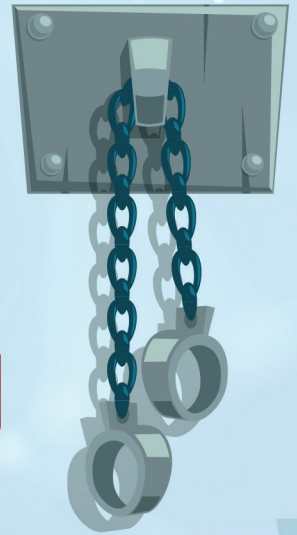




The Lebanese Institute For  
Democracy And Human Rights (LIFE)

# **Women Struggling Outside Detention**





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This report was prepared by the human rights activist Yasmina Benshi in partnership with the LIFE Institute and the Middle East Forum for Policies and Future Studies.

Syria's decade-long unjust war, which still persists, has had a staggering impact on the Syrian people, in general and woman, in particular. Undoubtedly, Syrian women have been taking the hardest hit of all, who have suffered the ravages of this war and paid a high price in terms of losing her beloved persons, being enforced to displace, experienced violence and grave violations committed against her.

While fleeing the bombing and destroying everything in Syrian cities, families were forced to displace and as a result they have been either internally displaced persons (IDPs) moved to safer areas, refugees in the bordering countries or asylum seekers in far states. However, frequent displacement has worsened the women's life, who are trying to protect the lives of their children, and in most cases, they were displaced alone without a breadwinner. In fact, all these hardships come in parallel with economic, social and psychological difficulties that have severely affected women, as they were subjected to forms of exploitation stemming from displacement and migration, as well as deprivation of basic services such as the areas of the healthcare, education, psychological and community support, especially those women who had to live in camps far from their families without any kind of protection. The environment of these camps was the worst thing they faced ever, that has the effect of placing them at greater risk for developing anxiety disorders and to get terrified of deprivation, exploitation or harassment, and this where the most troubles begin outside the framework of the battles.

## **Women Struggling Outside Detention**





## (Poor sanitation & latrines)

One major difficulty for women lies in the absence of sanitation facilities inside the tent, instead latrines exist in remote and inaccessible places, which makes it difficult to be reached by women that makes them vulnerable to sexual harassment and not to mention depriving them of privacy.

- The toilets are 50 meters away from the tent in which Abeer lives in (Ras Al-Hosn) camp in Idlib countryside, and there is nothing sadder than passing this path for her, which she has to cross once or twice a day. Abeer takes the water she needs with her because the toilets are not supplied with water and have a non-sewered system and users suffer from dirt and unpleasant odors and foul smells and sometimes have to wait until it is clear of crowds, but, however, that is not all that concerns Abeer, while she is on her way, she says, “one of the young men living near the location of the toilets is always harassing me and whatnot. On a daily basis he tries to assault me, behaves in an unwelcomed verbal or visual ways, movements and gestures but I used to ignore many assaults and insults, despite I always felt that it is annoyed - out of concern for the reputation of my family in this society that blames females for everything happens to them, because people think that males are always right even if assaulted and committed sexual harassments and women are the ones who allowed males to do what they did. Actually, I said to myself “what a filthy, disgusting, despicable..... In fact, I felt I am disempowered, as if I was a





worthless commodity that anyone has the right to mock and underestimate.”

The young woman continues, “on a hot summer day, when most of the camp people were inside their tents get fed up and distressed, I went out to make water, hoping that that guy was staying at his tent, but as soon as he saw me passing in front of him, he immediately started following me and kept saying obscene words I had never ever heard before. Out of blue, I threw a fit, started screaming and shouting at him out of anger and I also scolded him... I didn’t realize that I was surrounded by the people of the camp, my voice broke the silence of the camp, he slithered into his tent in shame of the people who had gathered around us, but I started to look at their faces, I was looking for a sympathy angle by anyone, but to no avail.

I had collapsed on the ground, tears streaming down my face, waiting for someone to help me. Suddenly someone held my arms and pulled me violently in the midst of these crowds, putting his head in the ground ashamed of his sister’s act, he thought that “she had committed the guilt of self-defense against the governing norms and rules of the society.” Then, I was taken into my family’s tent and immediately my father and all my brothers started beating and insulting me. Unfortunately, no single one of them went to the perpetrator who assaulted me and who disturbed their sister, and they did not take into account that she kept silent and received many insults for a long time for their sake, they believe that “I had to stay inside my tent so that no one would be assaulted me.”

They hold women accountable under such circumstances, as if they left their houses and went on a picnic, not for doing something necessary. People think if women got out but they had nothing to do, is it wrong? Should these women stay in their tents for life for fear of being harassed just because they do not have the right to shout in response to the insult?





## **(Facing difficulties in life and undertaking men- associated roles)**

- Suad is a twenty-five-year-old woman who lives in Taftanaz camp after she lost her husband, living with her two kids (a young girl and boy) without a breadwinner, as circumstances forced her to be a mother and father at the same time in an IDPs camp. Although she lives in such conditions and faces this harsh life, in summer and winter times within the camp, Suad is struggling to do her duties towards her two little kids without fail, no matter how difficult and hard the works she does. "Although I feel severe pain in my back and joints, my pain goes away immediately when I think about my two children and their right to receive the most basic and the simplest needs available in this camp," said Suad.

This family has a solar panel, thanks to an organization that gave it to Suad. That panel secures some supplies for the family. One of Suad's daily duties is to move this panel and follow the movement of the rays of light throughout the day to store the largest amount of energy. On one clear (unclouded) winter day, it was very good for saving energy inside the panel, Suad got up and rushed to move the battery's terminals, given that the sun was shining, but the unthinkable happened, as it seemed that a malfunction hit the battery and made it explode in Suad's face.

The explosion led to deformities and facial burns that may remain on her face forever while she is still a young woman, and the major catastrophe is that she is now at risk of losing her sight due to severe retinal damage after the explosion.

Suad could be a strong woman, but this needs some capabilities to support, preserve and keep such a woman. There is neither solar energy technicians nor workers in the camp in order to conduct periodic maintenance, nor small electrical voltage regulators, that could have protected her from turning from a woman who takes care of her children into a woman who has a lifelong disability that needs someone able to take care of her.





# (Domestic violence /abuse or family violence)

- Rama lives in (al-Aqaba) camp in Idlib countryside with two children under the age of ten, her husband was martyred in the midst of the Syrian war. Additionally, all her family members and relatives displaced and have become homeless outside Syria... Naturally, as a widow who lives in a camp (community) dominated by traditional customs to think of getting married as a way to protect herself from unkind gossip and rumors and to avoid problems coming from the way people see women in general, as well as to secure supply for her two kids those must get a kind of support after losing their father.

Unfortunately, her conditions were not better after getting married again, as Rama became a captive woman in her husband's house. Her husband treats her in a bad way as a sole manner to release anger. He may behave in such a harsh way because Rama has no supporters of her family, given that she lives alone. So, her husband found her situation a good chance to do whatever he wants in a climate of impunity.

Rama says, "I get beat up daily and get insulted for no reason, and when I try to resist or seek help, I find no one except my two kids who get the same treatment I have from this man who is supposed to be like their father. "He thinks that I am no more than a slave girl, and he takes me as a means to over-compensate for a masculinity crisis he has got under the current circumstances.

If he had treated me like a wife, he would not have used profanity and bad words, which happens daily, actually it offends my modesty, for no reasons he starts cussing at me, calling me a whore and accusing me of adultery - according to an image drawn in his imagination only- all that takes place in full view of everyone, especially, in front my two kids, which is breaking my heart, because these two innocent kids have no sin except that they lost their real father in an unjust war... and her mum tried to compensate them for that loss with a surrogate father." said Rama





## (Displaced persons inside camps but of different species)

- Of course, stinging insects and reptiles represent the greatest danger threatening women and their children in the camps, that become more active in the summer time. People are not alone in feeling weary of the intense summer heat. Nour says, "At this time of year, tents turn into a place housing people and snakes and scorpions those flee the sun's fire to settle inside the camp beside people, in this case, however, people have to live with such creatures despite the panic attacks that affect women and children, as my youngest two-year-old girl has not escaped that matter, as she got stung by a scorpion that invaded our tent despite we were very cautious about that and precautions we took." Nour tells us her story on her child's treatment journey, "I took my daughter and rushed to the nearest hospital, it is next to the camp on the outskirts of Idlib city, then they sent her to a hospital inside the city, claiming that there were no serums or what is called (scorpion sting antidote) in that hospital, after spending two days inside the general hospital of Idlib, my child fell into a coma and it was supposed to be brought to Turkey for treatment. The doctors saw her in Turkey and were unable to do anything for her despite the availability of the antidote because it was too late and her weak body was tired and was no longer able to respond to the medication. My child died in Turkey after three days after she was in a state of clinical death.

After I returned back to the camp in Syria, I had got shocked news, it was just a complete disaster, she says, as I heard that the antidote is available in the first hospital to which my daughter was transferred, but the doctors and nurses over there are hiding it because of its scarcity, and due to the large number of cases have got such stings who come to the hospital at this time of the year, so, the doctors and nurses either sell it to those who can afford it, or give it for free to those who are powerful people, could pose a threat to the hospital's staff if knew that the drug exists and they did not give it to the injured. But, when it comes to Nour, as a lonely woman who has no supporters could not cause them troubles, even if she got information about the hard truth, which had killed her daughter, Nour, this poor woman would pose no threat to them.



## (Prefabricated health sanitary facilities inside tents)

- Living inside camps has got no privacy at all, especially for women, and this constitutes an extra burden on them. Samira is a woman who has three kids, she provides support for them in the absence of her husband in detention, who was held in the Syrian prisons. She says, telling her story, "We are from conservative families, we adopted the living within the camp, although all people violate the privacy of each other. In fact, until now I find it difficult for me to go to the restroom or to the public baths to have a bath or wash anything in plain sight of these men, the right to privacy that one cannot give up regardless of the upbringing and environment one comes from.

Samira, like many women in the camp, resorted to digging a pit on the inner edge of the tent that she lives in to bathe and relieve herself. Water and dirt, in turn, seeped through a small channel she had dug with her hands to a larger hole on the outer side of the tent.

When the pit is full, the women empty it and remove everything was inside and take it to the outskirts of the camp. Samira's sister, Rawaa, a mother of a young girl, says, "No one likes having such pits inside the tent, but don't I have the right to have a little privacy and comfort when showering and relieving myself? And what did wrong my little daughter do to get insulted and been mocked and harassed by the rest of the camp's children? It's unfair."

Over time, these pits caused problems for the owners of the neighboring tents due to the unpleasant odors, especially with high temperatures, but the fatal mistake that women did not notice is the spread of diseases, especially respiratory diseases due to the presence of these unhealthy and uncovered pits those were created inside a small tent. Samira says: I started suffering a chest pain, then it developed into coughing and shortness of breath, then the healthcare unit told me that I have acute lung infections, and rashes and skin allergies have invaded my children's bodies, and their appearance is terrifying because of the severity of its spread."

Some camp workers tell us that recently there has been a large spread of some communicable and contagious diseases, such as leishmaniasis, and other diseases that threaten the lives of people inside the camp, especially children. It is likely that these comfortably pits dug by women will turn into graves as time went on.





## (Extortion in exchange for relief aid)

- Reem is a young widow has got two children from her husband who died of cancer three years ago. She lives in Adam camp in a tent next to her family's tent. Her only concern is to raise her children and compensate them for the father's caring that they lost early. She spend times every day in a way her brothers wish, so she remains stuck to her tent with her children all day, and they only go out for food and drink with the big family. Her kids have no fun times because the simple things that may bring joy to the hearts of children go to her nieces and nephews only, not to her kids.

If she asks her brothers to give her something for the sake of her children, she will hear harsh words that break heart, they always make her feels she with her kids like a burden to her brothers, not mention beating her, and when she tries to complain to her mother, the latter asks her to stop talking and adds that she is a heavy burden to her brothers.

Reem says, "I really I am quite sad for my two kids' bad conditions, who meet double trouble. I know that all the children live in the camp deserve a better life, but I only demand that my children to be at the same level like other children in the camp, especially since they are orphans."





Reem asked one of her neighbors in the camp to help her, who advised her to communicate with one of the relief organizations that provide support and assistance, especially for orphaned children. Indeed, via her poor mobile phone, Reem contacted the organization's employee and asked him for some support for her two kids.

At first, he asked her to come to the organization's headquarters inside the city of Idlib, but she told him that it is too far distance that separates the camp she lives in from the city, in addition to that she cannot leave the camp without her brothers' permission. He told her that he would send some aid to the camp, but on condition to provide him with her data and photo to confirm her identity, Reem says, "I was afraid at first, but I was thinking of making my two children happy, and I felt that he was just an employee who wanted to help and did not want to make me suffer, but he repeatedly asked me to send a photo each time he was going to send me assistance, he claimed every time he asked for a photo that he wanted to make sure I'm a real person."

Suddenly, one day he called her and told her that he would publish everything he had (three photos and their data) if she did not pay him a large amount of money or date him in one of the places outside the camp. She was totally shocked of what just happened and started to beg him, but he insisted on a week's deadline and then he would carry out his threat. Reem told her neighbor, who gave her the employee's number, about the issue that had happened, but the neighbor was also helpless in front of such a situation and could not help her at all. Reem said to her neighbor, "It seems that committing suicide is my only way. Whether I told my brothers what happened or waited for the time to end, my fate is the same, and in this way, I might avoid some of the torment."

There are many women like Reem in the camp community who are subjected to extortion and resort to fleeing the camp, engaging in prostitution, or committing suicide to escape the burdens of life. Inside the camps you can find many individuals like Reem and nobody has real control over these violations against women.





United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) published an assessment of sexual violence in the region and concluded that women in Syria have been sexually exploited by men delivering aid on behalf of the UN and international charities, and the United Nations had warned against such activities 3 years ago, but the report says that these abuses continued until the end of 2017.

The report entitled “Voices from Syria 2018” says that humanitarian aid distribution sites are often considered unsafe places for women and dominated by men. It added: “Women and girls ‘without male protectors’, such as widows and divorcees as well as female IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons), were regarded as particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation.”

The report added: “Examples were given of women or girls marrying officials for a short period of time for ‘sexual services’ in order to receive meals; distributors asking for telephone numbers of women and girls; giving them lifts to their houses ‘to take something in return’ or obtaining distributions ‘in exchange for a visit to her home’ or ‘in exchange for services, such as spending a night with them’.”





Within the latest statistics of the “Syria Response Coordinators” team in northern Syria, the number of displaced Syrians has so far reached about 2.1 million, out of more than 4 million Syrians residing in the Syrian opposition-held areas.

While the population of the camps has reached 1,043,869 IDPs, the number of women outnumbers, as the number of Syrian widows who have no breadwinners is only 46,302. The report also indicated that the displaced Syrians live in 1,293 camps, including 282 random camps were established on agricultural land, and does not receive any international humanitarian support or





Finally, no one knows when the war in Syria will come to an end or which time the issue of the IDPs in the camps and the refugees moved to asylum countries will be resolved. This means that the suffering of these women will continue indefinitely. In fact, we cannot ignore the fact that the camps lack the most basic elements of human life for all its residents in general and for women in particular. We can see that women are often restricted and deprived of their public freedoms and have no privacy at all.

