDs in exile from MENA through its Diaspora in Action pipeline, where over 10 exile-led initiatives were seeded with mentorship and financial support, 17 HRDs were relocated in 2024 alone, and over 45 high-level policy meetings and missions were facilitated with EU, UN, and US institutions—providing further evidence of exile as a strategy rather than limbo.

These institutional frameworks intersect with individual repertoires. Wei, for example, recounts how exile forced him to build a new political jargon to *translate the fight for the European audience*, as he said (Interview with Wei, August 2025).

These narratives echo broader network theories that exile resituates local contention into acts of translation and platform building. Rather than diminishing activism, exile diversifies its forms, sustained by relocation schemes, municipal infrastructures, and transnational NGO networks that re-scale claims from the local to the global.

B. Exile as the Reactivation of Political Agency

While the previous point emphasised that activist repertoires are reconfigured in exile, this point highlights how exile reactivates political agency, bridging local grievances to transnational pathways. Political agency refers to the ability to reshape the political landscape, not only to the ability of an HRD to act.

Far from reducing HRDs to passive recipients of protection, exile, in some cases, transforms HRDs into visible actors in the global arena, while making others invisible, unheard, and excluded. The outcome in the first scenario has recast exile as a political resource, in the second as a political vacuum.

While sectoral data from international organisations confirm expanded agency, lived experiences illustrate contradictions in political empowerment. Camila, for example, while admitting how her UN mandate allowed her to be visible and to speak in Geneva, exclusion in daily life due to housing and income challenges negatively impacted her political agency. This situation relates to Arendt's reflection on political belonging, and, although it can persist even under statelessness, it is always mediated by vulnerability. The cases of Wei, Lucía, and Kirill also illustrate how HRDs in exile seize agency not by abandoning their agendas but by recalibrating them for new audiences.

Academic research provides theoretical grounding for these claims. Selim's (2023) comparative study on Syrian activists in Berlin and Oslo demonstrates that the availability of mobilising structures and the emotional resonance of exile communities shape whether activism is continued, routed, or suspended. In theory, these trajectories confirm Said's argument that exile is not only a rupture but is also a place for regenerating counter-punctual perspectives that critique nationalism and authoritarianism.

They also resonate with scholarship on transnationalism, which framed exiled actors as rooted cosmopolitans, who mobilise local experiences to influence universal norms. Exile, in this sense, is not solely a condition of loss but can also be understood as a site where political agency is reconfigured and re-embedded in global arenas (Tarrow, 2025). What makes this agency unique and different from that in the home country is its paradox: while it is constrained by precarious legal status and socio-economic insecurity, it is also reinforced by access to international stages.

This contradiction confirms another time that exile produces not political silence but political agency, one that is fragile yet impactful, vulnerable yet generative in a reconstituted form.

C. How Activism Adapts to Digital Spaces and New Alliances

In this dimension, we highlight the infrastructure and constraints that inform activism in exile, in particular digital platforms, legal regimes, and the emergence of new alliances and networks. During the last decade, digital spaces have become both a lifeline for activism of HRDs, as well as a battleground.

HRDs in exile, while often turning to social media, encrypted messaging, and online advocacy to sustain their activism, are facing more digital harassment, cyber-attacks, surveillance, and the weaponisation of digital laws (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Others, including Freedom House (2022), have reported that governments are increasingly extending their repression into cyberspaces through spyware, transnational

monitoring, defamation campaigns, and doxxing (Amnesty Security Lab, 2021), phenomena that Lucía and Tariq have confronted directly when their digital mobilisation attracted backlash from state-linked trolls.

However, both on-site and online, exile offers new opportunities to form new alliances or get involved in already established ones that transcend national frameworks. HRDs in exile integrate into these transnational and cross-border coalitions that link HRDs – both exiled and locals – NGOs, institutes, local initiatives, and city-based networks. Selim’s work on Syrian activists in Oslo and Berlin highlighted how these alliances emerge, which echoes Pratt’s concept of contact zones, where diverse communities coalesce around common experiences, often producing new pathways.

These examples align with the insights gathered in this research. Kirill and Tariq both recount joining European queer collectives, each in their host country. Laleh shares that her long-term fellowship offered her a sustainable channel to influence narratives about Iran, and Lucía continues to mobilise Latin American communities in Spain in support of the Salvadoran people. Digital platforms have also amplified these alliances by enabling coordination that transcends geographical boundaries.

These adaptations confirm what transnationalism scholarship has long argued: exile activism is not transplanted but reshaped by technology and coalition building. This reshaping echoes Bhabha’s notion of in-between spaces and Tarrow’s concept of rooted cosmopolitanism. Hence, exile of today is then not simply a survival but a recalibration of agency under technological, juridical, and relational condition.

4. TOWARD A RECONCEPTUALISATION OF EXILE

This chapter draws together the theoretical dismantling of dichotomies and the lived trajectories of HRDs in exile to reconceptualise exile not as an aftermath of displacement but as an ongoing and structured political condition. Across interviews, HRDs navigated exile through complex assemblages of legality, temporality, and infrastructure; cycles of permits, venues, and advocacy platforms that both sustain and constrain their activism. Their narratives reveal exile as at once a site of rupture and reinvention, loss and creation, vulnerability and agency.

This synthesis proposes four interrelated reconceptualisations: exile as a story, lived contradiction, transnational reorientation, and processual condition. Each reconfiguration arises directly from the empirical material and also speaks to the broader transformations in the global governance of mobility, security, and activism, where the civic space shrinks inside states, and repression now travels across borders.

4.1. Exile as Story: From Rupture to Repositioning, From Grief to Transformation

Exile has been frequently framed as rupture, alienation, and punishment—a violent separation from homeland, culture, and community. Said called it the unhealable rift while Arendt called it a stripping away of rights and belonging. For HRDs, the rupture—while not abstract—is still immediate, resulting in loss: a loss of community, family, activism spaces, organisation, the audience they speak to, and the groups they serve. Farid recalled how the Taliban destroyed the offices of his organisation in Kabul, leaving him no option but to escape, grieving both personal loss and work.

Yet stories of exile do not always end with grief. There is a glimpse of hope somewhere, often hidden beneath the unexpected, and they chart pathways of transformation and repositioning. Rana shifted from clandestine reporting in Damascus to feminist writing on women during conflict in Sweden. She is now safe, publishing, and not planning to go back to fear. Farid, while mourning loss, used a fellowship in Europe to rebuild his activism. These trajectories echo Hage's account of the diasporic condition as fragmented yet generative, where individuals inhabit multiple realities at once. Hence, exile as a story emphasises continuity through transformation: HRDs transform grief into collective strategy, memory into advocacy, and rupture into rearticulation. Their stories dismantle the binary between suffering and action, revealing exile as an evolving narrative of political life, not its epilogue.

4.2. Exile as Lived Contradiction: Between Loss and Creation, Vulnerability and Agency

Exile is not linear. It is, in fact, embedded in contradictions: loss along with creation, and vulnerability along with agency. Omid recounts how his forced departure from Afghanistan left him living with loneliness; however, he managed to establish new projects abroad and resume his career. Laleh, on the other hand, describes how her visa, income, and residency were all connected, underscoring both flexibility and ingenuity required to survive. Lucía, while being able to mobilise and advocate for the people of El Salvador at high-level institutions in the EU, struggles with housing and is still facing digital transnational repression. These contradictions mirror Butler's (2004) notion of precarity, a condition in which vulnerability is unequally distributed yet becomes a site of political mobilisation. HRDs split archives across countries, develop encrypted workflows, or stage public appearances strategically to manage exposure. Their practices of care, documentation, and coordination show that vulnerability is not antithetical to agency but its precondition under coercive systems.

To read exile as contradiction is to acknowledge this simultaneity. HRDs remain at risk while reconstituting their activism; they experience exclusion while generating alternative infrastructures of belonging. The contradiction is therefore not an anomaly but the structure of their political existence. Seen this way, exile cannot be reduced to victimhood. Instead, it is better understood as a dynamic process in which HRDs continue to negotiate structures of exclusion while creating infrastructure for sustaining their activism.

4.3. Beyond the Nation-State: New Political Imaginaries and Networks

HRDs in exile migrate from national politics only to reorient their activism beyond the nation-state level and leverage it to a transnational one. Kirill continues his agenda by getting involved in queer rights networks. Camila leverages her UN mandate to continue her fight. This reorientation echoes Tarrow's (2005) concept of rooted cosmopolitanism, where actors remain grounded in local grievances but act transnationally to influence global norms. It also aligns with Appadurai's (1996) view of global flows as creating diasporic publics that challenge the territorial limits of the political. Empirically, this transnational turn manifests in municipal residencies (e.g., cities in ICORN), academic affiliations, and fellowship

networks that anchor HRDs' presence and lend procedural legitimacy to their work. These infrastructures substitute for the nation-state's absence, creating layered sovereignties of care, recognition, and advocacy. Exile, in this light, becomes a generator of new political imaginaries, decentralised, networked, and relational, rooted in solidarity across borders rather than loyalty to a single nation.

4.4 A New Conceptual Framework of Exile: Exile as a Processual and Relational Political Condition

Exile is not an aftermath of displacement. Rather, it is a political condition organised around displacement in which alienation and continuity coexist. What looks like a rupture becomes in practice a reconfiguration of how activism and public work are done. Calendars are treated then as design constraints rather than fate, and legal frameworks are navigated through procedures. Venues are sequenced so that each event leads to another. Care is codified so that expected harms are not exported to those with less mobility. In this sense, exile becomes a process, a well-structured, replicable, repeatable, and one that can be re-evaluated.

Time is the first medium of this process. Visa clocks, renewals, intakes, and income thresholds determine when presence can be recognised. Exile becomes workable when projects are aligned to those cycles; affiliations are staggered to avoid short-permit cliff edges, and visibility is paced to legal transitions. Legal position gives this temporal architecture its texture: where presence is formally tolerated yet substantively unrecognised, everyday actions (leasing, banking, publishing, convening) turn into compliance events. Under such conditions, credibility grounded in place gives way to procedural legitimacy, meeting standards of proof, documenting the chain of custody, and making safeguarding explicit, so claims can act in forums that do not share the original context.

The political arena is also multi-sited. Actions follow a ladder sequence of municipal, regional, professional, and international elements. Each step provides unique contributions: a city decision grants legal and fiscal identity, a university affiliation provides due-process baselines, a professional body sets standards, and regional or treaty mechanisms offer added leverage. These routes do not lead to dispersion for their own sake; they are designed and ordered to eliminate veto points and create new publics. The evidentiary spine of this sequence is a distributed archive designed to survive seizure and refusals of access to a platform: encrypted masters with split keys, de-identified working sets, mirrored custody across jurisdictions, and shared standards for verification, redaction, and admissibility of evidence.

Care increases impact capacity: As hosts take internal responsibility and decline events for compliance, collective action and co-ownership become the de facto practice: gathering, roundtables, workshops, and advocacy briefs, so that reputational and legal risk is shared, and no single refusal derails the trajectory of that risk. In this sense, care is not supplementary; it is capacity. Because pressure often comes through children, older relatives, landlords, editors, or programmers, continuity requires a set of rules to keep predictable burdens from being shifted into private life—staged mobility of dependents, consent for disclosure protocols, split-attention contact maps, school-facing documentation, and disciplined communication. Likewise, affect is treated as structural. Moral injury from unfinished cases, chronic uncertainty, and absorbed obligations to family are sustained by having peer supervision, pacing that works for those aware of trauma, and administrative buffers that stabilise attention in a way to keep evidence trustworthy.

The intersectional dimension is essential to this process. Gender, sexual identity, sexual orientation, indigeneity, race, colour, religion, social class, education, languages spoken, and legal status shape exposure and access. In the absence of an intentional brokerage, venue ladders preserve the privilege of those who are already resourced. The decision that practice then stabilises is also determined by host settings, recognition without redistribution, panels, and publicly created prestige that is not matched by legal personality and pathways to income, housing, health care, further hardening exile into managed

waiting. In the presence of material support, we see an expansion of repertoires: testimony becomes standard-setting, litigation support, pedagogy, and programme design. In a sense, hope can be operationalised; this is not sentiment but the predictable and repeatable alignment of time, custody, coalition, and care, around which tomorrow's work begins to bubble with potential.

In these terms, exile is reconceptualised as a relational political condition and a dynamic process of continuity under constraint, value-driven, multi-sited, and infrastructure-dependent. While this process is oppressive in its temporal and legal architecture, it is generative in the techniques and strategies it embeds. It is also marked by contradictory agency and intersectional differentiations through which HRDs reconfigure activism under conditions of displacement and precarity. Understanding exile this way, and from the perspective of HRDs, clarifies what is lacking: support that extends beyond emergency relocation, to the legal, fiscal, evidentiary, coalitional, and care infrastructures through which activism is sustained in conditions of displacement. This reconceptualisation reframes exile as a field of struggle, governed yet generative, enabling yet constraining, fragmented yet connected.

Implications of the New Concept

For scholarship: This framework advances exile studies beyond binary frameworks (voluntary/forced, loss/agency, national/transnational). It positions exile within the global governance of mobility and human rights, foregrounding its infrastructural, temporal, and relational dimensions.

For HRDs: It reaffirms exile as political life, not political afterlife. HRDs in exile continue to act, adapt, and shape global advocacy systems. Their practices, archival care, coalition brokerage, venue sequencing, represent new modalities of political agency under constraint.

For policy and protection frameworks: The findings call for infrastructures that extend beyond emergency relocation to encompass legal, fiscal, evidentiary, and care systems capable of sustaining activism long-term. Municipal residencies, multi-year fellowships, and diaspora networks must be recognised not as humanitarian gestures but as components of democratic infrastructure.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Legal Protection and Institutional Architecture

The architecture of legal protection for HRDs in exile must evolve from fragmented, state-centric models to coordinated frameworks that recognise mobility as a structural condition of human rights work. Current mechanisms often remain bounded by territorial jurisdiction and administrative calendars that fail to align with the temporalities of displacement, fellowship cycles, and risk escalation. A recalibration of protection architecture is therefore required at each institutional layer.

UN and International Mechanisms

The UN system should institutionalise a dedicated workstream on exiled HRDs under the Special Procedures framework. This framework should include a standing expert group, regular joint communications across relevant mandates (HRDs, freedom of expression, migration, arbitrary detention), and an annual host state guidance note consolidating good practices. The coordination should extend to synchronised reporting timelines with host country visa regimes to avoid procedural disjunctures that leave HRDs unprotected during transitions. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) should facilitate a registry of transnational repression cases, documenting patterns of cyber, familial, and diplomatic harassment to inform treaty body recommendations and UPR processes.

EU and Regional Bodies

Regional systems such as the EU, OSCE, and CoE should develop, or encourage their member states to develop, multi-year protection visas or automatic bridging permits aligned with academic fellowships, residencies, and relocation programmes. Legal frameworks should enable in-country status conversion and asylum or removal filings without the requirement of exit and re-entry, mitigating the cliff-edge status loss faced by many HRDs. Member states should designate police focal points for transnational repression—empowered to respond rapidly to digital, physical, or consular threats. The EU should further operationalise a venue ladder system: a structured process where municipal attestations and university hosting letters are admissible in regional or treaty filings through standardised hand-off packs that document custody, risk, and factual verification.

Host States and Municipal Authorities

Host states must embed municipal and academic institutions within their national protection ecosystems. Municipalities can act as primary anchors, providing attestations that unlock access to local services, housing, and legal representation. Universities, in turn, should anchor due-process and fiscal identity, offering contracts or honorary affiliations that create a recognised legal and administrative presence. Host states should also enable local police liaison units trained to address cross-border intimidation, harassment by proxies, and consular interference, ensuring these threats are treated as national security concerns rather than diplomatic sensitivities.

Civil Society and Universities

Universities and CSOs can consolidate these protections by maintaining due-process baselines, institutional letters, contracts, and research affiliations recognised under domestic law. Universities should also formalise memoranda of understanding with municipalities and NGOs, clarifying referral, verification, and duty-of-care procedures. This anchors protection within an institutional chain that connects the local to the international.

2. Safety, Security, and Duty of Care

Protection mechanisms must move beyond abstract guarantees to operational safety frameworks grounded in accountability and shared responsibility. The emphasis should shift from ad hoc visibility measures to sustained, evidence-based engagement with explicit risk management.

UN and Regional Bodies

The UN Special Procedures and regional monitoring mechanisms should integrate transnational repression indicators into their early warning and emergency response systems, including recognising harassment of families, surveillance through digital means, and diplomatic pressure as forms of extended repression. Engagements with exiled HRDs should adhere to a standardised risk protocol, including informed consent, venue risk assessment, digital security audits, and post-engagement debriefs.

Host States and Municipal Authorities

Host states should establish municipal-level rapid response teams tasked with evaluating and intervening in cases of digital or physical threats. These teams should operate under clear national frameworks ensuring inter-agency coordination between police, cyber units, and foreign ministries. Every public event involving HRDs should be preceded by a risk-benefit assessment and followed by a mutual agreement specifying responsibilities for safety, custody of evidence, and follow-up communication.

Civil Society, Universities, and Cultural Institutions

Academic and cultural partnerships should replace one-off visibility events with structured engagement cycles linked to tangible institutional outcomes (policy submissions, research outputs, or cultural documentation). Each collaboration should include:

A preliminary risk and consent assessment;

- A standard evidence pack (fact-verified, chain-of-custody documented, with responsible contacts);
- A formal follow-up mechanism (submission, inquiry, or policy meeting) logged and archived.

3. Financing Continuity and Infrastructure for Advocacy in Exile

Sustainability in exile depends on financial continuity. Current funding architectures emphasise emergency response but neglect the structural costs of long-term displacement, including legal representation, digital safety, and organisational survival.

Donors, Foundations, and International Organisations

Funding mechanisms should pair emergency relief with 12–24-month continuity financing that covers the operational spine of exiled advocacy: legal status, fiscal hosting, encrypted evidence management, translation, and modest income runways. Grants must be portable across borders, allowing relocation without re-application, and disbursed via fiscal hosts without significant delays. Assessment processes should shift from lengthy narrative proposals to operational blueprints containing timelines, custody plans, and a platform ledger care matrix. Donors should further provide multi-year core funding and technical support for HRD organisations in exile, particularly for registration, accounting, and labour compliance in host states.

Host States and Municipalities

Municipalities should introduce micro-procurement lines enabling local authorities to commission HRD expertise (briefings, workshops, or rapid analyses) without extensive tender procedures. Such funding creates sustainable engagement rather than dependency on humanitarian grants. Host states can complement this by supporting municipal fiscal hosting schemes, ensuring exiled HRDs can receive payments and file taxes without permanent residence.

Civil Society and HRD Networks

Civil society should collaborate to create regional infrastructure for fiscal hosting, encryption, and verification accessible to HRDs and diaspora groups. Cross-border consortia can provide pooled resources for translation, evidence mirroring, and safeguarding, ensuring continuity when individuals must relocate.

4. Access to Services, Integration, and Recognition

Integration is infrastructural: access to documentation, services, and recognition determines whether HRDs can rebuild sustainable lives and professional identities in exile.

Host States and Municipal Authorities

Municipalities must ensure access to core services, healthcare, education, and housing through attestations that function as proof of residence or affiliation, irrespective of migration status. Bridging permits should align with fellowship or academic cycles, preventing status gaps. Host countries should integrate recognition mechanisms (awards, residencies, exhibitions) into pathways of formal inclusion, linking visibility to documentation and fiscal identity.

Universities and Cultural Institutions

Universities should act as integration brokers, providing contracts, honorary titles, or research affiliations that create a formal legal and fiscal footprint for HRDs. Cultural institutions, when conferring recognition, must ensure that awards and residencies also deliver material inclusion, housing, legal advice, and credential recognition. Universities can further facilitate language and credential programmes for HRDs and dependents.

Donors and International Organisations

Donors should prioritise localised integration funding that links protection with belonging, supporting municipal programmes for professional accreditation, psychosocial support, and access to civic participation. The EU and CoE should monitor how host states operationalise these commitments, ensuring equality of access regardless of nationality or legal category.

5. Collaborative Platforms and Accountability

Protection requires shared responsibility rather than fragmented intervention. A co-owned model—anchored in municipal, academic, and civil society collaboration—offers a pathway to durable protection.

Municipalities, Universities, and Civil Society Coalitions

- Coalitions should be established where each actor's function is clearly defined and complementary:
- Municipalities provide the physical and administrative platform—venues, attestations, micro-contracts, police liaison, and official convening.
- Universities offer due-process baselines—legal clinics, evidence intake, compliant payroll, and fiscal identity.
- Professional associations contribute peer standards, audiences, and dissemination channels.
- HRD organisations in exile manage evidence curation and safeguarding.
- Relocation mechanisms oversee visa, residence, and logistical processes.

These platforms should operate with shared standard operating procedures covering risk, custody, and care, and maintain pooled legal panels to ensure equal access to counsel. Regional evidence and digital-security labs should be accessible to HRDs and diaspora communities. To prevent institutional bottlenecks, re-hosting pathways must exist, so that a single venue's refusal does not terminate engagement. Trained intermediaries should coordinate dossier movement through a structured ladder (municipal regional treaty).

Equity within this system must be ensured through translation services, childcare support, and credential recognition, enabling participation on equal terms. A single intake mechanism should route each case simultaneously to city affiliation, fiscal hosting, legal referral, and venue sequencing, eliminating repetitive vetting and minimising retraumatisation.

ANNEX 1: LIST AND COMPOSITION OF PARTICIPANTS IN INTERVIEWS

This annex lists all interviewees who contributed to this study. It distinguishes between HRDs who shared biographical life histories and expert/key informant participants who provided structural or institutional perspectives. All names are pseudonyms.

I. Human Rights Defenders (HRDs)

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Current Country of Exile	Field / Identity	Key Themes
Kirill	Russia	Austria	LGBTIQ+ rights defender, lawyer	Criminalisation of activism, NGO liquidation, legal insecurity, in-between identity between Russia & Europe
Rana	Syria	Sweden	Journalist & cultural critic	Gendered repression, censorship, exile as rupture, re-creation of feminist voice in exile
Farid	Afghanistan	Germany	Minority rights & peace activist	Double marginalisation (ethnic & political), Taliban persecution, discrimination in host country
Omid	Afghanistan	United States	Anti-corruption researcher, NGO founder	Trauma of loss, rebuilding activism through education, exile as survival & renewal
Camila	Latin America	Switzerland	Indigenous leader; UN expert mandate-holder	Criminalisation, forced exile through denied re-entry, Indigenous self-determination
Danylo	Russia	Turkey	Documentary filmmaker, cultural dissident/ LGBTIQ+ activist	Art as activism, censorship, digital solidarity, queer rights in post-Soviet space

Pseudonym	Country of Origin	Current Country of Exile	Field / Identity	Key Themes
Wei	China	Netherlands	LGBTIQ+ & environmental activist	State surveillance, NGO restrictions, transnational advocacy, redefining self-exile
Tariq	Tunisia	France	HRD/political activist/Queer activist	Transnational repression, precarity of visas, network building as safety
Laleh	Iran	undisclosed	Activist & researcher	Psychological toll of displacement, need for sustainable networks, gendered vulnerability
Lucía	El Salvador	Spain	Feminist HRD	Intersection of migration and gender, activism under asylum, language barriers
Karim	Egypt	Germany	HRD	Linguistic exclusion, precarious labour, and re-entry into activism through translation networks
Samatar	Somalia	Spain	HRD & researcher on civic space	Structural barriers within protection programmes, north-south inequities

II. Expert and Key Informant Interviews

Pseudonym	Affiliation / Expertise	Focus of Contribution
Hugo	Protection mechanism	Architecture of HRD protection, relocation gaps, intersectionality in programme design in the EU
Ines	Academic institution	Academic & training frameworks; trauma-informed pedagogy for HRDs
Sabine	European organisation providing support to HRDs in exile	Advocacy strategy; EU–civil society interface
Nour	Protection mechanism	US and global HRD support architecture; programmatic blind spots

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