

Under the Pretext of “Honour”: Syrian Women Killed for Exercising Their Right to Choose



- STJ Calls On The Transitional Government To Ensure Prompt, Effective, And Impartial Investigations Into Killings And Acts Of Violence Against Women, Hold Perpetrators Accountable Without Exception, Strengthen Protection Mechanisms, Promote Equality And Non-Discrimination, And Adopt A Zero-Tolerance Approach To All Forms Of Gender-Based Violence.

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Women and girls in Syria continue to be killed under pretexts linked to so-called “honour” in crimes that, at their core, target women’s right to make personal decisions concerning marriage, divorce, the choice of a life partner, and the management of their private affairs.¹ While the circumstances surrounding each case differ, these crimes share a common feature: they are perpetrated on the basis that a woman’s conduct or choices are perceived as affecting the “reputation” of her family or community, thereby providing, in the eyes of the perpetrators, justification for the use of lethal violence against her.

This report documents five cases involving the killing of women and girls in the governorates of Aleppo, Idlib, and Hama between June 2025 and May 2026. Testimonies collected by STJ reveal multiple forms of gender-based violence, including killings linked to the choice of a life partner, divorce, or socially disapproved romantic relationships. The report also documents a case in which a survivor of sexual violence was punished instead of the perpetrator being held accountable for the assault.

The cases documented in this report do not represent the full scale of killings committed under the pretext of “honour” in Syria. Rather, they constitute illustrative examples of a broader phenomenon that remains difficult to fully document. Crimes of this nature are often concealed by families and communities, frequently presented as ordinary criminal incidents, suicides, accidents, or deaths resulting from unspecified circumstances. In many cases, witnesses and relatives are reluctant to speak about the incidents due to fear of stigma, social pressure, or potential retaliation. These factors create significant obstacles to documentation efforts, thereby hindering efforts to establish a comprehensive understanding of the scale and prevalence of these crimes.

The findings obtained by STJ demonstrate how social, familial, and tribal norms can be transformed into mechanisms for restricting women’s freedom and controlling their lives, ultimately depriving them of their right to life. They further underscore the need for more effective measures to protect women at risk and to ensure full legal accountability for crimes committed under the pretext of “honour”, recognizing them as acts of murder that cannot be justified by social, cultural, or other considerations.

For the purposes of this report, STJ interviewed five sources, including witnesses and relatives of the victims. Participants provided informed consent after receiving a full explanation of the voluntary nature of their participation and the intended use of the information provided, including its publication in this report. They were also informed of their right to withdraw their consent at any stage. At the request of participants, the

¹ STJ has published several reports documenting killings committed under the pretext of “honour”. See, for example: [Syria’s Transitional Phase: “Honor” Killings Persist Amid Failing Protection and Legal Response](#), 19 June 2025; [Syria: 185 Cases of “Honor Killing” since 2019](#), 25 November 2022; [A Woman Disappeared in Southern Syria — Reports Say She was Killed for Honor](#), 25 August 2021; [Under the Guise of Honor: Women Continue to Fall Victims to Violence Across Syria](#), 5 May 2021; [Ten ‘Honor Killings’ in al-Hasakah and As Suwayda Since Early 2019](#), 19 August 2019; and [Syria: Girl, Two Women Murdered in Alleged “Honor Killing”](#).

victims’ real names have been withheld and replaced with pseudonyms, and any identifying details that could reveal the identities of witnesses or victims, or expose them to the risk of retaliation, have been omitted.

1. Rana: Killed After Being Blamed for a Sexual Assault Committed Against Her

Many women who survive sexual violence suffer harms that extend beyond the assault itself. Rather than receiving protection, justice, and accountability for the perpetrators, they are often blamed for the violence committed against them and subjected to stigma or punishment within their families and communities. Fear of family or community reactions leads many survivors to conceal what they have experienced and refrain from reporting it, fearing the consequences of disclosure more than the perpetrator himself.

In December 2025, Rana (20 years old) was killed in rural Idlib Governorate by her brother, who fatally stabbed her multiple times after discovering that she was pregnant.

According to testimony obtained by STJ, Rana was involved in a romantic relationship with a young man from her village who wished to marry her. However, her cousin opposed the relationship and sought to marry her himself. The testimony indicates that Rana was raped by her cousin while she was on agricultural land belonging to the family. She concealed the assault out of fear of her family’s reaction.

The witness stated: **“Rana refrained from telling her mother or any member of her family about what had happened to her because she feared that she would be blamed instead of the cousin who had raped her.”** The witness added that Rana’s fears were ultimately realized when her pregnancy, resulting from the rape, was discovered.

According to the testimony, Rana later told her mother what had happened and explained that it was her cousin who had raped her. The witness added that **“Rana’s mother told her son that the young man with whom Rana had been in a romantic relationship was responsible for what had happened to her. She did not tell him that it was his cousin who had committed the assault, in order to avoid major family disputes.”** Rather than holding the perpetrator accountable, Rana was stabbed multiple times by her brother, who killed her immediately.

The tragedy did not end there. According to the testimony, Rana’s brother later killed the young man with whom she had been romantically involved, while the person accused of committing the rape was never held accountable. The witness further stated that Rana’s brother was detained for a period of time before subsequently being released from prison.

The witness concluded: **“Rana lost her life twice: first when she was subjected to the assault, and second when she was denied her right to protection and justice.”**

2. Sarah: Killed After Being Forced to Abandon the Man She Chose as Her Life Partner

In March 2026, Sarah (18 years old) was killed in rural Aleppo after months of attempting to marry a young man she loved who belonged to a different tribe. According to testimony obtained by STJ from a person close to the victim, her father repeatedly refused to approve the marriage because of the young man’s tribal affiliation, despite his having formally proposed to her on several occasions.

As her family continued to reject the relationship, Sarah decided to flee with the young man in an attempt to marry away from familial and tribal pressures. However, her family managed to bring her back following the intervention of tribal dignitaries. This was followed by a series of tensions and disputes between the two sides, including reciprocal kidnappings involving relatives of the young man, before tribal leaders intervened to broker a reconciliation meeting in the city of Aleppo.

According to the witness, during that period, **“the girl was entrusted to a tribal sheikh and remained under his protection until the matter could be resolved... before her father pledged not to harm her and promised to marry her to her cousin in Lebanon.”**

[These assurances](#), however, did not prevent the crime from occurring. While Sarah was later near the Syrian-Lebanese border, her brother shot her in the head, killing her instantly. According to the testimony, both her brother and her father fled following the incident, and the perpetrator had not been held accountable at the time of the interview.

The witness stated: **“Sarah lost her life at a very young age. She was killed because she loved someone and tried to choose her own future, while those responsible remain at large.”**

This case does not appear to be isolated from other incidents documented by STJ involving the intervention of tribal leaders and influential community figures to negotiate arrangements concerning women who had fled their homes or rejected family decisions regarding marriage. STJ previously documented, for example, [the case of Julnar Azqoul](#), a minor who sought refuge with the family of a young man with whom she had been in a relationship after fleeing her family home out of fear of violence. Following mediation efforts involving religious leaders and local dignitaries, Julnar was returned to her family after her father signed a written pledge not to harm her. He later violated that pledge and killed her.

These cases illustrate the continued treatment of women as subjects of negotiation and settlement between men and tribal structures, while women's own rights to make decisions concerning their lives and to receive effective protection remain marginalized.

3. Nora: Killed Fifteen Years After Choosing Her Own Husband

This case illustrates how women can remain subject to social judgments that do not fade with the passage of time. More than fifteen years after Nora married, established a family, and became the mother of six children, her decision to choose her own life partner continued to be treated as an offence warranting punishment. The case reflects the persistence of social norms that place notions of family “honour” above a woman’s right to autonomy and to make decisions concerning her private life.

In March 2026, Nora (35 years old) was killed in rural Homs by her nephew, more than fifteen years after she had married a man whom her family had opposed because of sectarian differences. Nora was Sunni, while her husband belonged to the Alawite community.

According to testimony obtained by STJ, Nora had chosen years earlier to marry the man she loved despite her family’s objections. As a result, she left her family home and settled with her husband in rural Homs. Over the following years, the couple built a stable life together and had six children, the eldest of whom was thirteen years old.

Despite the passage of many years, the family estrangement did not erase the consequences of the earlier dispute. On the day of the killing, Nora received a phone call from her young nephew, who told her that he wished to visit her. According to the witness, Nora welcomed the gesture with hope, believing that the years that had passed might have eased tensions and reopened the door to communication with her family.

According to the witness, **“Later that same evening, her nephew lured her to the al-Salihiyah area near Homs, where he shot her, leaving her bleeding to death before fleeing the scene. For her family, news of her killing was entirely ordinary; they believed they had finally cleansed their ‘dishonour’ after fifteen years.”**

The killing left six children without their mother, while the perpetrator remained free and had not been brought to justice at the time of the interview.

4. Reem: Killed on Her Way to a New Life

In November 2025, Reem (28 years old) was killed in the city of Jisr al-Shughur in rural Idlib by her cousin after attempting to leave Syria and return to Germany. According to testimony obtained by STJ from one of the victim’s relatives, Reem had lived with her husband and children in Germany for several years after leaving Syria because of the war. Following the fall of the Assad regime, however, she returned to Syria despite her opposition to the move, in response to her husband’s insistence and his desire to resettle in the country.

As living conditions deteriorated and family disputes intensified, Reem decided to separate from her husband and informed her family of her intention to return to Germany. On the day of the killing, she left with a young man from her neighbourhood

who was helping her reach the Syrian-Lebanese border in preparation for her journey. Her cousin saw them together, verbally insulted the young man, and then shot Reem, leaving her bleeding at the scene before fleeing.

According to the witness, **“the cousin justified his actions on the grounds that Reem’s being accompanied by a man to whom she was neither related nor married constituted an affront to what he perceived as the family’s honour and a violation of social customs and traditions.”**

The killing left three children without their mother. The suspect was arrested approximately one month after going into hiding. The witness expressed concern that he might eventually be released, given the tendency to treat such cases as crimes linked to so-called “honour”.

5. Dalia: A Death Case Closed Quickly Despite Surrounding Suspicions

Not all deaths associated with the pretext of “honour” are openly acknowledged or conclusively documented as crimes. In some cases, a victim may have expressed fears or concerns prior to her death, only for the incident to be subsequently recorded as an accidental or natural death, leaving unresolved questions surrounding the circumstances. Dalia’s case illustrates this type of situation, where prior fears and social pressures intersected with a death that gave rise to serious suspicions.

Months before her death, Dalia (21 years old) had confided to people close to her that she feared returning to her family home following her divorce. According to testimony obtained by STJ from one of her relatives, Dalia repeatedly stated that she **“felt that something bad might happen to her because of the way some members of her family and tribe viewed her, and because of the rumours and gossip that had circulated about her following her separation from her husband.”**

In June 2025, Dalia died in her family home in Aleppo Governorate. The incident was recorded as resulting from **“electrocution while bathing.”** However, the circumstances surrounding her death, together with the events that preceded it, led those close to her to question the official account and raise concerns that she may have been killed under the pretext of “honour”.

Dalia had married a relative at a young age and had two children before her marriage ended in divorce. The witness stated that the victim **“was afraid and felt that they would harm her under the pretext of cleansing dishonour,”** adding that the pressures she faced extended beyond her immediate family and into her broader social environment.

According to the witness, **“within Dalia’s family and tribal environment, divorce is viewed as a highly sensitive matter. Women are subjected to significant social pressure, while early marriage and marriage between relatives remain widespread.”**

This is accompanied by an excessive emphasis on what is referred to as family reputation and its impact on various aspects of life.”

Following the announcement of Dalia’s death, she was buried quickly, and it remains unclear whether any independent investigation or forensic examination was conducted that could have dispelled the doubts surrounding the case. The witness added: **“Some people close to her spoke of major unanswered questions regarding what happened,”** expressing her belief that certain family members had sought to get rid of Dalia for months, although no conclusive evidence exists to substantiate that allegation.

While there is insufficient information to conclude that a killing occurred, this case highlights the importance of taking seriously deaths that are preceded by threats or fears expressed by the victim herself. It also underscores the need to ensure independent and effective investigations whenever suspicions arise concerning gender-based violence or so-called “honour” crimes.

6. Legal Analysis

Although Article 548 of [the Syrian Penal Code No. 148 of 1949](#) was repealed by [Law No. 2 of 2020](#), thereby abolishing provisions that had granted mitigating or exempting circumstances for certain killings committed under the pretext of so-called “honour”, such crimes continue to occur with alarming frequency. This reflects the persistence of the social and cultural factors that have historically contributed to the justification and tolerance of violence against women.

As Syrian legislation remains in force pursuant to Article 51 of [the Constitutional Declaration](#) issued in March 2025, the acts documented in this report constitute intentional homicide or premeditated killing, depending on the circumstances of each case, and are therefore subject to the provisions set forth in Article 533 and subsequent articles of the Syrian Penal Code. Article 535(3) expressly provides that the intentional killing of an ascendant or descendant is punishable by death, reflecting the legislature’s recognition of the gravity of such offences. While STJ opposes the death penalty as a violation of the right to life, the provision nevertheless underscores the seriousness of these crimes and the necessity of ensuring that perpetrators are held fully accountable and are not afforded impunity or leniency.

At the same time, the Syrian Penal Code continues to contain provisions that may, in practice, be used to reduce penalties in certain cases, most notably Article 192 concerning the so-called “honourable motive”. This provision raises serious human rights concerns due to its reliance on vague and subjective concepts that may allow implicit justification for acts of violence committed in the name of protecting “honour” or “reputation”. Such an approach is incompatible with the principle of equality before the law and the State’s obligation to protect the right to life.

The documented cases also reveal violations of a range of fundamental rights protected under international human rights law. These crimes constitute violations of the right to life as guaranteed under Article 3 of [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) and Article 6 of [the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#). They further amount to a form of gender-based violence prohibited under [the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#) and other relevant international standards. Moreover, such acts are contrary to the principles set out in [the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women](#), which affirms the obligation to protect women from violence and to guarantee their rights to life, dignity, equality, and security.

7. Responsibilities of the Transitional Authorities and Recommendations

The transitional authorities bear a particular responsibility to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, both by ensuring the prosecution of perpetrators and by sending a clear message that violence against women can never be justified on the basis of notions of “honour” or “reputation”. Such justifications have no place in a State governed by the rule of law and respect for human rights.

Addressing these crimes requires meaningful legislative reforms that go beyond punishing offenders after the fact. Such reforms should include a review of laws containing discriminatory provisions or allowing interpretations that may facilitate leniency towards violence against women, with a view to ensuring more effective legal protection for women and girls.

The documented cases also highlight the need to strengthen the effectiveness of criminal investigations into crimes and deaths surrounded by suspicions of violence against women, and to ensure that cases are not prematurely closed or handled in a merely formalistic manner when circumstances warrant a comprehensive and independent investigation.

Building public trust in State institutions during the transitional period depends not only on addressing major political and security challenges, but also on the ability of those institutions to protect individuals most at risk and to ensure that women can enjoy their fundamental rights free from violence, retaliation, and impunity.

Accordingly, STJ makes the following recommendations to the Syrian Transitional Government:

- Publicly and unequivocally condemn killings committed under the pretext of “honour” and affirm that such acts constitute murder and cannot be justified by social, familial, or tribal considerations.

- Ensure prompt, independent, impartial, and effective investigations into all killings, suspicious deaths, and acts of sexual violence affecting women, and hold those responsible accountable in accordance with the law, including individuals who instigate, facilitate, participate in, or conceal such crimes. Appropriate protection measures should also be provided for victims, survivors, witnesses, and those at risk.
 - Conduct a comprehensive review of existing legislation, particularly the Syrian Penal Code (including Article 192) and the Personal Status Law, with a view to repealing or amending provisions that discriminate against women and girls or restrict their rights and fundamental freedoms, in line with the principles of equality and non-discrimination.
 - Ensure that perpetrators of so-called “honour” crimes are excluded from any general amnesty measures or extra-judicial administrative release mechanisms, and that criminal proceedings against them continue in accordance with the law.
 - Mainstream a gender perspective into legislation, public policies, and justice and security sector reform processes, and strengthen the capacity of judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement personnel to address gender-based violence in accordance with international human rights standards.
 - Develop effective mechanisms to protect women and girls at risk of domestic violence or threats to their lives, including through safe reporting channels, early intervention measures, and referral pathways to specialized entities capable of providing protection and support.
 - Support public awareness campaigns that promote women’s rights to life, dignity, and personal autonomy, and challenge practices and beliefs that justify violence against women in the name of “honour” or “reputation”.
 - Strengthen cooperation with international mechanisms concerned with women’s rights and work towards aligning national legislation and policies with Syria’s international obligations, including under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), while taking steps to review and withdraw reservations that are inconsistent with the principles of equality and non-discrimination.
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ABOUT STJ

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization.

ABOUT Ceasefire



The Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights aims to empower civilians in situations of armed conflict or prevailing insecurity to document violations of their rights; to seek justice and accountability for violations of civilian rights; and to develop the practice of civilian rights protection and raise public support for the promotion of civilian rights.

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