

I Felt Wronged Twice



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Introduction

During the Syrian war, Women were subjected to multiple abuses from all parties of the conflict, including arrest, displacement and killing under torture¹. Some extremist groups have committed various abuses in the areas they have controlled, such as flogging and stoning to death², even forcing women, some are already married, to marry to group militants.

In Deir Ezzor, eastern Syria, ISIS has had the largest share of abuses against women compared to other armed groups since 2011, most notably the divorce of women under threat from their husbands who were not residing in the province and forced to marry members of the group's choice.

Justice for Life organization³ interviewed four women⁴ who experienced this violation, three of them agreed to publish their stories while keeping their name confidential and some information to avoid any danger. The women recounted part of the injustice they suffered during ISIS time in control of the city, the bitter choices they had to deal with, the decisions they were forced to make, the resulting negative consequences on their lives and their children, as well as the denial of them and their suffering by the community.

A Married Women Forced to Get Married Again

Budour⁵ is a woman from Deir Ezzor, who used to work as a nurse in the city's Al-Jura neighborhood⁶, married and has two children.

¹ The Death of a Woman from Deir Ezzor as She was Arrested in Philistin Branch, JFL, 8 June 2020. <https://bit.ly/2J3T596>

² An interview conducted by JFL with a civilian who witnessed a stoning incident in Deir Ezzor, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgZvDstjr4c&t=11s>

³ www.jfl.ngo

⁴ All witnesses' names in this report are pseudonyms upon their request.

⁵ A direct interview conducted by JFL female researcher with the witness, 23 September 2020.

⁶ One of the western neighborhoods in the city of Deir Ezzor, that remained under control of the Syrian government, where all government institutions were moved to it along with other surrounding neighborhoods following the control of armed opposition groups, and then ISIS, on most neighborhoods in the city between 2012 and 2017.

"After the siege was laid on Deir Ezzor⁷ neighborhoods by ISIS, my husband, I and my children faced two options: either starvation or displacement to Damascus, and unfortunately we chose the worst one. The way to Damascus must be through the ISIS held areas. As soon as we got there, they arrested my husband to start the "repentance"⁸ courses, because he was a teacher, and during these sessions he was transferred to one of the fronts of the fighting in Aleppo, where he was forced to fight in the ranks of the group, and from there he managed to escape towards Turkey" . The witness says that her story began with her husband's escape from the group; "My husband was considered apostate. Therefore, we were forbidden to leave the house, this was what the Women' Hisbah⁹ told me after my husband fled" .

Days after the group decision to prevent the witness from leaving, the witness was informed of a decision by the Women Hisbah. "I had to marry one of the ISIS fighters, otherwise I would have been punished and they didn't explain to me what it was. I thought about running away because it was impossible to move around because it was forbidden for women without a husband, son or father" she says.

The witness guessed the penalties that she and her children might suffer in case of rejection. "They might make me a slave girl for the elements, or deprive me of my children, I had absolutely no idea what my fate would be if I went out of my way" she says.

According to the witness, she had no choice but to get married and comply with the group's decision. The group chose for the witness a libyan-national spouse named Abu al-Harith. "I had no choice but to say yes when I was asked about my position on marriage, and the group continued the rest of the proceedings, and that's what happened," the witness continued.

⁷ ISIS laid a siege on the neighborhoods controlled by the Syrian government and lasted for over two years (since early 2015 until late 2017). The Syrian authorities obstructed the humanitarian aid during the siege, which affected remarkably on the availability of food and medicine.

⁸ Courses imposed by ISIS on specific group such as teachers and lawyers, and sometimes on entire villages, where the courses teach the principles of Islamic Sharea in accordance with ISIS vision. The participants should show "regret" for their previous work as it is, according to ISIS, not in line with Sharea. The participants are granted a certificate that proves the course attendance.

⁹ ISIS affiliated women group with the mission of applying the rules of Islamic Sharea that are imposed by ISIS to women and going after females who violate those rules.

Abu al-Harith died in a battle in 2018 after having a child from the witness, now 4 years old, which is what remains of the witness.

"After the SDF took control, my first husband came back from Turkey, divorced me, took my children from me and left. I can't stop thinking about them. What does he tell them about me? Does he tell them that their mother is a bad woman? I tried to communicate with my parents, but their fear of what people would say about me stood in the way of my return to them, so they always tell people that they have no idea about anything related to me. I dare not tell anyone the truth, and tell everyone that my husband died in an air strike without further details."

About her child from Abu al-Harith, she says "The most important thing for me today is my child, he cannot be registered by any party and I did not try for fear of the problems that I would cause, such as being transferred to a ISIS militants camp, being interrogated or being subjected to reprisals if someone knew my story. I know I will not be able to register him in school in the future, so I will try to teach him to read and write myself at home" the witness talked about her child from her spouse Abu al-Harith. "I fear today that we are the ones who are building a new generation of ISIS, these children no guilt, they should not carry the guilt of their parents, we must find solutions to recognize them and laws not to discriminate against others because of a sin they did not commit," the witness said.

Samira¹⁰, in her 30s, married with two children. After the siege of Deir Ezzor neighborhoods was laid by ISIS, the illness of her elderly mother, and the severe shortage of food and medical supplies in the besieged areas, she decided to go to Turkey in search of a better place for her family.

¹⁰ A direct interview conducted by JFL female researcher with the witness, 24 September 2020.

"I had to go through the areas controlled by the ISIS, and because my husband was a lawyer, he couldn't get into the area for fear of being arrested as being a lawyer is considered a crime. So, my mother and I went out with my brother as a guardian¹¹" samira says.

Samira deleted all the messages on her mobile phone so as not to be held accountable by the checkpoints of the group. Before reaching the checkpoint of the town of Ayyash¹², she heard the sound of a message from her mobile phone, but she was very afraid that the members of the group would see her holding her phone and they think she was filming, that is why " I did not look at the message I received from my friend, when the members of the group took the phones to search them, they asked "whose phone is this? " I had to tell them that, so they asked me to go down and accompany them with my children."

Samira tells JFL researcher about the details; "They took us to an unknown place and they put us in a two meters small room with a toilet. We stayed there for three days without being interrogated, we slept near the toilet, we ate two meals a day. We knew nothing about the time, except the time of prayer where they were knocking hard to tell us that it was time to pray and we have to pray now. My son got sick and suffered from diarrhea. I asked them to take him to the hospital. There, I knew that we were in Madan district, near Raqqa City.

After my son got better, they brought us back to the same room where we stayed for a whole week before we were moved blindfolded to another place, which I later knew was one of the ISIS headquarters in the village of Al-Husseinia in Deir Ezzor countryside in an area in front of the train tracks".

Samira and her children were placed in a small room with a small opening to breathe. The weather was hot, and they had difficulty in breathing.

"After one night I was called up to be interrogated. It was a small room that was also dark and had a light bulb in the middle of the ceiling. They asked me about my husband, my friends, my relatives and my neighbors. I was so scared, I told them everything I knew, but they were always yelling at me and telling me not to lie as they already knew everything.

¹¹ The English word for Mahram who is an unmarriageable person with whom marriage is totally unlawful at all times on the basis of kinship or uterine relationship.

¹² Located in west of Deir Ezzor, where ISIS checkpoints, that participated in the siege of Deir Ezzor neighborhoods, were positioned.

They kept interrogating me for a whole week. Sometimes I was alone with masked investigators and sometimes they would bring my children and start screaming at us. I could hear the detainees screaming at night and they were being tortured, it was terrifying."

On the eighth day, while Samira and her children were in the cell, one of the operatives entered and told her that the group would train her children to carry out suicide attacks in Iraq. "I started screaming and crying, I begged him not to approach my children, I would do whatever he wanted, he answered me by saying "nothing will prevent the Islamic State from doing this" and he left. Then, another operative entered, and started talking to me and my child about the Islamic State and the Islam religion. He was kind to me and the children." This situation was repeated over three consecutive days; at first, an operative comes and threatens, then another operative comes and speaks kindly.

A day later they took the children out of the cell and told Samira that it was time for training. They brought them back after hours with a lot of gifts where they told Samira that the kind operative was the one who bought gifts to her children and took care of them.

Samira continues; "A female ISIS member came and asked me, "do you want to get out of here? "I said yes, and she said, "Then you have to marry one of the mujahideen brothers, I told her that I am a married woman. she started shouting at me and telling me "your marriage is invalid, and if you want to get out of here and save your children from being recruited, you only have to accept". Then , she continued, "soon the Sheikh will come and ask you if you accept a man as your trustee, answer yes and we will take care of the rest". That was what happened, I had no other choice, I had to protect my children. Now I'm married to a man I don't know."

The husband was a Tunisian and Samira gave birth to a child. Later, the group told samira that her husband was killed by an air strike during battles with the SDF in 2017. Samira talks about her family's attitude: "My brother didn't accept it, he left to Turkey, sometimes he calls me and helps me to secure my living, but he's still mad at me. My husband divorced me when he found out what happened and emigrated to Europe, and after the Syrian

Democratic Forces took control at the beginning of 2018, he took my children away from me and I haven't seen them again. As for my little girl, I don't know what will happen to her, I can't register her in civil registry as if they need a paper to prove her lineage and I don't have one. I always wonder about the future of this girl who is not guilty, but pays the price like me."

Hiba¹³, a woman from Deir Ezzor city who has three children, told us her story; "I used to live in Deir Ezzor when ISIS took control of the area. My husband was working in Saudi Arabia. One day, the women's Hisbah came to my house and asked me to accompany them to the headquarters, so I did. When we arrived, they asked me about my husband and I told them the truth. Their response was that my husband is an infidel and therefore my marriage is invalid, and I should not live without a guardian, so I have to marry one of the mujahideen brothers to raise my children on the principles of the Islamic State. I refused at first, and they told me that they would give me a day to think about it."

Hiba tried to contact her husband that day, but the network was not working and it was not easy to call from the internet because the group would have been watching her. Hiba made her decision to refuse to marry.

About the threatens she received, Hiba says; "The next day, the Hisbah came back to my house, and they asked me if I had changed my mind or not, so I told them that I am married, and I could not marry another man. They told me that I had no choice, either to marry to one of the group operatives or to be treated as a slave girl to do what asked of me without my will. Additionally, they would not allow me to see my children again. I accepted as I had no choice. My husband was an Iraqi, captured during the battles with SDF. I don't

¹³ A direct interview conducted by JFL female researcher with the witness, 21 September 2020.

know where is he and I don't want him to know where I am either. I have two sons and a daughter."

No one communicates with Hiba today and she does not want to communicate with anyone as she is living in a state of fear.

"None of my family today communicates with me, my first husband did not. I am living today in two fears; a fear that someone will know what happened with me in the past, and a fear for the future of my children. I did not dare to try to register them in the civil registry for fear that I and my children will be transferred to a camp of ISIS families. So, my children's future is unknown. I don't know if we can forget and forgive each other one day."