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Global Perspectives on Freedom of Association: Portraits of Associational Involvement

Erin Jackson

Societās — Exploring the Value of Freedom of Association

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Portraits of Associational Participation: Exploring Personal Narratives

Erin Jackson[*]

I. Introduction

Real stories or non-fictional narratives can be a meaningful or powerful way to ground human rights in real experience. They have long been used to pinpoint the intersection of human rights and personal testimony or 'life narrative', often through emotive stories.[1] Keeping with this tradition, and as a foray into the multi-faceted chapters in this volume on freedom of expression, this opening narrative chapter seeks to briefly capture real moments of participation in associations.

The purpose of this chapter's narrative focus is to highlight stories of lived experience in associations as a gateway to thinking more about associational living as a whole in our societies. From the city band to the local book club, portraits of participation illuminate motives and meaning, and give a small snapshot of associational participation from several angles. Why do people join or leave them? What do they experience within them? And what do they take with them when they are no longer involved? This chapter engages with this purpose by drawing on an empirical pilot study conducted under the auspices of the Societās project.[2] The stories captured within these narrative portraits are drawn from broad exploratory interviews

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[1] See for example, Schaffer K. and Smith S (2004), *Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition.* New York, Palgrave Macmillan.

[2] The pilot study comprised 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with (former) students and staff of an Irish university about their experiences with and perceived value of associational participation over the course of their lives. The project formed part of wider Societās project led by Professor Maria Cahill and based at the School of Law, University College Cork. Ethical approval for this project was sought and granted by the UCC Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC). The data has been anonymised, and the names of participants, places names and other identifying references or data have been omitted or changed.

on the value of associations in people's everyday lives. They are presented here as portraits in respect to key themes pertaining to associational involvement. This chapter does not purport to be exhaustive but instead offers a glimpse of lived experience. Through these portraits, it illustrates some of the myriad ways associations affect our lives.

The narratives in the chapter are the result of interviews conducted as part of a pilot study in Ireland on the value of associations and how people experience them in different ways across their life course. In the interviews, participants had the opportunity to share experiences of associations throughout their life and what they meant to them. With a qualitative empirical approach as its basis, this chapter draws on the experiences of a sample of university students and staff to capture a range of lived experience and memories of participation. The portraits of pursuit, fulfilment, frustration and impact are stories used to exemplify motivations, perceived value, challenges, and lasting legacy.

By means of the empirical research conducted in this pilot study, the chapter aims to spotlight some of these facets of associational experiences – good and bad – with real-life examples through storytelling and to set the stage for wider and more legal and philosophical contributions of this book. After an explanation of the dataset from which these portraits are derived (Part II), this chapter presents a series of stories under the four main themes: motivations, value, challenges and legacy (Part III) and then concludes (Part IV). This food-for-thought exploration of narratives brings to life, in a personal way, how associations touch daily life.

II. The Dataset: An Irish Pilot Study

The narratives in this chapter stem from a pilot study on experiences of associational involvement carried out within the Societās project,[3] which expand upon background research that gathered a series of testimonials from participants of associations. As part of the study, a total of 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out with students and staff of a university in Ireland. The university is situated in a city where associational involvement is deeply embedded in the culture of the surrounding area. It is also home to over 200 clubs and societies. A flyer was distributed amongst students and staff outlining the purpose of the research and a call for participation. Participants could be current or former students or staff from any discipline, as long as they were currently participating or had at some point

[3] For more on the Societās research project on freedom of association, please see: https://www.associationalfreedom.org/.

participated in an association (for easy understanding 'club or society') in their lifetime. Participants could be of any nationality, any age (adult) and participation could be in any type of association for any length of time. No parameters of specific involvement (such as leadership roles) were placed on participation, though these were discussed where relevant.

The resulting pool of participants ended up as follows**:** 12 male, 17 female and 1 non-binary participant aged between approximately 18-65 years old. Of these, 17 were university staff and 13 were (current or former) students. Of the participants, 26 were Irish and 4 were from outside Ireland. Of these participants, 25 spoke about associations based in Ireland and 5 spoke about associations based outside of Ireland. A couple of participants (2) spoke about associations that were international (either because the association was based abroad or because it had chapters abroad), one about a national association (1), and the remainder about locally-based associations (27).

The interviews, carried out in May 2024 in-person (and online in a few instances) lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded (with one exception). This empirical pilot study of the project was approved by the research ethics committee of the research project's host university. In line with the ethical approval of the project, participants were informed at the beginning of the interview of the purpose of the study, right of withdrawal and confidentiality, and they signed consent forms. The narratives presented here are derived from the interview transcripts.[4] To preserve the anonymity of the data, names of participants and places in the portraits have been changed and associations are referred to only by subject matter.

The participants' experiences ranged in scope and formality from recreational book clubs, to choirs and music clubs, to more structured student societies, professional associations, and athletic clubs.[5] Given that many participants had been part of multiple associations over the course of their lifetime, also at different stages of life, they were first invited to share their history with associational involvement and then allowed to self-select the experience most meaningful to them or that they wished to talk about. The participants were first asked: what

[4] Meta data for the project, including the information sheet and transcripts, has been published via the Digital Repository of Ireland and is accessible online: https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.8c980s15f. In line with the ethical approval by the SREC, the project data is stored with Professor Maria Cahill for a minimum period of ten years.
[5] The activities of participants included: local choirs, book cubs, prayers groups, performance and music bands, athletic associations (e.g. badminton, tennis, national sports, Taekwondo, golf, yoga), and a diverse variety of societies including medieval costumers, LGBT, skydiving, board games, and national volunteer organisations.

associations have you been a part of in your life? After a full account, they were asked: which experience would you like to speak about?

III. Portraits of Experience: Associational Participation in Daily Life

Within their chosen experience, participants were further asked about their motivations for entering and leaving associations, their experiences within them and the lasting impact they felt their involvement has had in their lives. In addition to their practical experiences or tasks, this often led to more philosophical discussions on lessons learned, stories of personal growth or trials that accompanied decisions in life to join or leave groups. At times, it led to displays of grief, sadness or gratitude related to their participation. While the participants spoke on the subject with ease, it became clear that associations touch upon life milestones in a way that evoked emotion, and for some participants these questions prompted a first reflection on the meaning of their associational involvement throughout their life.

The narratives presented below are selected from the interview transcripts. They comprise different experiences and exemplify a theme or part of a theme found to be expressed in the pilot study. In this way, they make three dimensional some aspects of the choices of joining, the experiences of being within associations and their impact long after. Naturally, in the cycle of any individual's experience, they may have experiences that fit all themes. After all, each person joins an association, has an experience within and leaves it. The chosen portraits have been placed under the theme where they best illustrate something meaningful.

In what follows, each of the core themes of motivations, value, challenges and legacy are illuminated by two or three stories from participants. As such, each theme presents a set of portraits that bring to life experiences related to that theme. Under each theme there is a brief summary of the characters about to be introduced. Following that, each story is told through a stylized summative narrative of the story told in the interview. Each narrative is followed by a short quote in participants' own words to encapsulate part of their experience or message.

A. Portraits of Pursuit: Motivation for Associational Involvement

Two women, two life transitions, one keeping a connection to home, and the other searching for likeminded individuals in a new home. One man training his kids teams out of a sense of obligation. One woman joining a band and finding music and friends. The stories of Elaine, Emma, Joe and Gwen are stories of what motivates people to participate in associations.

1. Elaine: Keeping a Connection to Home

When Elaine joined the book club, she did not really need friends, she already had a lot of things to keep her busy. A friend invited her to come along, and she thought it would be a good idea. She knew that she would be expected to read a book a month and thought this would instil the habit of reading. She was nervous at her first meeting and thoroughly prepared for the discussion of Colm Tóibín's "Brooklyn", but everyone was very nice and welcoming. You had to speak, but it was not an exam, and she quickly became part of the core five of the group. That was 18 years ago now. Now she has moved away, as she had a few times over the years, and lives an hour and a half away. Still, she travels once a month to be there. There are other book clubs where she lives now that she could join, but for her it would not be the same. Everyone has their place in the group and the familiarity is stabilising. It gives some structure. As she has gotten older, it has been harder to meet people, and the book club has become about friends after all. She is now the second-longest member of the group and her involvement over time has given her long-lasting friendships and self-confidence, just by being consistently involved. As an added bonus, when she travels back for the book club, she meets other old friends and has a reason to go back home. In Elaine's words:

> "We have moved around the country quite a lot, and I just find it quite stabilising to be able to return to something which is familiar. … The structure, the coherence, the predictability, those kind of things, even the regularity, the discipline of having to read the book and all of that. That I think is what it provides. … You know, there are all sorts of promises to stay in touch and whatever and sometimes it's hard to do that unless you have a particular reason to go back somewhere. So, if I say go back to the book club there, I can then attach to that meeting other people whom I've known in the past. And I think it's a very useful hook as well for that because otherwise, you know, you go back aimlessly to somewhere and you don't really keep doing it."

2. Emma: Looking for Connection in a New Place

When Emma moved to the UK ten years ago, she had already found her passion in historical reenactment. A chance encounter with a student society led her through her student years punctuated by medieval weapons training and events with a close-knit group of friends. She'd learned to sew her own costumes and took carefree trips across the country to attend fairs. So, it was only natural her first stop in her new home abroad would be to seek the same. She searched online and tried to find the closest possible thing. It took six months, but she found a medieval dance renaissance group. Some of the group cared more about the dances, while she

preferred the costumes, but through it she was able to find what she was looking for – people with similar interests and a new community. For that reason, she would take the train to the lessons and return late in the evening, and she kept going up until it was time to move back to Ireland. Now back in Ireland, she regularly goes back to the UK to see her friends she made in the dancing class. They keep in touch and are some of her closest friends. When she gets the chance, she travels back to attend balls and to hang out with them, just like they did when she was in a new place away from home. In Emma's words:

> "I've been doing this for probably 25 years. I don't see it changing at all. And I think the fact that so many of my friendships are founded on it, it's always there in the background. So even if none of us are doing it again at some point in the future, it will always have that grounding. That sounds bad in the sense that we're not friends just because of the thing. They're obviously really important people in my life, you know, [but] I can't change the fact that that's how I met them and that's how we became friends. That's the history. … I feel that if I was to sum it up, it really enriches my life. Not to say that I wouldn't have an enriched life if I had another hobby, but I'm so glad it's this one."

3. Joe: Coaching his Children's Sports Teams

Joe has three sons. Like most kids their age they play sport at the local club. The youngest plays soccer and the oldest plays Gaelic football with his local Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA).[6] Both local clubs run on the work of volunteers. He grew up playing sports himself and he does not believe in standing on the sidelines and not helping out. He would have to be there pitch-side every week as a parent anyway, and so he takes it upon himself to be a coach for the team. Who else will do it, he thinks. The parents at times seem ungrateful. They often do not express any thanks, and some seem to see it as free daycare, with little interest in the sport. Still, the fathers are expected to pitch in. He is left wondering, why does a swimming coach get paid for their coaching while we receive no compensation? Afterall, he has to go through training for his coaching badges. It is not about the money per se, but it just does not seem right. In any case, he has been doing it for three years already and he will probably be doing it for a few more. He appreciates the time bonding with his kids and seeing the children improve their

[6] Gaelic football is a team sport played in Ireland. It is governed by the Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA), Ireland's largest sporting organisation, which promotes amateur Gaelic sports, including Gaelic football, hurling and camogie. On Gaelic football, see further: https://www.gaa.ie/my-gaa/getting-involved/gaelic-football.

skills, but as soon as his sons leave the teams, so will he. For him, it is primarily a practical way to be involved and spend quality time with his kids, but without them on the team the coaching itself would not be personally fulfilling enough to maintain. In Joe's words:

> "There's no way off this merry-go-round. There can be a bit of politics. People can get emotional about these things, some dads are there to win and to live out their dreams through their children. They can be competitive and that causes tensions. … The upside is you would get to know the other dads well and you'd see them at the schoolyard. You meet kids and other parents that as they get older you will know them as they grow up. You feel like you're contributing something. You're standing there, you might as well be helping. … I do get fulfilment from seeing the children develop and improve [but] I have no attachment to doing it, I see it as a responsibility."

4. Gwen: Venturing into a New Hobby and Feeling Less Alone

Gwen had no musical training, but she had always loved music. She had seen the large, Latin American city band around and always wanted to join. After leaving her job and starting to freelance, she found she had more free time but not much of a social life. She found the band's email address online and contacted them. She was in luck. They were just taking on new members and she was invited to join a practice. The leader had two simple criteria for membership: participants should have a bit of rhythm and be nice people; the rest was just a matter of practice. That made it easy to join and get started. Like every member, Gwen started on the smaller simpler instruments and worked her way up to the big ones. After the first practice, someone suggested they all go out for some drinks, a tradition they kept up, and so she got to know everyone. She spent six years in the group, with people from all different backgrounds. They practiced, they travelled, they performed – all for free and because they loved it. It was unstructured and free flowing in those days, and that suited her. During the Covid-19 pandemic, they practices came to a standstill. A group chat formed and they joined an online quiz twice a week to stay social during the lockdown. She felt included. One night she did not show up online because she was not feeling up to it. A text popped up – someone from the band checking in – are you okay? She cries as she recalls it. It was a level of care that she had not expected. After all, they did not know much about each other's lives outside of the band. The connection they had formed through their mutual love of music was the basis of making memories together. Yet, those check-ins during the pandemic showed her how much her bandmates truly cared. Despite otherwise not being deeply involved in each other's lives,

they took the time to reach out to her and she felt less alone during what was a difficult and isolating time. In Gwen's words:

> "Within those years, it was my social life. And because of [the band leader's] two criteria, he had gathered a group of people who were really similarly minded but had completely different backgrounds. … At the same time, our other lives weren't that relevant to the band. There was a lot of people I still don't know what they do and it doesn't matter. … With the lockdown, it was really intense at the beginning and at the time it was a little bit, maybe too much, but we were frantic when we were all trying to connect. But they always included me, and I remember one night I just wasn't feeling it. And I got a message, one of the guys, he was like, 'everything okay'? ... And he made it his business then to check in. So, I mean, that's [a level of care] completely separate to the band."

B. Portraits of fulfilment: Perceived value

One man on a mission to make tangible change to society. One woman seeking solace and meaning among people who share her faith, and another lost in her career, searching for a way forward. The stories of Stephen, Mary and Donna are stories of value.

1. Stephen: Fighting for Change within Society

When Stephen joined a national advocacy group, he was annoyed. He disagreed with the religious laws (governing schools and oaths) in Ireland, which he did not think fit within a secular society. He wanted to make a change. After the death of his wife, he had left behind a time-consuming job that he loved and had taken up law as a new career path. He had more time and he wanted to make a real change. Though he had been a part of other NGOs or associations, this one was different. He felt as though they were all on the same page. They wanted to fix a problem. More than that, he admired and learned from the way other members advocated for their cause – some with humour, some with great tenacity – and he learned from them along the way. Together, they made an impact on how the law is written and their campaign featured prominently during a referendum that passed country wide. For his part, he stayed behind the scenes, letting others talk to the cameras, but wrote letters and volunteered his time to make the campaigns a success. Now he is a retired pensioner, and with his child grown up, he stays involved and funds change for the future. In Stephen's words:

> "I was in therapy after my wife died and the therapist said, you can't fix the whole world. I was like, oh yeah, but you can try. … It hasn't really changed me, but I see

> it, especially having children, that there's like a humanist principle that you're custodians of the world for the next generations. And part of that philosophy is that you improve the world and build a better world. And that's the way I would sum it up."

2. Mary: Finding a Faith-Based Community

When Mary first joined a large youth prayer group, she was looking to make friends with similar values. Her faith was really important to her and she wanted to expand her social circle. She was a self-described slow starter and often left straight after the prayers were finished, even though she wanted to meet people. She was not prepared for how enthusiastic everyone would be and found that she would only join in every few weeks. She found that most young people were looking to meet their future girlfriend or boyfriend there, and there was a lack of oversight in the group. It lacked leadership and rules, she felt, and was too casual. She wanted friends but she did not want the pressure that she experienced when joining group activities. Instead, she found a different group, with mostly older people, where she found she could just attend and pray, where the pressure to socialise was not as intense. She was the youngest member in the group by far, but there she felt completely safe, and she appreciated that there was an authority figure to lead the group. Even though it was an hour away, she went twice a week, and it was worth it. The membership got younger over time, and one day in walked her future husband. They now have five children together. In Mary's words:

> "I got the space to find my faith in a more deep way. It was really a space out of the week to just think and pray and then really enjoy the company of people afterwards. I went there for a long time, for three or four years, and as time went on, it wasn't just old people. In the beginning, literally, there were like 70s and 80s and me. Then as time went on, it got younger, but for about two years that was it. So those two years really gave a lot of space, gave a lot of peace. It just gave the chance to decompress from the business of the week. … I met people who revealed parts of themselves that were very personal and very deep and who shared their faith and that impacted and strengthened mine."

3. Donna: Keeping ties to a Professional Community

Donna had been struggling with her career. After finishing a PhD three years prior in a niche topic, she found herself with no prospects and not knowing how to keep connected to academic circles without a university position. She was about to leave university life – her opportunities

were waning, and she was not sure how to make progress in her field. Academically-speaking, she had one lifeline remaining and that came through a society that had asked her to give a talk. The group met a few times each year and discussed their work amongst talks, teas and lunches together. They were not judgmental, and they did not exhibit the usual competitive air of people jockeying for success. She remembers, as a junior scholar, she was invited to sit at the right hand of the chairperson, and she felt treated as an equal. The elder scholars in her field filled the group with knowledge. She received encouragement, she found an academic position and her career began to flourish. When the secretary stepped down, she took up the role and she continued it for 10 years, stepping down when she felt it was time for someone else to take over. Over time, things changed. The meetings moved online, and some older inspirational scholars were lost, but she still remembers it fondly. It got her where she is today – a successful scholar. If it was not for them, she is not sure she would be doing what she does now. In Donna's words:

> "I feel it was a huge part in saving my career, actually, because it kept me in touch. And they were just such a supportive group and completely non-judgmental, because there are certain academic societies and groups that if you're an independent scholar or you're not involved in a post, they just don't want to know you, but this group was the opposite. … I was really grateful to them and I felt that they'd been good to me."

C. Portraits of Frustration: Challenges of Associational Involvement

One person builds an organisation and loses it to differences of opinion. Another spends years in a temporary role helping a society grow and finds it hard to step away and watch their successors take it in a new direction. The stories of Jennifer and Finn are stories of challenges.

1. Jennifer: Leaving What you Started

When Jennifer got her first car, she joined her first search group. She had always loved animals and since she had seen search dogs on the back of a van as a child, she had always wanted to be a part of it. She met her husband right away. He was passionate about dogs too. Together, they started their own group, training a breed of dog that until then had not been included in the Irish search force. She invested her own money and time. Sometimes it was difficult, and assisting the police and families with missing persons could be heavy emotionally, but she was proud of her work. Together, they did that for almost 10 years. By then, the group had grown and become more structured. Initially, there was no paperwork, but then people got titles and

the atmosphere of the group changed. There were disagreements about allocation of funds and the future direction of the group. She felt they were losing track of what it was about. After a disagreement with the management, Jennifer and her husband left the group on bad terms. The chairman had the power and so she left. Looking back at it, she wishes she had stood her ground and said 'this is our club, you leave', but at the time she did not feel empowered to do so. The club felt like their child in some ways because it was something they had built together. Even now, she feels bitter that it still exists and that other people are running it. She takes part in a music group now, but finds she invests less in the people there and remains more guarded. She does not let herself become friendly with others too fast. In Jennifer's words:

> "It seems like a lifetime ago now, I suppose, but it is something that hurts a lot. I think because of the fact that we were so invested in it, when it all went apart, even our relationship was around all that kind of stuff. And then, there was nothing. It was one of the weirdest kind of things. Yeah, it was a big loss to us at the time, I think. … I really am bitter that it still exists and people are there running the club. That was our club that we started for a reason and its purpose is turned into something which it was never supposed to be."

2. Finn: Watching what you have Made be Reassembled

As a student, Finn was involved in a multitude of societies. Within the LGBT society, which they were a part of for five years, they took on roles in inclusivity, finance and coordination. To be more involved, they took a one-year student sabbatical, staying fully registered but taking no classes and being fully committed to the society. They became a go-to person for guidance, integral to advising other students on taking on committee roles and managing their workload to make sure they did not suffer a burnout. They used their own experience taking on too many activities to help others avoid the same mistakes. It felt good to pass those things on to others. Without that, a lot gets lost. Over time, Finn noticed that a huge amount of institutional knowledge is gained and lost each year. They saw it happen a few times – a society passes from one group to the next and it inevitably changes. Finn begrudgingly watched his successors make mistakes from information not being passed on or from trying new things, and saw cherished events get cancelled and replaced with new ones. It was always hard to watch it get broken down and rebuilt, even if the society was built back in a better way. It is a cultural evolution, they know, but it can still hurt to see parts of what you have created be taken apart or altogether replaced. In Finn's words:

> "I wasn't ready to admit that the version of these groups that I first came into was changing and was gone. Once it happened with three or four of them, I was like, OK, this just happens. Because with the first one, I was like, what's going on? I got so angry. Why are they ruining it? And then when the second one happened, I was like, are these young guys all just idiots? Do they not know how to do things? And then it happened again. I was like, oh, I'm the problem. I get it now."

D. Portraits of Impact: The Legacy in one's Life

Two women grow up in highly active sports-based communities and follow similar paths but with two different outcomes. The stories of Aoife and Olive, here intertwined, are about the lasting impact of associational involvement.

1. Aoife and Olive: Contrasting Legacies from a Similar Path

Aoife grew up immersed in her local GAA sports club,[7] playing traditional Irish sports at all age levels, making friends and sharing a sense of purpose with them. As a college student, now in a competitive medical program in another county, she still travels home regularly to train and play with the club and takes the communication and leadership skills she learned with her into her academic pursuits. Olive, who also started playing Irish sports from an early age, was similarly deeply involved in her local club throughout her childhood and recalls with fondness making friends and having fun. Yet, the pressure from coaches, lack of support and rigid training schedules took away from the joy of camaraderie and collective wins and affected her mental health. She abruptly quit. Now a student in the same medical course as Aoife, she stays active through the gym but has never found that exuberance of being part of a team, and wonders whether, if she had stayed, she might still be part of the lasting friend groups she sees on social media.

For both, involvement in a vibrant local sports club throughout their childhood sparked friendships and demanded ongoing time and effort to be part of a team. Both experiences left a lasting impact on their lives, though one was positive and the other not so. One leaves a lasting legacy of ongoing connection to her home, a source of pride and enduring transferrable life skills. The other leaves a feeling of something lost and lasting doubts about ever joining a

[7] The GAA is a community-based organisation with over 2200 clubs across Ireland in all 32 counties, and typically people join the local club in their county or parish. For more on the GAA generally, see: https://www.gaa.ie/the-gaa/about-the-gaa.

club again due to lingering anxiety about the requisite commitment and pressure. In Aoife and Olive's words, respectively:

> "I suppose just kind of having more people stay in sport and even the younger girls on the team coming up, seeing like she's still able to give her time to her sport while doing quite a big course and she's still able to balance her life. She's still able to be organised and she's still getting through the year. I feel like it would be nice to kind of just be a kind of a motivation for other girls, especially in the club."

> "I felt like I was letting people down when I wouldn't give 100% to it. So, I think I kind of struggled with that to keep it up to the standard that I would have wanted to do it at. … They just expect a really high standard of commitment from you, and for an amateur sport at a young age, I think that was quite difficult. … Let's say if I couldn't go to a training, then my teammates would be annoyed if I was starting a match ahead of them. It was just a lot of pressure and a lot of stress on me. That was kind of the main reason why I gave up in the end was because I just couldn't keep up with it."

IV. Conclusion

Personal stories have often been used to give insight into the lived experience of human rights. In the context of freedom of expression, for example, Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Irene Khan, has used them to chronicle experience and give voice to communities whose rights are at stake.[8] In the context of this volume, the purpose of these narrative portraits is to offer a first set of reflections, in the context of a set of essays exploring the nature of associational life and freedom from legal and philosophical perspectives, on the meaning that associations have in everyday life. The experiences chronicled may sometimes be mundane but they hold meaning for the participants involved. The stories of Aoife, Olive and others demonstrate how associations intersect with one's personal life. In the end, associations are made up of individuals who are filled with their own desires, who contribute in their own ways and who have their own experiences.

As stated at the outset, the purpose of this narrative chapter is not to be exhaustive in its survey of the daily lived experience of associations. After all, eight portraits cannot capture

[8] UNESCO, UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan launches essay collection "#JournalistsToo" on personal stories of harassment by women journalists, 25 November 2021, available at: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/un-special-rapporteur-irene-khan-launches-essay-collection-journaliststoo-personal-stories.

the entire breadth of means or ways that involvement in associations can affect people's lives. Instead, the stories presented here give a brief glimpse of experience and open a door to thinking about how associations touch daily life in different ways. For the participants in the present pilot study, the associations in their lives had specific purpose or meaning at different times and left a long-lasting impact.

These stories give a 'face' to some of the facets of associational living. They journey through some wider themes of the motivations to join, the value and challenges and the legacy. They are not intended here to be empirically consequential (generalizable) or the basis of a wider estimation on the value of associations, but rather a more visceral and imaginative capturing of lived experience, in this case from an Irish perspective. Still, there are other stories, from other parts of the world, which might include a different narrative, and where involvement in associations might raise concerns not seen in this national context. Other narratives might intersect with abuse of government powers, (fighting) authoritarianism, and experiences of danger, fear, rebellion, protest or backlash. Different contexts would produce different stories and portraits of how we might think about the value or impact of associations across the globe.

With this in mind, these narratives form a modest backdrop to the depth of this collection. We can remember these stories – of real people and their meaningful experiences – as we cross the legal and philosophical terrain of the right to freedom of association globally, be it in Chile, Germany, Indonesia, Kenya, Slovenia, Türkiye or the United Kingdom, and examine more technical aspects of associative agreements and disputes. It can serve as a reminder that at the heart of freedom of association is the lived experience of individuals for whom associational participation can be meaningful, impactful and even crucial to their life experience.