



July 2021



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Executive Summary

Gender-based violence remains rampant 10 years into the Syrian conflict, particularly violence against women. Women continue to be subjected to all forms of violence, including sexual exploitation and honor killings. However, the most widespread form of violence continues to be domestic violence, a relatively old phenomenon within Syrian communities which has been exacerbated by the ongoing conflict.¹

In this extensive report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) sheds light on the injustices inflicted on women and girls in several areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria. Some of the women discussed in this report are trapped in the throes of domestic violence at the hands of husbands or other male family members. Other women are struggling to heal from the potential life-long physical and psychological impact of the brutality practiced against them.

The testimonies obtained by STJ indicate that poor social awareness, norms reinforcing violence against women, and the absence of laws deterring gender-based violence, as well as poverty and conflict-driven displacement, have all contributed to increasing rates of domestic violence against women in al-Hasakah province.

In addition to discussing the root causes of widespread domestic violence, this report addresses violence's tragic consequences, both physical and mental, for women, many of whom have even developed suicidal ideations. Additionally, the report discusses the less direct impacts of domestic violence, such as family fragmentation and increasing divorce rates.

According to the annual statistical report by the Social Justice Council in northeastern Syria—the supreme judicial body in the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration—at least 1679 crimes were committed against women in northeastern Syria in 2020. In 476 of these cases, women were attacked and injured. For their part, SARA Organization for Combating Violence against Women documented at least 22 femicides and nine female suicides between 2020 and late March 2021.

Unfortunately, violence against women has been increasing across Syria. In a number of previous reports addressing abuses of women and girls' rights, STJ documented numerous cases of violence against women, including honor killings in the provinces of Idlib and Daraa, as well as in the suburbs of Aleppo between 2020 and 2021.² Furthermore, STJ recorded a

¹ The UN Women defines domestic violence, “also called domestic abuse or intimate partner violence, [as] any pattern of behavior that is used to gain or maintain power and control over an intimate partner. It encompasses all physical, sexual, emotional, economic and psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This is one of the most common forms of violence experienced by women globally.” “Frequently asked questions: Types of violence against women and girls,” UN Women, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/types-of-violence> (last accessed: 28 June 2021).

² “Under the Guise of Honor: Women Continue to Fall Victims to Violence Across Syria,” STJ, 5 May 2021, <https://stj-sy.org/en/under-the-guise-of-honor-women-continue-to-fall-victims-to-violence-across-syria/> (last accessed: 26 June 2021).

marked increase in child marriages in the provinces of Idlib and al-Hasakah, in addition to Aleppo's suburbs, and highlighted the traumatic impact these marriages are having on the lives of little girls.³

Methodology

This report draws on a total of 13 interviews, mostly with women subjected to domestic violence in al-Hasakah province, in northeastern Syria. Additionally, field researchers with STJ spoke to a judge working in the province to gain insights on violence against women in the Autonomous Administration's laws. STJ also spoke with Arzo Tammo, the officer in charge of the legal office at the SARA Organization for Combating Violence against Women, about the reasons behind the increase in domestic violence in northeastern Syria.

STJ's field researchers interviewed witnesses online or in person between late 2020 and late March 2021 and consulted several open sources addressing the report's subject matter.

1. The Testimonies of 11 Battered Women from al-Hasakah Province

In this section, a number of battered women open up about their suffering, recounting their experiences with domestic violence at the hands of husbands or other male family members in northeastern Syria. Some of these women are still recuperating from the psychological and physical effects of the violence practiced against them.

- **“No matter how brutally he hits me, I'll take it only for my children!”**

Maha M.— born in Qamishli/Qamishlou city in 1988— has been married for nearly 10 years. She is a mother of four, but motherhood did not spare her the violence of her husband throughout their marital life. M. narrated:

“My husband has been abusing me physically and mentally for the most trivial reasons since the beginning of our marriage. I never told my family. I did not want to cause them trouble, especially because divorce in our society is considered a source of shame. We were married only for three months when he brutally hit me with his hands for not carrying his crying nephew. I put up with his behavior and kept silent about his violence. I was patient with him, hoping that he would recognize his mistakes and never repeat them. However, he hit me again, so badly that I lose conscience this time, and he had to take me to hospital. I spent three days in the hospital and never told my

³ “Early Marriage Hits High Rates in some Areas of Syria,” STJ, 17 September 2020, <https://stj-sy.org/en/early-marriage-hits-high-rates-in-some-areas-of-syria/> (last accessed: 24 June 2021).

family the truth of what happened. Later, he travelled to Africa and stayed there for a year and a half. He did not call me, or even send me money for the kids.”

M. added:

“He has not been able to make us a living since he returned from Africa. Instead, he keeps telling me that my brothers who are in Europe should help us. Once, he kicked my five-year-old son. My son fell, hit his head, and had to be taken to the hospital. Shortly later, he beat me ruthlessly in front of my children. He stepped on my head and made me bleed, all for no obvious reason. I finally managed to escape to my family's house, possessing only the clothes I was wearing. I filed a complaint against him with the local council; I asked for divorce. I wanted to survive him. I wish I could count on my family to support me and my children financially — I would have immediately got a divorce. However, this is difficult. It is impossible.”

M. added that after she filed for the divorce, her husband begged her to return home and promised that he would not hurt her again. Her family threatened that if she complained of violence again, they would kill her husband. Knowing that her family was struggling financially, M. was forced to return to her husband. He resumed his habits and continues to subject her to physical, psychological, and financial abuse. Heartbroken, M. told STJ:

"I always tell myself that no matter how brutally he hits me, I will take it for my children's sake only. What can I do? Nothing! There is not a family, nor authorities, nor human rights organizations to support me or safeguard my and my children's rights and dignities.”

- **“He used to hit me and ask me for money.”**

Zainab M.—born in al-Hasakah province in 1991—married her husband nearly eight years ago. M. opted for the marriage to escape her brother's physical and psychological abuse, particularly as she hails from a conservative family, governed by patriarchal norms and traditions. She said:

“My brother used to shame me for not getting married. He compared me to my cousins, who were all married. He hit me and my sisters in front of my mother. My mother would stand there, helpless. So, I got married in 2013. My husband's financial conditions were pretty bad. All my relatives advised me against marrying him, because they knew he was an alcoholic and a drug abuser. I agreed to marry him just to escape my brother's tyranny. The second day into our marriage, he took my dowry money and jewelry and paid his debts. I never said a word. We rented a house in one of the Qamishli's slum neighborhoods. I taught children and did hairdressing for the neighborhood's women, while he never got a job. Despite all this, he would beat me every now and then. He would also take any money I had. Later, we moved into one of my relatives' house. We stayed there for free, in exchange for looking after the family's possessions in their absence. But my husband sold some of their possessions. My brother reported him [to authorities]. They took him to prison until he returned two of the things he sold. We then travelled to Turkey.”

In Turkey, M. found a job as a janitor. She stood guard at a building while her husband did not search for a job. Worse yet, he did not give up on drugs or alcohol. She added:

“My husband once stole drugs from his friends. The police arrested him. My daughter was only months old. I worked to get him his needs while in prison for two months. However, I could not do it anymore, especially after his family moved in with us. I was shocked to know that my father-in-law was using drugs as well. I decided to run away. I took my little girl and went to my sister in the Turkish city of İzmir. Then, I returned to Qamishli. I was unwelcome at my family’s house. My brother and father cursed me all the time. They cursed my mother for failing to raise me properly.”

In late 2017, M. asked for assistance from a humanitarian organization. They helped her get a divorce. However, her husband’s family took custody of her daughter. In early 2019, needing to escape the abuse of her father and brother, M. remarried. However, her sister told STJ little had changed in M.’s life.

“Since she got married, [M.] has only visited my house or my parents’ twice. Her husband has been denying her everything. He took her phone. She is not talking to us. Sometimes my father calls her husband to check on her. Her husband always comes up with excuses for not visiting us. No one knows what’s going on with my sister there, whether she is being abused, or is having issues with her husband. No one knows anything about her!”

- **“He pointed a gun to my head and threatened to kill me.”**

Nisreen K. — born in al-Hasakah province in 1988—has been married for more than 15 years. K. accepted to get married while only 16 due to her family’s poor financial conditions. Her husband refused to allow her to leave home and often beat her, accusing her of cheating on him. K. recounted:

“My husband would not let me leave home unaccompanied. His jealousy made him suspect [I was cheating on him]. His family made me suffer as well. They accused me of having an affair and called me immoral, driving my husband to hit me. Fed up with their cruelty, I convinced my husband of travelling to Iraqi Kurdistan. There, a year later, I gave birth to my son. We then returned to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. It all started again, the beating, insults, and accusations of infidelity. During the last military operation in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, we fled to Qamishli, me, my mother-in-law, and my husband who worked as a driver back then. I shared the house with my mother-in-law.”

K. added that her husband would often beat her just to please his mother. K. narrated that once he even threatened her with a gun, attributing his behavior to his frequent use of drugs and alcohol. She said:

“There was a time when my mother-in-law incited my husband against me, telling him that I did not take care of the children or feed them. I begged her not to raise her voice, I kissed her hands and feet, asking her not to let him hear what she was saying. However, she did not care. My husband got so angry and hit me with his belt. He whipped me 18

times. It took the bruises a while to fade away. Another time, my husband came home in the evening. He beat me hard, put his gun to my head and threatened to kill me. I escaped to my aunt's house for several days. I also recounted the incident to my family, who lives in Iraqi Kurdistan. They told me to get a divorce, leave him the children, and join them in Kurdistan. However, for the sake of my children, I could not do it. I decided to endure the physical and psychological violence for their sake only."

- **"I attempted suicide to escape this torment."**

Marwa— born in the city of Qamishli/ Qamishlo in 1980—married in 2001 and left school. Marwa described life with her misogynist husband and the forms of violence she suffered at his hands to STJ. She narrated:

"I wish I finished school and did not marry this man. However, I was not mature enough back then. And, unfortunately, there were no associations or organizations to raise women's awareness about such matters. My husband was a government employee and a completely introverted person. He had an aversion for women. We lived in a room on the roof of his family's house. He was plagued by doubts since the beginning of our marriage. He would spy on me every time I called my mother. Furthermore, he was upset with my family's visits. Whenever they came to see me, he would beat me after they left. I no longer allowed them to visit me at home."

Marwa is a mother of three, the oldest of whom is 19 years old. She recalled one particular incident. By then, she had already had her first child when her husband hit her so badly that she escaped to her family and stayed there for a month before she returned. Marwa narrated:

"I had to return because divorce is considered a source of shame. When I went home, my husband literally told me, 'I brought you back to humiliate and destroy you, not because I care for you. I'm going to make you have 10 children. Then, I will divorce you and throw you out to your parents' home.' I convinced myself that he said this because he was still angry. However, he continued to beat me. He once even hit me with a sharp object. I was wounded in some sensitive areas. He beat and insulted me in front of my children so badly that once I collapsed. He only screamed and threatened he would burn the house down if I did not get up. I did so just because I feared him."

Unable bear the violence, Marwa twice attempted suicide. The first time she used a sharp razor; the second, she swallowed a mix of medicines. Finally, she divorced him. She told STJ:

"Six years ago, I divorced him. My former husband continued to harass me even after the divorce. Later, I also learned that he was beating my children and denying them their pocket money and not letting them leave home. His actions had an adverse impact on them. This was apparent from their behavior and the way they interacted with people, especially the girls, who grew to hate marriage. However, I always advise them to continue their education and not give in to their reality and their father's violence. Needless to say, my family does not allow me to visit my children because how can a divorced woman travel alone to al-Hasakah city. This would bring them

disgrace, being part of a traditionalist Middle Eastern community. So, I have been visiting them secretly.”

Marwa concluded her account with a comment on the status of divorced women. She said:

“In such a society, there is neither a future nor a life for a divorced woman. We [divorced women] are considered a disgrace. No one wants to marry us except old men. I take up available jobs to support myself, in a kindergarten and a stationery store. I also attend events by associations and awareness organizations concerned with women’s affairs to forget my worries and sorrows.”

- **“Over time, I turned into a servant.”**

Baritan M.— born in the city of Qamishli/Qamishlo in 2002—married in 2016. M. lost her father when she was three years old and married at 15, driven by her family’s poor financial status. Her early marriage made her a victim to domestic violence. She recounted:

“A sheikh officiated our marriage. We also bribed [employees] to register our marriage at the courts of the Syrian government. We had a good relationship early in our marriage. However, his mother always incited my husband against me. Over time, I became like their servant although I was two months pregnant and my body was too weak for pregnancy. I miscarried due to excessive work. Worse yet, I developed anemia, calcium, and iron deficiency. My husband cheated on me. I saw him talk to other women, and when I asked him with whom he talked, he would beat me. So, I went to my family; they divorced me from him when I was 17 years old.”

M. said that she sought help from the Women's House of the Autonomous Administration. The house’s management could not assist her because she was still a minor and her marriage was not registered in the courts of the Autonomous Administration. M. added:

“I was eventually divorced. My husband gave me 150,000 Syrian Pounds, secretly, because he feared his mother. I am now staying with my mother, and our financial conditions are very difficult. This harsh experience has left me in a very bad psychological state. I still cannot comprehend what happened to me. In this society, men, young and old, when they see a divorced woman, they would prey on her to have affairs or sexually exploit her. What makes it worse is that I am still tied to my former husband through our family card. To annul the card, I have to pay 15,000 Syrian Pounds —a sum I cannot afford.”

- **“My father hit me so hard on the head that I had to be taken to hospital.”**

Lava B.— born in al-Hasakah province in 1981— was forced to leave school nearly four years ago. Her father made her stay at home to take care of her sick mother, who later died as a result of her illness. B. narrated:

“My mother was sick and blind. She could not take care of herself. So, I watched over her all the time. My father used to tell her, ‘when will you die and relieve us from your

burden?'. I also had a brother. He was killed by the Turkey-backed armed opposition factions in northeastern Syria. I have been raising his two children after they were abandoned by their mother. I cannot forget the moment my mother died, about eight months ago. Her health was very poor, so I asked my father to take her to the hospital. Instead, he beat me brutally. I took her to the hospital myself. She died once we got there."

B. added:

"My brothers in Europe sent us money every month, but my father used to hide all the money. He did not even give me money for our daily food. So, we started to argue. He hit me. The neighbors would hear me scream and come to my rescue. My mental state started getting worse day by day. I complained to my brothers, but they did nothing. Once, my father said something so provocative that I responded. He got mad and started hitting me hard on the head. I had to be transferred to the hospital, where I stayed for nearly 10 days."

B. said that she sought help from relatives and members of the *Komin* (local council) to convince her father to stop his violent practices against her and allow her to travel to Europe. However, all their efforts failed. She narrated:

"My father continues to beat and insult me for any trivial reason. He also deprives me of my money and rarely lets me out of the house. That is why I keep secretly praying that he dies soon, to be relieved of this suffering. Why would a girl my age have to put up with this? Am I not entitled to be a university student, to have friends, and a life with them? Instead, I am raising two children that I do not know how to take care of or help grow up."

- **"I had to endure the pain, just not to be called a divorcee."**

Amal B.— born in the city of Qamishli/Qamishlo in 1989—married when she was only 15 years old to a man twice her age. B. lost her husband in a car accident and was asked to marry his brother if she wished to remain with her children. She recounted:

"I was happily married. However, my husband had issues with his father, who later expelled us from his house. We rented our own house. About a year later, I gave birth to my first child. The baby made us happier. But, alas! This happiness did not last. A year and a half later, my husband lost his life in a car accident. I was sixth months pregnant with my daughter, and my son was barely a year old. It was then that the journey of suffering began. I was still too young, only 18 years old!"

B. moved to her in-laws' house and gave birth to her daughter three months later. She was abused by her in-laws in multiple ways. She narrated:

"My in-laws interfered in my personal life. They even scheduled my visits to my family, who lived in the same city. Still, I tolerated everything and did not tell my family so as not to lose my young children. However, several months later, my in-laws put me before two options, the best of which was bitter. I had to marry my late husband's

brother to be able to stay at their house. They said that I am still a young woman in the prime of life and it is not permissible for me to stay with them without a *mahram* (a male guardian). Or else, I had to leave my children in their grandfather's house and return to my family. I left that house and went to my family. However, I did not accept to give up the custody of my children; I sued them and won the case."

However, B.'s in-laws did not leave her and her children in peace and tried to take the children by force. B. added:

"My in-laws' attacked our house several times to take the children. Shortly after, under pressure from my parents and relatives, I was forced to abandon my children, so as not to cause trouble to both families. I agreed with my in-laws on seeing my children twice a week in a neutral house, because my father-in-law did not allow me to enter his house, nor did he accept the children to come to my parents. I was in agony for years. Seven years after they took my children from me, I met another man. He was married but his wife could not get pregnant. He convinced me that he wanted to marry me out of love, not just to have children. I ultimately married him against my family's wishes."

Only 13 days into her second marriage, B.'s husband hit her for no reason. The next day, she asked him to drive her to her family's house because it was her children's visit day. He refused and told her, "Forget about them", although she had this matter settled before they were married and he agreed that she could keep seeing them. Today, B. visits her children secretly at her family's home.

As her second marriage progressed, the violence increased. She added:

"I and his first wife lived in the same building, but on different floors. My husband hit me every time I asked him to treat me with love and respect. He was miserly. He did not give me any money. It was my older sister who provided me with money. She was well-off. When my husband noticed that I was buying my needs, he asked me about the source of the money, and I answered him that it was from my sister, but he did not believe me. He hit and punched me in the face several times. He also accused me of having an affair. I remained patient and decided to cope up with his behavior just not to be divorced, especially because I married him despite my family's opposition."

B. lived in fear. She recalled one incident when she fought with her husband. He hit her and pushed her to the floor. She broke her teeth and would later need three stitches to repair the damage. He grabbed her hair, dragged her down the stairs and pointed a gun at her, saying, "I will kill you."

B. was terrified. She suffered for over a year. Her husband took her to doctors, asking them why she could not get pregnant. They all assured him that "she was physically fine, and that it was all due to her deteriorating psychological state." B. added:

"A year and two months after my marriage, my nephew was killed by ISIS. My husband did not show up for the funeral. I went alone. In the evening, he came to take me in his

car and on the way home he asked me why I went without his permission. I told him that I went because I was the deceased's aunt and I had to be there for my sister. He hit me while driving and wounded my mouth, threatening that he would discipline me properly at home. I opened the car door and asked him to take me back to my family's house and divorce me, otherwise I would throw myself out of the car. He was forced to take me back to my family's house. Two months later, I divorced him after one of our acquaintances intervened and convinced him of the decision."

- **"He threatened to slaughter me. My mother blamed me, saying I provoked him."**

Helen K.—born in al-Hasakah province in 2001—married a man 22 years older than her, to escape the violence her brother practiced against her. She narrated:

"My brother beat and harassed me even since I was a child. He continued to do so until I was 18. He controlled my life, and his list of demands was endless. He even denied me my right to choose my clothes. I submitted to his orders and changed the way I dressed to avoid clashing with him. However, he went too far and regarded himself as the guardian of everything that related to me, especially since my father died in my childhood. The violence that my brother subjected me too increased year after year. Once he attacked, insulted, and beat me. He also hit my mother when she came to my aid. He threatened to slaughter me because I did not keep silent. My mother blamed me for provoking him."

K.'s psychological state worsened after her mother justified her brother's actions. She felt alone, with no one to protect her. Ultimately, she decided to run away from home. After much thought, she found no other escape but joining the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). K. recounted:

"My second journey of torment began. I was fatigued by excessive training that was beyond my body's ability to endure. Twenty-five days after I joined the forces, I suffered from excruciating flank pain. They took me to the military hospital in Qamishli. For two months, I had to put up with acute inflammation and a swelling of the kidneys that I developed due to the extreme cold. Later, I planned escape with another girl. We did escape when we had a chance, but I did not dare to go back to my house, afraid of my brother. Instead, I went to my uncle's house in a village in the city of Qamishli. When he knew that I was there, my brother attacked me, but my uncle defended me and told him, 'Get out of my house. If you raise your hand at your sister, I will break it.' My brother left and did not return. My mother visited me secretly."

Over time, K.'s uncle's family started mistreating her. She was left no other choice but to marry a man that proposed to her, 22 years her senior, a widower, and a father of two sons. K. said:

“I have been married since early 2020. He is a well-mannered man. But I am unhappy because we belong to different generations.”

- **“He does not hesitate to hit me in front of my children.”**

Laila M. was born in al-Hasakah province in 2001 and married when she was 16 years old to a cousin 10 years her senior. M. was not as happy as she imagined she would be after marriage, receiving only pain and abuse from her husband.

M. is from the al-Darbasiyah city and lives with her husband and children in a village near the city on the road to al-Hasakah. Her husband works in farming. Even though he has an education and is a member of a political party that calls for women's freedom, he is not ashamed of beating his wife and sisters. M. narrated:

“Less than a month into our marriage, he hit and insulted me because I bought my brother a gift for successfully passing the high school national exam. His reaction made me furious, and I left to my parents’ house for a few days. I told my family, and they asked him to divorce me. He refused and attacked our house. He took me with him by force after neighbors and relatives intervened. It was then that I realized the mess I had fallen in.”

M. said that she is forced to put up with her husband’s violence so as not to cause her family trouble. She added:

“It was my choice to marry my cousin, and I paid for it. Before we were married, I saw how he treated his sisters like animals, but I never thought that he would treat me the same way. I was wrong to think that he might change because he loved me. Unfortunately, it is getting worse day by day, and there is nothing that I can do about it. Divorcing or abandoning him — any of these choices would worsen the problems between our families, and my family and I will pay the price. This will also harm my reputation.”

M. described the abuse she is suffering at her husband’s hands and her helplessness as a mother:

“Even the way he talks to me hurts. He is constantly irritated, scolding me for trivial reasons, and insulting my family. He does not hesitate to hit me in front of my children and his sisters. Worst of all, he is no longer afraid that I will leave him or ask for divorce. On the contrary, he always threatens me with divorce and tells me he will marry again. As for me, I can do nothing about it. I am now a mother of two young children. How could I leave these precious two children and have them pay for my mistake? I have to tolerate [his abuse] and be patient.”

M. says she deeply regrets her early marriage, adding that a woman should not marry before she is an adult and fully-aware of the decisions she is making. M. said:

“My parents did not approve of my marriage at the age of 16. It was my decision, which I regretted later. I realized that my family was right. The way a woman thinks, her

affections, and desires change completely after reaching the age of majority [18 years]. My story is an example.”

- **“He threw an electric heater at me.”**

Rawan K.— born in al-Hasakah province in 1992—was married at 15. Her marriage was traditional. Her husband saw her in a wedding party and liked her. He proposed, and she willingly married him. They were happy in the beginning, but soon she started having troubles with her in-laws and miscommunication governed her relationship with her husband. She narrated:

“I was very happy with him in the beginning of our marriage. However, my happiness soon turned into hell because his family started to interfere in our lives. We lived in the same building. Our house was on the first floor, theirs on the second. His family always incited my husband against me. Over time, he changed into a completely different person. He would not talk to me or spend time with me. He would return from work, I would set the table. He would have the meal and then go to them or leave the house. I once asked him, ‘What happened? What changed you that much?’ He said, ‘Because you are naggy, and like to argue.’ He said this even though I avoided arguing with him, so that he does not yell at me, become loud, and let his family hear us.”

K. decided to be patient and thought that her husband's treatment might change when she had a child. However, he continued to disappoint her. She added:

“I became pregnant two months after we were married. However, the idea of the child did not change my husband’s ill-treatment. Rather, he hit me, shouted at me, and insulted me in front of his mother and sisters every time we argued. His family hated me because they wanted my husband to marry his cousin. The situation was the same throughout the pregnancy. Even after I gave birth to my first child, the situation only became worse. He allowed me to visit my parents once a month, and I did not tell anyone of the situation, fearing that it would exacerbate the problem. I wanted to save my marriage, as not to be separated from my child.”

At one point, K. decided to start a small project and work, hoping that this would improve her mental status and the relationship between her and her husband. She was planning to help him in making their living. She said:

“I sold my jewelry, and opened a small shop within the house. I sold women's accessories and other supplies. I helped my husband cover our costs of living. A while later, I noticed that some of the goods were going missing every time I visited my family. I discovered that his sisters were stealing from the shop in my absence. When I told my husband, he beat me with a metal clothes hanger. His family heard me screaming and came down. But instead of blaming him for beating me, they scolded me and said that I turned their son's life into hell.”

K. was not the only victim in this marriage. Her little son was also abused and beaten:

"Once I heard my son screaming. He was only two years old. I went to see why he was crying. My sister-in-law was beating him. Asking her why, she said, "I will discipline him. We won't have your upbringing ways.' I could not take it and yelled at her. She and her sisters got up, slapped, hit, and pulled my hair. I did nothing but cry. I waited for my husband to come back to tell him what happened, and go to my family's house, because I could not stand it anymore. However, when he was home, his mother was waiting for him at the door and told him what happened, making the whole thing my fault. He was angry and started hitting and punching me. He even threw the electric heater at me. He stopped only when exhausted. I called my brother and asked him to take me home."

K. sought divorce, but found out that she was pregnant. The pregnancy forced her to give up on the divorce. Relatives intervened to settle the matters between her and her husband, who promised to change. She said:

"I returned to my husband and went home. His treatment improved a little, especially after I gave birth to my second child. However, he still subjects me to psychological and physical violence from time to time."

- **"He threatened to slander me and my family if I said a word against him."**

Rama K.— born in al-Hasakah province in 2002— married traditionally in mid-2020 to a well-off young man. K.'s husband owned a household appliances store and spent three years in Europe before he settled in the city of Qamishli/Qamishlo. K. said she was miserable despite her husband's good financial status because he often beat her. She narrated:

"I accepted to marry him [despite my young age] because he was handsome and did well financially. A few days into our marriage, I discovered he was a drug abuser. He was also dealing in drugs. I confronted him. He made fun of me, and said, 'Money has blinded you. I would have told if you asked how I got all the money. However, you married me for the money without even trying to know me well.' His answer was a knife stuck into my heart. I was at a loss for an answer. I withheld the tears and suppressed my anger. I went to my room and started contemplating my situation."

To her shock, K.'s husband confessed to having sexually abused some of the women who came to his appliances store. She recounted:

"That evening, I also asked him if he had any relations while in Europe. He sarcastically said, 'To be honest, I do not even remember the number. Not only in Europe! Here as well, I exploited the young women who came to my store. I had sex with many of them in exchange for money.' I could not control myself, I yelled in his face and told him what a wicked, ignoble person he was. He started hitting me. He punched me in the face and pulled my hair. He kept hitting me in the face and gave me a black eye. My eye and cheek were swollen. My mouth also was wounded."

K. spent that night crying in regret for having rushed to marry such a person. She decided to conceal her grief and not tell her family or anyone else about the incident. She recounted:

“A month later, while I was visiting my family, a female neighbor called me, asking how I was doing because she saw my husband and a woman entering my house. I rushed there. By the time I arrived home, they were gone. However, it was evident that he had an affair in my bed because my private things and my bathroom towels were also used. I called my husband and asked him to come immediately. I confronted him that he was having an affair. He did not deny it, but rather told me that it was not the first time that he cheated on me and that the woman who was with him is his long-time girlfriend, even before our marriage. I could not help myself, broke a vase that was on the table, and shouted at him, ‘You are a monster, divorce me at once!’”

K. said that she was determined to have a divorce, but that his reaction to the idea was so terrifying:

“He told me that he will not divorce me, and threatened to ruin my and my family’s reputation if I said anything against him. He said, ‘If you utter a word to your family, I will divorce you and tell people that I did so because you were disloyal and you were not a virgin. I have evidence of that.’ I was taken aback by his vile manners. I asked him what evidence he was talking about. He opened his phone and showed me pictures he stealthily took while I was in bed, wearing only underclothes. I challenged him, saying, ‘What is so strange about these photos, you are my husband?’ Mockingly he said, ‘do not try to be so smart, people do not know what you know. Who would believe that it is your husband that took these pictures and slandered you?’”

She added:

“While he showed me the photos, I snatched the phone. I threw it at the wall and it shattered. My husband beat me harshly. After several blows I started screaming. He took a few steps back and left home. I called my brother and told him to come and take me. I told him that my husband is bad-tempered, I could not live with him, and I wanted divorce. I did not tell my brother the truth, fearing his reaction and knowing what an immoral person my husband was. He could have easily defamed me and my family.”

K.’s husband refused to divorce her at first, ignoring the efforts of relatives and acquaintances who tried to settle the issues between the two families. However, having lost hope in her return, K.’s husband finally yielded and approved to get on with the divorce.

“After a month of quarrels and altercations, I promised him over the phone that I will not say anything against him if he accepted to divorce me and let us part ways. He agreed. I was divorced in October 2020, less than four months into our marriage. When my brothers’ wives brought my possessions from his house, we discovered that he tore all my clothes into shreds in vengeance.”

2. The Root Causes of the Rising Cases of Domestic Violence

Poor social awareness and widespread norms reinforcing violence against women are the root causes for the continued abuse of women in the region, said Arzo Tammo, the officer in charge of the legal office at SARA Organization for Combating Violence against Women—an independent organization concerned with defending women’s rights in northern Syria. Tammo stressed:

“The key causes of violence against women include social norms that grant men privileges or dignify them while abusively disparaging women; beliefs related to family honor and chastity; the weakness of legal mechanisms and sanctions imposed on perpetrators of violence; low levels of education; and employment, financial, and educational gaps between men and women, in addition to conflict-driven poverty and displacement. All these are risk factors increase the rate of violence against women.”

SARA experts believe that controlling violence against women in northeastern Syria requires providing substantial funding for women's empowerment programs and raising awareness about their rights, as well as firmly implementing laws defending women’s rights, especially those passed by the Autonomous Administration, which protect women to a great extent when applied.

According to the World Health Organization, intimate partner (physical, sexual, and psychological) and sexual violence cause serious short- and long-term physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health problems for women. They also affect their children’s health and wellbeing. This violence leads to high social and economic costs for women, their families, and societies. Such violence can have fatal outcomes like homicide or suicide, lead to unintended pregnancies, induced abortions, gynaecological problems, and sexually transmitted infections. Furthermore, these forms of violence can lead to depression, post-traumatic stress and other anxiety disorders, sleep difficulties, eating disorders, and suicide attempts, not to forget social consequences, including divorce and family fragmentation.⁴

3. Over 1600 Crimes against Women Recorded in Northeastern Syria in 2020

SARA Organization documented 22 femicides and nine female suicides in areas in northwestern Syria between 2020 and late March 2021, said Tammo, the official in charge of the organization’s legal office.

⁴ “Violence against women,” WHO, 19 March 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women> (last accessed: 27 June 2021).

More broadly, the annual statistical report by the Social Justice Council in northeastern Syria— the supreme judicial body in the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration— revealed that 1679 crimes were committed against women in the regions of Jazira, Manbij, Raqqa, al-Tabqa, Deir ez-Zor and al-Shahba over 2020.⁵

The report indicates that the crimes committed included 50 cases of murder, 29 cases of suicide, eight cases of attempted suicide, and 19 cases of rape, as well as 476 cases of beating and abuse, 351 cases of child marriage, 241 cases of defamation, 9 cases of infidelity, 50 cases of prostitution, 12 cases of kidnapping, 72 cases of harassment, and 33 cases of threat.

The report also documented 329 cases involving polygamy in 2020, against the laws enforced by the Autonomous Administration which, unlike the laws of the Syrian government, clearly prohibit polygamy.

The Social Justice Council noted that “numbers recorded in the statistical report of cases of polygamy and child marriages, pertain only to the Jazira region/al-Hasakah province, the Euphrates/ Kobani and al-Shahba areas, because the Women's Law has not been ratified and put into effect as in the rest of the civil administrations in Manbij, Raqqa, Tabqa and Deir ez-Zor.”

The report also concluded that Autonomous Administration areas are “a fertile ground for domestic violence.” Cases of domestic violence increased during the COVID-19 curfew measures, imposed on 28 June 2020 by the Women’s Justice Council of the Social Justice Council for Northeast Syria.⁶

During the lockdown, between 23 March and 16 June 2020, eight cases of suicide, 14 cases of suicide attempts, 126 cases of beating and abuse, 17 femicides, and 150 cases of matrimonial disputes were reported to authorities.

In northeastern Syrian areas, where the Autonomous Administration is in charge, Women’s Committees run houses for battered women, providing them with protection, care, and psychological support. Women are also offered legal aid.

4. Violence against Women in the Autonomous Administration’s Laws

After it was established, the Legislative Council of the Autonomous Administration approved a draft law, titled the Women’s Law,⁷ proposed by the Women’s Committee. The law addresses crimes like domestic violence, rape, child marriages, honor killings, forced marriage, polygamy, and sexual exploitation. In addition to abolishing dowries, the law

⁵ For more: <https://www.facebook.com/500722926770276/posts/1729958990513324/>

⁶ For more: <https://www.facebook.com/500722926770276/posts/1562350567274168/>

⁷ “Women’s Laws in Rojava – Northern Syria,” Kongra Star, 19 April 2019, <https://eng.kongra-star.org/2019/04/06/womens-laws-in-rojava-northern-syria/> (last accessed: 28 June 2021).

guarantees equal wages for men and women, and provides equal footing at court when summoned as witnesses.

STJ interviewed a judge in al-Hasakah province to gain insights on the laws addressing violence against women under the Autonomous Administration. The lawyer said that the Penal Code, used by the Administration since 2016, punishes those who perpetrate violence against women, whether in the form of beating, injuring, or abusing them, with imprisonment from one to six months.⁸ Article 95 of the Penal Code states:

“That who opts for intentional harm— namely, any person who intentionally hits, wounds or harms another person— resulting in the maiming or excision of an organ, amputation or disability of a limb, disability of the senses, serious disfigurement, or any other permanent or apparent disability, shall be sentenced to ten years in prison at most.”

Article 178 of the same code states:

“It is forbidden to practice violence against women. And whoever does that by beating, wounding, harming, mutilating the body or causing permanent disability, or cutting, removing, or amputating an organ, shall be punished, in addition to the penalties stipulated in this law for these crimes, by working under the auspices of the Women’s Center for ten days.”

Despite the Autonomous Administration adopting laws which ideally protect women, many women in northeastern Syria cannot benefit from them due to the tumultuous legal situation in the region. Women are forced to pursue proceedings stipulated by two separate civil status laws put into effect by two parties—the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration— that share control over the area but do not recognize each other’s governance.

Consequently, women experience the worst part of carrying out legal proceedings at courts, justice palaces, and the judicial chambers on both sides. This legal duality has caused a legal chaos in an area of clan-based communities, and undermined the population’s faith in the role of laws.

The Syrian government’s legal departments and courts continue to operate in the areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration, even though the Administration has set up their own courts and departments. However, the extreme differences in the laws addressing women’s affairs has made women victims of legal duplication and judicial chaos, in addition to social and cultural inequity.

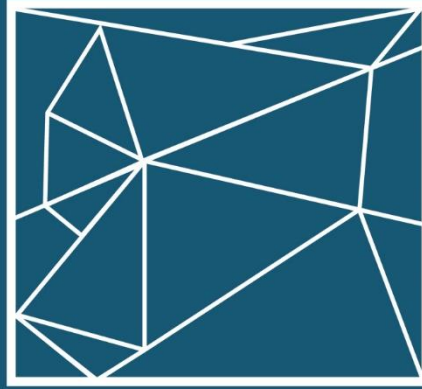
The Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration do not recognize each other, nor do they recognize the documents issued by their respective departments. This state of non-recognition has further complicated the lives of women and the population in these areas,

⁸ “The Penal Code- Decree No. 9 of 2016” (in Arabic), https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NYpTgVuRZkQJtAIF-REQMg1Bx-k_rbUv/view?fbclid=IwAR3Unk82U0q42Gvna8tZVGb67V_cbtv4yloaEL4RV9kNzwAsZgZ48BBMMn8 (last accessed: 28 June 2021).

particularly upon obtaining personal status official documents, including those related to marriage, divorce, and inheritance, as well as birth registration.

To safeguard their own rights, women are forced to pursue the same proceedings—whether for marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.— in two different courts. Women have to approach the Syrian government courts because government departments were in charge of their records and documents before the establishment of the Autonomous Administration in 2014. In addition, women are forced to obtain documents from the Autonomous Administration departments because the Administration is the party in control of the region today.

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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