

A woman wearing a black niqab is walking through a war-torn, rubble-strewn street in Syria. The image is in a dark, teal color palette. The woman is carrying a bag and is walking towards the right. The background shows damaged buildings and debris.

THE STATUS OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS IN SYRIA

التحالف الإقليمي للمدافعات عن حقوق الإنسان
في شرق الاوسط و شمال أفريقيا

THE WHRD COALITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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Women Human Rights Defenders are at the forefront of the struggle to defend human rights in Syria. For six years, Syrian Women Human Rights Defenders have been actively involved in all aspects of the on-going conflict. They have been protesting, delivering aid, documenting human rights violations, participating in peace talks and running community initiatives. Yet Women Human Rights Defenders face many abuses and threats, in addition to being actively excluded from the transitional process, silenced and side-lined. The militarization of Syria has left many Women Human Rights Defenders at risk as they face the intersecting oppression of patriarchy and conflict-related gender based violence.

The UN Resolution on Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs hereafter) affirms that WHRDs are “women of all ages who engage in defence of all human rights and all people who engage in defence of rights of women and those related to gender..... in addressing all forms of human rights violations, combating impunity, fighting poverty and discrimination, and promoting access to justice, democracy and the full participation of women in society, tolerance, human dignity and the right to development,”¹



The WHRD-MENA Coalition’s definition of a WHRD is anyone “who promotes and incessantly seeks, in peaceful manners, to uphold human rights in her society, whether individually or as a member of an organization of group, as well as contributes towards ending all human rights violations and primary liberties for people and individuals.”² As a Coalition, one of our aims is to mainstream the idea of WHRDs among Syrian activists both in Syria and in the diaspora and refugee communities. The simultaneous conflicts, divisions and disconnections among regions and groups due to these conflicts mean that WHRDs are not working collectively within the region and there is little acknowledgment and communication between them. Through this coalition, the WHRDs, individuals and groups, can share information and collaborate to further their work efficiently.

WHRDs are being attacked for both their work and their gender identity. WHRDs generally focuses on human rights, and in being in the public sphere. They are seen as defying social norms and threatening social structures. By challenging women’s roles, entering male-dominated spheres and standing against all kinds of human rights violations, women are being attacked by both state and non-state actors. They can be targeted by the regime; but they are also targeted by religious extremists for “promoting Western values,” for example. Women additionally run the risk of being pressured by their families and communities to cease their work as human rights defenders in the public sphere.

1. General Assembly Resolution 181/68, Promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: protecting women human rights defenders, A/RES/30) 181/68 January 2014), available from [rom undocs.org/A/RES/181/68](http://undocs.org/A/RES/181/68)

2. Women Human Rights Defender in the Middle East and North Africa Coalitions’ definition. Available online: <http://whrdmena.org/english/about-us/>

The Coalition strongly emphasizes the brave work of WHRDs in Syria and in the refugee communities in neighboring countries, including documenting crimes, torture, and arbitrary detentions by the regime or extremist groups, and advocating for human rights. This research paper aims to highlight the situation of WHRDs in Syria. The paper will briefly look into the changing situation of WHRDs before the conflict and analyze the variety of issues they face in the current state of violence and instability in Syria and in the diaspora community. The multifaceted nature of the conflict means that there is no one party that is responsible for violations, but all parties involved, both state and non-state actors, armies and militias, have records of abuses against WHRDs. Additionally, WHRDs face pressure from their families and communities, as well as host communities outside Syria. Taking this into account, the Coalition aims to work in solidarity with WHRDs to support them by highlighting their efforts and shedding light on the violations against them, in line with its mission of supporting and advocating for all WHRDs in the region.



Ref: worldnews.com

THE CONFLICT IN SYRIA

The on-going conflict in Syria has claimed more than 250,000 persons since it began in 2011. What started as a peaceful protest turned rapidly into a militarized repression of a struggle for democracy and human rights, and an armed civil war between the government forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad and the opposition. With the breakdown of the rule of law, armed Islamic non-state groups such as ISIS and al-Nusra have managed to fill in the vacuum and control parts of Syria committing many grave human rights abuses. Vested international interests



have thrown Syria into further chaos. Firstly a de-facto international coalition—one that makes informal allies of Assad, the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, the Kurds, and others—is focused on defeating ISIS in Syria while it remains divided on the question of Bashar al-Assad. Secondly, foreign fighters are entering the country fighting for either the oppositions (the Free Syrian Army, ISIS, al-Nusra and other opposition groups) or the regime. Syria is not experiencing a civil war but a number of interdependent wars.

Territorial control in Syria has changed many times since the uprising. The largest non-state actor ISIS has seized large parts of Syria and Iraq, where as many as 10 million people live under their control.³ Al-Raqqah is currently ISIS's defacto city. ISIS have imposed authoritarian, strict Sharia governance that strips the people who live under it of their basic human rights and violently discriminates against religious minorities that ISIS deems as 'infidels'. To the North where Syria borders Turkey, Kurdish controlled areas such as Hassakah and Kobani are now independent from the Syrian government. According to a truce between the Syrian forces and the Kurdish militia, «each side will keep the territory under its control.»⁴

The massive and systematic violence perpetrated by the Syrian government and non-state groups amount to a series of crimes against humanity and human rights violations. Women in Syria are routinely attacked, imprisoned and face sexual assault in secret detention centres to curb their work and silence their voices. Militias such as the Kurdish Militia also perpetrate human rights violations.

The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) has documented violence, including sexual assault against women at the hands of the government forces, opposition forces, ISIS, Kurdish fighters and other armed opposition groups.⁵ All parties of the conflict are guilty of violence against women including women human rights defenders.

3. «Islamic State Group: Crisis In Seven Charts - BBC News». BBC News. 25 July 2016. Accessed 3 Aug. 2016. Available from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east27838034->

4. «Kurdish Forces To Keep Areas Taken From Syrian Government Forces Truce». Reuters. 23 April 2016. Accessed on 3 Aug. 2016. Available from <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-qamashli-idUSKCN0XL0FH>

5. <http://sn4.org/blog/25/11/2014/the-syrian-woman-in-the-midst-of-the-syrian-conflict/>

Abuses by the regime against WHRDs include assassination, arbitrary detention, solitary confinement, harassment, sexual violence, the halt of any humanitarian aid food and medical health, abductions and forced disappearances. The Syrian Network for Human Rights has documented that the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) forces have killed no less than 25 women⁶ from March 2014-2011. Indiscriminate shelling and extra judicial killings have been used by the PYD to maintain control in their areas and as a direct consequence of the conflict. The tightening of womens rights in ISIS-controlled areas demonstrates the volatile environment women live in. For example, an account of two women living under ISIS explains how women must wear the double niqab (covering their face and eyes) and are not allowed to go out on the street alone as it is strictly prohibited.⁷ Punishments include slashing, stoning and even execution.

Syrian WHRDs in host communities also face violations, threats and difficulties as a result of their work. The lack of legal protection for refugees in neighboring Arab states, such as Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, leaves WHRDs vulnerable to gender-based violence. WHRDs are faced with very little alternatives; they are unsafe in their own country, and in host countries to which they flee to.

6. The Syrian Network for Human Rights, The Syrian Woman in the Midst of the Syrian Conflict, 25 November 2015 <http://sn4.org.blog/25/11/2014/the-syrian-woman-in-the-midst-of-the-syrian-conflict/> (accessed 3 August 2016)

7. K. Hamadé, Women's secret films from within closed city of Islamic State (2016). Available online:<http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/womens-secret-films-from-within-closed-city-of-islamic-state/> (Accessed 29 July 2016)



SYRIA BEFORE THE CONFLICT

Before we document the extent of abuse, harassment and human rights violations WHRDs are currently experiencing, it must be noted that under the rule of Bashar Al-Assad and his father, Hafez-Al Assad before him, human rights violations have been systemized. Various organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International⁸ have publicized these abuses. Forced



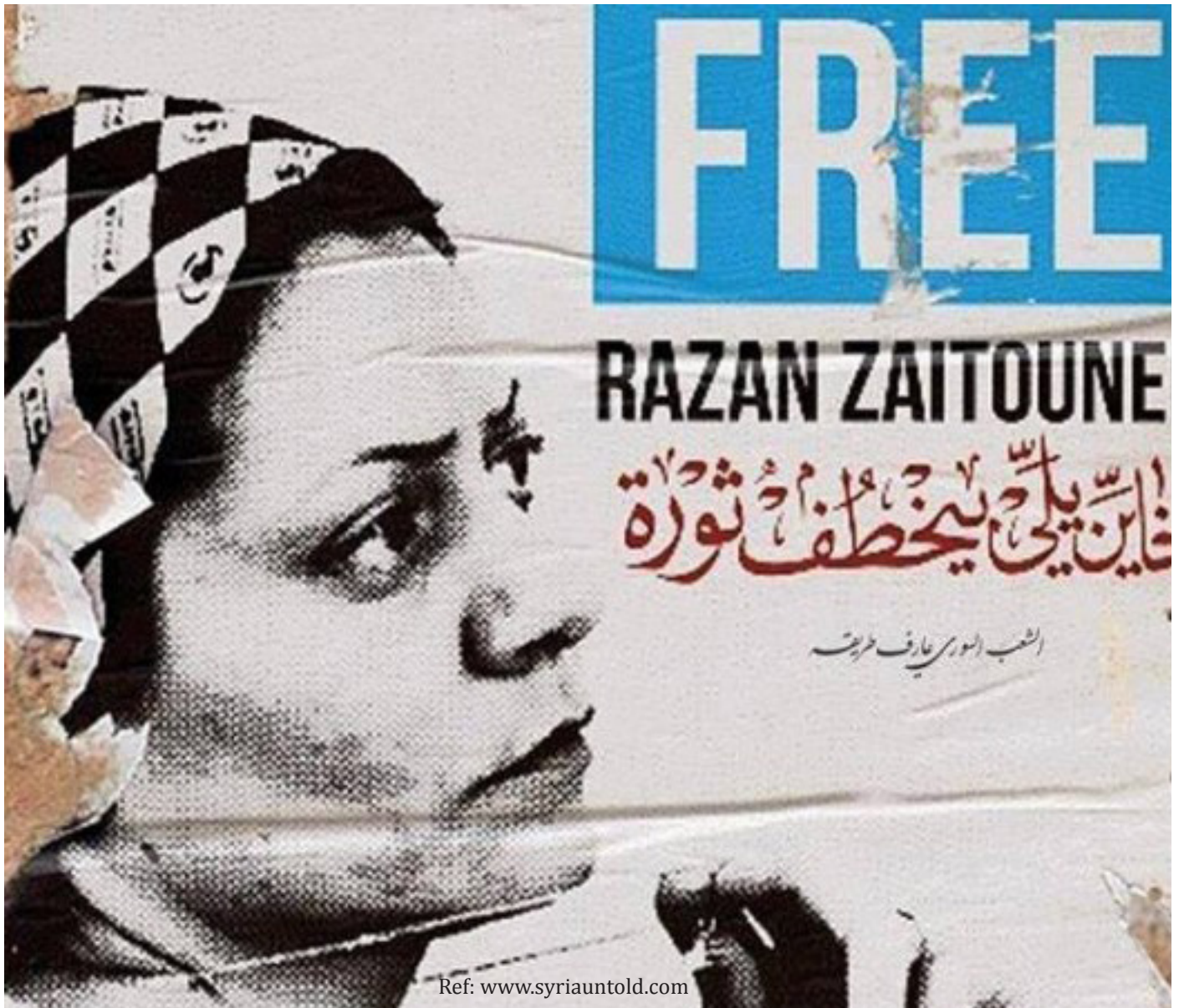
disappearances have been used to silence political dissent. In December 2009, Syrian forces arrested the -19year-old blogger Tal al-Mallohi because of the content on her blog. The Syrian government accused her of being a spy for the United States of America, and sentenced her on February 2011 ,15 to five years in prison.⁹ Tal wrote about the Palestinian cause and the right to freedom of speech on her blog. The trial was held behind closed doors and no information was provided about her case and where she would serve her prison sentence.

Since the beginning of the conflict, international debate on how to mediate the six year-old conflict that has killed over 100,000 people and displaced millions more remains unabated. The United Nations peace process has been working to find a solution to the conflict that began in late 2011. Originally women were not part of the peace talks that is moderated by the Arab League, the UN peace envoys on Syria, Russia and Western Powers. Syrian women peacemakers were not present at the Geneva I and Geneva II talks.

As a result of lobbying efforts by Syrian women's groups, the Women's Advisory Board was formed in late 2015, consisting of 12 Syrian women from different backgrounds. The Women's Advisory Board and the UN Special Envoy to Syria consult regularly when there are peace talks. However they do not participate in the peace talks and their role is purely advisory. Although a step forward in voicing women concerns and rights in the UN, their advisory role still undermines their efforts during the peace process in the international arena.

8. Reports including Human Rights Watch, Syria: End Persecution of Kurds (2009). Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/26/11/2009/syria-end-persecution-kurds>. Human Rights Watch, Syria: Investigate Sednaya Prison Deaths (2008). Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/21/07/2008/syria-investigate-sednaya-prison-deaths>. Amnesty International, Syria Annual Report (2010). Available online: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/research/reports/annual-report-syria2010->

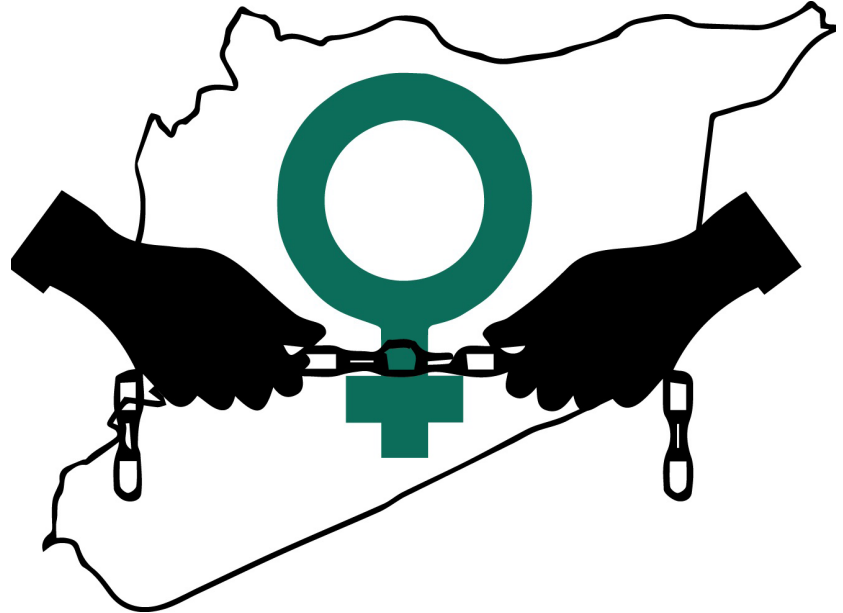
9. Al Jazeera, Schoolgirl blogger jailed in Syria (15 February 2011). Available online: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/201121514319413714/02/2011.html>



THE CURRENT STATUS OF SYRIAN WHRDS IN SYRIA

The militarization of Syrian society has normalised gender-based violence in the public and private spheres. Acts of violence such as rape, arbitrary detention, torture, sexual abuse and hostage taking affect many WHRDs and activists. The impact of the on-going violence goes beyond the direct victims to affect all women in society. The waves of conflict-related sexual violence take place against a backdrop of structural gender-based discrimination. Since women are seen as key bearers of honour and morality, control over women's bodies and behaviours is seen as vital in keeping order in a chaotic society.

Note that WHRDs have a limited capacity to carry out their work within conflict zones and refugee communities. Intimidation and repression by the Syrian government and militias have restricted their work severely. Firstly, the violent environment and the tight censorship in Syria mean that it is too dangerous for information to be documented and reported. Secondly, arbitrary arrests, detentions and even extra judicial killings are direct consequences of documenting human rights abuses by WHRDs (this point will be elaborated more). Lastly, due to the very specific nature of violations that women are exposed to, many WHRDs prefer not to talk about their experiences.



The harassment and detention of WHRDs in the country is high, especially after the Anti-Terrorism Law. Following the abolishment of the State of Emergency in 2011, a second decree followed in July 2012 the Counter-Terrorism Law No. 19 is used to convict peaceful activists and dissidents. The Law established the Counter-Terrorism Court and defined terrorism as: "every act that aims at creating a state of panic among the people, destabilizing public security and damaging the basic infrastructure of the country."¹⁰

The use of military courts and the Counter-Terrorism Court means the detainees are denied their right to a fair trial. The charges are brought under the guise of countering terrorism, but actually are charges used against human rights defenders who distribute humanitarian aid, participate in protests, and document human rights abuses. In addition, by accusing women of being terrorists the state is justifying their arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances. Furthermore, indirect harassment against WHRDs to pressure them to leave the country has extended to personal property. The Syrian Ministry of Finance has ordered the expropriation of many activists and their relatives under the pretext that they support terrorism¹¹.

10. Human Rights Watch, Syria: Counterterrorism Court Used to Stifle Dissent (25 June 2013). Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/25/syria-counterterrorism-court-used-stifle-dissent>

11. The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), Violations against women in Syrian and the disproportionate impact of the conflict on them- Universal Periodic Review of the Syrian Arab Republic submission to the Human Rights Council (May 2016), p. 13 Available online: http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WILPF_VAW_HC2016_WEB-ONEPAGE.pdf

The government uses intimidation against WHRDs To threaten the opposition. The case of Razan Ghazzawi clearly illustrates the intimidation techniques used by the government. Ghazzawi was arbitrarily detained twice in Syria and now lives in exile. She stated on her website that by leaving Syria, she has left both Assad and IS, but that particular to her as a woman, she has “left the male-dominated opposition territories...Today, if I want to go back to the “liberated areas” I must be veiled, and preferably with a husband.”¹²

The Syrian revolution, which has further tightened the patriarchal web, has thus betrayed WHRDs by not revolting against the patriarchy of an oppressive system. The spaces that are safe for WHRDs, and the opportunities for doing their work in the public sphere are greatly diminished, and their only option is to continue from outside Syria. Those who do stay are isolated in their struggles.

ISIS uses gender-based violence to terrorize communities and impose their agenda for an Islamist state, one in which women are stripped of their basic rights. In Syria, the strict Islamic governance has greatly restricted women’s freedom to move, access to health care, access to school and the public space. Due to the censorship in ISIS controlled areas, we can only get a glimpse of the living conditions of women. In March 2016, two Syrian WHRDs who had a hidden camera walked through the northern Syrian city of al-Raqqah over the course of several weeks to document their life under ISIS rule.



The visual footage and the conversations in the video reveal the extent of oppression women face. «Cover your eyes properly. We don't want the Hisbah women to see us. I don't want us to get in trouble,» Om Mohammed whispers to her friend Om Omran as they walk along al-Rashid Street in central al-Raqqah.¹³ Hisbah is ISIS's female religious police force that patrols the streets making sure women conform to the strict Sharia laws.

12. R. Ghazzawi, Exiled Razzaniyat, Exiled Razzaniyat- Personal Observation of myself, others, states and exile. 7th February 2016, Available online: <https://razanghazzawi.org> (accessed 18 July 2016)

13. K. Hamadé, Women's secret films from within closed city of Islamic State (2016). Available online: <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/womens-secret-films-from-within-closed-city-of-islamic-state/> (Accessed 29 July 2016)

Assassination is another punishment used by ISIS to oppress women. Also in al-Raqqa, ISIS murdered the female journalist Raqia Hassan having accused her of being a spy. Writing under the pen name Nissan Ibrahim, Hassan's posts described the life of al-Raqqa residents. She was arrested in August 2015 on the accusation that she was collaborating with the Free Syrian Army and subsequently killed one month later.¹⁴

To ISIS, women are considered a threat if they are not completely subservient to the men who rule them — the father, the brother, and the husband. They have no mobility; they are essentially enslaved. Yet these patriarchal values, which are taken to the extremes in the violence of ISIS, are just as present in state institutions, and in opposition forces. War further encourages the warrior masculinity, and glorifies protection, fighting and lack of emotions. Women's role here becomes to take care of the fighters' needs, in the private sphere.

Human rights abuses are also documented in the PYD-controlled areas, particularly the violation of the right to freedom of movement. In May 2016, the PYD released 16 women from Deir Ezzor after they were arrested and detained for 9 days in the party prisons in al-Mabroukeh in al-Hasaka. According to an activist, the PYD has been tightening the borders of their occupied areas and limited the entry to what it calls "Free al-Mabroukeh Point," as it considers itself an independent state¹⁵. The detained women were travelling from the ISIS controlled area of Deir Ezzor to get to Qamishli airport with the aim of travelling by air to Damascus or other areas which enable them to travel outside the country.

Detention is another tactic used against women and WHRDs to assert pressure on the individuals detained, their family and their community. According to estimates from the Syrian Network for Human Rights and the Syrian Center for Statistics and Research (SCSR), more than 2850 women remain detained by Syrian security forces¹⁶. Furthermore, the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC) documented around 1945 cases of women and 74 cases of girls under the age of 18¹⁷ arbitrarily detained¹⁸ between March 2011 and July 2016.



14. The Guardian, Journalist Ruqia Hassan Killed in ISIS Raqqa (5 January 2016) Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/05/journalist-ruqia-hassan-killed-isis-raqqa-syria>

15. Zaman Al Wasl, Kurdish PYD frees 16 Arab women after 9 days in detention (30 May 2016). Available online: <https://en.zamanawsl.net/news/16110.html>

16. Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN), Detention of women in Syria: a weapon of war and terror (May 2015). Available online: http://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/06/2015/EMHRN_Womenindetention_EN.pdf

17. As of 3 August 2016. Data from Violation Documentation Centre in Syria, Available online: <http://www.vdc-sy.info/index.php/en/detainees/1/c29ydGJ5PWUuaTN0ZXFhbF9kYXRlfnHnVcnRkaXl9REVtQ3xhcHB3ZlZD12aXNpYmxlfGV4dHJhZGlzcGxheT0wfHNeD0zfA>

18. Ibid.

The practice of detaining WHRDs has increased as a deliberate tactic of collective punishment taking advantage of the traditional patriarchal notion of what a woman's social position is. The dire prisons women are detained in dehumanize them and break their mental state. Statistics show that %76 of female detainees are detained in security branches and other secret detention places while only %24 are in the central prisons. Among those in central prisons, around %83 are detained in Damascus central prison, Adra¹⁹. even though the prison is located in a battle zone where military operations prevent the families from visiting their detained relatives, particularly those residing in other governorates.

Torture has been documented²⁰ in Adra prison, though women rarely talk about their experiences. One woman relates her experience to Syria Deeply, stating that she was "held by the intelligence division for 47 days. I was questioned 19 times and every time they hit me on my face, then with a rifle they hit me on sensitive places on my body; they electrocuted me then put me in cold water then electrocuted me again. I died a thousand times each second." Under torture, she made confessions to activities that she was not involved in, like collaborating with armed groups.



Ref: yallasouriya.wordpress.com

Detention has implications for women and WHRDs after release. Post-detention implications include dismissal from work or education institutions out of fear of rejection by families and communities. Rape in detention, or even the assumption of rape, is associated with deep stigma. In Syria at present, it has become a popular belief that every woman detained has been raped, regardless of what happened during detention. Rape as a war tactic has been widespread during the on-going conflict. Although precise data is not available, the SNHR has reported that there are as many as 4,000 cases of rape and mutilation of women and girls.²¹

19. WILPF, Violations against women in Syrian and the disproportionate impact of the conflict on them (May 2016), p. 10

20. See EMHRN, Detention of women in Syria: a weapon of war and terror (May 2015) and EMHRN, Confined, Abused and Instrumentalised: Detention of Women in Syria (March 2015). Available online: http://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/03/2015/Sheet-Detention-of-Syrian-Women_ENG1.pdf

21. Syrian Network for Human Rights, Human Rights Violations in Syria (Fact and Figures)- From March 2011 to March 2012, p. 8 (August 2012). Available online: http://dchrs.org/english/File/Reports/2013-02-27_Facts_And_Figures_SNHR_Report_En.pdf

All sides of the conflict have used rape as a tool of war. Reports of rape of women by the FSA and those affiliated with it have surfaced in Idlib. Rape by ISIS has been extensively documented, especially the rape of women from minority groups. Sexual violence is a predominate weapon of war used by all those involved in the conflict to traumatize women, their family and the community that they belong to. ISIS have even released a fatwa on the rules of raping female slaves!²²

Due to the stigma associated with rape and sexual assault, women are often abandoned and shunned by their families or communities in the name of “honour.” When WHRDs are stigmatized, some may have no option but to live in exile.²³ The dual threat of, detention and rejection by their community or family, leave WHRDs vulnerable and prone to more abuse. “Honour killings” are a consequence of the deep stigma associated with raped women. Zainab al-Hosni, a survivor, spoke out against the threats she faced by her brothers after her release²⁴. She recalls going to her relatives and being refused to be taken in because she was “subjected to shameful things in prison, that tarnished their honor...” Al-Hosni’s sister informed her that their brother wants to kill her for dishonouring their family, and a few months later, two young men came to her place in Damascus and attempted to kill her.²⁵



Ref: www.nytimes.com

Women’s bodies thus become one of the terrains of war. Violence against women is not merely a side effect of conflict, but a deliberate military strategy to destabilise and control communities, and spread terror. An emerging trend in the conflict is arresting women in order to trade them for weapons from armed opposition groups. Since 2013, women are being detained for the political purpose of gaining bargaining power. Women have been arrested at military checkpoints and detained for trading purposes. In Daraa, at Khirbet Ghazaleh checkpoint on the Damascus-Jordan highroad, many Syrians including women were arrested for trading purposes. Also, in July 2015, two women from Daraa were arrested for 5 months and released in exchange for a sum of money and some weapons from the FSA.²⁶

In its concluding comments on the second periodic review of Syria, CEDAW expressed deep concern about the risks women human rights defenders, particularly the following:²⁷

- Repeated reports on arbitrary detention. Physical abuse and violence by the government forces and militias due to participation in peaceful activities.
- Repeated reports indicate that most charges are done under the Terrorism Law (Law No. 2012/19)
- Lack of information about the number of women in detention on terrorism charges and those prosecuted and sentenced by the Counter-Terrorism Court.
- The travel ban imposed by the government on women activists.

22. Copy of the fatwa is available from http://graphics.thomsonreuters.com/doc/slaves_fatwa.pdf

23. For more information and examples see EMHRN, Confined, Abused and Instrumentalised: Detention of Women in Syria (March 2015)

24. Interview with Zainab al-Hosni available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQuztQ-KQZY> and EMHRN, Detention of women in Syria: a weapon of war and terror (May 2015) , p. 43.

25. EMHRN, Detention of women in Syria: a weapon of war and terror (May 2015) , p. 43

26. WILPF, Violations against women in Syrian and the disproportionate impact of the conflict on them (May 2016), p. 10

27. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Concluding observations on the second periodic report of Syria (18 July 2014, CEDAW/C/SYR/CO/2)

Many Syrian WHRDs face the threat of enforced disappearance. All sides of the conflict have kidnapped WHRDs whose fate remains. The case of Razan Zeitouneh—who won the Politkovskaya Award in 2011 for her work on human rights,²⁸ demonstrates the use of forced disappearance to target WHRDs.

Razan is a prominent human rights lawyer, activist and journalist who headed the Violations Documentation Centre in Syria (VDC). The VDC documents the death toll and ill treatment in Syria's prisons, and compiles lists of the detained, executed and the disappeared. On December 2013, a group of masked gunmen stormed the VDC office in Douma and kidnapped Razan, her husband, Wael Hamada, and her two colleagues, Samira Al-Khalil and Nazem Hamadi, (known as the Douma 4). Their whereabouts remain unknown. Because of her and her colleagues work, they were targeted by the regime, and by opposition groups. It is still unknown if Jaish al-Islam still holds them. Some believe they are now being held by the al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusrah.



Enforced disappearance is frequently used as a strategy to spread terror within society. Detainees know that their families and relatives do not know where they are so the chances are no one will come to help them. The kidnapping of Zeitoneh and many WHRDs is used to punish them for their work and cause further trauma in their communities. WHRDs face torture, abuse and even assassination. There is also a lack of local, regional and international attention to their struggles and their abuse. In an already fragmented and chaotic country, displacement divides WHRDs as individuals and as a collective.

28. Raw in War, Razan Zaitouneh: Biography, Available online: <http://www.rawinwar.org/content/view/161/>



Ref: Richard Wainwright Photography

THE STATUS OF SYRIAN WHRDS IN THE DIASPORA

The on-going displacement crisis in the Arab region has uprooted millions of people, dispersing them across the region under the precarious status of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), refugees, or asylum seekers. As many as 9 million Syrians have been displaced since the outbreak of civil war in March 2011;²⁹ 49.7 per cent of these are women³⁰ and children who live in a state of increasing vulnerability.³¹



In the Middle East, Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan host the largest number of refugees mainly from Syria, Palestine and Iraq. However, none of these three Arab countries have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. Also, out of the three, only one has a national asylum law. According to the Iraqi 1971 Political Refugee Act No. 51, political refugees are only entitled to benefits, such as the right to work and the same health and education services as Iraqis. However, it does not apply to refugees who have fled their countries for other reasons.

Similarly, Lebanon and Jordan do not have national laws on refugees. The Lebanese 1962 Law regulating entry of foreigners clearly states that Lebanon is not a country for refuge and as such, refugees are generally treated as «illegal immigrants». Article 26 of this law, however, does allow political asylum. The 1952 Constitution of Jordan prohibits the extradition of political refugees, however, no national law has been implemented on the protection of political and non-political refugees.

29. UNHCR estimates that of these 9 million Syrians, over 2.5 million have taken refuge in neighbouring countries and 6.5 million are internally displaced within Syria itself. For the most up-to-date figures on Syrian refugees, please see UNHCR Syria Crisis <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

30. Data from UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response (Updated 1 August 2016). <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

31. ESCWA, Female Refugees from Syria in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. Situation Analysis. P.2013) 1). Available online: http://www.escwa.un.org/divisions/div_editor/Download.asp?table_name=ecw_other&field_name=id&FileID=397

The negative opinions about Syrian refugees and WHRDs perpetuate fear amongst Syrian WHRDs. There is resentment against Syrian refugees in the host community for various reasons, including the idea that high employment among the Lebanese is because of the cheap labor Syrian refugees offer. Negative perceptions are evident in the Lebanese political discourse³² and amid the Lebanese people.³³ In an interview with Layla, a Syrian WHRD working in the Beqaa region in Lebanon,³⁴ she explains that there is very little communication between her as a WHRD and the Lebanese community, as she feels that the Lebanese cannot accept that the lives of some Syrians are improving while there is high unemployment. On a personal level, she describes how there is an ongoing view that those refugees who fled Syria have «abandoned their country and deserve what is happening to them in Lebanon.» This is a view that greatly upsets her as she, and the refugee community, are blamed for all of Lebanon's current problems.

The major obstacle she faces as a WHRD is the violation against the freedom of movement. As a Syrian refugee whose residency permit has expired, moving within the country is very risky. She explains that she is in constant danger of being arrested if asked for her papers. However she has been lucky and it depends on the mood of the soldier in charge. Travelling with no residency could land refugees a prison sentence.

The new regulations in Lebanon enforced in January 2015 mean that refugees applying to renew their residency permits are sorted into two categories: those registered with UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, and those who are not and must find a Lebanese sponsor to remain in the country legally. In addition, the cost of renewing a residency is high. Layla explains that it will cost her 400\$) 700\$ as a fine for living in Lebanon without a residency card for 2 years, 100\$ for issuing the documents and 200\$ for a sponsor), and it is a complicated process, as she does not have all the documents required. Her priorities, especially her financial priorities, are earning enough to live and continue her work as a WHRD and not being arrested in the bureaucratic and complicated process of renewing her residency. For many refugee WHRDs, who are the family's breadwinners,³⁵ the struggle to ensure the basic needs for living in the host country may interrupt their work as WHRDs or make it much more challenging. In addition, the fear of arrest and its reprisals leaves many WHRDs vulnerable to many abuses and discourages them from doing their work.

On a personal note, Layla describes how her family and neighbors do not know that she's a WHRD working with vulnerable women and girls. Her family only knows that she works as an English teacher and nothing more. When asked why, she replied that it was easier that way. Like many Syrian women, by hiding their role as a WHRD, they are able to work without their family's disapproval. The environment in which refugees live means that many fear of being sent back. That threat could discourage WHRDs families in accepting the type of work they do. Also the patriarchal stigma associated with a WHRD could be an additional reason why her family might disapprove. Gender prejudice and discrimination against female refugees means that it is safer to hide her role as a WHRD than confront these prejudices.

32. See The Daily Star, 'Bassil warns against permanent settlement of Syrian refugees' (accessed 3rd August 2016). Available online: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Apr-295333/22-bassil-warns-against-permanent-settlement-of-syrian-refugees.ashx>

33. See Al Araby, 'Racism against Syrian In Lebanon' (Accessed 3rd August 2016). Available online: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/9/10/2014/racism-against-syrians-in-lebanon>

34. Interview held at WHRD Coalition Office in Beirut on 4Th August 2016.

35. For more information on the number of female heads of household please see UNHCR, Women Alone: The fight for survival by Syria's Refugee women (2014). Available online: <http://www.unhcr.org/ar/53bb8d006.pdf>

The lack of legal protection means that WHRDs in the diaspora community are unable to seek remedies. The barriers, including the legal vacuum created by the absence of legal protection of non-citizens, the curtailed freedom of movement of refugees, and regulations by host countries related to the acquisition of residency leave WHRDs exposed to abuse. The influx of refugees and the Lebanese government's inability to deal with the influx has led to many negative perceptions within the host community. In Lebanon, there have been cases of arbitrary arrests, curfews and security raids.

Conclusion

The current conflict in Syria is placing a huge burden on civil society. WHRDs are working to combat a continuum of violence emanating from within society and in the context of the conflict. The intersectional attacks they face have left them vulnerable and isolated. The Coalition is here to support the brave women who face danger everyday, the women who refuse to give up and be silenced, the women who would go to great length to do what they believe in, the women who are fighting for a Syria free of repression and human rights abuses. The Coalition is here to support them by recognising their work and fighting for their freedom in the local and international levels. WHRDs play important roles in the on-going conflict and long after it ends. It is critical that WHRDs know how to mainstream their work and collaborate to enhance their work.

Recommendations

International community:

- Mainstream the role of WHRDs when dealing with the Syrian conflict in Syria and in the diaspora community, involve them in all talks and negotiations to end the conflict, and include them in the transitional period towards peace.
- Ensure the protections of WHRDs who are present in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly, Security Council and Human Rights Council sessions, and issue Resolutions on Syria.
- Pressure non-state actors to release detained WHRDs and ensure their safety by diplomatic means.
- Ensure WHRDs are part of all dialogues as they know what is best for women and society at large.

Local parties (the Syrian regime, Kurdish government and all non-state actors):

- Release all detained WHRDs immediately.
- Respect the international treaties that Syria is a state party to
- Ensure WHRDs are part of all dialogues as they know what is best for women and society at large.
- Offer psychological support to all detained WHRDs.
- Offer support to detained WHRDs who face difficulty in reintegrating their communities.
- Educate communities about the importance of WHRDs, and mainstream the idea of WHRDs as agents of peace and change.
- Ensure any violence towards WHRDs is dealt with under the rule of law, and hold perpetrators accountable.

Civil society organizations in Syria and the region:

- Ensure WHRDs in Syria and in the diaspora community have effective resources that assist their work, and keep them safe. This includes taking all means necessary to ensure their digital security, in addition to their protection from reprisals when engaging with international and multilateral fora.
- Ensure WHRDs are part of all dialogues as they know what is best for women and society at large.
- Offer psychological support to all detained WHRDs.
- Offer support to detained WHRDs who face difficulty in reintegrating their communities.
- Educate communities about the importance of WHRDs, and mainstream the idea of WHRDs as agents of peace and change.
- Develop an online platform for WHRDs to share their ideas and experiences.
- Train WHRDs on legal protection, as well as the existing local, regional and international mechanisms.

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