



# Surviving Freedom

An analysis of the experiences of female survivors of detention after their release, based on the testimonies of the 'Survivors or not Yet' Campaign

Research report



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Research report

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## “Foreword

The struggle of female detainees in Syria has roots long preceding the country's 2011 uprising. The uprising, however, gave rise to two parallel shifts: first, an increased intensity and complexity of this struggle, and second, an increased capacity for survivors to document their situation, and the creation of better mechanisms for working on their cases.

A number of factors lie behind this latter development. Syrians' demands for freedom allowed the various forms of political and activist work out of the reserve of the elite and into the public sphere, giving rise to an increased space for civil society, legal and media activity/activism, which prior to March 2011 had been highly restricted. Meanwhile, international movements challenging sexual violence, conflict-related sexual violence, and gender-based violence saw growth across the globe. The tools and resources within international legal work also improved in relation to arbitrary detention and forced disappearance, which had an impact on Syrian approaches to this issue.

Moreover, the increase in female empowerment initiatives led by non-governmental groups created more possibilities for women to be able to advocate for their causes, whether through writing, speech, photo-documentation, or other tools. This has made the launch of 'Survivors or Not Yet' campaign by 3ayny3aynak platform a possible and improvable work.

The platform was established in 2017 as by the organizations ASML/Syria, under the name of Women Empowerment through Media. The aim was to give professional media training to as many Syrian women as possible residing outside regime-controlled territories, working to redress the gender imbalance in the media sector, which has been especially stark during the conflict. The media's focus was the war's violent combat, which was more accessible for men to cover owing to traditional societal norms, with other stories from the war left unmentioned.

Since 2017, the platform trained 148 women across different parts of the country, and followed up with them consistently to avoid temporary inefficient empowerment. This was carried out despite the ongoing changes in the participants' circumstances given the Syrian conflict, including the extreme challenges of displacement.

Given this, it was easier for us to create a new platform working with non-professional women at the time to work on human stories, and to focus on so-called 'peace journalism', which tackles daily non-violent goings-on, especially those that relate to women. This project soon developed and came to include broader areas, accompanied by more challenges for women journalists in our society.

In the autumn of 2018, during a weekly team meeting, one of the participants shared a recorded testimony\* of a former detainee, and what her life has been like since her release. Her testimony moved us all and left us wondering about the countless other stories. The participant later shared further testimonies, which encouraged other participants to do the same. Having discussed it together, they suggested that these testimonies be published as a series titled 'Survivors or Not Yet'. After publishing 12 testimonies on a regular basis, we considered launching an advocacy campaign under the same name, in order to locate such stories and share them with the widest audience possible, garnering greater attention for the cause by those in the public sphere.

With this in mind, we contacted a number of Syrian media agencies, most of whom seemed willing to cooperate from the outset. The participating media group came to include 11 agencies,<sup>1</sup> which worked to collect and share testimonies on their platforms. These stories were also shared on the campaign's website [www.survivorsornot.com](http://www.survivorsornot.com), and social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, all under the one hashtag of #Survivors\_or\_not\_yet.

The campaign was launched on April 15, 2019 and went on for six weeks up until May 31, 2019. In parallel, several events were held in the areas of the participants, who took it upon themselves to attract more attention for the cause by finding an interactive space with the local audience and active civil society organizations in their areas.<sup>2</sup> The campaign also gained local, Arab and international attention from several media outlets.<sup>3</sup>

The main aim of the campaign was to raise awareness in Syrian society over the negative attitudes towards female survivors of detention, kidnap, or forced disappearance, upon their return to their communities. This is often disregarded in the narrative put forward by mainstream media and many legal groups, where reporting or documentation of former detainees' cases is limited to their experiences during detention, without addressing the violations that follow, even in cases where these cause greater harm than the violations faced in detention, for example.

One of the most significant issues these women face upon release is perhaps the social stigma they are subjected to, which survivors often perceived as victims of rape and sexual violence whether this is true or not. This places women in a position where they have to defend against these accusations, which comes to resemble another violation against survivors, and an implicit collusion with the dominant stigma and social norms regarding survivors of sexual violence. Such collusion even found its way to certain actors in the public sphere, including researchers and those working in the media.

\* This testimony and all testimonies included in the report were obtained with informed consent of the survivors for media use

1 The names of the participating media organizations can be reviewed at the end of the research

2 <https://horrya.net/archives/101371>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j6lv4IGycgg&feature=youtu.be>  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJbD9-\\_G7hE&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJbD9-_G7hE&feature=youtu.be)

3 <https://www.facebook.com/AJA.Syria/videos/428880951179072/>  
<https://bawaba-sy.com/2019/05/08/%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A3%D9%85-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF/>  
<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/2019/5/16/%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A3%D9%85-%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%B3-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-1>

Throughout the campaign, we noticed differences in societal attitudes towards survivors, depending on whom they were detained by. These differences could be seen clearly in comments on social media, with many including highly violent imagery, and questioning the survivors' credibility and the reasons for their detention. For example, women who had been kidnapped by ISIS faced a much more hostile response, including hate speech, than those who had been detained by the Syrian regime. While survivors of regime detention also face significant societal problems upon release, there is relatively strong consensus that the Syrian regime has detained a huge number of people arbitrarily, or on the basis of political or revolutionary activism. With ISIS, on the other hand, detentions were based on women's 'violations of Sharia,' and these arrests are not, as some believe, more planned nor selective, a misconception challenged by the testimonies in the campaign.

By the end of campaign, we had collected a large number of testimonies, such that they have a significant documentary and legal value for those working in documentation, research, and human rights. They were structured as press material, giving survivors a free space to shed light on details as they saw fit, without being limited within a more narrow research framework with specific prompt questions. As a result of this, the content of the testimonies was hugely diverse.

Following the end of the campaign, we collaborated with Women Now for Development (WND), which initiated a project addressing sexual violence in Syria. This project looked into the situation facing survivors of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, aiming to fill the gap between the reality of survivors and the efforts of relevant international organizations.

WND assembled a team of female experts in legal and psychological support, as well as media advocacy. This was an attempt to join efforts in the causes related to conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, and to produce databases and plans which were more effective and directly relevant to the needs of survivors. The outcomes of the Survivors or Not Yet campaign were of significant value, since reaching a greater understanding of the situation facing survivors was essential to the group's work. We therefore decided to create a research paper with the collected testimonies which could then be drawn upon by researchers, experts, and organizations.

WND provided its support and cooperated with the team of Survivors or Not Yet in order to review and analyze the outcomes of the campaign under 'The reality of survivors between international advocacy and real-life priorities'. These efforts emerged out of the necessity for collaborative work, in order to create a comprehensive response plan for these highly sensitive issues and give rise to forms of feminist collaboration. Accordingly, the testimonies in the campaign have been restructured and analyzed in this research paper in order to reach conclusions, outputs, and recommendations, and to create a local reference that preserves these testimonies.

I want to thank all those who contributed to this campaign, including media outlets, journalists, and civil society organizations. I would like to give particular thanks to Women Now for Development for their faith in this project, and for providing the necessary support to conduct this research. I also want to thank all the journalists and the team of 3ayny3aynak platform, who have put in tireless efforts for this campaign. And finally, I would like to thank the researcher Hiba Mehrez, who was able to transfer the testimonies of the campaign, despite their nature and diversity, into thought-provoking research material with valuable information and analysis. Such material will pave the way for further questions and ideas on this subject and constitutes an important addition to Syrian feminist knowledge production.



Rand Sabbagh

Manager of 'Women Empowerment Through Media' project - ASML/Syria

Chief editor of 3ayny3aynak



## “Introduction



“There is something wrong in our optimism... Our announced cheerfulness is in its core built on a dangerous readiness for death... We have become the witnesses and victims of horrors worse than death, and we were not able to find a purpose more sublime than life.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps ‘Witnesses and victims of horrors worse than death’ would serve as a suitable title for this research paper. The 82 press reports tell stories that can be described as no less than terrifying. These stories open the door to hidden worlds of pain and violence, causing wounds which time alone cannot heal. There is a violence and pain that survivors face twice: first in detention, with the deprivation of freedom and all the repercussions it entails, and then again when survivors are faced with the severe social stigma, stereotyping and prejudgments of the societies they return to. Such stigma has deeply ingrained roots from long before the war, roots that implicate society’s capability of total extremism.

It might appear that the repercussions of violence survivors face during and after detention might have already been discussed enough, but such a discussion has not lost its urgency. This is especially so given that such discussions often bring the myriad of ideological, classist, sectarian, ethnic, and gender complications to the surface, with these dynamics morphing into one rigid entity which becomes almost impossible to challenge or break down.

Meanwhile, every time we talk about survivors, or write reports and research on their situation, and in every study, research, or even discussion about litigation and justice, the voice of the victims, or survivors – their needs and the questions that they have are not given the attention they deserve. The voices of those for whom it all started, and for whom the solidarity and advocacy campaigns were launched, are marginalized. Do survivors want to speak publicly? Do they seek litigation, or do they simply want to live? Should they be pushed into programs such as vocational training, or should we simply ask what they want? And isn’t ‘What do you need?’ a deceptive question when information and awareness of choices is lacking? Is it possible to seek a more democratic advocacy that allows survivors to express their fears and their aspirations?

4 Hannah Arendt ‘We Refugees’



This is where the importance of the testimonies of Survivors or Not Yet comes in; countering violence by publicly addressing it is perhaps the most significant and courageous act for survivors, especially in a society which wages war on them on all fronts, and represses their voices after a coming face to face with the possibility of death in detention, and suffering experiences and fears that cannot be reversed.

As such, reopening the reports after more than six months of campaigning is a testament to the importance of studying and discussing them: to hear the voices of survivors as they narrate their struggles in a way which best represents what they went through. Such narration avoided the distortions of rigid and complex expressions that tend to find their way into research and studies on Syrian survivors of detention. Presenting this material which goes into clear details of the struggles and needs of survivors better allows for an assessment of what can be offered to survivors by service providers, international organizations, and the media, while raising awareness to reduce the stigma associated with detention.

While the statements of refugees might not contain new information for experts, and while many find it hard to read such painful testimonies, it is vital that we continue to document what is happening in Syria. Reports of the deaths of many women in detention in Syria continue to reach us, with the responsibility for these deaths found on all the sides of the Syrian war, with the Syrian regime at the forefront of these. Although the documentation is a challenge in and of itself, it is the documentation of the pain caused, and the discussion and analysis of the survivors' words, needs and desires, and the way they can come to live again, that are the most important aims that this research can, with hope, work to achieve.

## Methodology

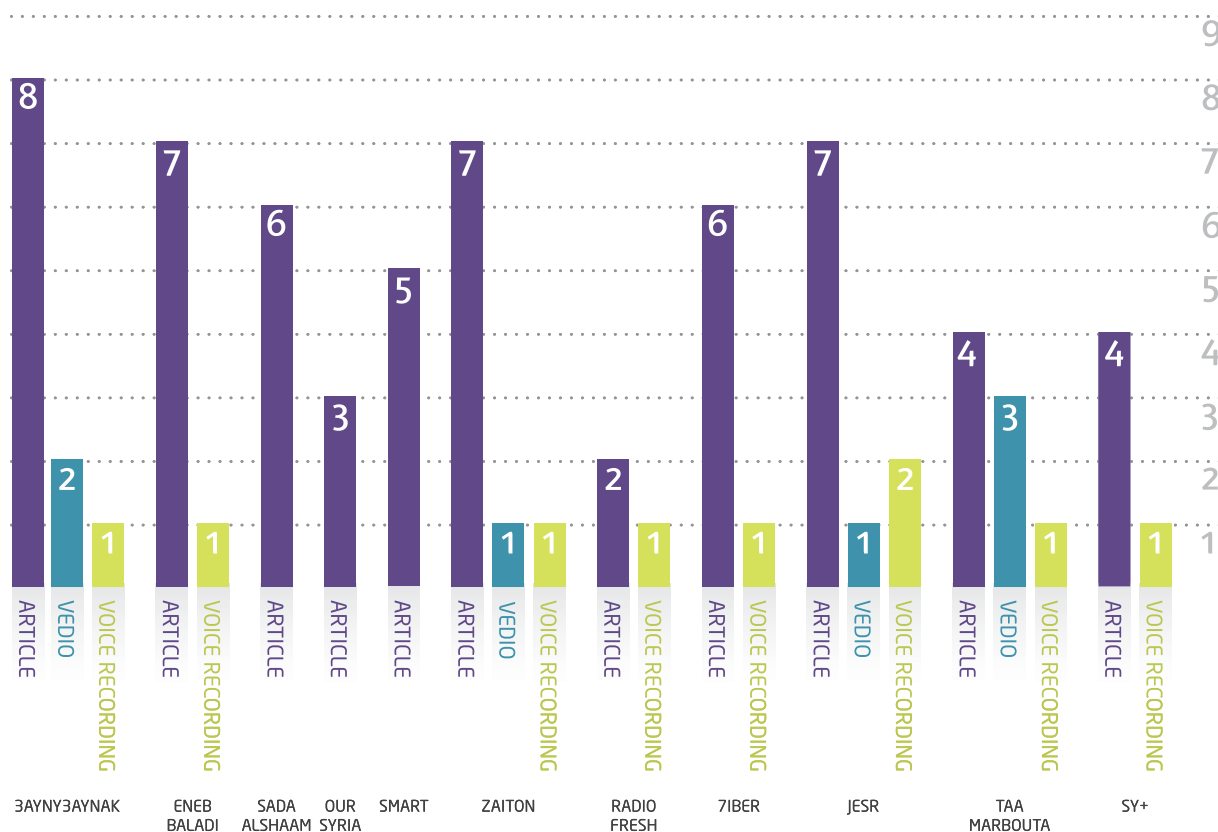
The analysis section of this paper is based on a study of the materials of Survivors or Not Yet, a campaign carried out by 3ayny3aynak training platform, in collaboration with several Syrian media outlets and platforms. The campaign was carried out over six weeks, between 15 April 2019 and 31 May 2019.

The studied sample constituted 82 written, audio, and video press reports, conducted throughout the campaign by 11 Syrian media outlets, which formed the backbone of this campaign. The reports were conducted to study the needs of survivors, and to shed light on their issues and mechanisms that could be used to tackle these issues.

The reports in the campaign were written under the hashtag #Survivors\_or\_not\_yet. Most of the reports were descriptions of personal stories by survivors, and of their experiences during and after detention. Some reports, however, were designated for service providers, and included presentations of models or interviews on ways to approach the social stigma towards survivors.

The methodology of the report thus draws upon the analysis of available data in order to present a holistic overview of the study sample, and to conclude outputs of potential value to reassess the current reality in terms of service provision or the inclusion of survivors in societies.

Division of the Study Sample by Media Outlet and Type of Medium Used



This shows the diversity of the study sample 59 written articles, 7 audio reports, and 9 video reports.

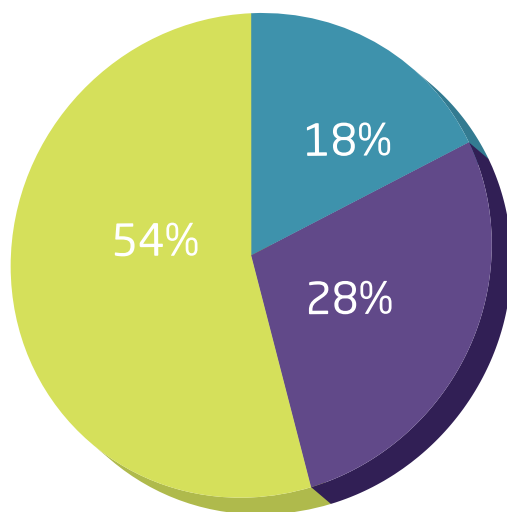
## “Research Outcomes



“It’s good you didn’t ask me to talk about the period of my detention in the regime’s prisons. There are other things that I need to talk about more. Today, even though I have returned to my normal life, got my children back, and got married to a man who proposed through a relative, I cannot forget what I went through in the prisons, both big and small.”<sup>5</sup>

outlining the cases discussed in the press reports, it is important to remember that survivors tend to question or distrust society, this being the result of their experiences after their release.

Division of the Study Sample by Content



- Reports (not containing personal stories) 18%
- Survivors' success stories 28%
- Stories of survivors' struggles after detention 54%

The key factors affecting the lives of survivors can be categorized into three main categories: discrimination and social stigma; physical and mental wellbeing; and educational and financial circumstances.

Such a categorization serves to provide a summary of the 82 sample reports, while explaining the survivors' circumstances using their own words. What distinguishes these reports is that survivors were given a chance to talk themselves about how they feel about their detention. This was a rare space for survivors to talk about their feelings outside the bounds of specific questions asked by experts, those which require coherent and consecutive answers. The emotions expressed by the survivors serve to indicate their most pressing struggles, those which affect them on a personal level, from an individual human perspective. This gives an added value to the research and studies on the case assessment of survivors of detention.

In terms of the relevant detaining authority in the 57 reports presenting personal stories of survivors, they are divided as follows: 48 reports came from survivors of detention by the Syrian regime, 8 from survivors of detention by ISIS, and one report was from the survivor of detention at a Free Syrian Army checkpoint. As for duration of detention, the cases in these reports range from minutes in custody to seven years in detention.

### Discrimination and stigmatization

A key experience shared by the majority of survivors in the reports was the violent reaction to the experience of detention by both close and more distant members of their communities. Almost all survivors were stigmatized, except for a few exceptions which do not challenge this rule. In some cases, the reactions were particularly extreme, mostly by male family members (fathers, brothers and husbands); some rejected the survivors entirely, and others declared their death while they were still alive. The narrations of survivors go some way in explaining the horrors faced by survivors upon their release; instead of beginning to rebuild their lives, survivors have instead had to face a new kind of violence:



"I went to visit the father of a girl I had met in detention. I wanted to reassure him about his daughter, assuming he would be worried about her. I was shocked when I heard him say: 'This is not my daughter, and I swear I will slaughter her the moment she walks out of prison.' His words made everything worse, and made me feel that people had become demons."<sup>6</sup>

Such gender-based violence becomes an additional pressure on survivors who clash with the realities of their communities' reactions. Ten divorce cases were recorded for women as a result of their detention.

6 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أبي-ذنب-الرتكيت>



"After my release, I could not cope with the injustice of the surrounding community. My husband decided to divorce me. The exclusion of my family was worse than my pain and cries in that dark, humid cell, and harder to handle than the jailor's whip."<sup>7</sup>



"As for other people, their position was similar to that of my husband's, but they demonstrated it differently; you can plainly see the rejection and hatred towards us survivors in their eyes. There are these who say, 'Only god knows how many people raped her in prison,' and others who say that what happened to us is a shame that follows the survivor's name and that of her family. All they focus on about prison is one element: sexual abuse. Why do they honor men and celebrate their release and see pride in detention for men and their families, when they reject us?!"<sup>8</sup>



"I left the country after I heard that my husband, a university lecturer, had spread a rumor of my death in detention, to relieve himself of the anxiety that overcame him during my detention."<sup>9</sup>



"I had no-one to console me. Even my fiancé left me after two years of loving one another. My colleagues, family, and neighbors - everyone looked at me like I was a prostitute bearing shame, sin, and scandal. It's as if I had chosen to spend that long time in the most horrible and repulsive place on earth."<sup>10</sup>

- 7 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أم-حمزة-من-سجون-النظام-إلى-قيود-المجتمع>  
 8 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ما-بعد-النجاة-من-المعتقل-معركة-ضاربة-مع-المجتمع>  
 9 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/تتم-ر-ر>  
 10 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/المجتمع-أوجعني-أكثر-من-الاعتقال-معتقلة-سابقة-تروي-معانيتها-بعد-خروجها>



"When I arrived at my parents' house, my mother and older brother were waiting for me. He started shouting 'Do you want to bring shame on us? Where was your brain when ISIS captured you? I wish they had executed you and relieved us.' I burst into tears, and my brother decided to kick me out. I told him that my husband had divorced me after 30 years of marriage, and he said that he would have divorced me too had he been my husband, and that I could not stay in the house for another minute."<sup>11</sup>



"I've seen prisoners whose husbands would visit only to say, 'You are divorced,' and they face injustice again; first by a regime that detained them, and then by husbands who abandon them. I have also seen pregnant women giving birth in prison and living there with their children."<sup>12</sup>

Four cases of forced marriage among survivors, as a consequence of their detention, were also recorded. "Faced with this reality, Duha was the subject of gossip, confined with her parents, until a foreign fighter, who has another wife and five children, proposed to her."<sup>13</sup>



"I was forced into marriage. Now I have two daughters from a husband whom I never wanted. He was forced on me to protect against what they call the scandal of my detention by ISIS. My husband proposed because he was aware of the good reputation and values of my family."<sup>14</sup>

Depriving survivors of their children or from seeing their families is a key instrument used to exert pressure on survivors. Seven survivors were deprived of their children, in different ways, while two others were banned from communicating with their families:

11 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أم-علي-السجن-والطلاق-بالثلاثة-لذنب-وحيد-أنا-امرأة>

12 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/اعتقلت-مرتين-أحدهما-أثناء-الحمل-الأقربون-أعلنوا-موتها-ورجل-نبيل-أخذ-بيدها>

13 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/المجتمع-أوجعني-أكثر-من-الاعتقال-معتقلة-سابقة-تروي-معانيتها-بعد-خروجها>

14 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/مها-في-حياتنا-سجون-كثيرة-أسوأها-سجن-المجتمع>



"When I expressed my position on the revolution, and that I was willing to face the consequences, they abandoned me. They even announced my death to the community after my detention. That was not enough for them; they prevented my mother from seeing me after my release, and they used my younger siblings as a pressure to prevent her from doing so. These people are the family of my grandfather, the family of my father."<sup>15</sup>



"What gave me hope for the future was my anticipation for release, when I could take my children into my arms again. But sadly, this did not happen; I was deprived of them forever."<sup>16</sup>



"... it speaks about a mother of two children and wife of a martyr who had been sentenced to death. She walked out of prison by a miracle, but she was shocked by the reaction of her in-laws when they refused to give her children to her. She rented a room in the area to be able to see her children, after her father also refused to let her stay in his house. Just two months later, the regime forces came back and took her again, and her fate today is unknown. This was all because of the stubbornness of her in-laws; by depriving her of her children, they slowed down her relocation to the liberated territories."<sup>17</sup>

There were some cases where survivors were met with cooperation and understanding by members of their communities. This does not, however, undermine the fact that society acts as another pressure and burden on the daily life of survivors.



"My husband stood by me. Even after my release, he continued to support me, was there for me and helped to alleviate my worries. Others did not treat me like this, however; I saw the look of hatred in the eyes of relatives, neighbors, and friends alike, as if I had walked willingly into detention. I also saw many other unspoken questions: 'Was she raped? How many times?'"<sup>18</sup>

15 <https://www.survivorsornoty.com/post/بيدها-أخذ-نبيل-ورجل-موتها-أعلنوا-الأقربون-أعلنوا-موتها-ورجل-نبيل-أخذ-بيدها>

16 <https://www.survivorsornoty.com/post/معتقلة-سابقة-حرمت-من-أطفالها-مرتين-ما-قصتها>

17 <https://www.survivorsornoty.com/post/أهل-زوجها-حرموها-من-أطفالها-وأبوها-رفض-استقبالها-فاعتقلت-مرة-أخرى>

18 <https://www.survivorsornoty.com/post/آلاء-مجتمعنا-منافق-وتهمة-الاغتصاب-بعد-الاغتيال-ستلاحقني-حتى-أعادر-هذا-البلد>



"My situation is better currently, but it is still shocking how much society still rejects me. I had no control over what happened. There is in particular the attitude of my husband's family; my daughter turned 6 today, and started school, and ever since her father passed away, she has not seen anyone from his family nor mine. We did not ask anyone for anything, all we ask is that we are accepted in this community."<sup>19</sup>

In other cases, women had to change their area of residence, or even seek refuge in neighboring countries to escape their community.



"Om Suhayb added that her brothers believed that for her to be arrested and tortured by the regime would be 'Easier than her living alone in another area.' But for her, living under bombardment with no one to rely on would be better than going back behind bars."<sup>20</sup>



"When I left Syria, I decided to cut all roots tying me to the place. It is true that home is precious, but community is a big part of home. And when they rejected me, my departure was inevitable."<sup>21</sup>

Looking at the testimonies, the lives of survivors too often become a journey of ongoing pain, with psychological and physical pressures being exerted from all sides. They are shocked by the level of societal rejection, often surpassing even the pain of detention. It is astonishing to see how common the wish to return to the torment of detention is, as shown in many of the studied reports.



"I wish that I was still in prison, being whipped by my capturer, whom I know is the enemy, rather than see those who claim to be our brothers who care about our rights taking advantage of us and crushing us."<sup>22</sup>

19 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أم-رفيف-حذاؤها-بوجه-القاضي-الداعشي-كلفها-حياتها>

20 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ناجية-من-سجون-النظام-تخلي-عنها-أشقاؤها-لتواجه-صعوبات-الحياة-وحيدة>

21 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/المعتقلة-رهف-هربت-من-أهلها-ومجتمعها-بعد-نيل-حريتها>

22 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ناجية-من-سجون-النظام-تعاني-النبت-من-المجتمع-وخذلان-المنظمات>





"I wish I was still imprisoned - at least there I know that I am at the mercy of cruel strangers. Today, I am facing the injustice of the people whom I waited to throw myself into the arms of upon my release and feel a kindness and compassion that I have not yet experienced."<sup>23</sup>

One of the testimonies, meanwhile, mentioned that the societal pressure began from the first moment of detention.



"In that moment, I started to ask myself amidst, while my heart beat fast, have I been arrested? Am I in their hands in the darkness of prison? Is that possible? What will my husband do? He will surely hang me to death. Then I started to worry about other people and how they would see me, both those who are close to me and those further away."<sup>24</sup>



23 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/معتقلة-سابقة-حرمت-من-أطفالها-مرتين-ما-قصتها>

24 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ما-بعد-النجاة-من-المعتقل-معركة-ضاربة-مع-المجتمع>

## Physical and psychological well being

Among the myriad of challenges that survivors face on leaving detention, physical and mental health is a highly significant one. Many survivors go into shock when facing their new reality after detention, and some experience suicidal thoughts in the face of the pressures exerted upon them and their rejection by their community.



"The way society saw me made me contemplate suicide, and I actually attempted to do so several times. The first time, I tried to cut my wrists in order to escape this society and the degrading treatment I was subjected to. In another attempt, I swallowed a large quantity of pills, seeking relief from this struggle; I was poisoned, and they rushed me to a hospital."<sup>25</sup>

It was clear that many illnesses the survivors developed were a consequence of detention, making their life after detention unbearable, with a lack of effective support from the community.



"The sound of shutting doors, dropping water, and Quran readings remind me of detention, because that's what they made me listen to while they tortured me."<sup>26</sup>



"I got kidney failure because of the exhaustion I suffered, and I also lost feeling in my limbs. Sometimes, I experience severe episodes of epilepsy that storm through my head and make me cry out in pain. I am living my life paying for wrongdoing that I did not commit."<sup>27</sup>

25 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أبي-ذنب-ارتكبت>

26 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/تيماء-ناجية-من-سجون-النظام-يحاصرها-المجتمع>

27 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/بجسد-متعب-ومقعد-خرجت-أم-خالد-من-السجن-وبقيت-آلامها>

In this report, we have looked at the issues surrounding psychological support and therapy provided to the survivors in our sample. It is significant that few positive stories emerged, with only a small number of testimonies referencing any form of psychological support or therapy. Furthermore, in the testimonies that do make reference to it, what stands out most prominently is the lack of societal awareness around psychological support and therapy, and its cultural association to madness and incapacity. As such, some survivors who remained part of their communities rejected the idea of therapy outright, as if it would be proof of their collapse in detention.



"A friend suggested I see a therapist, but I said no, I'm not mentally ill, I'm very strong."<sup>28</sup>



"She did not receive any specialized support afterwards, since she felt that she had overcome her distress quickly with the help of her family. However, there must be some perverse traces, such as an emotional numbness, which she describes by saying 'A lot of feelings inside me have died.'"<sup>29</sup>

It should be noted that survivors' families have played a key role in accepting or rejecting therapy. As such, raising awareness around therapy among survivors alone is often ineffective while their families maintain a closed attitude towards such treatment.



"During some of the visits, the girls in the neighborhood were talking about something we hadn't heard of before, something called psychosocial support. They were suggesting to my mother that I go to a center in the neighborhood, but the answer was always no. So the girls agreed to ask one of the young female specialists at the center to come see me as a guest and their friend, without mentioning her job or the reason for her visit. When she came, my family told her that I was staying at my sister's in another city."<sup>30</sup>

28 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/الناجية-سيدرا-صواف-كل-ما-لا-يقتلك-يقويك>

29 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/رهف-اللاحام-لا-تستحق-المعتقلات-الظلم-من-المجتمع>

30 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/المعتقلة-السورية-بين-سجنها-الصغير-والكبير>

In cases where survivors attended therapy, some mentioned prolonged periods of anesthetics and drug therapy.



"I went to a psychiatrist after a hysterical episode during which I was unable to think or talk, and after flaws in my judgment that have become clear. They said in the hospital that I was having a nervous breakdown, but the neurologist they referred me to said that my case was psychological, and that I had severe depression. The anxiety and sleeplessness went on for many months, during which I saw several psychiatrists who prescribed anesthetics and sleeping pills. I spent a year going back and forth between anxiety and anesthetics, until I was addicted, and it messed up my body. I had constant trembling in my limbs, and difficulties speaking. After a very difficult time, I was able to overcome this distress."<sup>31</sup>

### Economic and financial circumstances

The reports show us that economic circumstances continue to be a fundamental factor for survivors. The reports that look at poverty indicate that the survivors in destitution were forced not to heed societal opinion. Other testimonies indicate that good financial circumstances contributed to better inclusion of survivors, despite the continued mistrust from the community.



"What societal opinion should I be worrying about? That is a luxury. I have a big family, with children and unmarried women, but no breadwinner looking for someone to provide for us. I used to get my salary and provide for two children. But by the time I was released from detention, our family had grown, and it had become more difficult to find a job."<sup>32</sup>

31 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/الكرامة-الضائعة-تحت-أقواس-إشارات-الاستفهام>

32 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/فضيلة-الفقر-جعل-من-التفكير-بنظرة-المجتمع-لي-رفاهية>

“Alaa consoles herself with the thought of reuniting with her husband, but this became seemingly impossible after her name was added to the terrorism lists. She currently lives with her children in her elderly parents’ house in a welcoming community. Yet while she gained her freedom several years ago, questions continue to follow her round, without her having committed a single crime.”<sup>33</sup>

The reports also demonstrate the particular importance of education. 17 of the survivors were students, or gained academic qualifications before or after their detention; this is something which had a positive impact on their life after detention, and on the time required to fill the gaps caused by detention or the circumstances after it.

“Riham was able to find a job in the civil defense after her release, because of her nursing degree.”

“After her release, Rouba continued her college education and graduated. She did not weaken or break, and her family and friends supported her.”<sup>34</sup>

“Sarah needed another two years to recover and find what would help her forget the experience of detention. She had lost four years, the time it would have taken her to get a university degree, yet she did not give up. She chose to study business, but in a university not overseen by the regime, and she has also started working in media.”<sup>35</sup>

“Despite all that Rahaf went through because of her detention, she continued her revolutionary activism whenever possible. She has also sought to study political science, to fill that societal gap.”<sup>36</sup>

“Duha did not return to her family’s house after the incident; she decided to start a new life and cut ties with her past life. She began volunteering at a feminist organization in Jisr Al-Shugoor, before finding a job to provide for herself and her daughter.”<sup>37</sup>

33 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/آلاء-مجتمعنا-منافق-وتهمة-الاغتصاب-بعد-الاعتقال-ستلاحقني-حتى-أعادر-هذا-البلد>

34 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ربا-قطشة-كل-تأثر-هو-مشروع-شهيد-أو-معتقل>

35 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أؤلف-كتابا-عن-النساء-المعتقلات-لأنزع-ذاك-السواد-الذي-يحثم-على-ذاكرتي-وروحني>

36 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/رهف-اللاحام-لا-تستحق-المعتقلات-الظلم-من-المجتمع>

37 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/المجتمع-أوجعني-أكثر-من-الاعتقال-معتقلة-سابقة-تروبي-معانيتها-بعد-خروجها>

There was also one report of a survivor who learnt to read and write after her release.



"My stepdaughter was a huge support to me during this hugely difficult time. She had completed her higher education and was aware of the burdens faced by women in our communities. One day she came and told me that she wanted to sign me up for a literacy course. It was a great idea, and my son thought so too. I completed the course last year, and now I can read and write, thank God."

Some testimonies also show the relationship between survivors and their husbands as an important social factor for support for the survivors, in addition to other factors.



"I swore in front of everyone that what they feared had happened to me had not happened, so everyone welcomed me with joy and love. My old age and the way I look, alongside my husband's wisdom, love and understanding of me, were crucial in overcoming my detention, where I spent half a year in one security branch in our city. I was released when the rebels liberated the branch. I am neither young nor beautiful, and this is why many were convinced that I had not been raped in the regime's prison."<sup>38</sup>



"When I returned, my husband beat me until I passed out, and a nurse came and treated me at home. My husband later regretted it after he saw the signs of a whole week of torture all over my body. But I always overhear my neighbors whispering in astonishment that my husband kept me his wife after I had been imprisoned by ISIS."<sup>39</sup>

38 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أقسمت-أمام-الجميع-أنني-لم-أعرض-لما-يخشونه-فاستقبلوني-بفرح>

39 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ر-عبد-السلام-السجائر-كانت-السبب-والمجتمع-يرفضني-من-جديد>

## “Challenges and Needs

Survivors or Not Yet began as a media campaign to amplify the voices of survivors and shed light on life after detention. As such, it did involve carrying out needs assessment interviews, but rather centered on listening to their stories the way they wished to tell them. Therefore, although we can ascertain the fundamental needs of the survivors from their own words, it should be noted that this was not a main focus in the structure of the reports. This is therefore an attempt to identify certain challenges, based on what we heard from the survivors themselves, and the needs that these challenges give rise to, which must also be discussed.

Before elaborating further, two factors should be clarified, which while ostensibly contradictory, share common roots. These two factors are the lack of access to information or awareness of needs, and the demand of identified needs. These two factors are recurring throughout the testimonies, when identifying the stigmas faced by survivors. Survivors can be divided into two groups in this regard; the first comprises those who are unaware or unable to identify needs because of a lack of information or access to information, and the testimonies of this group appeared more interrogative than demanding on this topic. The second group comprises those who were able to identify their needs on their own, based on their perspectives and the importance of these needs to them. It is important to distinguish between these two groups, even while we recognize that both groups share roots and causes for these very different consequences.

### Lack of access to information

The struggle for survivors of detention is exacerbated by the lack of information about what they can do and where they can go, coupled with a prevailing sense of frustration and withdrawal caused by the intense cycle of violence they faced both during and after detention. It is clear from some of the testimonies that there is insufficient awareness about the help survivors, be it legal, financial, or psychological. We can conclude from the 82 testimonies that one of the most significant needs is access to information, with survivors unaware of their options as per their particular individual cases.

“The periods of Wafaa’s tragedy have not yet come to a close; she’s remarried, to a man who is fifty years old, many years older than her. As with the first time, it was her parents who arranged the marriage. Wafaa does not know whether this will mark the end of her journey of suffering, or yet another episode of a life where she had endured her pain alone, without anyone to help, or even just to listen, understand, and stand by her side.”<sup>40</sup>

40 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/معتقلة-سابقة-حرمت-من-أطفالها-مرتين-ما-قصتها>

## Demanding identified needs

some of the reports demonstrate cases of survivors who tried to shed light on the needs of other women like them. Most of these women were former activists or from a politically active environment.



"What I needed during that time, and what all released detainees need, more than media advocacy campaigns, is a job to occupy them and preserve their dignity, safe access to education, and an understanding environment that respects their experiences in prison. They also need a home away from the one they were displaced from, as well as a great deal of psychological support, and some peace, in order to regain what they had lost."<sup>41</sup>



"I feel an overwhelming desire to leave and rid myself once and for all of these abhorrent questions, which still haven't stopped after all this time, and which come back every time prison or detention is mentioned. I want so badly to go out to a world that can give me back some of my dignity that was lost in the twists of question marks."<sup>42</sup>



"Chams doesn't feel comfortable in the decision some women make to submit to their fate. She tries in her message to tell them that to give in to feelings of rejection and inferiority is to lose the cause for which they had been detained."<sup>43</sup>

41 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أنا-السبب>

42 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/الكرامة-الضائعة-تحت-أقواس-إشارات-الاستفهام>

43 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/المعتقلة-منى-بركة-اعتقالي-وسام-شرف-لا-وصمة-عار>



“Bayan Raihan said the biggest mistake she’s seen at organizations working on detention is the immediate categorization of detainees as socially ostracized. Also, many of the staff of these organizations had never been detained, and this impedes their understanding of the experience and of those who experience it.”<sup>44</sup>

“The least that detainees deserve is respect and understanding, without being subjected to pressures, prejudice, and an underestimation of what they gave for the revolution. Many of them were not detained for a crime they had committed, but for their family ties to revolutionaries, or because they had been malevolently informed upon.”<sup>45</sup>

“I went up north to work for the revolution, to continue the path I had started upon, and for which I had been detained. I work in several fields, and I do my best to work for the cause of detainees, because there is so little progress these, and no proper representation, especially in terms of protection for detainees, whether in or outside Syria. I do not feel safe anywhere.”

“Although we feel we have more liberty in Turkey, and although the treatment towards Syrians here has been decent, I wish survivors were given more attention and appropriate treatment. Most of them are like me, suffering health problems that do not allow them to work in difficult work environments.”<sup>46</sup>

44 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/بيان-ريحان-صيفة-يا-حرام-لا-تليق-بالمعتقلات>

45 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/رهف-اللاحام-لا-تستحق-المعتقلات-الظلم-من-المجتمع>

46 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/معتقلة-سابقة-تعالج-مأساة-اعتقالها-بالنجاح-والعمل>



### The challenges and needs of survivors:

Having looked closely at the two aforementioned groups, we can now categorize the challenges and needs of survivors into seven points, as represented in the survivors' testimonies.

#### 1. Healthcare

The reports show that many survivors left detention with chronic illnesses, some of which required medical follow up. These included kidney failure, partial loss of sight, strokes, recurrent miscarriage, and sterility.

“Ghada lives with her husband now, without children. Several years on from the incident, she’s never become pregnant.”<sup>47</sup>

“Detention left me with psychological difficulties; I am easily triggered and very short tempered. I also suffer from a blood malfunction, and spinal disc herniation because of the uncomfortable positions we had to sit in while in detention.”<sup>48</sup>

47 [https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/غادة-محمد-بسجني-شيء-ما-انكسر-?fbclid=IwAR3YGv\\_PwKn\\_IILsj9rXbqs-H097n0gDPUATxdXlpH-\\_kkT\\_OyQX6R5KFNw](https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/غادة-محمد-بسجني-شيء-ما-انكسر-?fbclid=IwAR3YGv_PwKn_IILsj9rXbqs-H097n0gDPUATxdXlpH-_kkT_OyQX6R5KFNw)

48 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ناجية-من-سجون-النظام-تخلي-عنها-أشقاؤها-لتواجه-صعوبات-الحياة-وحيدة>



"Detention caused me to have a stroke and rendered me partially blind."<sup>49</sup>



"Om Khaled currently lives with her son, daughter in law, and three grandchildren in Idlib, after her husband passed away during the besiege of Maaddamiyeh. She has to go for dialysis three times a week and spends much of the rest of her time in physiotherapy in order to be able to walk again."<sup>50</sup>

Crucially, there are also cases where detainees were injected with drugs or viruses, and deliberately physically harmed while in detention.



"They gave me drugs which caused memory loss. I didn't realize at first - they forced me to take them after I passed out - but then I became addicted and began asking for them myself. I was in solitary confinement in the aerial intelligence branch in Damascus and could see nothing. But the voices of tortured people made me sleepless, and these pills were perhaps my refuge."<sup>51</sup>



"Fadila also mentioned that other detainees told her that their jailers put sterilizing medicines in the water they were forced to drink, and that they drank it, helplessly."<sup>52</sup>



"I have high blood pressure; they beat me so hard that I fainted and fell. The jailors threatened me that as soon the Sheikh arrived in the morning, he would announce a fatwa to have my fingers cut off."<sup>53</sup>

49 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أي-ذنب-ارتكبت>

50 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/بجسد-متعب-ومقعّد-خرجت-أم-خالد-من-السجن-وبقيت-آلامها>

51 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/كل-ما-يحتجّه-هو-الكلام-الذي-ح-ر-م-عليه>

52 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/فضيلة-الفقر-جمل-من-التفكير-بنظرة-المجتمع-لي-رفاهية>

53 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/فوزة-غصبا-عن-الفرابيبي-السود-سيظل-للجمال-مكان-بيننا>

## 2. Psychological wellbeing and protection

Feelings of trust and safety are among the most prominent needs expressed by the survivors. Having been rejected by society, these survivors often do not feel safe, to the extent that in many cases they are too afraid to talk to others.

“Rania has a panic attack every time she sees a uniform, regardless to whether the soldier is from the regime or the Free Syrian Army.”<sup>54</sup>

“That period was very difficult, I used to panic every time I saw a man, and every time I heard a raid was happening I felt sure it would reach me.”<sup>55</sup>

“I went up north to work for the revolution, to continue the path I had started upon, and for which I had been detained. I work in several fields, and I do my best to work for the cause of detainees, because there is so little progress there, and no proper representation, especially in terms of protection for detainees, whether in or outside Syria. I do not feel safe anywhere.”<sup>56</sup>

This feeling of a lack of safety demonstrates the needs among certain survivors for social or specialized support. It illustrates the importance of raising awareness about the positive impact of therapy, and eliminating the stigma surrounding therapy, in education and through social norms, as a cure for mad and desperate people. In many of the testimonies, the survivors sound desperate and display a sense of, as they themselves put it, withdrawal and disappointment.

“Despair found a home in me and worries never leave me. I came to believe I was a minor, and burden to a society that had given me nothing but humiliation. That is not to mention the yearning I have for my children, which exceeds all other pain and misery.”<sup>57</sup>

54 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/لم-يتبق-لها-من-حياتها-السابقة-سوى-مسبحة-والمستقبل-لأودلاها-قصة-معتقلة-اغتصبت-وقتل-عائلتها-كاملة>

55 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/تيماء-ناحية-من-سجون-النظام-يحاصرها-المجتمع>

56 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/تيماء-ناحية-من-سجون-النظام-يحاصرها-المجتمع>

57 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/وكأنني-أثمة>

### 3. Work and financial security

One of the most pressing needs for survivors is to find a job in order to support themselves. Cases of survivors who were abandoned by their family and community, and were left to face life alone, were dominant in the campaign reports, totaling 42 cases. This is a significant number, out of the 64 reports that go into the survivors' personal stories.



"What societal opinion should I be worrying about? That is a luxury. I have a big family, with children and unmarried women, but no breadwinner, looking for someone to provide for us. I used to get my salary and provide for two children. But by the time I was released from detention, our family had grown, and it had become more difficult to find a job."<sup>58</sup>



"Om Suhaib rented a small room with a kitchen in Idlib for herself and her four children, and made her oldest son, who was 13 years old, to leave school in order to help provide for the family. She said he makes 15,000 Syrian pounds per month, which doesn't go very far at all; she has a daughter with a kidney disease who needs regular hospital treatment."<sup>59</sup>



"Rahaf lives in Turkey now, in a small room she can afford to rent by offering babysitting in the area. She believes she has a new life there, but she avoids any communication with her family and her community."<sup>60</sup>



"Larine became angry when she started talking about the organizations who work with survivors of regime detention. She joined one of these organization after her release, but soon came to consider it, in her own words: 'a commodity traded by some of those high up in the organization, who took advantage of the cause of detainees, just like many other organizations and campaigns which didn't even provide job opportunities for survivors to allow them to the chance for dignity.'"<sup>61</sup>

58 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/فضيلة-الفقر-جمل-من-التفكير-بنظرة-المجتمع-لي-رفاهية>

59 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ناجية-من-سجون-النظام-تخلي-عنها-أشقاؤها-لتواجه-صعوبات-الحياة-وحيدة>

60 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/المعتقلة-رهف-هربت-من-أهلها-ومجتمعها-بعد-نيل-حريتها>

61 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ناجية-من-سجون-النظام-تعاني-النبد-من-المجتمع-وخذلان-المنظمات>

#### 4- Change of residence

Shelter and mobility pose another struggle for survivors following detention. On top of all the enormous difficulties facing Syrians after 2011, most survivors had to leave their homes, especially those in regime-controlled areas, and move to northern Syria or out of the country.

“After receiving direct threats of further detention, she decided to move to northern Syria, away from the regime control.”<sup>62</sup>

“I suffered what I suffered, ending with my brother being martyred by a regime sniper. After that I was forced to leave the country illegally.”<sup>63</sup>

What distinguishes the struggle of female survivors in this regard, compared to male survivors, is that some of these forced changes were the result of family and environment pressures particular to women.

“After my husband died, my brother kicked me out of the house, saying ‘You are a convict,’ and that I was no longer part of the family. I went to stay for a little while with a friend from Menbej. Like me, she was an orphan with no-one but her mother with whom and a number of children she shares the house. I stayed there for about a year.”<sup>64</sup>

“Om Khaled was afraid that if she returned to her family in Deraa, she would bring shame to them in front of people with unending suspicions. She was also afraid of being detained again, so she left to Idlib, despite being overwhelmed by a feeling that she and her colleagues were being taken somewhere where they didn’t know anyone like a herd of sheep.”<sup>65</sup>

62 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/تيماء-ناجية-من-سجون-النظام-يحاصرها-المجتمع>

63 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/هند-مجلي-هل-لكم-أن-تتخلوا-قلب-أم-اعتقل-النظام-ابنتها>

64 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أم-رفيف-حذاؤها-بوجه-القاضي-الداعشي-كلفها-حياتها>

65 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/وكأنني-أئمة>

In some cases, leaving was the family's solution to protect the survivor.

“Rasha’s family stood by her side. She was not released until they paid 6 million Syrian pounds for her freedom. Then her uncle smuggled her to Lebanon for her to be able to stay away and get a break.”<sup>66</sup>

“Larine and her sister were sentenced to death after they were transferred to the State Security branch, where they forced, under torture, to confess to crimes they had not committed. They were saved by their mother paying 10 million Syrian pounds to bribe a senior officer at State Security, which allowed them to leave detention, and head to Turkey.”<sup>67</sup>

Other survivors had to leave because of devastation and displacement.

“She headed for the area of Qusoor, in her city of Homs. But as she had been warned, she found nothing but devastation and abandoned houses; everyone was dead -there was nothing left.”<sup>68</sup>

“Malak did not leave Qaboun area until it fell to the Syrian regime in May 2017. She eventually ended up in Turkey.”<sup>69</sup>

## 5. Legal matters

Another set of challenges discussed by the survivors were the myriad of legal issues they faced, ranging from travel bans and work bans, to confiscation of documents. Many of the survivors in the study sample have suffered significant repercussions for these various legal matters.

“All of my attempts to pursue my education have failed; because I am former detainee, no-one dares to obtain my certificates to continue my education.”<sup>70</sup>

66 <https://www.survivorsnotyet.com/post/رشا-عاشت-مع-أفعى-في-المعتقل-وفي-المجتمع-اتهمتها-عم-ة-زوجها-بالسرقة-فطلقها>

67 <https://www.survivorsnotyet.com/post/ناجية-من-سجون-النظام-تعاني-البذ-من-المجتمع-وخذلان-المنظمات>

68 <https://www.survivorsnotyet.com/post/لم-يتبق-لها-من-حياتها-السابقة-سوى-مسبحة-والمستقبل-لأولادها-قصة-معتقلة-اغتصبت-وقتل-عائلتها-كاملة>

69 <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/294922#ixzz6AZYGfnhx>

70 <https://www.survivorsnotyet.com/post/الناجيات-من-المعتقل-معاناة-تمتد-من-الزنازة-إلى-المجتمع>



Also the survivor's record as a detainee prevents her from work or mobility.

“After the regime recaptured Deraa, her uncle told her she could pay 4000 US dollars to remove her name from the terrorist lists without having gone through the same procedure as her fellow activists. She managed, with extreme difficulty, to obtain the money and pay it, but was shocked to find that her name was still on the lists. So her uncle asked her to leave permanently to Lebanon to guarantee her safety.”<sup>71</sup>

“After my release, I was fired from my job, having studied and worked at Deraa's schools for 20 years. I was also banned from leaving the country.”<sup>72</sup>

Travel bans force survivors to choose between leaving illegally, in highly dangerous circumstances, or staying in the country and facing constant, daily horrors.

## 6- Justice and accountability

There was no mention of the term accountability in any of the testimonies. However, several survivors said they had a clear memory of the jailor responsible, and that they were hoping for a state of peace through the achievement of justice.

“She will keep waiting for the day when those who tyrannized her and let her down are punished, and when all of those unjustly held in the regime's prisons and cellars are released.”<sup>73</sup>

“At the end of the conversation, the former detainee said that she lives her life waiting for the day that this criminal regime is removed, ending with prayers against those behind her torment.”<sup>74</sup>

“Manal remembers only one name, Abu Jaafar, who raped her, before giving orders to the others to do the same. She walked out of prison carrying a baby without knowing who the father was. She wanted to kill herself, but it was impossible in prison.”<sup>75</sup>

71 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/آمال-اعتقلها-النظام-واغتصبت-ونبذها-مح>

72 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/هند-مجلي-هل-لکم-أن-تتخلوا-قلب-أم-اعتقل-النظام-ابنتها>

73 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/ناجية-من-سجون-النظام-تعاني-النبيذ-من-المجتمع-وخذلان-المنظمات>

74 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/بجسد-متعب-ومقعّد-خرجت-أم-خالد-من-السجن-وبقيت-آلامها>

75 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/كل-ما-يحتجّه-هو-الكلام-الذي-ح-م-عليهين>



It is important to stress that in most of these cases, the survivors are trying to forget their experience in detention, and distance themselves from anything that might remind them of it. While it is natural for survivors to try and move on, avoiding documenting or discussing the experience is an indicator of the presence of 'omission'. This is something which affects female survivors, owing to a myriad of societal factors including the traditions of honor and protectiveness among the survivor's family, the perception of the experience as a scandal, and pervasive silence over the topic.



"My incarceration was a horrible experience; I even wish I don't return so I don't remember it."



"My mother refused to talk about what had happened to her in detention; she kept silent. All she said was that she had been verbally abused, without mentioning any details."<sup>76</sup>



"When I left Syria, I decided to break away from everything that tied me there. Yes, one's homeland is precious, but society makes up the biggest part of it, and when it rejects me, there is nothing to do but to run."<sup>77</sup>



"Today all fear is gone, whether my fears or the fears of those around me. We have overcome detention, and since my liberation, I am living a happy content life."<sup>78</sup>

76 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/اقترن-زوجها-بأخرى-عند-اعتقالها-فاعتصمت-بالصمت-حتى-اليوم>

77 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/المعتقلة-رهدف-هربت-من-أهلها-ومجتمعها-بعد-نيل-حريتها>

78 <https://www.survivorsornotyet.com/post/أقسمت-أمام-الجميع-أنني-لم-أعرض-لما-يخشونه-فاستقبلوني-بفرح>

## “Conclusion

Female survivors of detention in Syria face enumerable challenges after their release. They are met, all too often, by pitying looks from their community, rejection by their parents, or the absence of their husbands. Such struggles are compounded by the myriad of challenges which all women face in patriarchal societies, replete with systemized violence against women. Survivors who believe they have seen the worst days of their life in detention are met by a new form of torment when they walk free. So much of what they expect to find is completely dependent upon their release, as they come face to face with a society ready to judge them, and determine the kind of life these survivors will lead. These testimonies came to cover the different aspects of this new life, with all its complications, its pains, and its challenges. The social stigma took particular prominence, with generalizations working to conflate the experiences of all survivors together, associating their struggles in detention with sexual violence. Hence, the survivor becomes a victim of sexual violence even if she hasn't herself experienced it. Social judgment becomes a double-edged sword, with all survivors placed in one category, while having to constantly deny 'allegation' of sexual violence, in an attempt to move attention away from her struggle, and be accepted again by society. Social stigma thus places everyone in the position of fighting against the accusation of sexual violence, rather than fighting to help victims or to properly define their cases.

As such, it became clear that for the survivors, who are doing their best to struggle through their new existence, being able to talk and tell the world their story became a chief source of hope. Every story is unique; these survivors are individuals who were subject to detention and often kidnap, but each testimony exposes clear distinctions, no matter how similar the circumstances may seem. The testimonies show that gender-based and conflict-related sexual violence inflicted upon survivors is an accumulative state of violence stemming from intersectional factors (social, classist, economic, gender, etc.), rather than a single incident or pattern. Here we can look to the feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality from the 1980s:



“Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times, that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.”<sup>79</sup>

What remains is to remind ourselves that the testimonies of survivors allow us a closer look into their realities and their struggles. It appears that some commonly discussed ideas related to international litigation and justice is a problematic aspect in the victims' testimonies, and that the main demands must be the demands of the survivors themselves. As we made clear at the start, understanding what the survivors want is a complicated process, especially given a lack of information. Hence, the type and form of justice might not be beyond dispute nor agreed upon as it appears in the public sphere or in NGO discussions. In fact, it is perhaps the thing most absent from the perspectives of survivors who are trying to deal with their everyday, financial, and medical needs. Meeting these needs is an enormous struggle for many survivors, and these should form the focus of the organizations working on such cases.

Ultimately, this research report is an attempt to redirect attention to the survivors themselves, to the struggles they face, and to fill the ostensible gap between service providers and organizations working with survivors of detention, and the actual needs of said survivors. This can lead to a state of preserving efforts that are wasted or do not meet the interest of survivors



## “Final word

The analytical report of the Survivors or Not Yet campaign is the result of a feminist collaboration between the 3ayny3aynak platform and Women Now for Development. It is also one of the outputs of a project led by Women Now, which seeks to understand the vast gap between the realities of female survivors of violence and the international discourse, replete with complex terminology on justice and prevention, with accountability for sexual and gender-based violence never absent from international discussions about Syrian women. These discussions are often held without survivors, and in many cases without any Syrian women.

Our project came out of our interest in the realities facing survivors of sexual violence, to understand their challenges, needs, and perceptions of justice and accountability. Yet, the impact of sexual violence affects all women. The stories included in the campaign are a vivid example of how pervasive sexual and gender-based violence is in society. We thus became interested in the Survivors or Not Yet campaign by the 3ayny3aynak platform, which focused on the realities of female survivors of detention after their release. The 82 stories remind us that once the violence of detention has ended, many survivors walk into another kind of violence, that of their communities which associate detention with rape, and which judge victims as criminals.

One detention survivor says in the book *Until War Started*: ‘Going to jail is in itself rape’. This is a very simple expression of what happens inside and outside detention.

A detained woman is guilty until proven innocent. While her detained brother walks out a hero, she walks out wondering whether there will be anyone waiting for her... What is waiting for her on the outside? Divorce papers? Murder? There are of course detainees who are released and find supportive families, but that is not the case for everyone. Gender-based violence is rooted deep in the structure of society, stemming from the ownership over women’s bodies in the name of honor, and other considerations.

The stories also expose other problems facing survivors of detention that are often overlooked, including chronic illnesses, legal issues, financial need, and protection needs. They also show the various intersections between different kinds of violence, and the circumstances which allow for the exploitation of survivors.


The need for therapy is often absent from the testimonies; the survivors try to rely on themselves and move on, without acknowledging the trauma that detention creates in anyone who is subjected to it, both women and men.


Mention of juridical justice is also absent from these stories. There are a number of potential reasons for this:

This is perhaps the result of the gap between the form this justice takes, and their realities and daily priorities; or perhaps it is out of a lack of awareness of the instruments of justice and how to access them; or finally, perhaps it is because, for them, justice has a wider, more holistic meaning than simply holding the perpetrator accountable, instead extending to the social, economic, and political aspects of justice. Sometimes, there appears to be little use in accountability without addressing the social, economic, and political repercussions of the crime, and without working on dismantling the societal violence that further amplifies these repercussions. If we truly want meaningful justice, and if we are looking to build a new society on the basis of juridical and social justice, it is vital that we take women's perception of justice as a cornerstone for understanding and demanding this justice. As an organization, we believe in the importance of justice and accountability as a basis for building a new society. However, it is also clear that for many women, as well as having many priorities which surpass that of justice, they also face enormous obstacles in achieving it, social stigma being chief among them. Therefore, it is crucial that we understand and eliminate such obstacles, for them to then be granted the freedom to demand justice first or demand it the way they see fit.

We have sought in this report to share some of these priorities and challenges, focusing on their points of commonality. However, there is still a significant need for further in-depth study, in order to fully understand the realities of female survivors, and of women more widely, in times of war, in order to avoid adopting ineffective, readymade solutions.

We therefore hope that this report paves the way for future studies, and that it resembles a platform, albeit a small one, which demonstrates the courage of those women who have shared their stories, in spite of the many, many challenges they describe.

 Dr. Maria Al-Abdeh  
Executive Director  
Women Now for Development



## Appendix

Names of the media organizations participating in the 'Survivors or not yet' Campaign

SY+

Taa Marbouta

Jesr

7iber

Radio Fresh

Zaiton

SMART

Our Syria

Sada alShaam

Eneb Baladi

3ayny3aynak