

# Syrian Road to Justice

In June 2020, coinciding with the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, Syrian feminist organizations: Badael, Dawlaty, Women Now for Development, and the Syrian Female Journalists Network, as well as The Syria Campaign, launched the 'Syrian Road to Justice' campaign.

This campaign advocates for greater legal access to justice for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) perpetrated over the past ten years in the Syrian detention centers, especially for women survivors who face particular barriers to justice.

Survivors of SGBV in detention, and particularly female survivors, are discriminated against within society in multiple ways, from the social, economic and political to both public and private life. They often face a lifetime of trauma, social discrimination (stigma), and gender-based violence ('honour' crimes), making most too afraid to seek justice or speak out about their experiences, sometimes even to their families or friends. Some even experience violence and abuse as a result of their actual or perceived attack.

Survivors' fight for their rights extends beyond the courtroom to every home and street in Syria and beyond. Until survivors are given the care, respect and support they so desperately need, international crimes will continue to go unpunished and basic humanity will fall short.

The campaign works to produce content that contributes to enhancing the access of survivors of SGBV to justice and narrating their experiences and challenges that they face. The Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN) has therefore worked to produce this series of blogs written by survivors of gender-based violence (during detention), and/or experts in the field and others interested in the justice and accountability processes in Syria.



شبكة الصحفيات السوريات  
Syrian Female Journalists Network



Syrian Road To  
Justice طريق  
سوريا إلى العدالة

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## **Detention and Stigma**

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**Many human rights organizations document the violations, and many male and female media professionals document the stories of arbitrary arrests and incidents in the Regime's prisons, but what after the documentation?**

What after the recall of memories and opening the unhealed, still-lasting wounds for many former female detainees, who were in the Regime's prisons once and still suffer from numerous problems, the most important of which is stigma?

When I started working with former female detainees in the prisons of the Syrian Regime and in a project called "Female Survivors of Detention", I did not know how to talk to women or explain the project to them, as they are not merely survivors or beneficiaries, nor they are only former female detainees.

Many questions were revolving in my head, and I was ashamed to talk to many women, especially the elderly ones who were subjected to arrest, torture, displacement and asylum, and most of them had a husband, son/daughter, brother/sister who was martyred or disappeared, but despite all that they are trying to adapt to survive.

Despite the great faith in work, it was not easy to work on the project with former female detainees as the needs are plenty, and the most important of which is having a safe housing in addition to medical treatment, therapeutic and continuous psychological support, reintegration with the community, obtaining identification documents and raising the community awareness of the importance of documentation and psychological support, as all of what was mentioned, if available, is at the minimum level and is not available for everyone.

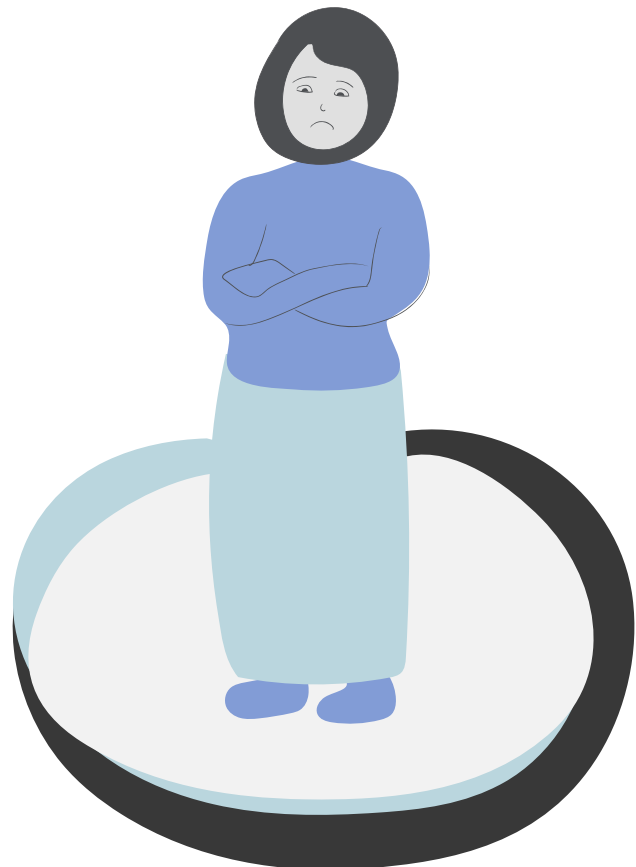
Organizations cover some of the needs according to their operation zones and donors' red lines. Adding to all that the lack of coordination among operational organizations, after 10 years of the Syrian revolution.

Those women were arrested for different reasons, but their concerns are the same, the most important of which is the loss of the surrounding community that supports them, and the abandonment of many friends and family members. Lacking the entities that support female detainees, including the community's active moral actors such as clergymen, knowing that many people have lost faith in them, but still, clergymen are an important category, and they are still heard in the Syrian communities, especially religious and conservative communities, moreover, they have their own humanitarian organizations and institutions, nevertheless, because of the lack of their advice and guidance to the community in this difficult period, in addition to exploiting the file of female detainees by a number of them, inside their institutions, and participating in prisoner exchange deals, which turned the cause into exchanging prisoners of war and using women as a pressure tool because of (honor), all that reinforced the culture of stigma as well as the culture of marginalization and guardianship over women.

This stigma did not only affect the former female detainees, but also their children, especially girls. One of the detainees told me that she married her daughter at the age of 16 for fear of the society's view after arresting her and her husband, who was killed under torture, and there was no one

left to defend her and her daughter. Another one told me that she had stopped sending her daughters to school because many of the teaching staff and parents were asking them why their mother was arrested and about the methods of torture the mother was subjected to, in addition to intimidating them about the future.

Many female detainees also talked about their husbands leaving them and how this also affected their daughters' and their own reputations.



With all this, former female detainees are trying to find a way to completely adapt to the new conditions in the areas of displacement and asylum, with all the other difficulties in providing for daily needs. However, they have not lost hope of access to justice,

as many of them wish to participate in the documentation process to convey the voice of female and male detainees inside the Regime's prisons.

But after 10 years of the revolution and violations, the saddest thing is that with all the projects that work with female and male detainees, there is no coordination and networking among human rights, service-providing, and humanitarian organizations, just as there are no projects that help former female detainees to pursue their education or train them on some life skills to access the labor market. If one or two organizations are working on this, the number is still limited, as well as the operation zones. The biggest problem is the lack of sustainable and effective psychological and therapeutic support projects, as they are short-term projects that include group or individual sessions for one or two times. All of this reinforces the stigma and limits the ability of former female detainees to overcome all these difficulties and challenges and imposes guardianship over them.

Women in our society face many problems and difficulties, and these are doubled with a former female detainee. Moreover, senior positions in the organizations and institutions are mainly held by men, even those working with female detainees and women, so many of those men do not care to conduct projects on raising awareness towards stigma or psychological support, and many of them do not even know the needs of women and female detainees.

**Despite all that, I have hope and faith in women. Those who faced all that injustice inside and outside detention will be able to overcome the difficulties with or without help, and they will create connections and groups to overcome all the challenges together and help those who remain in detention, and this is what the former female detainees actually do.**