

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

Zahra

(a nickname of a survivor of detention)

Zahra in the Swamp

Thoughts... We live in a world of thoughts that we create and live in to face it later and try to change it. Isn't it better to improve our thoughts so we can live in a better world?!!

However, what we try to change is the world itself and ignore the fundamental engine of this world, that is our thoughts. In fact, my suffering is summed up in living with thoughts and trying to confront or change them at best. Who knows! I may be on the side that I want to change, or had I been before?

As a survivor from the prisons of the Syrian Regime, I will ignore the situations I faced inside the prison despite being unique for me, but they intersect with many of the current and former men and women detainees and those who died in the Regime's prisons, but as a female, I was arrested in a society that looks at me differently than a man, even if he had undergone the same experiences I went through; I am arrested every daily, even after my release and asylum outside Syria.

When someone is surprised that I am still married even after my detention and release, and even tries to urge my husband to divorce me, this is a serious issue in our society, and they consider my husband less of a man because he is still married to the mother of his children.

Or when men who know that I am a former detainee treat me as an "easy" woman and that I can offer them whatever they want or hint at, that's because they are locked in their own ideas and prejudices about any female being arrested in Syria.

(What did you do that they arrested you?!! – You are the one to blame because you were not cautious enough – You are cheap and you may sell yourself – You are crazy and there is something wrong in your mind - Enough, you have nothing to speak about but this story!

You are released, so stop talking and repeating this story – Close on the subject and stop talking for the sake of your daughters' future – Who would marry girls whose mother was a former detainee?!!). I hear that daily by people I know or do not know but they heard of my case in a way or another.

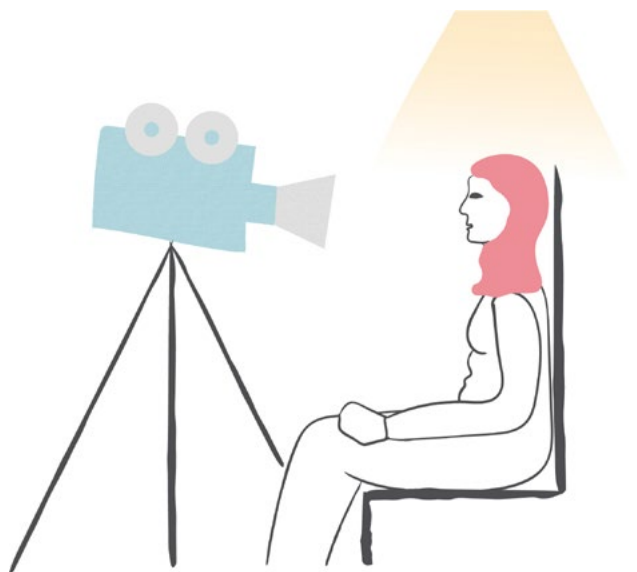
The comments went beyond my ears to the life of my children despite all my protection of them. One time my daughter entered the house crying and rushed into her room frantically. I tried to calm her down, but she was screaming hysterically: “Why did the Regime arrest you? Did you do something bad? The school administration asks you to go to school to discuss this with them.” This of course happened after they distributed a form for collecting the personal and familial information of students at the school and the form included a question on whether one of your family members is a former or current detainee? My daughter's answer was shocking to the school administration.

These happenings and situations take place almost every day with me. I may find some people sympathizing with my condition and others (men or women) judging me and my life based on their own points of view, and the worst of them are those who take advantage of what I went through either to achieve material gains or to promote an idea or a cause and benefit from it.

I still suffer from remembering one of those people when I was working in one of the centers and was called on during my leave, without notifying me what the matter was. When I arrived in the center, I saw the center manager and she said to me rudely and coldly “Zahra, the TV is here to shoot your story, so get in and tell them what happened with you

in prison because you are working here, and this is one of your duties and you must do it.” Many thoughts came to my mind at that moment, and I thought what could happen to me if I was fired from my work? That was the only job I did! How would I survive in this foreign country without work? As I said at the beginning, thoughts are our way to either heaven or hell.

I was not aware of what I was doing, so I automatically went to the room next to the administration; it was the shooting room, there were many faces waiting for me and many cameras, and all people were men! I felt like I was being stripped of my clothes, at that moment my heart was about to pop out of its place, all the cells of my body were on hold, but I didn't know what was pushing me



I sat on a chair to which someone pointed, the lights were off, and the room was dimly lit by tools they were using for that purpose. Many thoughts stormed in my head; why am I here? What will happen if I refuse? But my body was outside the scope of my mind, and it worked automatically. I was speaking briefly trying to summarize all the events, and every now and then someone would stop me and re-record

and archive what I was saying, the interview lasted from 9am until 4pm.

I came out of the room sweating and saw the center manager distributing envelopes containing sums of money to a number of women who told their stories to another group of cameramen. She patted my shoulder saying, "Zahra, you can go as your salary is still rolling!! Your working hours are over now. Don't come to the center today. Go and rest in your home."

I came out of the center and sat on the sidewalk trying to comprehend what had just happened. After a while I took a taxi and headed home, but suddenly my stomach started hurting and I had a severe headache. I suddenly started feeling my body, I felt scared and started to throw up. It was a strange, indescribable feeling. I was so afraid. I was wondering what would happen when my story would be shown on TV? Why didn't I refuse? What kept me going? Then the taxi stopped, and I asked him to go to the orphanage, where I actually worked. The manager of the orphanage saw me and tried to calm me down, but that didn't work until I was taken to the hospital, and I had a medical intervention, and then I came back home in a deplorable condition, but what could I say to my husband and children who looked at me with sharp looks and I could not do anything.

When I remember those numerous situations that I went through and that still continue, I wonder what to do next? Do I complete or stop? But stop what? Stop being a detention survivor in a society that does not understand, does not realize, and does not appreciate women in their life, and blame them for everything that happens to them?...

No, of course I will not stop any of what I do, and I will go on strong. It is a partial issue of my mother cause, I do not regret anything I gave to the revolution and to Syria, knowing and absolutely certain that we will establish justice, not only because I believe in this, but also because there are many people who really believe in this cause.

What I am doing now by writing these situations is showing people that I am not weak, and I do not need pity or sympathy, just as I am not the old Zahra that accepts or is subject to exploitation. I learnt my lesson and I will not stop and protect my children from confronting a society that is ungrateful to what women do for it, but rather, I will teach them that I am one of many women who carry the same concern and cause, and we will work to achieve justice for them, whether legally or socially.

It is true that I was arrested against my will, but I will not accept to remain trapped in the notions of a society that imposes stereotypes and restrictions on females just for being females regardless of the circumstance they have been through. I bear the concerns of this cause now and until death, and I will keep working until I achieve my dream of a society in which men and women are fairly equal.

And that is not far-fetched.