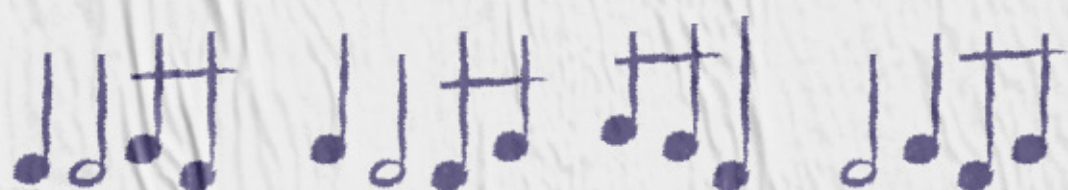
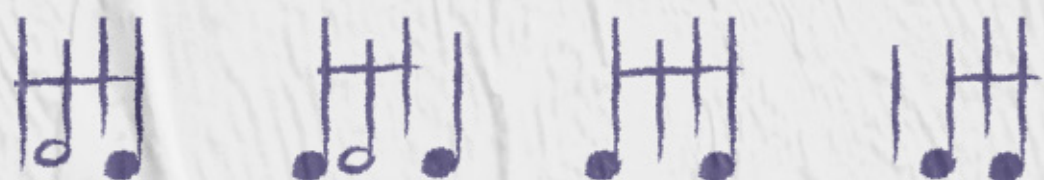


# **SHADOWS** **OF THE DISAPPEARED**

**TESTIMONIES OF SYRIAN FEMALE RELATIVES LEFT WITH LOSS AND AMBIGUITY**









“ ***There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.***

***Arundhati Roy***

***[...] This report is dedicated to the women who never gave up, to those who refuse to forget, to those who get up every morning and resist in the shadows.***

**This report is a product of cooperation between *Dawlaty* and *Women Now for Development*. For any inquiries or information, you may contact either of the organizations at ([researcher@dawlaty.org](mailto:researcher@dawlaty.org)) and/or ([advovacy@women-now.com](mailto:advovacy@women-now.com)) respectively.**

## DAWLATY

is a non-profit foundation that believes in nonviolence and peaceful resistance, and works towards achieving a democratic and peaceful transition in a state that upholds human rights, equality, tolerance and diversity. Dawlaty works to support of civil society to become active participants in transitioning Syria to a just democratic state. Dawlaty works to build the knowledge of civic values and life skills of young people to engage in their communities and nation. In addition, it works to build an archive of stories and artworks to immortalize the memory of the Syrian uprising and highlight the experiences and voices of marginalized groups within the Syrian conflict. The organization works on the ground and online to document, advocate and build capacity for civil society group and young people. Dawlaty works in partnership with Syrian organizations and solidarity groups to amplify Syrian voices.

## WOMEN NOW FOR DEVELOPMENT (WND)

aims to initiate programmes led by Syrian women that protect Syrian women and children across socio-economic backgrounds, and empower women to find their political voice and participate in building a new, peaceful Syria that respects and safeguards equal rights for all its citizens.

Strengthening women's rights and amplifying local women's voices are at the core of Women Now's work, and are inherent in our mission to empower Syrian women and girls. Rather than competing with those who have the same visions and goals as Women Now, we are passionate about supporting and contributing to any movement that is geared towards socially progressive and peaceful change.





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# GLOSSARY

**AL-NUSRA** | Al-Nusra Front; Jabhat Al-Nusra; Jabhat Fatah al-Sham

**CED** | International convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance

**EMHRN** | Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network

**FCAS** | ..... Fragile and Conflict Affected States

**FFF** | ..... Families for Freedom

**IS/ISIS** | ..... Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

**PYD** | ..... Democratic Union Party

**SGVB** | ..... Sexual and Gender Based Violence

**SNHR** | ..... Syrian Network for Human Rights

**SOHA** | ..... Syrian Oral History Archive

**UN** | ..... United Nations

# FOREWORD

Enforced disappearance is one of many human rights violations that occur in armed conflict. It is, however, one that does not end when conflict ceases, but rather continues to have long-term impact on the concerned persons, their relatives, and the community as a whole. This kind of ambiguous loss makes an impact that transcends generations and shapes societal interrelations. Hence, whilst enforced disappearance should be considered in relation to and within the broader context of the current armed conflict in Syria, the inverse is equally important. Other human rights violations should also be examined in relation to enforced disappearance. Examples include, and are not limited to, forced displacement as invoked in many cases by the fear of losing family members to arbitrary detention raids; livelihood deterioration; and education deprivation.

The Syrian Oral History Archive (SOHA) project has been launched in August 2016 to challenge the narratives of enforced disappearance that focus solely on the missing, detained or forcibly disappeared. SOHA documents the stories of female relatives of the detained, disappeared and missing persons in Syria with the aim of giving historians, researchers and advocates a greater understanding of the magnitude of the issue of detention and enforced disappearance. This report uses oral history as a tool to reintegrate women's silenced voices and neglected personal and communal narratives into the epochal events taking place in Syria today. It uses gender as a defining category of analysis and opens a space for female interviewees to shape the report agenda by articulating what is of importance to them, with the aim of redirecting our gaze to overlooked and/or undermined topics.

With the SOHA project and this report, we intend to contribute to the recording of history from the bottom up by challenging the normative social, economic and political priorities that obscure women's lives<sup>1</sup>. We are grateful to everyone who has been supportive of the SOHA program and this report. We are especially indebted for the continuing counsel and constructive critique of Lynn Maalouf throughout the journey of building the archive and on the content of this report. We would also like to extend our gratitude to all the partners who enriched the discussions around our work and continue to inspire us by their own work and support. No one has been more important to this work than the brave women who have believed in the vision of the archive and have shared their stories, their pain, and their hopes. More so, we acknowledge those women who have been part of this program and collected the stories of their peers and worked tirelessly to shape the framework of the program itself. This work would not have been possible without the continuing support of Kvinna Till Kvinna.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Green, "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates," *Oral History*, 32:2 (Autumn, 2004): 35-44.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local and International Human Rights Organisations, including Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, have stated that thousands in Syria have vanished without a trace. It is estimated that over 117,000 people have been detained or disappeared in Syria between 2011 and 2016. It is believed that most of enforced disappearance cases are conducted by the Regime. Nevertheless, other armed groups have also utilized it against human rights activists and civilians. Generally, women constitute a minority of the disappeared but form the majority of family members and relatives who endure severe long-term social, economic, legal and psychological disadvantages as a result.

A total of 52 Syrian female relatives of the detainees from inside Syria and Lebanon were interviewed for this report. The report indicates that all female interviewees have been through one or more tragic events beside the enforced disappearance of a relative, including displacement, exposure to violence, besiegement, detention of more than one relative, and the loss of family members (including young children). These combined with earlier forms of gender social injustice, a patriarchal legal system, and the financial and care responsibilities they bear, have proved to have a huge impact on their livelihood and physical and mental health.

This constitutes a form of violence against women, and many interviewees described feeling virtually powerless after the loss of their household's male breadwinner. That said, women have also demonstrated bravery and resilience to keep their families safe and help them survive. Their example should be drawn upon in the design, planning and implementation of transitional justice mechanisms in Syria as their persistence and coping capabilities can be beneficial for building mechanisms of long-lasting and sustainable peace.

Coming from a variety of social background or areas of origin, the interviewees in the sample that this report is based on have presented a set of demands. These demands should not be regarded as alternative to justice but rather as a prerequisite and urgent steps towards it;

- ▶ the release of all arbitrarily detained civilians;
- ▶ the right to know the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared/detained family members: whether they are dead or alive, adherence to duty of care in the detention centres, and the right communicate with the outside world, especially with family members
- ▶ special support schemes for the disappeared persons' families, including financial pensions, education, medical treatment and jobs for family members;

The analysis of the interviews combined with the women's specific demands highlight the urgency and importance to undertake several actions to realize such demands. Gender-perspective research and documents can develop better understanding of the gendered dimensions, magnitude, and impact of enforced disappearance. This understanding of the impacts of enforced disappearance should be addressed with long-term gender-sensitive efforts directed at the root-causes of such impact. Such efforts should include factors of social norms, poverty, and cultural reservation around the value and the importance of women's experiences as a public matter. These efforts should be part of a special support scheme that is designed and implemented to meet the specific needs of the families of disappeared persons inside and outside Syria. That includes income-generating opportunities, medical treatment, psychosocial support, and equal opportunities for the women and their children to continue their education. Services, benefits or any aid should not be dependent on the prerequisite of presenting evidence of death of the disappeared person.

Gender-sensitive approach to future transitional justice mechanisms should be ensured and encouraged; including but not limited to investigations, exhumations, truth seeking, and reparations. This includes creating an environment in which women are encouraged and properly prepared to speak about their experiences, as well as including women and integrating their voices in peace talks and negotiation processes.

Others actions include the protection of refugees and enforcing their rights to education, work, and protection from exploitation; particularly in refugee countries such as Lebanon and Jordan.







# INTRODUCTION

Enforced disappearance is: “[The] arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law”<sup>2</sup>.

Since the 1970s, the authoritarian regime in Syria has had a legacy of using enforced disappearance as a systematic practice to silence political opposition, and as a tool to instil fear, repression, and intimidation<sup>3,4</sup>. After the 2011 uprising, the practice has been used as a tactic of war, as well as a form of reprisal against the family members of protesters. In its report ‘Between Prison And The Grave: Enforced Disappearances In Syria’, Amnesty International (2015) stated that thousands vanished without a trace and: “the enforced disappearances carried out since 2011 by the Syrian Regime were perpetrated as part of an organised attack against the civilian population that has been widespread, as well as systematic, and therefore amount to crime against humanity”<sup>5</sup>. Due to the secretive nature of this act, accurate documentation is difficult; however, over 117,000 are estimated to have been detained or disappeared in Syria between 2011 and 2016<sup>6</sup>, with 95,000 still forcibly disappeared by the end of August 2018<sup>7</sup>.

It is believed that most enforced disappearance cases are conducted by the Regime. Nevertheless, other armed groups have also used this method against human rights activists and civilians. For example, in 2013, human rights defender Razan Zaitouneh along with her husband, Wael Hamadeh, and her colleagues, Samira Khalil and Nazem Hamadi, were abducted from the opposition-held town of Douma, their whereabouts remain unknown until today<sup>8</sup>. Many other Syrians share the same fate.

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<sup>2</sup> International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED), 2006, article 2.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2010) A wasted decade Human Rights in Syria during Bashar Al Asad’S first ten years in power. New York: Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/HRW-WD>

<sup>4</sup> OHCHR (2013) Without a trace: enforced disappearances in Syria. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/OHCHR-WT>

<sup>5</sup> Amnesty International (2015) Between Prison And The Grave: Enforced Disappearances In Syria. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/amnesty-PG>

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2017) Syria Events of 2016. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/HRW-WR>

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2018) Syria Events of 2018. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/HRW-WR18>

<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International (2015) Syria: Human Rights Organisations Mark Birthday of Razan Zaitouneh with Renewed Call for Release of ‘Duma Four’. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/amnesty-15>. Human Rights Watch (2014) Syria: No Word on 4 Abducted Activists. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/HRW-AC>. Angelova, I. (2014) Governance in rebel-held East Ghouta in the Damascus Province, Syria. CGHR Working Paper 10, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Centre of Governance and Human Rights.

Documented cases of women who have been formerly detained in Syria, conducted by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN, 2015), revealed exposure to unfair trials and extraction of false confessions to discredit the anti-Regime armed groups, as well as using the women as bargaining chips during hostage exchanges<sup>9</sup>. Like their male counterparts, women are often exposed to poor detention conditions, ill treatment, physical and psychological torture, and abuse.

Although also experienced by men, women are more likely to experience physical and verbal sexual violence and abuse, or witness it against other women<sup>10</sup>. In addition to the violence and inhumane environment in which they are held captive, the disappeared are denied any contact with the outside world, medical care, legal aid, and are placed outside the protection system<sup>11</sup>.

Generally, women constitute a minority of the disappeared but form the majority of the family members and relatives who endure severe long-term social, economic, legal, and psychological disadvantages<sup>12</sup>. They are unable to re-marry, inherit and in some cases even move out from their homes, because they require another male relative's permission to do so (uncle, brother, parents, or their in-law counterparts). Once the male head of household is detained or disappeared, the entire family household is essentially at a severe disadvantage and therefore the female relatives of Syrian detained and disappeared face many challenges, often not discussed or spoken about. On a larger scale, this constitutes a form of violence against women in the Syrian conflict, as women are left without the social, economic and legal heads of their families and are therefore forced to take over many of these roles.

With the aim to broaden and enrich the ongoing discussions around enforced disappearance and its long-term 'gendered' impacts on society, this report uncovers the gendered aspects of enforced disappearance and its impacts on female relatives. It provides a preliminary analysis of the experiences of women whose family members were detained, disappeared, or went missing in Syria since 2011. Although far from being exhaustive, the report sheds light on women's stories of harm caused by enforced disappearance, their resilience, and ways of coping and it emphasizes the need to integrate their voices into the current dialogue on transitional justice and reconstruction in Syria.

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<sup>9</sup> Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) (2015) Detention of Women in Syria: A weapon of war and terror. Denmark: EMHRN. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/EMHRN15>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid supra no 7

<sup>11</sup> OHCHR (2013) Without a trace: enforced disappearances in Syria. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/OHCHR-WT>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid supra no 2. Subramaniam, J.; Majumder, M. N.; Zulkarnain, A. H.; & Zakaria, M. A. (2014) Implications of Enforced Disappearances on Women-headed Families in the Northern Province, Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4 (4), 236. Robins, S. (2010) Ambiguous Loss in a Non-Western Context: Families of the Disappeared in Post conflict Nepal. *Family Relations*, 59 (3), 253-268.

# **LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN SYRIA**

Transitional justice can be defined as ways in which systematic abuses of fundamental human rights are acknowledged and accounted for (Olsen et al., 2010). The ultimate goal is to achieve justice and reconciliation as well as to facilitate the society's transition away from conflict<sup>13</sup>. It involves mechanisms such as "individual prosecutions, reparations, truth-seeking, institutional reform, vetting, and dismissals," or a combination of two or more of these elements<sup>14</sup>. One of the common shortcomings of transitional justice processes is the adoption of solely reparative (compensation for victims) or solely retributive mechanisms (punishment for wrongdoings), as this not only creates new political problems but also further ruptures the already broken social fabric in post-conflict societies<sup>15</sup>.

Case studies from different fragile and conflict-affected states (FCAS), such as Kenya, Northern Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nepal, indicate victims' preference for reparative and distributive justice over retributive justice<sup>16</sup>. As Vinck and Pham (2008: 404) explains: "As long as basic survival needs are not met and safety is not guaranteed, social reconstruction programs, including transitional justice mechanisms, will not be perceived as a priority and will lack the level of support needed for their success."

Significantly, as Fulton (2014) points out, the issue of enforced disappearance must be approached holistically, combining truth, holistic reparation, criminal accountability, and a set of measures to ensure non-repetition<sup>17</sup>. For example, supporting forensic investigations can meet the rights of the relatives of disappearance victims to know the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared, and sooth the anguish resulting from the uncertainty and lack of closure<sup>18</sup>.

Reparation programmes offered by states provide diverse material reparations to victims of enforced disappearance, including compensation, social and psychological support, and access to healthcare, education and accommodation. Notably, however, victims' relatives are not always recognized by such programmes, even though this contradicts international

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**13** Bell, C., Campbell, C. and Ní Aoláin, F. (2004) Justice Discourses in Transition. *Social and Legal Studies*, 13(3), 305-328. - Teitel, G. R. (2000) *Transitional Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc. - Teitel, G. R. (2003) *Transitional Justice Genealogy*. *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 16 (69), 69-94.

**14** Kangas, A., Haider, H., Fraser, E., Browne, E. (2015) *Gender, Statebuilding and Peacebuilding*. GSDRC. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/GSDRC15>

**15** Rubio-Marin, R. (Ed.). (2006). *What happened to the women: Gender and reparations for human rights violations*. New York: Social Science Research Council. - de Greiff, P. (2006). Introduction, repairing the past: Compensation for victims of human rights violations. In P. de Greiff (Ed.), *The Handbook of Reparations*. Oxford & NY: Oxford University Press. - Villa-Vicencio, Ch. (2010) *Inclusive Justice. The Limitations of Trials and Truth Commissions*. In Sriram, Lekha C., & Pillay, S. (ed) *Peace versus Justice- The Dilemma of transitional justice in Africa*. University of Kwa Zulu-Natal Press. 2010. 44-68

**16** Pham, P. N., & Vinck, P. (2008) Ownership and Participation in Transitional Justice Mechanisms: A Sustainable Human Development Perspective from Eastern DRC. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 2, 398-411. Pham, P.N., Vinck, P., Stover, E., Moss, A., Wierda, M., & Bailey, R. (2007) 'When the War Ends: A Population-based Survey on Attitudes about Peace, Justice and Social Reconstruction in Northern Uganda,' Report by the HRC, the Payson Center and ICTJ.

**17** Fulton, S. (2014) Redress for Enforced Disappearance: Why Financial Compensation is not Enough. *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, 12 (4), 769-786.

**18** Keough, E. M., Simmons, T., & Samuels, M. (2004) Missing persons in post-conflict settings: best practices for integrating psychosocial and scientific approaches. *Perspectives in Public Health*, 124 (6), 271-275.

law and ignores the profound hardship that relatives, especially women, endure<sup>19</sup>. To tackle this, feminist scholars identified three principle areas of concern in transitional justice. These, as put by O'Rourke (2015), are the “incorporation of injustices against women within transitional justice mechanisms; the acknowledgement of structural inequalities that leaves women, specifically, more vulnerable to these gender-specific injustices; and women's participation in transitional justice processes”<sup>20</sup>.

## Injustices against women

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Central to the question of entitlement to reparation and justice is an understanding of what constitutes violence and who is defined as a victim. Taking into consideration political violence in transitional societies, and the justice system's prosecution of such violence, the dominant discourse is deeply gendered. It links certain forms of violence to oppressive regimes and armed conflict, and excludes other forms of violence from within their definitional boundaries<sup>21</sup>. As such, Ní Aoláin & O'Rourke (2010: 1) asserted that “feminist interventions aimed at shaping the field and scope of transitional justice have concentrated on widening the range of harms visible in the process of societal transformation”<sup>22</sup>. Sankey (2013) introduced the term ‘subsistence harms’ to refer to deliberate maltreatment and denial of physical, mental, and social needs, executed with the knowledge of the consequences of such denial. The concept of subsistent harms seek to acknowledge and incorporate such injustices throughout the transitional justice process<sup>23</sup>.

In cases of enforced disappearance, both the disappeared and their close relatives are recognized as victims in international law. Consequently, it is important to investigate, acknowledge and address the compounding injustices women face, and to ensure that gender-sensitive mechanisms exist to deal with them. Reparation should not be conditional upon a declaration of death, as this pushes wives, as Dewhirst and Kapur (2015: VIII) explained, to “make an emotionally difficult decision with long-term social and psychological consequences, including guilt about abandoning hope, blame by in-laws, and loss of social status by becoming a widow.”

Mechanisms of transitional justice also need to be attentive to the ways in which legal and administrative measures can create barriers to access<sup>24</sup>. For example, cultural norms might prioritize male children's education over their female counterparts in situations of enforced disappearance; and elderly mothers are more prone to poverty than their male counterparts in old age. Moreover, social stigma associated with enforced disappearance might discourage women from seeking their rights or participating in the registration processes.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid supra no 2

<sup>20</sup> O'Rourke, C. (2015) Feminist Scholarship in Transitional Justice: a de-politicising impulse? *Women's Studies International Forum*, 51, 118-127

<sup>21</sup> Ní Aoláin, F. (2006) Political Violence and Gender During Times of Transition. *Colombia Journal of Gender and Law*, 15 (3).- Nagy, R. (2008) Transitional Justice as Global Project: Critical Reflections. *Third World Quarterly*, 29 (2), 275-289.

<sup>22</sup> Ní Aoláin, F., & O'Rourke, C. (2010) Gendered transitional justice and the non-state actor. In A. Lyons, & M. Reed (Eds.), *Contested transitions: Dilemmas of transitional justice in Colombia and comparative experience*. Bogotá: International Centre for Transitional Justice.

<sup>23</sup> Sankey, D. (2014) Towards Recognition of Subsistence Harms: Reassessing Approaches to Socioeconomic Forms of Violence in Transitional Justice. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 8, (1), 121–140

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, supra no 2



## Root-causes of gender-specific injustices —

Research highlights that “women’s experiences of injustice during conflict are also a result of existing inequalities and as such are not necessarily the crimes that are codified in international human rights law”<sup>25</sup>. Patriarchal social frameworks with pre-determined cultural norms and socioeconomic conditionality tend to place higher risk of gendered harms on women than men<sup>26</sup>, and also have severe consequences in the design and application of transitional justice mechanisms<sup>27</sup>. Even when efforts are made to introduce the gender dimension, it is often no more than an afterthought, narrow in scope, and solely based on women’s victimization<sup>28</sup>. Ní Aoláin (2012) also criticized the ‘uncritical and narrowly’ liberal conception of gender equality which distracts us from understanding the cultural, material, and geopolitical settings in which transitional justice practices have emerged<sup>29</sup>. Analyzing and addressing the socioeconomic structures remains vital for reaching a sustainable peace<sup>30</sup>.

Although amplified and intensified during the conflict, women’s experiences of enforced disappearance have their roots in the pre-conflict context of Syria’s patriarchal society. Consequently, gender inequalities and social injustices are a pre-existing part of the social, cultural, economic, and political structures within the country. This is reflected in Syria’s discriminatory and exclusionary laws, especially in relation to marriage, property rights, and sexual offenses which aggravate and deepen institutionalized inequality. In their analysis of women’s experiences of violence and the political economy of gender in the Syrian conflict, Alsaba and Kapilashrami (2016: 7) asserted that: “[a] full understanding of how conflict shapes women’s lived realities and risks to violence must therefore be historically located in gender relations and the social, political and economic context in Syria”<sup>31</sup>.

The alternative, feminist concept of transitional justice is one which promotes the aims of reconciliation and positive peace, going beyond the narrow militarized definition of peace and security<sup>32</sup>. It associates peace with women’s capability of obtaining social and economic independence to eliminate insecurities, in relation to social inequalities as well as economic and political conditions that sustain structural and cultural gender-based violence<sup>33</sup>. Effective support for gender-responsive transitional justice and peace requires a deep understanding of the wider political and economic conditions.

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<sup>25</sup> Valji, N. (2007:13) Gender Justice and Reconciliation’, Dialogue on Globalization, No. 35. Berlin: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung)

<sup>26</sup> Turano, L. (2011) The Gender Dimension of Transitional Justice Mechanisms. New York Journal of International Law and Politics 43: 1045-1086

<sup>27</sup> Lambourne, W. and Carreon, R. V. (2016) Engendering Transitional Justice: A Transformative Approach to Building Peace and Attaining Human Rights for Women. Human Rights Review, 17 (1), 71-93.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid Supra no 17

<sup>29</sup> Ní Aoláin, F. (2012) Advancing Feminist Positioning in the Field of Transitional Justice. International Journal of Transitional Justice, 6 (2), 205-228.

<sup>30</sup> Laplante, L. (2008). Transitional Justice and Peace Building: Diagnosing and Addressing the Socioeconomic Roots of Violence through a Human Rights Framework. International Journal of Transitional Justice, 2 (3), 331-335.

<sup>31</sup> Alsaba, K. & Kapilashrami, A. (2016) Understanding women’s experience of violence and the political economy of gender in conflict: the case of Syria, Reproductive Health Matters, 24 (47), 5-17.

<sup>32</sup> Galtung, J. (1967) THEORIES OF PEACE A Synthetic Approach to Peace Thinking. Oslo: International Peace Research Institute.

<sup>33</sup> (Copelon, 2000).

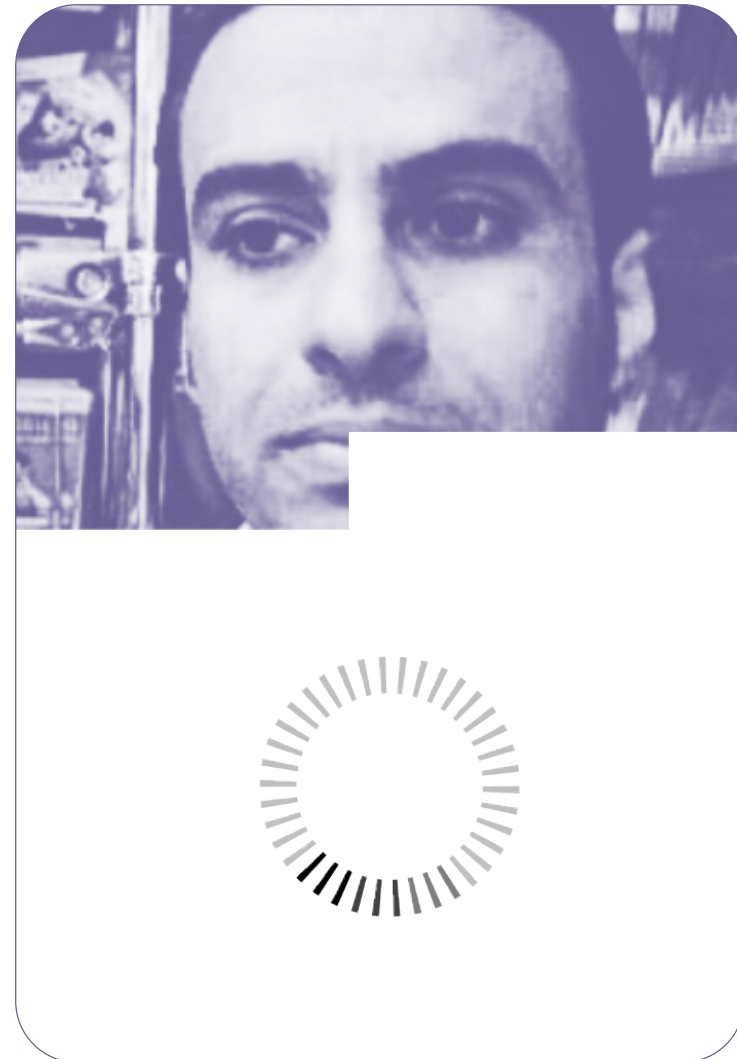
## Women's participation in transitional justice processes and mechanisms

A significant element of gender equality is women's participation in transitional justice processes and mechanisms<sup>34</sup>. A truly meaningful participation is not “just add[ing] women and stir[ring]”<sup>35</sup>. Women are usually ‘essentialized’, often denied political agency, treated as a homogenous group, and given no recognition with respect to how gender intersects with class, ethnicity, religion, or political stance (known as intersectionality). That, in turn, is re-

flected in the transitional setting when society and government fail to consider how gender-responsive approaches intersect with wider social, political, and economic dynamics.

Ní Aoláin and Rooney contend that two main areas have generally been passed over: poor enforcement of processes of change which can have a substantial positive impact on women's lives, and the application of intersectionality to women's experience in societies during post-conflict periods<sup>36</sup>. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the adoption of a liberal peacebuilding and transitional justice project that did not include a gendered understanding of the harm caused by the conflict on women resulted in reinforcing structural constraints on women's involvement and participation. The transitional justice process in this case is critiqued for three gaps in gen-

der-justice: accountability, acknowledgement, and reparation. This meant transitional justice became another site for the long-term construction of a gendered post-conflict order<sup>37</sup>.



<sup>34</sup> Ibid supra no 26.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Ali, N. (2005) *Reconstructing Gender: Iraqi Women between Dictatorship, War, Sanctions, and Occupations*. Third World Quarterly, Vol. 26, No. 5, pp. 739–758.

<sup>36</sup> Ní Aoláin, F., & Rooney, E. (2007). Underenforcement and intersectionality: Gendered aspects of transition for women. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 1, 338–354.

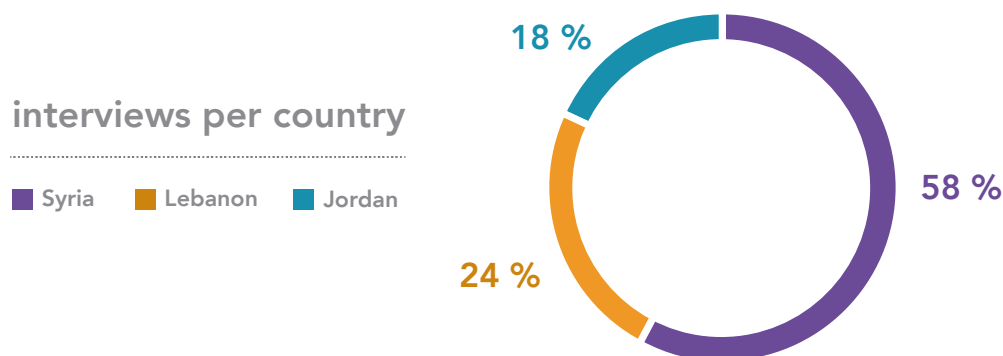
<sup>37</sup> Ní Aoláin, F. and Haynes, F. D. (2011) *On the Frontlines: Gender, War and the Post Conflict Process*.

# RESEARCHING WOMEN AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

## Definition, Scope of Study, and Limitations

International conventions such as the Geneva convention and the CED provide clear definitions of detention and enforced disappearance practices that are mutually exclusive in theory. In Syria, these processes overlap as established detention centers by the Regime and the warring parties do not adhere to communicating the whereabouts of the detainees and their status. For this report enforced disappearance refers to both forcibly disappeared and detainees, whose family lacks adequate information or a clear statement from the party responsible for the detention, on their whereabouts or status.

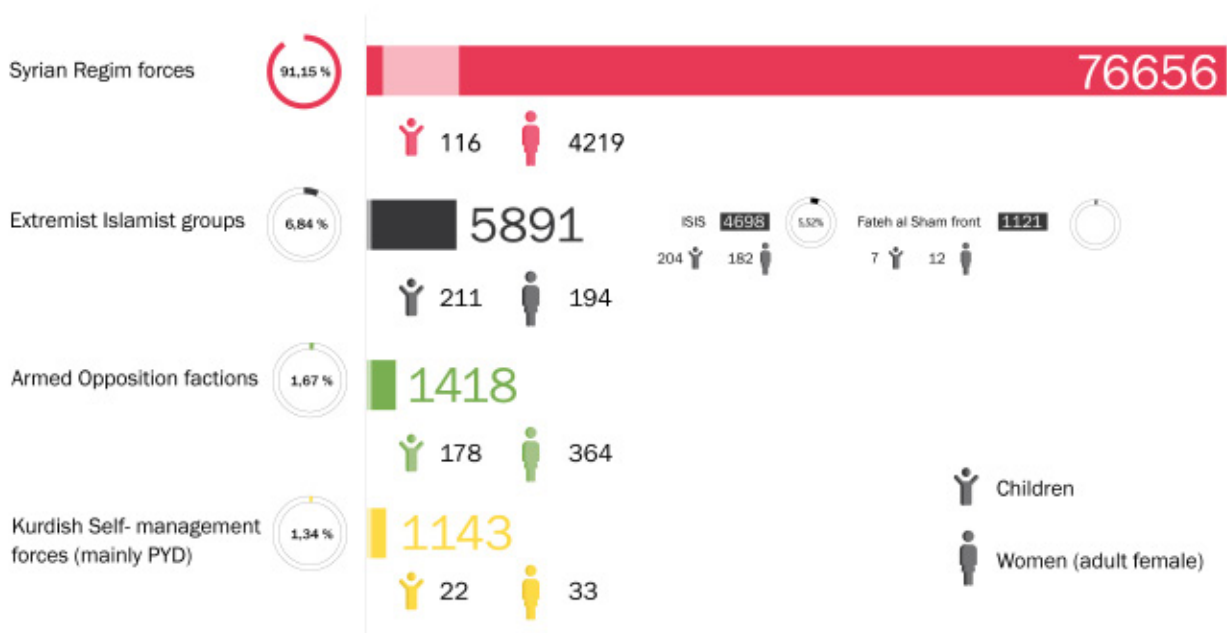
The study included 52 interviews with women from diverse demographic groups and segments across political and military lines. In Syria, it covered Idlib and Aleppo (Ma'rat Al Nu'man and Atareb), and Swaida and Daraa governorates, both local communities and displaced people. Interviews were also carried out with Syrian refugees in Lebanon; in Shtura and Majd Al Anjar, and in Jordan; in Irbid, Amman, and Al-Ramtha.



The report's scope was limited in some areas where we had no physical presence, especially in communities residing in Regime and Kurdish-controlled territories due to high surveillance and security concerns. Attempts were made to partner with civil society organisations in Damascus and other cities under the control of the Regime, but they were reluctant to join the project due to a fear of persecution. Similarly, we found it difficult to get female narrators in areas outside the control of the Regime who had relatives detained or forcibly disappeared by one of the armed groups. Women living in those areas were reluctant to share their stories in fear of similar retribution or potential harm to their relatives (e.g. Al-Nusra

in Idlib). We also had to terminate our work in Al-Hassaka governorate (Amuda city) due to constraints imposed by the self administration dominated by the PYD who demanded that the researchers breach the field interviewers' code of conduct by providing detailed reports on what we do and who we meet with. Not only would this be a violation of research confidentiality, but it would also compromise the safety of interviewees and their relatives, given the detentions and disappearances carried out by the PYD.

No less than **85,036** individuals are still forcibly disappeared in Syria from March 2011 until August 2017, distributed as follow:



Distribution of the forcibly disappeared in Syria by the party responsible. With permission from SNHR; 2018.

Generally, security concerns associated with this kind of information disclosure during the conflict meant that we needed to rely on trusted personnel and networks to reach the affected women in a way that ensures both the women and field workers' safety. Other reasons that prevented potential interviewees from taking part in the project were: fear of putting their relatives who are still missing or detained at greater risk; undervaluing their lived experiences in comparison to the disappeared themselves; cultural reservations around sharing their experiences and lives with people outside their immediate family; and finally the emotional exhaustion as a result of speaking to several human rights organisations to document their cases. The absence of adequate psychosocial support (PSS) services in the target areas meant that we had to be thoroughly cautious and avoid certain questions that might have caused psychological and emotional distress.

## Methodology

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A total of 52 semi-structured interviews were carried out and transcribed by field workers who work with local communities and individuals in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. All field workers were trained in interview techniques, recording oral histories, and related ethics and codes of conduct. Some of the field workers were women whose own relatives had been detained or disappeared, which gave them personal insight into the issues under examination. Most of them are activists who have been in close contact with their target communities for many years. These interactions were invaluable and provided them with a great deal of knowledge and understanding of the social and political context.

The semi structured questionnaire (See Annex II) was prepared in collaboration with Act for the Disappeared (ACT)<sup>38</sup>, an organisation that works towards similar ends, and with an independent consultant who provided expert guidance based on his experience working with the South African History Archive (SAHA). The questionnaire also benefited from a review of various interview guidelines created by a number of countries that have lived comparable contexts. At various stages of its design, the questionnaire was shared with the field workers for input and insight to ensure it was appropriate to the Syrian context.

Both the transcriptions of the interviews and notes provided by the field workers constituted the data analysed. Content analysis was done through classification into thematic categories that sought out commonalities between cases. This report does not however dismiss the heterogeneity of the women's experiences and recognizes that careful attention should be paid to the intersection of gender, class, religion, age, marital status, and ethnicity. As well as to the ways in which they shape the construction of memory, and the way we order and prioritize events.

A typical interview lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, beginning with a general discussion on the family's circumstances and gradually moving on to the story of disappearance or detention, the living conditions resulting from the event, and their expectations and demands. As such, women's lived experiences of enforced disappearance were captured by looking at the specific event of disappearance in relation to the broader context of the conflict, and how these have shaped women's identity and actions. It examines the psychological, political, socioeconomic, cultural, legal, and health challenges that women face, along with coping and support mechanisms which they used to deal with the hardships created by enforced disappearance. Moreover, taking political participation beyond visibility in the public sphere, women's demands and a potential movement of solidarity are explored and considered in light of the ongoing negotiation and peace-building efforts.

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<sup>38</sup> Let's act for the disappeared is a Lebanese Human Rights Organization created in 2010 and works towards clarifying the fate of the missing and disappeared persons in Lebanon.



## Verification and Consent

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The information provided about the forcibly disappeared and detained were verified by various sources and several human rights organisations. These organisations include but are not limited to: The Syrian Network for Human Rights and The Violation Documentation Center in Syria. The duration of the data collection process took place over a period of fourteen months (August 2016 - December 2017). Arabic was the language of communication. Cases of words and cultural concepts that are not easily translatable into English, are written in Syrian Arabic with an accompanying explanation.

The interview locations were chosen by the interviewees. For the most part, we visited the women in their homes. If the women felt uncomfortable due to the presence of family members (often male relatives or in-laws) or if their residence was inadequate (people coming in and out, or overcrowded accommodation as was the case in Lebanon), the interview would take place in one of the women's centres run by Women Now for Development, or in a public venue chosen by the interviewee.

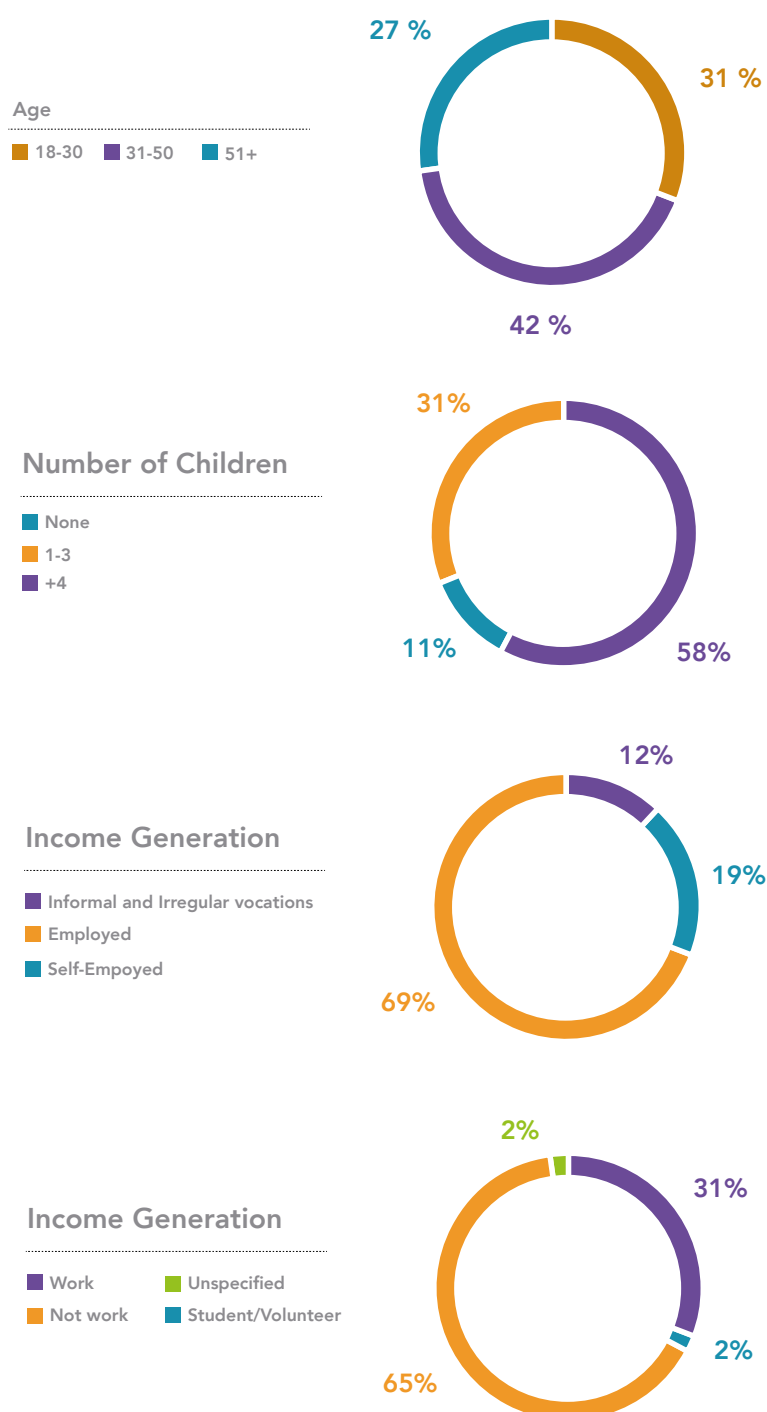
Informed consent was obtained so that the women interviewed understood that their testimony may be used for research. They were also given the chance to reflect and think about their participation for a few days after the consent form had been explained. Additionally, release authorisations were provided. Interviewees had the final say on how the data could be used. A final verification exercise took place where the purpose of the study were shared with the field researchers and with some of the interviewees we were able to re-establish contact with. This work was approved by all those consulted – they confirmed that they believed the report would represent their needs and the problems faced by female relatives of the disappeared.



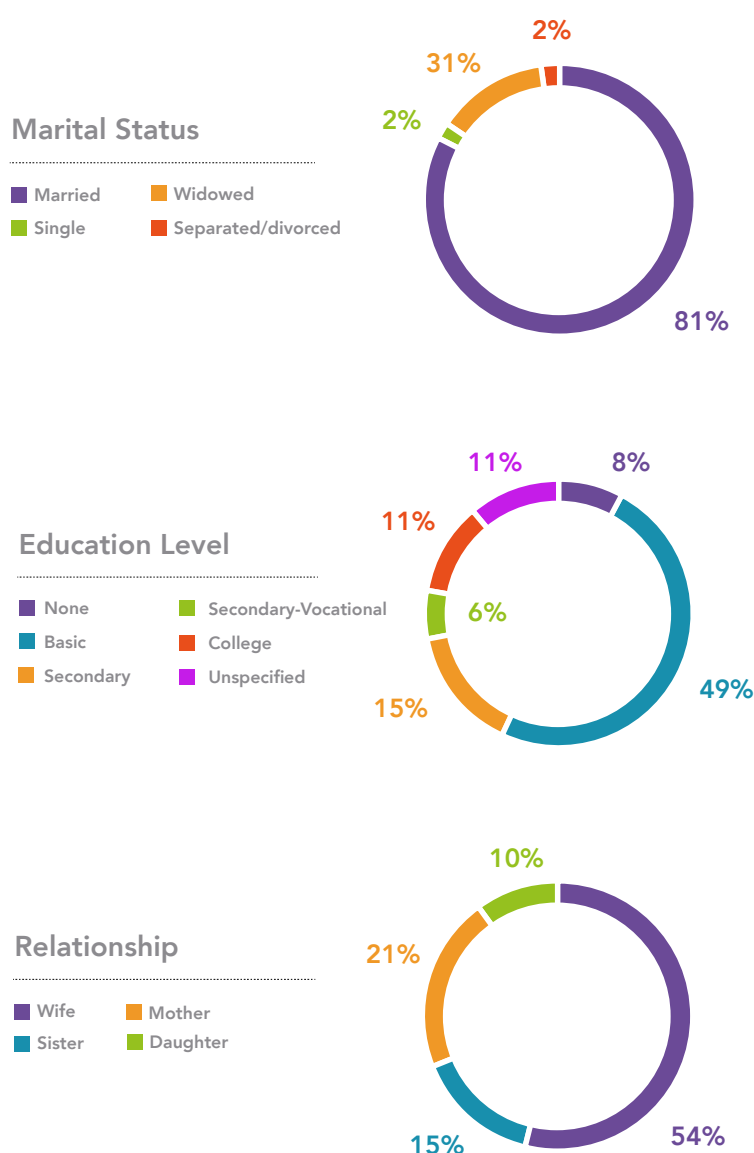


## The Narrators

The female interviewees are of different ages, education levels, social, geographical, and class backgrounds (see charts II, III, IV, V and VI). Also, in addition to losing a family member to enforced disappearance, they have experienced various aspects of conflict-induced hardships, including: living under military siege, experiencing direct and indirect violence, and ultimately displacement. As a result, their needs are complex and evolving and should be examined with special attention to their specificities, contextual experiences, and changing priorities.



The United Nations Development Programme reports a literacy rate for Syrian women at 74.2 percent and the rate of females over 25 with secondary education is 29.0 percent<sup>39</sup>. The difference in our sample is 10 percent, possibly due to the displacement crisis and that many Syrians with higher educational degree are living abroad. Also it is worth mentioning that the Syrian regime has used massive enforced disappearance mainly in the rural and poor countryside, which may also explain the different level of education in this sample.



<sup>39</sup> United Nation Development Program (2016) Human Development Reports. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/HDR-16>

# THE IMPACTS OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE ON FEMALE RELATIVES

“What’s the way to know if my husband is dead or alive? I don’t know. I reach out and tell my story to people. I don’t know where my husband is. Our life, like this, is not good. A woman without her husband is worth nothing. We live in pain, frustration, and sickness. [...] and they<sup>40</sup> offer nothing to support the detainees’ families. They say they only give [assistance, support...] the families of martyrs<sup>41</sup>. We’re in a similar position [with no husbands], we ask, what is the difference? I have 8 kids, how would I look after them if it is not for the little I get from my family, and from here and there. They should help all people equally. [...] They should consider the detainees and their families as they have also lost their houses and jobs.” - **Soumaya Haj Ali, 57 years old - Sarmada, Idlib**

## So, what happened? Searching for a Trace —

Despite the precarious conditions of the conflict, the majority of women began their search and started looking for their relatives alone, as soon as they became aware of their disappearance. In our sample, a few women reported experiencing social pressure by family members to prevent them from taking an active and direct role during the search for their relatives. Although they were sometimes assisted by male members of their immediate family or in-laws, such assistance has been limited and challenging due to the likely risk of the men facing disappearance. This is a fear that has been established and grown due to reported incidents in which male relatives went missing while searching or paying ransom for the disappeared relatives.

“A man was detained once he went to ask for his cousin. No one knew his whereabouts. So, when I saw that no one wanted to go with me, I went by myself to the security branches... all of them.” - **Maisa’a Mohammad, 32 years old - Aleppo**

While searching for their relatives, in hospitals, local administration facilities, security branches, and prisons, women have travelled across cities, endured ill-treatment at checkpoints and spent long-hours waiting in the crowded information offices of the relevant entities. In one case, Maisa’a who had made her way from Aleppo to Damascus seeking information about her husband, described her stay with her acquaintances in Sayida Zeinab<sup>42</sup> as “tragic.” In addition to constant questioning and humiliation, the checkpoint in that area would keep her ID and only give it back to her on her way out. She also had to spend the

<sup>40</sup> They refers to aid agencies and humanitarian groups as well as individuals and groups that provide donations and aid, usually outside the humanitarian system who often prefer to donate to orphans and wives of martyrs as opposed to detainees’ families due to a strict interpretation of the prophet’s word in this regard.

<sup>41</sup> The use of the terms “Martyr” is traditionally given as a honorific for person who have died during the war. Its use is loose yet sensitive to various factors; mainly alleged or perceived political affiliation. For the purpose of this report, the use of the term is context specific and we have refrained from replacing the terms with another one to maintain its full meaning.

<sup>42</sup> A town in Rif Damascus Governorate, inhabited by majority of Shiaa-faith population.

whole day waiting for her turn at the information centre in the military branch in Damascus. Even as early as 6:00 a.m (the time she arrived), there were over 75 people waiting in the queue, each with a heartbreaking story about one or more missing persons. Often these official entities simply denied having any information. Even when women had sufficient information to identify the perpetrator<sup>43</sup>, the answer was a simple denial and adjournment until the person in question is sent to investigations, which never seems to take place. Communications are mostly conducted verbally, without proper or official documentation of either the requests or responses.

“ I got some news a year and two months following his detention (...) he’s been moved to the security branches in Damascus but still has not moved to Adra (prison). We’re still trying to get information but they say the papers have not yet been transferred to investigation”.

**Hiba Al-Ahmad 30 years old, Ma’rat El Nu’mān - Idlib**

In very few cases, some information regarding the fate of the disappeared person, usually taken by the Regime, was available but visits were often prohibited. When a brief visit was permitted, the women experienced vicious interrogation, verbal abuse, and humiliation at the checkpoints with the purpose of intimidation and were eventually forced to end the visits.

Furthermore, bringing medicine and general necessities was also prohibited . In one case, the detained was subject to torture and abuse to such an extent that he “voluntarily” asked his family not to come visit anymore. Ultimately, information and contact were lost. Samar Qasem, 28 years old, has lost all contact with her husband in Seydnaya prison after he was tortured and asked her not to visit “if she loved him.”

**Rweida**, describing her daughter’s experience when visiting her father at Adra prison facility after 2 years of searching:

“ She has been interrogated (at the checkpoints on the way to the detention center) several times, and her husband was worried about her and her two children. On her way, they ask her where and who she’s coming to visit, search her person and humiliate her. The day she brings him something, like pants with a zipper... a shoe with shoe laces, they throw it in the rubbish bin in front of her... assaults and humiliation.”

Another woman, Reem Hussein, went to identify her disappeared husband’s car, survived an assassination attempt, having been targeted with live bullets in one of the security branches (Hamida Taher). She was also sexually harassed in the military security branch and invited inside to receive a ‘generous treatment.’

For some women, assault and direct physical violence started on the day of the arrest, they reported being beaten and subjected to sexual verbal assaults during the arrest cam-

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<sup>43</sup> By their own presence or eyewitness account of a direct involvement of arresting the person.

paings. In other cases, when seeking information, some women reported being belittled, undermined, and ignored. Maisa'a, who went to the military security branch in Aleppo to ask about her disappeared husband, was met by complete disregard as the officer suggested that her husband had been taken by terrorists<sup>44</sup>. When she argued that she does not live in an area controlled by terrorists and questioned whether the police were at the service of the people, he sent her away, ridiculing her, and repeating terrorists took her husband.

Time, extensive efforts, as well as direct or implicit violence, humiliation, and verbal abuse (all forms of SGBV) are not the only price women have paid. Enforced disappearance has added an additional financial burden on the women; including costs attributed to their search efforts (travel expenses, ransoms, bribes, and in few cases visit preparations). A common experience of all women is exposure to extortion and the need for an intermediary or crony for information. The payments requested ranged between SYP 5,000 - 10,000 (for every phone call) and upto SYP 5 million (as a ransom)<sup>45</sup>. To put this into perspective, each phone call would cost a family 30% of their monthly income. It is important to note that 80% of Syrians inside Syria and more than half of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in extreme poverty<sup>46</sup>. The vast majority of women interviewed had no source of income and thus had to sell whatever they owned, and/or accumulate debt to pay off the requested money despite the fact that this would not guarantee accurate information let alone the release of their relatives.

“ I myself went to Damascus, stayed in a hotel, and started asking about him. They said we will show him to you but you need to pay. ‘You pay half a million’, I accepted, but I needed to see him, or for them to show me a picture of him in the prison or to let me hear his voice. [...] I stayed in the hotel for more than 10 days, fasting, it was Ramadan. I had no kitchen or anything. I had to buy food and pay here and there. Everything turned out to be a lie.” - **Soumaya Haj Ali, 57 years old - Sarmada, Idlib**

**Sana'a**, 31 years old, said that after her husband was kidnapped, she was contacted by people who claimed to be members of the Islamic State (IS) asking for money to set him free. After negotiation, her in-laws were able to collect and deliver the money but she never heard from her husband again.

Arrests and kidnappings have at times been conducted by opportunists, affiliated with the Regime or other armed groups, for the mere purpose of profit. Najah, 22 years old, said that after a mass arbitrary arrest of all men, including her husband, in her neighbourhood in Daraa, a man came knocking on the door asking for SYP 20,000<sup>47</sup> to get their relatives back. She suspected he was working with the group who conducted the arrests, but people, driven by their desire to see their loved ones again, felt that they had to pay. As she put it: “a drowning person would clutch at a straw”.

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<sup>44</sup> The use of the terms “Terrorism/Terrorist” to describe opposition to the Syrian Regime has been a crucial part of the Regime’s narrative of the conflict. This includes but not limited to protesting, armed groups in areas outside the control of the Regime, as well as criminal activities in some cases.

<sup>45</sup> Between USD 10-20 and up to USD 10,000.

<sup>46</sup> UNHCR. Syria Centre for Policy Research.

<sup>47</sup> Around 35-40 USD







## Financial and Economic Deprivation

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Losing a relative to enforced disappearance does not necessarily result in economic insecurity. However, this seems to be the case in a patriarchal society such as Syria where men make crucial economic contributions, and in most cases, are the main breadwinners for their families. Combined with gender-specific injustices (including girls dropping out of school, early marriage, gender norms around what constitutes suitable work for women, and the traditional opposition to women's participation in the public and economic spheres) and other conflict-induced injustices (such as siege and forced displacement, which lead to less overall economic activity), means that enforced disappearance becomes a major factor in condemning families to poverty – the straw that breaks the camel's back. Families with tenuous livelihoods have either struggled or fallen into extreme poverty<sup>48</sup>.

The majority of the interviewees have lost the main breadwinner of their household, and were displaced at least once. As a result, enforced disappearance has brought about drastic gender role changes. A 31-year-old interviewee, who had devoted herself to household work and child care after graduating from the Teachers Preparation Institute, went back to work in 2011 when her husband was unable to work due to the shelling and fear of detention at checkpoints. She continued to work after his disappearance.

Despite changes in the gender roles, women have continued to struggle economically, and are hardly able to afford the bare necessities (rent and bills, food, medical treatment, transportation, and children's education) due to their engagement in low paying jobs (hair-dressing, cleaning, and knitting and sewing) or due to laws within host countries that limit work opportunities for refugees, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. A dentist who was interviewed, and considered lucky to have found a part-time job in a medical center, described her income as 'barely enough' to meet basic needs. Furthermore, some families have spent considerable amounts of money in search for their missing loved ones.

It is important to note that for these women, entering the labour market means an additional burden on their already existing household and care responsibilities. Working women have to manage a tremendous amounts of labour, both in their household and their paid employment. They spend their day at work and come back to do the household chores: cooking, cleaning and looking after their children's needs as well as helping them with homework.

The household and childcare responsibilities are no less for women who were unable to find work (mostly due to age, lack of education and/or displacement). They are usually left with more than one child and have to rely on their parents, siblings, or other children when any of those are able to help. In the absence of economic support, some women are left dependent on the kindness of their community and the scarce aid handouts. The first to be sacrificed by such economic insecurity are health care and education.

Given these circumstances and considerations, women have tended to emphasize the competing economic demands of raising children, working to ensure their family's survival, and searching for their partners.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid supra no. 24

44

Today for example it has been **322** days



## Enforced Disappearance and Education: A Generational Impact

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Education provides an advantage to secure potential employment and provides access to a wider range of jobs within the market. Due to the need to compensate for financial loss in household revenue or at least maintain personal financial independence, women viewed educational opportunities for themselves and their children as a tool which could alleviate the impact of losing the male head of household and breadwinner. Many of the interviewed women have not completed their education due to social norms that favour boys' education over girls' and reduce women to their roles as housewives and mothers; poverty which requires them to start working early; early marriage, childbearing and rearing; and more recently the conflict which limited their ability to continue their education. They had less opportunities for employment than their female counterparts who finished university.

A 24-year-old explains the reasons behind not completing her education, despite having it as a condition in her marriage contract, due to the current security situation. She says:

“ I got pregnant. During the events [of the conflict], normal [single] girls who used to study were rarely allowed [to go to school] by their parents, how do you expect it to be for a married and pregnant woman then?”

Lack of documentation and financial support have been the main obstacles which have prevented women from carrying on with their education in neighbouring countries during displacement. A complete lack of support structures has also meant that the women were forced to remove their children from school and put them to work in order to bring in extra income for the family. Salwa's 15-year-old son, like many others, dropped out of school to work and support his mother and four siblings after his father's disappearance.

That being said, women have generally exhibited a positive attitude towards education. They have acknowledged the importance of it and expressed regret over the circumstances that led them and sometimes their children to drop out of school. Bahiya described her disappeared brother's wife as “strong” for returning to university and getting her degree, all done out of a sense of responsibility towards her young daughter, she said. Another woman, Souad Al-A'awar, 61 years old, referring to her five grandchildren (between 8 and 17 years old) currently within her care, following the death of their mother and disappearance of their father, said:

“ Even if they don't eat or drink, their education is a priority [...] It is a shame that a boy does not study or a girl does not study. No. She should. When she studies, she can become a teacher, teaching languages. She becomes responsible for herself. I always warn them (about that) and I'm here for them, I won't leave them. [...] Whenever I hear about courses, and whatever I can afford, I offer it to them.”



**“ ..SO  
I pronounced him  
dead.**

## Gender-biased Legislations Result in Legal Complications

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Aside from the important points have been raised about <quo>custody and the entitlement to a financial pension and aid. The uncertain status of the disappeared has often left the women outside the support schemes often available for other families (such as the martyr's families), as well as the continuation of the husband's salary. In displacement, property ownership and its complications in the absence of the husband or father (?) is another critical issue to consider, as property is predominantly owned by the men in the family, due to state laws and Islamic practices. Even in the unique cases where women could access and afford legal support, their claim on their property is at a disadvantage in the absence of their husbands. Several women stated that they risked and even lost their properties to a member of their husband's family, or even to the Regime<sup>49</sup>.

Fathers are the main guardian of children according to Syrian personal status law. Having no legal authority over their children's custody, women need their male partners' permission to be able to travel with or do administrative work for their children. Safa'a, a 35-year-old, explained that she had a procuration signed by her husband before his disappearance, without which she would not have been able to leave the country with her three children (between 2 and 8 years old). She said:

“ When we came here (to Lebanon), he had to procure a ‘birth certificate’ and custody for me so that I can bring them out with me... We were at the borders about to enter when we faced some problems. They asked me where the children's father is? (...) I told them he's detained and I have no idea where he is. I do not know if they double checked but they let us pass in the end.”

In cases where this permission is not given before disappearance, the guardianship is automatically transferred to the uncles and male in-laws, making it a) difficult to move with children to a safer country and b) easier for women to get blackmailed or deprived of their children by their in-laws at times of disagreement.

## Social and Psychological Impact

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Many women experienced emotional distress during the interview as they narrated the story of their relative's disappearance, their displacement journey, or their current living conditions and situation. Women have reported experiencing chronic physical and psychological symptoms following their relatives' disappearance.

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<sup>49</sup> Publicized in April 2, 2018, Law 10 gives property owners, inside and outside of Syria, a period of 30 days to lay claim to their land properties by presenting their deeds to local administration offices. The law is restricted to war-damaged areas and allows the Regime to liquidate the property and sell it at auctions. <https://www.sana.sy/?p=733959>







At the time of disappearance, some women witnessed brutal body searches and detention raids while others were on the phone with their relatives just before they disappeared. Whether they witnessed the disappearance or not, women have reported trauma and shock as their immediate reaction to news of the disappearance. Reem Hussein, 24 years old, describes the moment she heard the news of her husband's detention:

“ The world has turned black. I could not have a sense of myself, I mean I felt like I was dreaming, could not believe that it had happened. I used to sit and wait for him. Even the days, I used to count them one by one. Today for example it has been 322 days, and the other day, it has been 250 days, and I count day by day.”

Her mother-in-law, on the other hand, has entered a state of denial after being informed of her son's death. She was given a document that confirms his death and was asked to collect his ID and belongings from Tishreen hospital. However, with no physical evidence, the mother continued to believe that her son was still alive. Another woman, Dalal Khoury, 27 years old, whose brother disappeared, reported sleeping for long hours. She said:

“ I went to a neurologist. He asked if I have trouble sleeping. I told him I was sleeping a lot, for two or three days sometimes, and I don't want anyone to wake me up. He said I had symptoms of [escaping] from reality. I asked: what is that? He said: [escaping] from reality.”

Lack of clear information about the circumstances of the disappearance has left the majority of women living in such a pain that continues to be experienced through memories, dreams, or encounters with children. Life, as described by some of the women, has been suspended.

“ Until now, every time I remember him, it is like he has just been taken in front of my eyes. The pain is still the same. It gets even worse the older the kids get.” **Maisa'a Mohammad, 32 years old - Idlib, Aleppo**

Women also have to take on the burden of conveying the truth of the father's disappearance to their children. Many women have expressed concern about the mental and psychological health of their children. In some cases, their children experienced severe psychological trauma. Several women spoke of anger outbreaks, irritability, depression, and a sense of insecurity experienced by their children, symptoms of mental distress which were often left unaddressed. Many of the women had between two to six children. The majority of children were aged between a few months to 14 years old at the time of disappearance.

“ If you look at my children, you would think they are dummies/ mentally retarded.”

“ He [10-year-old son] feels like he's inferior, there is no one to take his side [...] I try to do that but whatever I do, it is not like having a father. Other kids would fear a father more than a mother. His older brother has a hard time, too. Sometimes, they would be sitting and suddenly burst into tears. I ask them why are you crying? but they don't answer.”  
Some women have internalized their pain and grief so that it would not burden their chil-

dren and the people around them. The following is a narrative from Batoul Hasan about standing strong for her children:

“ I’m with my children all day, I try to encourage them to feel hopeful and optimistic, I can’t let them feel that I’m sad because they are already affected. In the evening, however, after they sleep, I wish to die, and not see the next morning. I don’t show anyone that deep deep inside, I’m very sad. I don’t let them realise.”

The trauma surrounding the disappearance has provided a breeding ground for rumours, leading women to face turbulent times: high hopes followed by disappointment with every piece of news about an exchange of prisoners or negotiation campaign. Many opportunists have exploited the rumours to con family members and more specifically the female relatives with promises of news, follow-up, legal representation, or even the release of their relative from detention.

## Social alienation and inclusion

Whether it is due to social stigma (fear of being related to the disappeared persons’ families<sup>50</sup>), an increase in responsibilities (since women have no time to maintain social relations), depression, or the displacement, women have been deprived of their social support circles and that has affected how they feel about society and the way they view themselves; their self-confidence and self-image.

Positive examples of social support in areas where internally displaced and refugee populations reside were highlighted in the interviews. This included hospitality, financial support (even when often as a form of debt), sharing household items and food, and emotional support. However, such support seems to be generally occasional and temporary. The longer the situation continued, the more likely the resources and support lessen and families are expected to find their own means to survive. Many women said they felt they had received no emotional or financial support from their own families, their in-laws, or from society at large. Factors worth mentioning include: fear of association with the family of the disappeared, the social norms that impose pressure on married women, and the perception of women and their children as an additional burden. In some extreme cases, women have been deprived or threatened with being deprived of their children by their in-laws. One woman spoke of the pressure of living in a ‘gossip-obsessed’ society and her discomfort in her social environment.

In refugee contexts, some women found a safe and familiar place in host countries. Douha Al-Masri, a 40-year-old who was displaced from Daraya to Majdal Anjar in Lebanon after witnessing brutal massacres, felt safe and happy that she could walk in the street without being asked for her ID, having her bags searched, being questioned about her destination, or exposed to verbal abuse at the checkpoints for being from Daraya. However, for other

<sup>50</sup> Area of residence and the party responsible for the detention are two main factors that define how the surrounding community approaches the issue. For people detained by the Regime and with family members living in areas under the control of anti-Regime forces, they are regarded as heroes and activists. Those who are detained or forcibly disappeared by one of the anti-Regime forces, they are usually regarded as collaborators with the Regime and their relatives are more likely to be treated with caution and possibly with shame.



women the stigma and discrimination has doubled, associated with being refugees.

“ Syrians are the problem. Anything that happens, even when not related to Syrians, Syrians are blamed. [...] I got used to it a little bit, what to do. But I still feel insecure and worried when I go out, I also feel worried about my kids when they go out.”

**Amani Al-Homsy, 39 years old -Majdal Anjar, Lebanon**

“ The way they talk about us hurts. They look at you as somebody who came to their country, some would argue, to steal their jobs. I had a fight with a woman who said that our Syrian children took their jobs.” **Souad Al-A'awar, 61 years old - Majdal Anjar, Lebanon**

## Available Support for Women

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Women have reported bad housing and living conditions; often living in overcrowded places without proper services including clean water and electricity. When asked about the official support structures and aid schemes for them and their families, all women interviewed expressed cynicism and dissatisfaction. Some women have repeatedly appealed to local and international aid offices and organisations for help but never heard back from them. Others, especially older women, said they could not possibly handle the long queue and waiting hours at crowded registration centres.

“ I went to the local council and asked for housing, they said they do not provide housing for women by themselves.”

When aid was available, it was irregular and insignificant. The aid either failed to meet the specific needs of women, thus leading them to sell it, or it was of bad quality. Especially in terms of medical treatment, women preferred to seek paid services. In some cases, women had to pay so much in transportation to receive the aid, that its purpose and suf-

iciency were undermined. Others, who had no one to leave their children with when seeking aid, expressed concerns about their children's safety. M.M. had to leave her primary school aged children at home alone with the doors and windows locked.

“ My daughter (11-year-old) has epilepsy [whose medication] is currently unavailable in the medical centres, I pay for it. Her eyesight is affected, her vision is partial, only 20%, and I have migraines which I also pay for and get it from the pharmacy because the medication provided by the medical centre is no good.”

**Samar Qasem, 31 years old – Al-Ramtha, Jordan**

In Syria, where the monthly living costs ranges between \$300-\$600 with an average rent of \$200, aid seems to be scarce, especially when contrasted with the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). High demands and few services often lead to creating a system of hierarchies and an exclusive criteria that favours some groups over others. Older women who are left alone seem to be given less attention and considered for less aid; when such aid is available for the detainees' families. And in some cases, where women have suffered from social pressure, seeking aid was not a straightforward process and the support was usually shared with their families and in-laws. In one case, Kawkab Khalas, 39 years old, had to pretend her husband was dead in the hope that she could receive support. She said:

“ I issued a death certificate for him with hope for orphans' patronage for my [seven] children. There is no proper support for the families of detainees, so I pronounced him dead. She (her daughter) barely talks to me now. She felt sad and disappointed that I did that for a few hundred pounds. I tried to explain that I'm tired of the high living expenses and debts, and that the money would help her brothers. She asked me not to justify it, and said that I did not have the right. When I see her like this, I feel suffocated. I regret it.”

**Khoulo! Al-Haj, 32 years old**, explains that she had to stop taking her two children who experienced trauma, aggression, and anger outbreaks to see a specialist in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, because of the transportation costs that she could not afford. Once her absence was noticed in one of the centres whose services she used, they offered to partially reimburse her travel costs. On the other hand, some international humanitarian organisations were reported to cut off aid without notice or an explanation in spite of the women's continuous visits and contact attempts, seeking information and help.

Apart from some food vouchers, medical aid, and psychosocial support available for some women, mostly in neighbouring countries where local and international organisations have more space to operate, the women generally felt that they were left behind, and that martyrs' widows were favoured over them when it came to aid and support.

## The Women's Demands

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The report confirms that women's requests and needs differ based on their position within the family, their personal experience of the conflict, and the nature of their relationship to the missing person(s). Noticeably, the examined group of women presented a common level of awareness of the situation despite their various education levels. The main commonalities found between women in this report are evident in their demands and priorities. All interviewees that come from a variety of social backgrounds or areas of origin, have unanimously asked for:

- ▶ the release of all arbitrarily detained civilians;
- ▶ the right to know the fate and whereabouts of the disappeared/detained family members: whether they are 'dead or alive,' duty of care in the detention centres, and the right to visit and make contact
- ▶ special support schemes for the disappeared persons' families, including pensions, education, medical treatment, and jobs for family members;





“ There are many with an uncertain future, counting their days in detention centres, no one [knows if they are] dead or alive, or their whereabouts, in heaven or on earth... and the detainees’ wives all [were left] with no future... no support... nothing... no one standing by them... [that’s] a tough life indeed.” **Najah Rihawi, 22 years old - Ramtha, Jordan**

“ To bring them back to their families. To release them... let them live, receive [medical] treatment, eat... end [their] humiliation” **Rweida Al-Laham, 49 years old - Erbid, Jordan**

“ They say the mothers of the martyrs are more (deserving). No one remembers us. We want them to set our relatives free [and we will manage].” **Hiba Al-Ahmad 30 years old - Ma’ra El Nu’mān, Syria**

Whilst not vocalized explicitly as a demand, the need for justice and the desire for seeing accountability of those responsible for the disappearance, and ultimately, the women’s suffering, have been implied in their political views, prayers and appeal to God, and sometimes expressed wishes that the perpetrators suffer a similar pain to that which they have inflicted (in retaliation). This suggests that the priorities, in the following order, (the right to know, the release and duty of care to the disappeared/detained, and the economic support for their families) as noted by the women do not qualify as alternatives to justice and accountability, but rather a prerequisite and more urgent step towards it.





# | CONCLUSION

Enforced disappearance has been an instrumental and deliberate strategy by armed groups and repressive regimes to suppress dissent and eliminate political opponents in secrecy to avoid legal accountability<sup>51</sup>. In addition to the scale and severity of continued violence that Syrians have experienced to date, there lies another challenge that has to do with the lack of serious consideration and inclusion of women's experiences. Although slowly growing<sup>52</sup>, gender analysis and research on different aspects of women's experiences during the conflict in Syria remains inadequate.

Understanding women's immediate and subsequent suffering from enforced disappearance is essential for analyzing how such violations shape women's status and affect their lives in post-conflict settings. Importantly, an examination of the gendered impact of enforced disappearance should explore the changes in gender roles, relations, and identities brought about by the conflict and the vital and varied roles women play. Direct and indirect involvement in the conflict, taking on increased or new economic and social roles, and participation in political and social movements have all shaped the experiences of women during the conflict<sup>53</sup>. This preliminary analysis of women's testimonies draws broad findings and common themes while, at the same time, encouraging more detailed research of the highlighted themes in relation to social status (wives, mothers, daughters, sisters etc.) as an indicator of community level inter-relations.

## Searching for a trace

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From the mothers that gathered in various state landmarks in Buenos Aires in 1997 to those who are still searching for their loved ones in Beirut 28 years after the end of the civil war in Lebanon, women were the first and the last to challenge state sponsored silence on the fate of the forcibly disappeared and the missing. The women in Syria have endured significant ordeals in the search for their husbands, sons, daughters, and relatives who remain arbitrarily detained and/or forcibly disappeared.

International bodies and civil society organizations should support the rights of Syrian women to know the fate of their disappeared and detained relatives, and echo their calls at peace talks, negotiations, and programming, for a just and democratic transition in Syria. They should also open opportunities for safe spaces that women can access and support

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<sup>51</sup> Dewhurst, P. and Kapur, A. (2015) The Disappeared and Invisible- Revealing the Enduring Impact of Enforced Disappearance on Women. International centre for transitional justice (ICTJ). Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/ICTJ-GGD>

<sup>52</sup> Ghazzawi, R., Mohammad, A. & Ramadan, O. (2015) Peacebuilding Defines our Future Now: A Study of Women's Peace Activism in Syria. Badael and Kvinna Till Kvinna. - Khalaf, R., Asad, R. and Tawil, R. (2016). Women in Emerging Media in Syria (2011 – 2015): A Critical Discourse Analysis. The Netherlands: The Syrian Female Journalists Network. - Khalaf, R., Al-Taweel, R., Heme, N., Kikhia, S., Menem, A. and Sabbagh, R. (2017) Women Participation In Syrian Cities Today: Emerging Roles And Opportunities, A Preliminary Scoping Review On Governance And Productivity. Beirut: Common Space Initiative (CSI). Alsaba, K. & Kapilashrami, A. (2016) Understanding women's experience of violence and the political economy of gender in conflict: the case of Syria, *Reproductive Health Matters*, 24 (47), 5-17.

<sup>53</sup> Bop, C. (2001) Women in Conflicts, their Gains and their Losses, in S. Meintjes, A. Pillay, and M. Turshen (eds) *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation*, pp. 19–34. London: Zed Books. - Hughes, M. M. (2009). Armed conflict, international linkages, and women's parliamentary representation in developing nations. *Social Problems*, Vol. 56, No.1, pp. 174-204. - Cohn, C. (2013) *Women and wars: towards a conceptual framework*. In: C. Cohn, ed. *Women and wars*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1–35. - Ni'Aola'in, F., Haynes, D., & Cahn, N. (2011) *On the frontlines: Gender, war, and the post-conflict process*. NY: Oxford University Press.

each other. Groups such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) as well as academic and research institutes are asked to expand their efforts when working with the relatives of the detained and disappeared. Using recently available technology such as crowd mapping<sup>54</sup>, DNA identification systems, and others, can allow such groups to create better registries on the detained and disappeared in Syria. They should also ensure that persons in detention have access to their rights in terms of the security forces adhering to the duty of care, communication with the outside world, and due process. Families of persons in detention and the disappeared need to be able to reach their relatives and be certain they have access to these rights. They should also be able to search and locate their relatives in a process that protects them from implicit or explicit harassment and/or violence, and have access to mechanisms that protect them from any form of abuse and harassment in detention centers or any other place they need to visit or access.

## Support women's resilience

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Female relatives of the disappeared and the detained are taking on new responsibilities and roles in their families as breadwinners, and more importantly as decision makers in the affairs of their dependants. Educational opportunities are identified by the female relatives as a crucial element to navigate their responsibilities and alleviate the impact of the burdens they now carry. Literacy opportunities are critical for women with minimal to no formal education to be able to negotiate administrative procedures at security branches, administrative facilities, and prisons. Vocational training for female relatives can expand the number of jobs they can pursue and occupy, as much as access to higher education can for those with sufficient previous formal education. Increased educational opportunities can allow the female relatives to negotiate better compensations and salaries, as well as increase their self-reliance and confidence.

Therefore, despite the hardships faced by Syrian women due to a multitude of circumstances compounded by the disappearance of their relatives, women have found a way to go on and support their families, both financially and morally. The toll it takes on them is sometimes unimaginable, but with the proper support, training and aid provision, women are resilient agents of change and not only victims.

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<sup>54</sup> Ushahidi first started as a Kenyan based website that collected testimonies and stories via emails and text messages and presented them geographically over google maps. Through its many uses, it demonstrated the ability of crowd mapping to report on violations as they began and better at collecting information from rural areas.

## Access to justice mechanisms

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Access to justice is a basic right that needs to be supported and facilitated for female relatives. This includes processes of justice that permeate the various day to day needs of women; from custody of their children, to property rights and ownership, as well as legal counsel and representation. Justice should not be perceived as a narrow path to maintain peace, but rather as an ongoing process of transformation and healing that can bring about peace, a conclusion to the conflict, and peace beyond the transition phase in Syria. The pursuit of justice in Syria lacks both context and the gender-specific harms that undermine achieving an equitable and fair process. To challenge the narrow view of peace, international parties should open spaces where justice processes are developed for Syrian civil society organizations, more specifically women-led civil society organizations, in order to engage with the programming and development of gender-sensitive justice.

Civil society organizations that work with Syrian women should empower them with much needed knowledge on their rights, and knowledge to better understand the operating legal procedures in the areas they live in. Additionally mapping of legal aid services and access to legal counsel, can be a very empowering tool for women to be able to navigate the legal system in Syria and neighboring countries today.

## Dealing with the psychosocial impact

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Civil society organizations should aim to encourage aid programmes to be designed and carried out to meet the specific needs of the families of the disappeared and the detained. Access to psychosocial support is a crucial step for many female relatives to be able to deal with and overcome their traumatic experiences as well as to better cope with their situation, as this also increases their ability to support their children and dependants. Financial aid and support can function as an alternative at the least, and as a complementary element in the best case scenario, which would allow women to better cope with the demands of their household and families. This aid should not be reserved for women who can ascertain the death of their relative (and breadwinner), but also for those who are still searching for them.

Access to medical care can help to alleviate the suffering from war-related injuries, chronic illness, and other health demands that weigh heavy on women. Quality and equitable medical care is a right that needs to be upheld by state agencies, local administration parties, and civil society organizations. Civil society organizations and international parties engaged in documentation, conflict research, and similar respondent-based work should incorporate referral and protection strategies, that identify the needs of female-respondents and refer them to available aid/support that they may not be aware of.

Finally, aid provision should envision women not only as beneficiaries, but also as partners and stakeholders. Decisions, cuts, and information on aid provisions needs to be transparent and communicated clearly to its recipients: including dates of provision, duration, and forecasted support sustainability.

## Memory and mobilization

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Our experience working with female relatives of the detained and disappeared proved to be of value to the women, as was mentioned by them when they reflected on their experiences as narrators. Oral history can play a function of relief and empowerment for many women. By sharing their stories, the women were able to recognize their suffering, organize their thoughts, and find support by organizing and forming groups to demand their rights.

Advocacy groups, both international and local Syrian, need to recognize the importance of female relatives' experiences and to support spaces to accommodate women to voice these experiences. Local organizations have a crucial role to play in transforming the stories and testimonies of the female relatives into solidarity projects and the creation of sustainable tools. And to encourage women to share their stories and effectively shape their programming accordingly.





## ***Families for Freedom***

One of the family groups that formed as a result of this work is the Families For Freedom. They are a women-lead movement which is demanding to know where their loved ones are. The movement positions itself against enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention by all parties to the conflict. They aim to mobilize the public to pressure all sides to comply with their demands. Despite intimidations of silence, they continue to expand their movement to include every family with a detained or missing person, across religions, political beliefs or ethnicities.

Through networking with other families, the continuous presence and public visibility at peace talks, and lobbying, FFF delivers a set of demands:

- ▶ The release of the names of all the detainees, along with their current location and statuses, as well as the immediate halt of torture and mistreatment. For those who died in detention, a certificate of death along with causes of death and location of burial to be provided to family members.
- ▶ Access of international humanitarian organizations to detention centers and the monitoring of duty of care in these centers.
- ▶ The abolishment of exceptional courts (field-, war-, and counter-terrorism courts) and upholding of due process under UN supervision.





## Peace and security

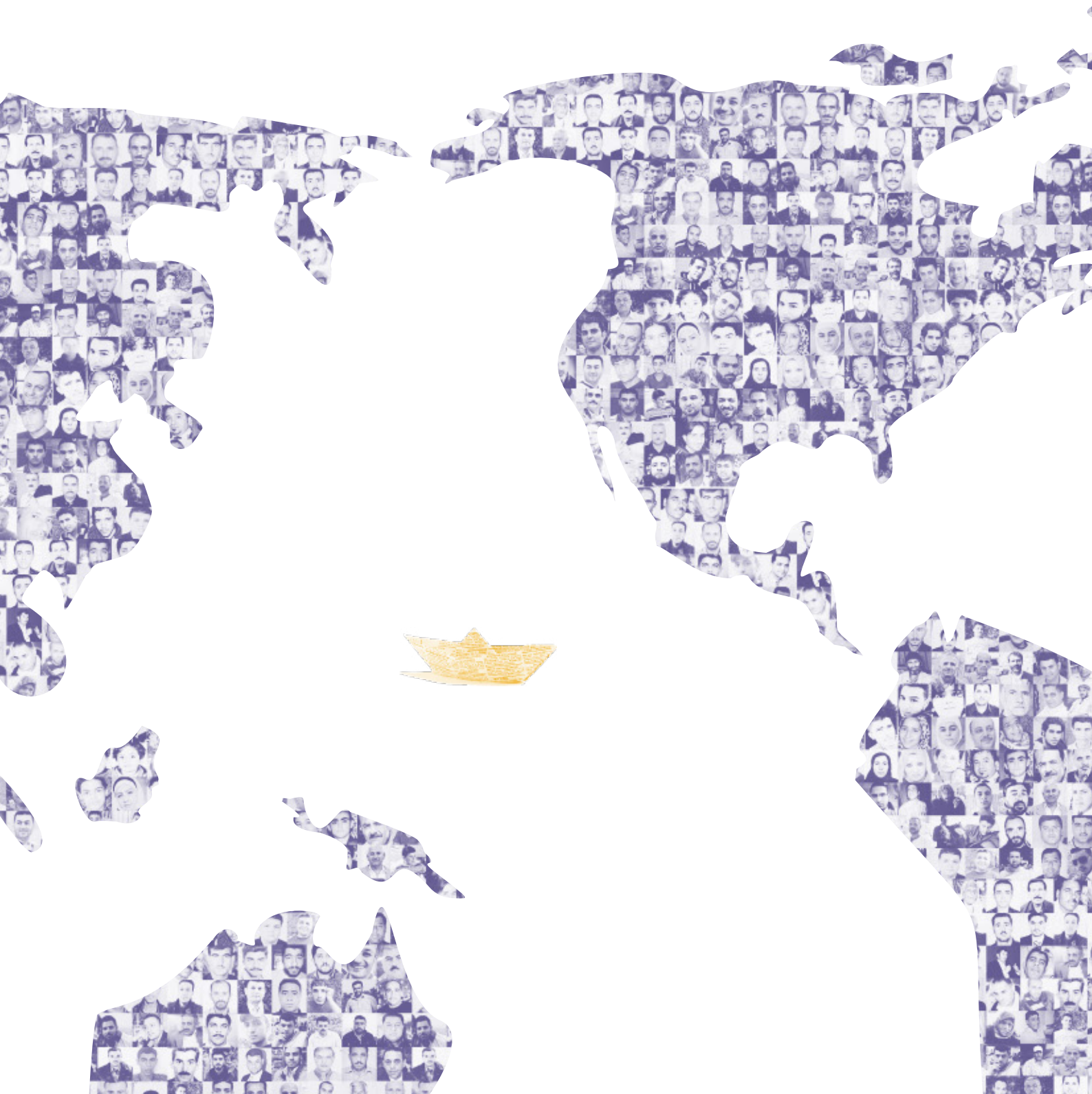
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The stories reviewed and analyzed in this report uncover various levels of impact the conflict has had on female relatives of the detained and disappeared. There are many additional stories that are still hidden and unheard from the areas that were not accessible by the project due to the security constraints. Any form of peace should be founded on the premise that all the voices of Syrians are heard, rather than a simplistic peace based on a military balance that will only reinforce injustices towards women.



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The right to know the fate of their relatives is paramount, and it is also crucial to note that this right is not limited to knowing the general status of the detainee as alive or dead. Current practice by the Regime includes the release of names of detainees who are deceased and/or have died while in detention without any proof or the bodies. What the women demand and need goes beyond this limited information and includes details on their current whereabouts. It includes a process of communication with the person if they are alive, and when and how to retrieve the body of the person -so that they can mourn- in cases of death.





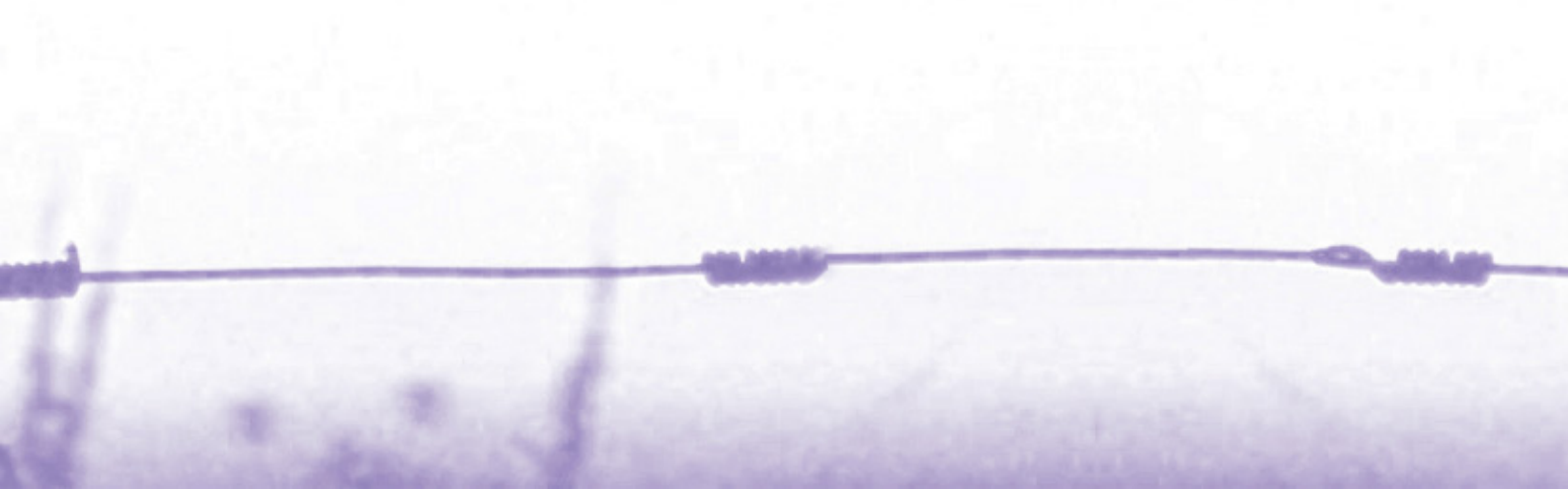
# | RECOMMENDATIONS

## **For Development and Humanitarian Support:**

- ▶ Support and encourage programming for that safe spaces that are accessible for women to network, exchange their experiences, and support each other.
- ▶ Support programming for livelihood and education for women, such as literacy courses, vocational training ,etc
- ▶ Encourage aid programming that is tailored and accessible for female relatives of the detained and disappeared; including psychosocial support, medical support and treatment for them and their dependants, and transparent and co-operative financial aid when possible.

## **For Human Rights Advocacy:**

- ▶ Provide female relatives with mapping and referral procedures on legal counsel and aid that are affordable and accessible.
- ▶ Incorporate novel and innovative technologies to map and register the disappeared and the missing.
- ▶ The ICRC should increase its effort to contact the detained and provide them with communication channels with the outside world, especially with their family.
- ▶ Push the Syrian regime to abolish exceptional courts (field-, war-, and counter-terrorism courts) and upholding of due process.
- ▶ Hold the Syrian Regime and warring parties accountable to adhere to their responsibilities, and report on their duty of care at detention centers and prisons.
- ▶ Ensure the protection of female relatives from any form of harassment and/or violence at detention and administrative facilities.



## For Empowerment and Community Organization:

- ▶ Amplify the voices of female relatives at peace talks, negotiations platforms, and similar initiatives.
- ▶ Provide training and capacity building for women to organize themselves and pursue their demands and needs.
- ▶ Support awareness and capacity building programming for women on their economic and civil rights; especially when navigating administrative processes around prison, child custody, property ownership, etc.
  - ▶ Raise awareness of the work of ICRC in the Syrian community, especially the female relatives.
- ▶ Open justice development venues and programming to female activists and women's rights groups to challenge their tokenistic representation.
- ▶ Ensure the availability of equitable and quality mental health and medical aid for women and their dependents.



# ANNEX I

## THE SYRIAN ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

The Syrian Oral History Archive (SOHA) is a project launched by Dawlaty, in partnership with Women Now for Development, within its mission of supporting Syrians and youth in particular to engage in democratic transition and transitional justice in Syria. While the archive seeks to document the experiences of a wide range of Syrians affected by conflict, the project focuses on documenting marginalized voices and experiences, more specifically that of women and youth. As young people are often under-represented and overlooked in discussions regarding their country's future, and local women are inadequately represented in forums aiming to highlight the voice and participation of Syrian women. The project found that it is crucial to work with vulnerable groups on documenting their experiences.

Based on the above rationale, the short-term aim of the archive is to document and follow the needs of the population, amplify their voice regarding human rights violations, and shed light on issues of people who have been detained or disappeared. The archive's data will also be used for advocacy, programming, and policymaking purposes at the international level. On the long term, the archive will attempt to work with civil society organizations on memorialization of the Syrian conflict, in order to better guide post conflict mechanisms.

When one talks about transitional justice, beyond the mechanisms themselves, what is at stake is a process of social transformation. At the very core of any effort to engage communities in transitional justice processes, lies the underlying longer term process of using the period of conflict as a transition towards setting the foundations for a new, inclusionary society. Dawlaty will work with partners to reach Syria's diverse population groups and segments, including across political and military lines, to create an oral history archive. The archive started with a focus on two populations of interest to collect their experiences of the conflict; female relatives of the missing, the disappeared, and the detained, as well as young Syrians between the ages of 18 and 24.

### Archive's Methodology

Dawlaty aims to develop methodologies for three independent yet interconnected processes: (1) oral history collection, (2) archive building, and (3) programming on transitional justice, advocacy, and community engagement.

In the first vein, the work on oral history collection is the most developed. Dawlaty and Women Now received conceptual training on oral history archiving, while field interviewers received training on the interview process and management of data.

The methodology, plan, and tools for archive building and for transitional justice, however, will

be further developed through strengthening the archive from a technical perspective, and through developing advocacy and community outreach strategies targeting wider audiences and potential partner organizations.

When it comes to the archiving methodology, Dawlaty and its partners are devising a workflow, guidelines, and tools for archiving and information management that ensures all interviews collected are standard/compliant. Dawlaty commenced a process of thorough research and consultation to arrive at a comprehensive process of building the archive's digital infrastructure, taking into consideration all aspects of the workflow (material description, storage, preservation, and access).

Building on the above, the establishment of the archive and its use in transitional justice processes is treated as two separate yet interlinked goals, where the archive is utilized as evidence in the transitional justice period. A community outreach strategy, with guiding principles for dissemination and community participation, is en route for development. The strategy, to be developed, will contain specific information on who the archive aims to serve, who are its users, what are the potential sources of funding, what is its added value, and which agencies have similar aims and can therefore be used as sources or partners in this process. The project will also engage and address interviewees as sources of change, where people who have contributed their stories to the archive take an active role in the design and implementation of outreach activities, and are viewed as active agents in advocating for their rights during the transitional justice period.

This report reviews and analyses the data that has been collected to date. The report aims to evaluate the needs of the narrators, and explore the various ways that their lives were affected by the disappearance and/or detention of their loved ones. Moreover, the report draws from the data, mechanisms of resilience and coping that the female narrators took on to respond to their needs. It also develops recommendations for programming and advocacy that local and international actors can carry out to strengthen the women's resilience and/or raise their demands.





# **ANNEX II**

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Framework for interviewing relatives of detained, forcibly disappeared and missing persons**

#### **Selection criteria**

Syrian girls and women residing in Syria. Interlocutor must be close relatives (mothers, sisters, daughters) of the detained persons or forcibly disappeared during the conflict in Syria since 2011. The participation of the detained or the missing persons in the armed conflict does provide grounds for excluding the relative from documenting her experience.

#### **Interview Guide**

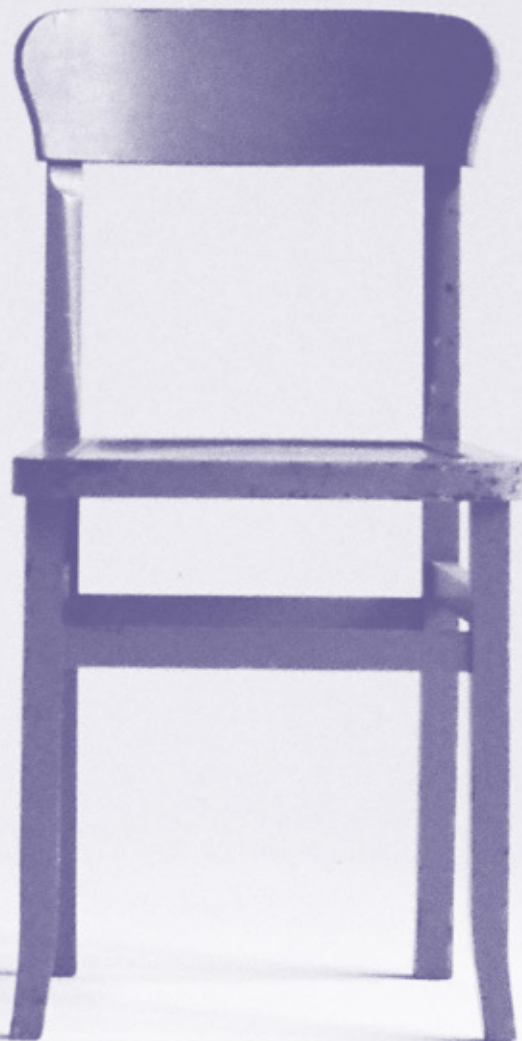
Make sure that the interlocutor has read or is aware of the items included in the consent document and do read the document clearly to people who are illiterate. Give the interlocutor ample opportunity to ask questions about the interview and her role in it. Try to make your interlocutor as comfortable as possible.

This form is a guide. Try asking questions in the order shown in this document, but keep the conversation going smoothly and allow the interlocutor to discuss freely without departing from the main ideas. You can use the probing questions to urge the interlocutor to clarify her thoughts. Try to encourage the interlocutor to clarify her ideas constantly by urging her to go into details, especially when giving quoted answers.

First explain the basic rules:

**Before we begin, I'd like to remind you that there are no right or wrong answers in this interview. We are interested in learning about your experience, so please feel to be frank as much as you can and to share your thoughts and feelings about your experience. It is very important that I listen to all your views on this subject. I'd also like to remind you that all the information you will share with me will be subject to the release and sharing permissions that we agreed upon in advance and written in the Release Form.**

Let's begin by introducing ourselves first (the field worker must introduce herself and her role in the project).



# INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## Part One: Background on the person

1. Can you introduce yourself?
  - a. How old are you? Where were you born?
  - b. What is your native language (Arabic, Kurdish, Syriac, Armenian, Aramaic, Turkmen)?
2. Where do you live now? Is this your original place of residence or were you forced to leave/flee to this area?
  - In case of displacement, inquire about it (when did the displacement take place, with whom, why, etc...)
3. What is your educational status? Are you pursuing your studies currently?
  - a. In case of studying currently: How and where? What is your specialty? Are there any obstacles?
  - b. In case of disruption of education: What happened? What are the current obstacles? Do you think that pursuing your studies is a priority for you?
4. Can you tell me about your social status?
  - a. Who do you live with? What is your relationship with them?
  - b. What is your relationship with your current environment?
  - c. Are you married or engaged? Can you tell me more about your current or previous relationship(s) that you feel have been important to you at this stage?
5. What is your professional status? Do you work?
  - a. In case of working: What is your job? How long have you been in this career? Is it satisfactory to you, in terms of the salary for example? Are you happy with it?
  - b. In case of unemployment: Who takes care of your financial income?
  - c. What is the approximate monthly income of the family? In your opinion, what is the minimum required for a decent life in the area you live in (healthcare, rent, food, water, electricity...)?
6. How would you describe the living conditions (housing conditions, heating, drinking water...)?
7. Continue to inquire about any point that may be significant in this context. You can ask about the chronic health problems that an interlocutor or a family member suffers from, for example, or about other responsibilities she shoulders. (Do you have any health problems or diseases? When have these problems begun to appear? Do you or any of your children/family members have special needs or war injuries? Do you receive aid, of what sort (medical, financial, in-kind...)?



## Part Two: General information about the missing person

### Personal Information

1. Name of the person:
2. Place of birth:
3. Date of birth:
4. Profession/Education:
5. The normal address:
6. Nationality:

### Family Information

1. Father's name:
2. Mother's name and surname:
3. Social status:
4. Did the missing person have children? How many?
5. The age of the children at the time of detention/disappearance:

### Information about the person

1. Can you tell me about this person and her/his personality?
  - a. How was her/his character? With her/his family and siblings?
  - b. How was her/his relationship with her/his friends?
  - c. What did her/his lifestyle look like?
2. How was her/his social environment, e.g. the family?
  - a. Was s/he in a relationship with someone? with whom?
  - b. Was s/he married?
  - c. Did s/he have children? How many, how old (and their first names if possible)?
3. What were her/his hobbies and interests?
  - a. What did s/he used to do in her/his spare time?
4. What were her/his ambitions and dreams?

### Information about detention/disappearance

1. Date of detention/disappearance:
2. Location of detention/disappearance:
3. What was your reaction when you knew about her/his detention or when you first checked where s/he was?
  - a. What did you do first?
  - b. What were your initial feelings? How did these feelings and attitudes develop?
4. Has the missing person been seen after the incident of disappearance/detention/abducting?



- a. Where and when was s/he seen?
  - b. Have you been allowed to visit your relative? How was the visit? What were the features of the place? How much did the visit cost (travel expenses, food, gift to the relative, bribes... etc.)?
- 5. How much time and have you spent searching or inquiring about the person until now?
- 6. Have you been harassed, persecuted or asked for sex services in exchange for information?
- 7. Is it possible to describe the context of the detention/disappearance?
  - a. Description of place of detention?
  - b. Were there certain events occurring on the same day or month (battles/invasion of town/...)?
- 8. Is there information available about the responsible authority?
  - a. Do you have an idea about the reason for the detention/disappearance? What is your take on this reason?
  - b. Do you receive rumors/news about the fate of the person? Like what?
- 9. Have you tried to investigate about her/him?
  - a. If no, why? What were your fears?
  - b. If yes, how did you try to reach her/him? Whom did you seek? What were the legal procedures?
    - i. What obstacles have you encountered (abuse, humiliation, fatigue...)?
- 10. Have you heard of any official authority or local or international initiative working on the issue of detainees/abductees/ forcibly disappeared persons? How did you hear about it?  
***If such an authority exists, would you like to participate and testify? If not, why not? What would motivate or encourage you to participate?***
- 11. Can you tell me about the results/effects of the detention/disappearance of the person on your family?
  - a. In terms of securing your main needs?
  - b. In terms of legal consequences (children's custody, official transactions...) Do you have official papers (passports, family register, IDs, birth certificates, death certificates)? Under whose name is the property (house, land) registered, and do you have ownership papers? In case of new children after the husband's disappearance, were they registered? In case you wish later, could you marry again without legal (or social) restrictions?
  - c. In terms of economic consequences (income, labor...) if the person died, how much did the funeral cost and who bore the costs?
  - d. In terms of social life: Do you feel that your social environment is supportive, and did you feel that some people kept a distance out of fear for themselves? Do you feel exploited or weakened because of the absence of the husband/son/father? In what sense?

12. According to your observation, how do you think the absence of the person reflects on the children? Is there a difference between boys and girls, their school performance, play-time, and daily work?

a. Other aspects...

13. Have you ever been asked to declare the death of the disappeared/detained person?

14. Had there been other cases of disappearance/detention in your family history before the revolution? When?

## **Part Three: General information on missing women**

1. Did you know or hear about women (not necessarily relatives) who were detained, abducted or lost/disappeared without any news about them? Who? What do you know about them?

2. In the case of women who had been detained/abducted and then released, how does society perceive and treat them? What do you think personally?

## **Part Four: Motives and demands**

1. What are the reasons for sharing your experience with us?

2. What are your demands on the issue of detainees and missing persons and their families?

3. What is your relationship with the actor exercising authority on the ground? Do you feel that any of the actors/groups on the ground represent you? Why? If yes, what are they?

**Thank you very much for your participation. I have finished the questions that I wanted to discuss with you. Is there any other important point that I missed and you'd like to tell me about?**





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must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests that Dawlaty or Women Now for Development endorses you or your use. You may not use the material for commercial purposes. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

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All the pictures of the disappeared persons (pre-edited) in this book are taken from the database of the Violation Documentation Center in Syria.



