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Survived Women in the Syrian Society
An Analytical Reading



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Ahmad Al-Shikhani

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An analytical reading that attempts to explore the situation of survived women before and after sustaining violations in the course of the Syrian Revolution, in an effort to focus on the social mentality that deals with women in general.

Ahmad Al-Shikhani

A psychotherapist, and a psycho-social support trainer. He worked with survivors of wars and catastrophes, and has many published articles concentrating on children circumstances during wars, he is also an author of two books:

- Al da'am al nafsi lil atfal fi zil al hurub wa al niza'at [Psychological support for children during wars and conflicts]
- Al-'atfal wa al harb [Children and war].

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Translated by: Amin Noor
Enas N Chabaan
Cover design: Hussein Derik

Prelude:

The impact of detention on women differs from that of men, mainly due to the different environmental factors that surround them; generally, detention has more painful impact on women since most female detainees suffer from new ordeals as soon as they are released. These ordeals could be more traumatizing than detention itself. When released from detention, women have to face a probing and judgmental society, which can cause them new ordeals. This is the same society which is supposed to be the very refuge in times of psychological hardships in order to heal one's self after one of the most difficult experiences in confronting oppressive and authoritarian regimes. While male detainees are hailed as heroes when released, female detainees are forced to suffer yet another dilemma. Detention is among the most excruciating experiences a person could suffer in societies ruled by tyrannical regimes, and thus it will intensively reflect all the negative elements dwelling in the mind set of such a society. In other words, the situation of previously detained women in oppressed societies is nothing but an extension to their detention in a condensed and tensed form that lacks the balance needed for a post-detention recovery, and while it may seem as a "balance" yet in reality it is a fragile balance that does no more than supporting the Status Quo.

Therefore, we need to dissect such a "Status Quo"—apart from detention—in order to understand the composite anguish that women as well as men have to endure in a post-detention phase, after all, both of the sexes are victims of a social, political, and economic order that is based on relations of tyranny and oppression, where such relations are supported by many thinking patterns and beliefs that justify and allow these relations to continue in time, yet, as we mentioned, it

continues in a seemingly superficial balance, while it is quite fragile in reality.

A glimpse on societies living under tyrannical regimes:

People in such societies are usually considered in a “dilemma” that they try to solve through their behaviors, orientations, values, and stances, and to control in a way that would eventually lead to psychological balance whose necessity is crucial for survival. Basically, this dilemma *is* the oppressive status imposed by the quality of life that one is living in, and is characterized by uncontrollability and arbitrariness, which is perpetuated by people in power who further enforce this capitulation.

Therefore, out of such a collective, a person’s condition from a humanitarian perspective is that of an “oppressed human”. This condition is controlled by the oppression practiced by authoritarianism, and whatever reactions one exhibits to it, ranging from complete submission to complete rebellion every now and then. Thereby, both the composition, and the psychology of an oppressed human becomes governed by oppressiveness and weakness, and whatever the latter imply from radical dread, to general insecurity, and all the way to helplessness in controlling one’s own fate. But for it is the case that oppressed humans are *humans*, therefore, they don’t remain idle in front of such an ontologically threatening condition, rather they try to face it with many defensive measures that change according to the phase one is going through, and consequently, many of the beliefs and thinking patterns that oppressed humans form, serve as attempts for them to control and properly solve their dilemmas.

Features and characteristics of an oppressed society:

In the violent hierarchy of authoritarianism, an oppressed person has nothing but to surrender, submit, and fall into further inferiority, and to deal with it as a determined destiny. Out of this, acts of exaggerate obsequiousness emerge to glorify the masters in order to prevent their evil or to pursue their gratification. Oppressed people live in a merciless and uneven world, so that if they think about confronting their reality and rebel against it, then they would receive a definite and unrelenting response that will suppress such heretical thoughts. Their world exists only in terms of authority and domination, such a world is so imbalanced that the relation between the authoritarian and the oppressed person reaches a point of no return when even the humanistic value is denied, and thus, relations of equality get to be suppressed, giving rise to relations of *objectification*.

The situation of women in an oppressed society:

The case of women is the most explicit example that illustrates the oppressed state our societies are living in, it is where all society's contradictions are summed; in women we find what most represent helplessness and incapacity, and complexes of inferiority and shame, thus, women are the perfect depiction of the disturbance of our thought patterns. Our societies have extremely contradicted views about women since their significance is the most underestimated social element at all levels (sexually, intellectually, productivity, prestige...), and in contrast to this mortification, we find an excessive idealization that we rarely see in men, this is manifested in upholding the role of motherhood and showering it with positive qualities (kindness, loveliness, a stream of care, the icon of sacrifice...).

Therefore, the value of a woman varies, in the eyes of men and society in general, from the highest pinnacle; “the priceless being, the center of dignity and honor, and the icon of human purity incarnated in motherhood”, to the rock bottom; “The symbol of shame and weakness, the minor, the dependent, the ignorant, the tool men use for their benefits.. the A’wrah(meaning: nakedness, defectiveness in Arabic)”.

Other forms of contradiction include labeling women as childish and dependent, beings that are deemed to be subjugated, without any freedom, will, or recognition. They are the family’s property from the cradle to the grave (of the father, then the brother, then the husband, and sometimes they may end up to the son). A woman’s existence is defined by what is wanted for her to be, and no more. On the other hand, we deem her, especially in the case of the mother, as a referee that even her husband and sons completely and childishly depend upon, so that sometimes the husband asks his wife to act as his mother, or to take the role of a daughter waiting for his nurture.

Women have been denied from their rights of being recognized as standalone creatures with independency, distinctiveness, and authenticity (a creature with a special entity that is different from other creatures). Despite the fact that god created women and addressed them as independent beings, yet the civil and religious societies have both legislated rules that deprive women from gaining freedom, from the ability to choose, and from the ability to control their bodies as well as the latter’s mobility, all in the sake of serving the purposes of social domination on them. This social pressure turned the woman into a mere tool of procreation, pleasure, and production, and as a mean to compensate the humiliation of oppressed men who have already submitted to tyrannical regimes, and to compensate for men’s incompetence that is

usually unconsciously present, as this is achieved when men project their oppression and incompetence on women, which in turns imposes a state of subjugation that disables women's intellect, creativity, independency, and financial abilities.

The social order reinforces a woman's incapacity, which is by itself the consequence of her inferior state caused by society in the first place, and then such a social order considers this incapacity as part of women's nature, and complains from her inabilities, ignorance, whims, and the predomination of her emotions over her mind, although this society *is* what dominated her for all of her life, marginalized her, imposed such a role upon her since an early age, chose for her what suits this role, and then "manufactured" her accordingly. Next, this society would find itself suffering from the consequences of what it manufactured, and what status it had put women into, so it ends up seriously denying such a "social disgrace", and despises women's way of thinking, a phrase like "society's disgrace stigmatized none but women" would summarize such a stance.

With this denial, society frees itself from the responsibility of what it had done, and through practicing the role of an "authoritarian" upon women, it reaches a sort of an inner balance in face of the disturbance that was caused by its submission to the policies of tyrannical regimes during its lifetime.

In reality, a woman has no hands in such an oppression, for the biological and anatomical differences between the two sexes never justify what was imposed upon her or support what injustice she suffered, on the contrary, biology challenges these views, and tells as that women are more immune than men, and their genetics are more robust. Also, women's neurology isn't at any case less developed than that of men, the only difference is the status given for each of the two

sexes, and whatever this entails of opportunities that develop men's capabilities, and suppress those of women. Excessive emotionalism, predomination of sentimentalism and superstitious thinking, is the result of ignorance imposed upon such a woman, it is the consequence of depriving her from the opportunity to develop her mentality, which may have allowed her to be logical and rational. Imprisoning her in her house limits, and what this implicates; depriving her from the opportunity to tame and deal with reality, stripping her from her will and ability to choose, is what perpetuated her superstitious view of the world. Depriving her from the freedom to express herself, is what forces her to take refuge in dubious methods. Her situation is that of a threatened person whose destiny is out of control, this doesn't leave much room for her but to follow magic, auguration, soothsaying, superstitious thinking, and to believe in mythical powers that control one's destiny. And thus, we are not dealing with "biological characteristics", nor with "women's nature", but with a forced situation, an imposed status upon her.

Women are vested with social roles that were précised to keep them humiliated, and to remain the elements that carry all the disturbances a society bears, including those of oppressed men yoked by tyranny, all in order for men and people in authority to keep things under control, whereby the latter take advantage and support these beneficial patterns; mainly, the pattern of perpetuating profitability out of enslavement and authoritarianism.

This is the core of the oppressed state a woman falls under in our societies, she is turned into a tool that serves authority's purposes, into a focal point of social contradictions. This is done by a series of usurpations and reductions imposed upon her entity. By so, oppression imposed on women is positively correlated with the amount of oppression suffered by men in

a given society. The issue is never a mere feminine submission to male chauvinism; the more men are oppressed, the more they practice oppression on women. Thus, men come to be supported by laws of oppression, whose blessing was perpetuated by authoritarianism in the first place, whether through media (which emphasizes the imposed role on women, and cue men to accept the oppressive authoritative control on women in order for the former to be dignified, and consequently men would forget their own subjugation and enslavement to the authority, for this would give them the opportunity to vent off whatever feelings they've repressed, an opportunity embodied in the form of oppressing women, whom, in the end, would find themselves "possessed" by men as much as men are "possessed" by authoritarians.), or through legislations that justify and bless honor killing, this blessing reinforces the dominant hierarchy of relations, for if one is at sometimes a subject and at other times an authority, then one would accept these concepts and utilize them in explaining the "nature of life", and introject them as "natural laws", for it becomes natural for one to be a subject of higher authority and an authority for lower subjects. Therefore, authoritarianism supports such a relation, and even instills it in the mentality of women, and plays with its strings whenever it suits it, so that when the society decides to confront its oppressors, the latter use one of the most famous weapons for repelling society all the way back to the aforementioned pattern, namely, it uses *the woman*, exploiting what was implanted and dedicated to distort our thought through the years. Those authoritarians know that men sum up their honor with the hymen of a woman, so they infringe this sanctity, or at least threaten to do so, leaving the rest for *society* to honor-kill and shame-wash, for this would bring back a feeling of control and power. Authoritarianism bets on such a reduction

for their opposing cause, so that their opposers would accept submission and subordination, and concordantly confirming a pattern based on relations of oppression that is manifested in many faces, and honor crimes are but one of them.

In one way or another, society submits to the oppressor's desires whether it is aware of this or not. People would kill under the pretext of "honor", which was virtually absent in this whole relation with authoritarianism, they receive from the oppressors the baton and continue the dirty work. The oppressor's role finishes after detaining, dehumanizing, and raping women; therefore, society practice killing in a way strikingly similar to that of the oppressor who designed such means for people to follow.

All the aforementioned information are not intended to solidify conspiracy theory, but rather to dissect the reality that we must comprehend if we want to lead any change. Even though we are to stand up against the oppressor, we are still practicing what has been implemented in us over the course of many years. The oppressor knows this, and is forcing us to kill ourselves with our own hands when it ignites the spark of delusional "honor".

We will now show some facts and realities related to the aforementioned concepts by listing examples of violations committed by the oppressive regime, and by clarifying the responses of the society that revolted against these violations.

1. Torture

Women in Syria were subjected to various types of torture; some reported that they weren't subjected to the

same severity of physical torture men undergo, but were subjected to other types, including mental torture. For instance, 55 women reported the types of violation they underwent to the United Nations as follows:

- (20) women reported that they weren't even touched by any security personnel but were subjected to psychological torture.
- (2) women paid money in order not to be touched/violated by the security personnel.
- (23) women were beaten up by sticks, slapped on their faces, or other parts of their bodies twice at most. (some of them were subjected to sexual harassment).
- (10) women reported that they suffered from severe physical torture in order to force them to confess specific confessions.

2. Sexual Abuse:

Cases were documented in which security personnel violate female detainees sexually, take advantage of them, and subjugate them to several forms of harassment with absolutely no retribution. In the midst of our helplessness in offering these survivors any help, be it psychological, medical, or legal in Syria or in countries of refuge, abused women prefer silence rather than allowing fruitless intrusions to disturb their privacy. Only one woman out of our sample said that she was not subjected to any sexual violation (not even in a verbal form), while all the others reported that they were subjected to stern verbal abuse. 23 women reported being sexually abused (harassed, physically inspected in intent of harassment, sexually enslaved, or witnessed sexual violations suffered by others). 2 women reported being raped.

In reality, as soon as female detainees are released, family, friends, and others ask the detainee - explicitly or implicitly- the following questions: "What did they do to you? Did they beat you up? Did they hurt you? Did they touch you? Did they rape you?.."

Such questions would probably seem normal in such cases, but they cause great infuriation for girls and women. Women believe that the aim of all these preliminary questions is to reach the final one "Have you been raped?", and even if they weren't asked this question, many of them would think that people do want to ask it, and a "no" answer will not suffice to eliminate suspicions about its occurrence. And even if a woman was trusted and believed, her family will be overpowered by this "obsession", that is going to be particularly evident in the mother's behavioral interaction with her previously detained daughter.

What we fail to recognize is the fact that when we act as aforementioned, we, in one way or another psychologically "re-rape" women. This psychological re-rape takes many forms, ranging from the way we question them, to having members of society harassing them simply because they underwent the experience of detention.

Here we view the impact of such questions on previously detained women:

- (41) Women were disturbed by people's pitifulness, compassion, and sorrow.
- (40) Women were disturbed by their families, friends, and neighbours' avoidance (not making usual calls and visits, refusing to be seen with them in public); due to a belief that they are still under surveillance from the regime; which might put those close to them in danger.

- (12) Women were disturbed by society's neglect and lack of sympathy.
- (10) Women were disturbed from their families' strict measures imposed on them, such as making them flee the country in order to protect them from re-detention. They felt that these measures were more of an attempt to avoid dealing with their cases.
- (6) Women were disturbed by opposition activists' suspicious behaviour towards them; doubting that they have become informers to the regime because of their release.
- (6) Women were disturbed from people's degrading and belittling looks; while they thought of themselves as heroes.

After release, former female detainees usually do not like to talk about what violence and humiliation they were subjected to throughout their detention period. Instead, they look for spending their first moments expressing their nostalgia and asking about what life events and happy family moments they had missed out, in an attempt to revive them. They are simply humans who go through the exact range of emotions former male detainees go through.

- "N", a single activist who was detained for eight months says: "I had missed life, joy, and fun. I did not want to answer their distressing questions. I wanted to talk about parsley and play cards, not about that place I was captive in. I did not get raped, but my brother insisted that society wants a proof that I am still a virgin!"
- "L", a single pharmacist who had no revolutionary activity says: "I did not get any negative reactions from my family, however I heard some insulting whispers

and gossip from people around me. I left the country upon my release.”

- “K”, a single woman who was detained for seven months. Her father could not believe that she wasn’t raped and kicked her out of their home.

For different motives, divorce is common after married women are release from detention. It can either happen by the husband’s own initiative, or as a result of the long-term psychological damage that detention has done on the survivor’s psyche. In other cases, even without divorce, husbands might look upon and treat their survived wives differently and end up staying with them only for their children’s sake.

- “S”, an activist, a housewife, and a mother of two, she was raped during detention. Upon her release, she immediately asked for divorce and could not bear spending one day with her husband. She could not even go to his house to get her children. She said that the interrogator kept telling her husband that he should divorce his cheating wife.
- “H”, an activist and a mother of three, when she was released she found herself divorced with her children refusing to contact her.
- “Sh”, an activist and a mother of two, her husband did not await her release but instead remarried, which put her in severe psychological distress.
- “F”, an activist, a housewife, and a mother of one child says: “my husband no longer treats me the same, all I hear from him is expressions of blame and disapproval. He forced me to flee the country alleging that it’s for my own safety”
- “L”, an Administration & Management graduate and a mother of three. She was released in a

prisoners exchange agreement brokered by the Free Syrian Army, and got divorced by her husband following her release, which consequently caused her great pain and made her leave the country.

- This is probably the reason why “A”, a lawyer, a mother of two, and an eyewitness of her inmate’s rape, hides the fact that she was detained from her family and society. She says: “although I am a lawyer who is supposed to defend rights, yet I made false confessions only because the interrogator promised my release in exchange. I was unable to face my society with the truth of having been detained, and instead, I preferred to lie to my husband and family, fearing that I’d get the typical negative reaction from our male-dominated society”. “A” fled the country and still suffers from repercussions of the experience despite being under the supervision of therapists.
- “R”, an engineer and an activist who was detained for two years and a half. Most of her family fled the country fearing detention. Her husband was killed as a result of shelling his city during her detention period. Upon her release, she was told that her husband’s family does not want to get in contact with her at all. Her brother was supposed to be collecting money to help in releasing her, but instead he used that money to buy a European visa. Today, “R” remains in Damascus; lonely, miserable, and fearful.
- “T”, was detained for three months and was put on the Syrian state television to confess that her family members were terrorists. Upon her release, she got a warning call from her sister that her brother is

planning to kill her. After a short period of time two unidentified men broke into her house, assaulted, and killed her husband. This event forced her to leave the country.

Among other burdensome consequences, released females are forced to handle economic backlashes. Upon their release from detention, it is likely that their mobility becomes restricted, and their employment opportunities diminish. It could be worse in cases where a survivor's family or husband chooses to abandon her and her children. From the sample of our study, only five women reported returning to their jobs or studies; whereas the rest either willingly left or were forced to leave their occupations. In both regime-controlled areas as well as areas controlled by Islamist radicals, a former detainee has a very difficult time in finding a job.

Inarguably, one of the most excruciating experiences a female detainee may undergo is getting pregnant from rape and having to bear a child she had no say in bringing.

- "M", an activist who got detained for three months. During her detention, her family had claimed that she was visiting a relative in another city. Two months after her release, her corpse was found in front of her family's building. Then only, her family spoke of her detention, in what seemed like a justification as to why she had killed herself. M's corpse was never autopsied to figure out the real reason of her death. Nothing disturbed the silence of her funeral but people's gossiping about the reason of her death/suicide. In an attempt to clear up suspicions about the family's involvement, one of her relatives claims that the family had tried to help "M" heal but

the pain was too much for her to handle. Another relative claims that “M” committed suicide after finding out that she had been forcibly impregnated and it was too late to fix the situation.

Before her death, her detention remained a secret in order to avoid the stigma associated with such experience. After her death, her detention became the family’s defense against the murder accusation; rendering her a victim of post-imprisonment depression and suicide.

Psychological and social consequences of the detention experience:

Within traditional cultures which treat issues like virginity and sexuality as taboos, detention is considered a stigma. A former female detainee is likely to be viewed by as a traitor, an impure, a morbid and a reckless person. Upon their release, these women often suffer from isolation, disownment, divorce, or ban from marriage, and sometimes even torture and killing. Therefore, the impact of such behavior towards women can extend to the women’s children and families and the society as a whole.

In addition to having to cope with the psychological repercussions of the traumatic event, many of these women are left to support their children on their own, and to live under constant fear from rape and society’s rejection. Such living conditions have long-term impacts not only on the woman as an individual, but also on the society as a collective, whereby its structure is getting weakened.

Moreover, previously detained females often neglect physical treatment and psychological therapy. They feel that no one is able or willing to help them. The shortage of professional help

and the weakness of support programs increase their hesitation in seeking help.

“Treating these cases requires direct feedback between the victims and the specialists, a foothold in jurisdictional assemblies, and an international, national, and domestic mobilization against an inseparable part of the dogmatic orders and social structures that are used to discriminate against females and allow sexual abuse to continue unabated. Governments, donors, and humanitarian agencies, are urged to provide the needed resources to end gender based violence once and for all. When states continue to violate human rights, and when the international community fails to respond, then it is a universal responsibility that holds us all accountable for our failure to unite.” (IRIN & OSHA, 2007)

Acute reactions that are common in post-detention phase:

- Trauma (coldness, weakness, vomiting, and lack of focus).
- Body aches in the spots that were exposed to damage and unwanted touches. General pain and anxiety.
- Lower back and/or stomach ache.
- Emotional outbursts (crying, screaming, anger, loss of concentration, and self-humiliation).
- Withdrawal (detachment from events, isolation, denial).

Stresses aroused by reorganization procedures:

In an attempt to comprehend the impact of trauma, a female survivor goes through a phase of “reorganization”, which is an inner strife that aims to understand what happened, to

find inner peace, and to deal with new worrisome issues spawned by the addressed event. These aroused stresses are as follows:

Intrusive symptoms: Unavoidable symptoms that involuntarily intervene in survivor's life:

- Intrusive memories and images from the traumatic event.
- Recurring nightmares.
- Dissociative episodes (flashbacks) during which the individual revives and re-experiences the event.
- Intense emotional distress when faced with similar events.
- Anxiety or panic attacks causing survivors to feel the inability to breathe.
- Long periods of tearfulness.
- Feelings of shame.

Avoidance symptoms: Symptoms that serve as mechanisms in countering the trauma, but they often do not give the intended results.

- Efforts to avoid thoughts and feelings associated with the trauma.
- Efforts to avoid activities that are reminiscent of the trauma.
- Desire to change job, home, or any other change.
- Inability to recall certain events of the trauma.
- Depression or loss of interest in life.
- Feelings of detachment, avoidance of others, and lack of interest in forming relationships.
- Restricted range of emotions and expressions
- Believing in a restricted future.
- Fear.

- Difficulties in work or study.
- Hypoactive sexual desire/arousal.
- Emotional or physical numbness.
- Helplessness and loss of control.
- Confusion.

Hyperarousal symptoms: These symptoms put the survivor in a constant state of remembering the traumatic event and its backlashes:

- Sleeping difficulties.
- Anger and agitation.
- Difficulty in maintaining concentration.
- Hypervigilance.
- Susceptibility to panic.
- Physiological reactions triggered by things reminiscent to the event.
- Headaches.
- Muscle strains.
- Nausea.
- Eating difficulties.
- Breathing difficulties.
- Cold sweats.

Common feelings at post-detention phase:

It is well known that each person has a different nature and thus different reactions, yet traumatized detainees share some common feelings as follows:

- Shame, guilt, and depression.
- Self-lowness.
- Self-blame and anger for missing preliminary cues of abuse shown by the oppressor, even though there may not be any such cues.
- Fear from confronting or meeting the oppressor.

- Fear from future intimate relationships.

It is evident that society's attitude towards survivors of such experiences -which leave disastrous psychological repercussions- is in a way a continuation of the oppressor's cycle of abuse. Indeed, when society wrongs survivors it is actively subjecting them to more humiliation, and continuing the crime initiated by the oppressor. It must be noted that the oppressor is completely aware of the society's perception of former female detainees, and knows exactly how it is going to treat them, and uses this mind set for its own advantage, and reinforces such conceptions by utilizing some obsolete values falsely attributed to religion and ethics. This resulted in making normal individuals who directly or indirectly insult survivors a powerful tool in the hands of oppressors, enabling them to pursue their goals in obliterating society's fabric which ultimately leads to making it easier to control.

From this reasoning, we ought to be more aware of our authentic values and religious ideals, and shed aside shame-values that were thrust into our mentality, and made us tools for authoritarians, who pitted us against each other. We should look after previously detained women, and observe our latent behavior that may be out of goodwill, yet could be very offending unobserved. This could be in the form of Sutrah' marriage (availing or cover-up marriages), for what is dangerous about such a behavior is that it judges these women to be eternal victims who are dependent upon men's or society's cover-ups.

Merely shedding light on this issue is not enough, as it is only a wake-up call regarding the sufferings of survivors. On the other hand, it is important not to allow survivors to sink

into a permanent state of victimhood and helplessness. Instead, it must be emphasized that these women are competent and powerful enough to survive the trauma. The way society should help these survivors is through empowering and trusting them, that they are able to rise above their sufferings, and engage with others in raising a powerful generation and building a free and a dignified society whose existence is not based on games of Saviors and Victims.

Ahmad

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Translated by
Amin Noor
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