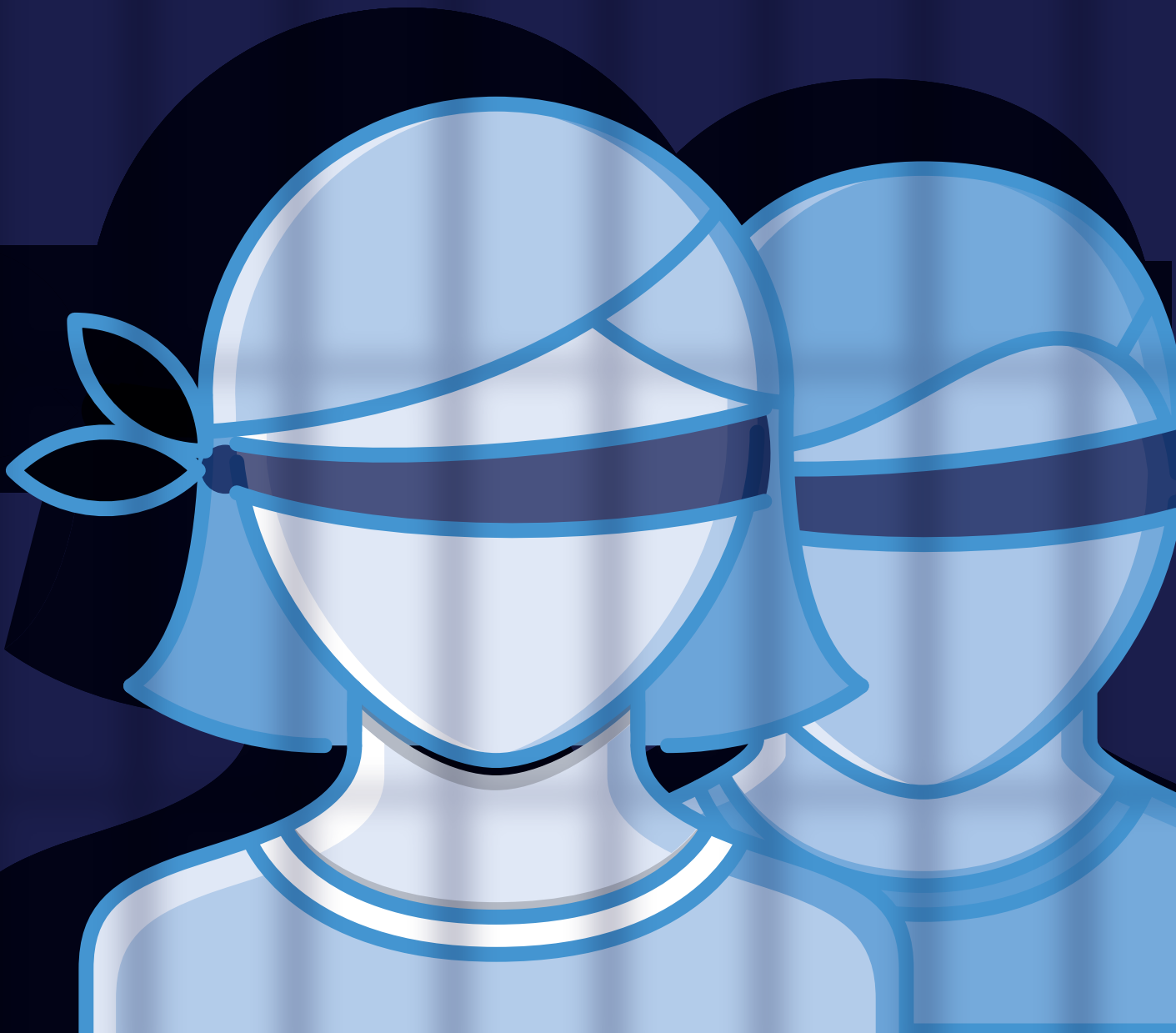




**Sexual and Gender-Based Violence:
Shared Experiences Among Syrian
Detainees
(An Overview)**



اليوم التالي
لدعم الانتقال الديمقراطي في سوريا



THE DAY AFTER
Supporting Democratic Transition In Syria

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: Shared Experiences Among Syrian Detainees

(An Overview)

September 2020

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The Day After (TDA) is a Syrian organization that works to support democratic transition in Syria, and its scope of work is focused on the following areas: Rule of law, transitional justice, security sector reform, electoral system design and Constituent Assembly election, constitutional design, economic reform and social policies.



We thank the Orient Policy Center for their valuable contribution to this report.



The Orient Policy Center (OPC) is an independent research center established in 2014, providing consultations and research services with the aim of developing humanitarian policies and programs, and supporting stabilization and reconstruction in crisis areas and fragile environments.

Sexual and Gender-based violence (SGBV) has been defined as “any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially-ascribed (i.e., gender) differences between males and females.” Acts of SGBV violate a number of universal human rights protected by international instruments and conventions. Many SGBV acts break national laws, although both definitions and practical implementation of laws and policies vary widely. SGBV includes acts that “inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, or other deprivation of liberty.” The term SGBV is most commonly used to refer to violence perpetrated against women and girls. The subordinate role of females in society is seen as a root cause of SGBV, and gender discrimination contributes to acts of SGBV being ignored and a lack of support for survivors. SGBV is also used by some people to describe the “gendered dimensions of certain forms of violence against men and boys, particularly sexual violence committed with the purpose of reinforcing socially constructed ideas of what it means to be a man and male power.” - ***Definition of Sexual and Gender-based violence according to the United Nations.***



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Executive Summary

Now in its tenth year, the Syrian conflict is the largest refugee and displacement crisis of our time, displacing nearly 13 million within and outside the country. One of the most heinous, and often misunderstood manifestations of the violence affecting Syrians is sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), which remains a serious issue, particularly for detainees, who are most at risk of SGBV in any humanitarian crisis.

The Day After (TDA) aims to guarantee that violations during the conflict are extensively reported so as to advance transitional justice and peacebuilding in Syria. Despite the vast amount of documentation that TDA has been able to collect since its inception in 2013, very little information has been gathered on violations related to SGBV. The root causes of SGBV tend to comprise a vast array of origins, triggers, and factors.

Given the history of SGBV in Syria, and incidences of SGBV that have occurred prior to 2011; those incidences were “mostly hidden,” due to social stigma, and became more widespread and exposed during the conflict. SGBV has long been a societal problem in Syria; this includes domestic violence, incidences of SGBV in regime prisons, and honor killings. Because there is an urgent need to provide support to survivors of violence, particularly those in prisons, TDA felt it useful to publish this report.

This report sought to assess the prevalence of SGBV in Syria in regime prisons, as well as to gauge survivors’ experiences during their detention.

For this assessment, the TDA research team conducted 100 structured interviews with former Syrian detainees (79 women and 21 men) currently residing in Turkey and other countries in the diaspora.

All respondents reported that SGBV was present during detainment, but also in the general community, primarily in the form of domestic violence and sexual harassment. A significant minority of respondents reported that they were sexually tortured with tools during detainment, and threatened with rape. Additionally, the most common problem identified by female respondents was the lack of access to reproductive care.

Finally, 92% of respondents confirmed that they suffer from PTSD symptoms post-detainment; it is of note that while male survivors were less likely to be sexually abused in prison, they were less likely to talk about it if they were, suffering psychologically as a result. The small sample of data suggests that the majority of PTSD-positive responses were almost equal between genders. A clear example that even when bodies heal, the mental health toll often endures.

Psychological services for survivors must be provided, along with other institutions to effectively achieve justice and accountability, in order to address and assuage the anger and trauma of the victims. Otherwise, SGBV will continue to have a severe impact on Syrian society.

SGBV survivors overall, and survivors of sexual violence during detention in particular, face considerable challenges in obtaining support after they are released. With SGBV falling under the protection sector, all response plans treat gender equality as a cross-cutting issue; in many cases specific SGBV-related actions are integrated into other response sectors, particularly health. Nevertheless, international NGOs like Save the Children, and local NGOs such as Kesh Malek, have developed comprehensive, multi-year crisis response plans that include SGBV as a protection priority, and they serve as excellent partners to engage with on violence against both male and female victims at the community level.



SNAPSHOT

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence:

Shared Experiences Among Syrian Detainees



Affected populations

Survivors of SGBV in Syrian regime prisons



Location of violence

Syrian regime prisons in various Syrian provinces



Trends during detention

Various forms of SGBV: Threatening with rape – Rape – Torture with tools – Lack of access to reproductive care for women – Verbal abuse with sexual connotation – Sexual Harassment – Witnessing sexual harassment – Witnessing rape – PTSD – Marital problems – Social stigma



More commonly reported during detention

Psychological abuse (threatening with rape/sexual harassment) during detention
– PTSD – Lack of access to reproductive care



Negative outcomes after release

Difficulty accepting SGBV survivors back into the community – Marital problems- Mental health challenges (PTSD) - Forced marriage for women after their release – Social stigma



Positive attitudes after release

Community and family values inherent in Syrian society that doesn't abandon survivors

WHAT TO DO?

- ✓ Acquire the support of local leaders (including local women leaders)
- ✓ Build strong relationships with community members for regular consultation on SGBV issues
- ✓ Strengthen informal community support networks for SGBV survivors of prison
- ✓ Finding organizations well-versed in SGBV at the grassroots level to support SGBV survivors

Introduction

This report focuses on the types of SGBV committed against detainees in Syrian prisons, and their ramifications. The report addresses those acts of violence with the objective of recording incidents of sexual and gender-based violence, which are vital to promoting accountability and achieving sustainable peace in post-conflict situations.

According to reports by the U.N. Commission of Inquiry on Syria (UNCIS), both women and men have encountered conflict-related SGBV since spring 2011.⁽¹⁾ The most common occurrences of SGBV take place in detention centers, checkpoints, and houses during government raids. When men report suffering from SGBV, it is often in the context of torture. There is little information publicly available about whether men encounter SGBV in other contexts. Women report sexual assault during torture as well, and also face SGBV by way of forced marriages, domestic violence, denial of access to reproductive care, and honor killings.

The effect of SGBV has impacted detainees' sense of safety (or perceived safety). Rumors and stories of rape are ever-present, and often used to intimidate detainees. Meanwhile, resources for SGBV survivors after their release are scarce. Medical, psychosocial, and protection services are necessary for survivors, particularly if they are to come forward for the purposes of documentation. Pervasive social stigma surrounding SGBV is one of the most significant reasons why there is little documentation of such cases. SGBV is a taboo subject matter in Syrian society and is further complicated by the fact that traditionally honor and female sexuality have been closely linked. Women in particular fear coming forward because of the possibility that they will be shunned by family members and their communities for the perceived sense of dishonor that sexual assault denotes. However, this does not negate the fact that men also suffer post-detainment, and this report cites both male and female respondents suffering marital problems following their release from prison.

Research Objectives

The objective of this report was to assess experiences of SGBV among survivors of Syrian regime prisons. Researchers were tasked with analyzing the experiences of survivors during detainment in regime prisons, and their conditions after release. The research focused on the various types of SGBV violations committed against both women and men among respondents who are mostly potential survivors of SGBV.

Additionally, the report aims to inform TDA's strategy for increasing its documentation of SGBV, and help establish guidance for transitional justice mechanisms to engage with the Syrian community with the intent to increase post-conflict accountability for SGBV-related violations in Syrian regime prisons. Additionally, the report gives recommendations of the capacity for reform through the engagement of CSOs, NGOs, and communities in supporting women and men who were subjected to SGBV.

(1) UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria (UNCIS) "Sexual and gender-based violence against women, girls, men, and boys, a devastating and pervasive feature of the conflict and must end now," 15 March 2018 <https://cutt.ly/8fzdfbC>





Methodology

For this assessment, the TDA research team conducted 100 structured interviews with male and female former detainees currently residing in various Turkish and European cities.

Each interview took approximately 40 minutes. Before the start of each interview, researchers explained the objectives of the research and the definition of SGBV before moving on to the interview questions.

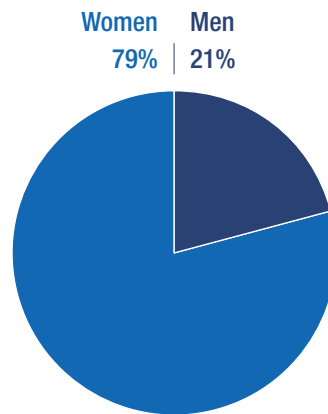


Figure 1: Distribution of respondents according to gender

Most of the respondents were typically in their 30s (39% of the total sample) and 20s (27%).

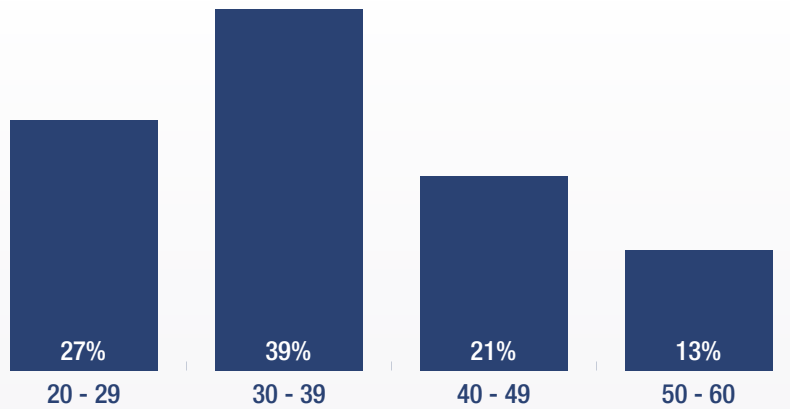


Figure 2: Distribution of respondents according to age category

Respondents hailed from a diverse array of Syrian provinces. However, because respondents were interviewed in Turkey and other countries of the diaspora (with the exception of one respondent in Syria), not their native city/town, TDA has considered any province with fewer than three respondents insufficiently representative for province-level analysis.

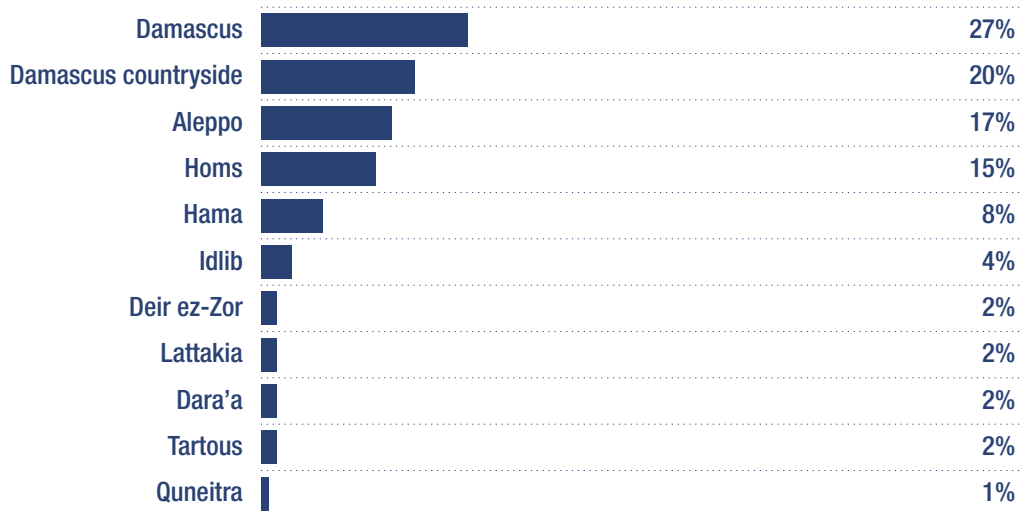


Figure 3: Respondents' distribution according to their province of former residence in Syria

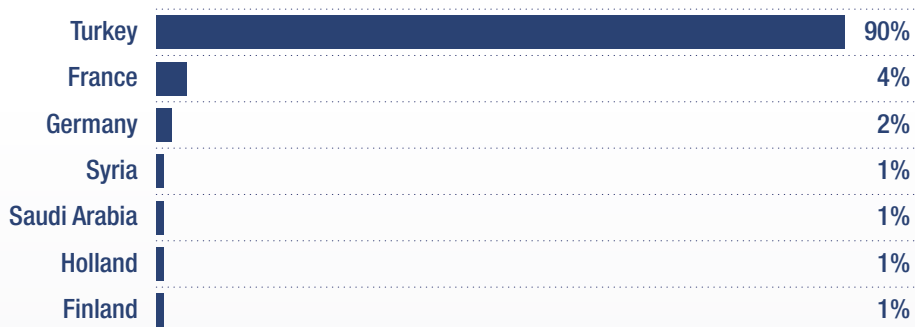


Figure 4: Distribution of respondents according to their current place of residence

The information on the SGBV impact on Syrians is not complete; this would require a much longer report. However, this report gives a basic understanding of gender-based violence in Syria, particularly in prison facilities. The report covers only regime prisons; domestic violence, early marriage, and violence against the LGBT community all exist in Syria but are not discussed in this report.

SGBV is a taboo subject in Syrian communities. Due to the sensitive nature of the focus of this study, there is a risk that some respondents may not have been fully forthright in their testimonies. Furthermore, SGBV is not a concept native to Syria. Despite researchers' efforts to explain the framework of SGBV to respondents, it is possible that misunderstandings persisted.

Given the sample size and scope of the survey, this report does not present an exhaustive source of knowledge on SGBV. The sample size also limits the ability to compare the responses of males and females. However, it does provide a window into the current situation and can therefore serve as a simple summary.



Historical Context

Social Dynamics and Equal Opportunities

Syrian culture places great emphasis on family and extended family (or tribal) connections as well as patronage (*wasta*), which continue to play an important role and provide a crucial safety net in the absence of sufficient state support. This has protected many vulnerable Syrian families from falling into poverty. However, localized social norms and practices can make it difficult for victims of gender-based violence to formally report violence and seek justice.⁽²⁾ Customary practices and attitudes dominate communities in Syria. Women are treated as subordinate to men in the highly patriarchal culture, and social customs place gender-based restrictions on their rights. It is widely believed that a “woman’s place is her home and children,” while the domain of public interaction is reserved for men. However, this has changed since the conflict broke out, as women’s contributions to family income increased amid difficult economic conditions.⁽³⁾

Political Rights

Gender dynamics have a relatively long history of complexities in Syria. While women obtained the right to vote in 1949, the effects of their contribution to Syrian society have been stifled by the realities of the repressive political climate. When the Ba’ath Party seized power in 1963, it imposed a state of emergency that indefinitely suspended many provisions and protections of the legal system.⁽⁴⁾ In particular, freedoms of expression and association have been severely reduced. These rights were curtailed further when Hafez al-Assad took power in 1970, and transitioned Syria to a government dominated by a one-party system, during which many popular protests were suppressed. The state of emergency continued under Assad, and was used to justify arbitrary arrests and detention, and a ban on all opposition. In addition, other laws were conceived that gave entrenched security forces wide powers to keep tabs on the population and restrict the activities of independent groups.⁽⁵⁾ The effects of the repressive political climate hindered women’s participation in politics and their freedom of expression. Furthermore, legal reforms that ensure gender equality are still very limited, and women have a limited presence in the executive and judiciary, reducing their potential role in developing, implementing, and enforcing policy decisions.

1. History of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Syria

Patriarchal values in Syrian society have left women vulnerable to gender-based violence, both inside and outside the home. Ongoing studies⁽⁶⁾ have indicated that aggressive behavior at home is common throughout Syria, but such abuse isn’t explicitly outlawed; spousal rape is excluded as a culpable offense under the legal definition of rape.⁽⁷⁾ For instance, the definition of and evidentiary burden for adultery is different depending on the gender of the perpetrator; women face higher minimum sentences than men. In addition, under the current personal status law, women lack full control over issues related to marriage, divorce, custody, inheritance, and other family matters.⁽⁸⁾ Though the law has undergone minor amendments under the current Syrian regime, the changes remain marginal, particularly for women, and do not incite real change. In addition, conservative customs relegating women to a secondary position in society continue to hold greater sway than formal law for many Syrians.

(2) United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), “Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in the Syria Crisis,” April 2016, <https://cutt.ly/3fzjcX9>.

(3) TRT Arabic, “How Syrian Women Faced Difficulties During the War,” 7 November 2019, <https://cutt.ly/NfzlkdJ>.

(4) “No Room to Breathe: State Repression of Human Rights Activism in Syria,” Human Rights Watch, Volume 19, no. 6E (October 2007), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/syria1007/3.htm>.

(5) Same as previous source

(6) Rhonda Roumani, “Study reveals domestic abuse is widespread in Syria,” Christian Science Monitor, 25 April 2006, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0425/p04s01-wome.html>

(7) Da’ad al-Moussa, “Women and the Syrian Penal Code,” 17 October 2016, <https://cutt.ly/pfzLrm>

(8) Syrian Legal Forum, “Syrian Personal Status Law between reality and aspiration,” March 2019, <https://cutt.ly/xfEjQtC>.

The system of patriarchy is deeply ingrained in Syrian society, and men rarely deviate from traditional roles. Therefore, the pressure on both women and men is exacerbated, and achieving any kind of equality for women is extremely challenging. Additionally, men talking about incidences such as SGBV committed against them is almost out of the question, as they are expected to live up to their code of idealized masculinity, and stay “strong and silent.”

Before 2011, gender-based violence occurred in Syrian government detention facilities, but also in the general community, mainly as domestic violence, early marriage, and sexual harassment. Since the uprising, gender-based violence is perceived as a weapon of war, used mainly by the Syrian government, but also by the armed opposition and extremist groups. Though not mutually exclusive, gender-based violence, war, and politics are inextricably linked, and SGBV is used as a tactic during war and detainment.

2. Overview on the Treatment of Prisoners

Before 2011, Syria was a police state rife with corruption, political repression, and inequality. At present it remains a police state, rampant with poverty—in addition to becoming a playground for various external powers. The Syrian police state is more aggressive than ever. Nothing is more representative of the Syrian police state than its horrifying prison facilities. About 1.2 million Syrians (1 in 18) are estimated to have been arrested or detained at some point in the country’s eight-plus-year-old civil war. At least 148,000 people are still in custody or presumed dead, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights.⁽⁹⁾

The weaponization of gender has served ideological purposes to legitimize the Bashar al-Assad regime. The sectarian narrative of the regime retains gendered foundations, insofar that “the significance of the community’s women being raped is that the honor of the community’s men has been assaulted.” This approach is further exacerbated in Syrian regime prisons, where the Assad regime portrays itself as the sole security provider; yet the portrayal is a gendered one, reliant on the depiction of the vulnerable female requiring a masculinized regime protection.

(9) The Syrian Network for Human Rights “Statistics since March 2011” & “Statistics of 2020” Based on last visit to the website 31 August 2020 <http://sn4hr.org/#1523098545619-e820e287-18bd>





Findings

1. Types of Gender-Based Violence and Violations during Imprisonment

Respondents mentioned a wide variety of types of violations of SGBV. Verbal harassment, threatening to rape the detainee, torture with electric tools targeting the genitals, and threatening to rape a family member were among the violations most prevalent.

According to respondents, by far the three most common associations with SGBV in the context of detainment were verbal harassment—using words with sexual connotation (87%), threatening to rape a family member in front of the detainee (27%), and threatening to rape the detainee (37%).

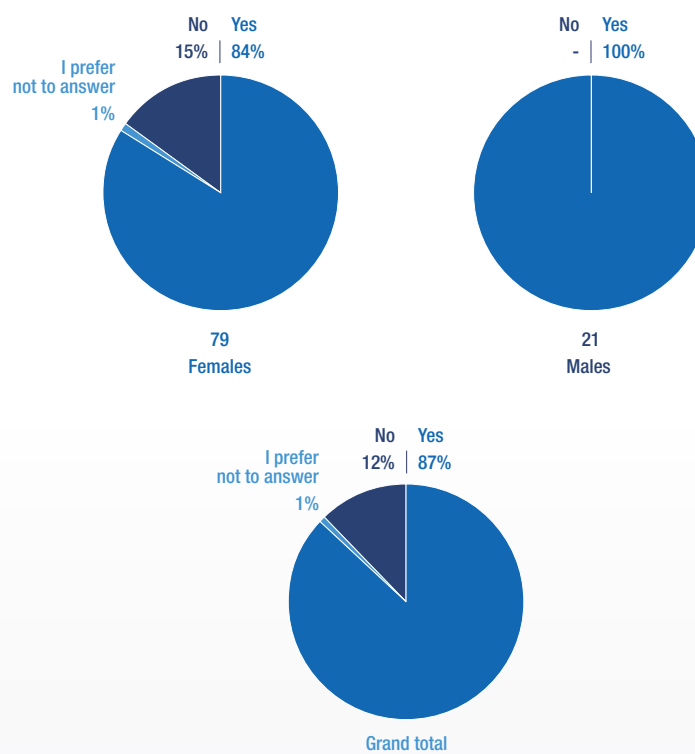


Figure 5: Distribution of respondents based on whether or not they were verbally harassed during imprisonment

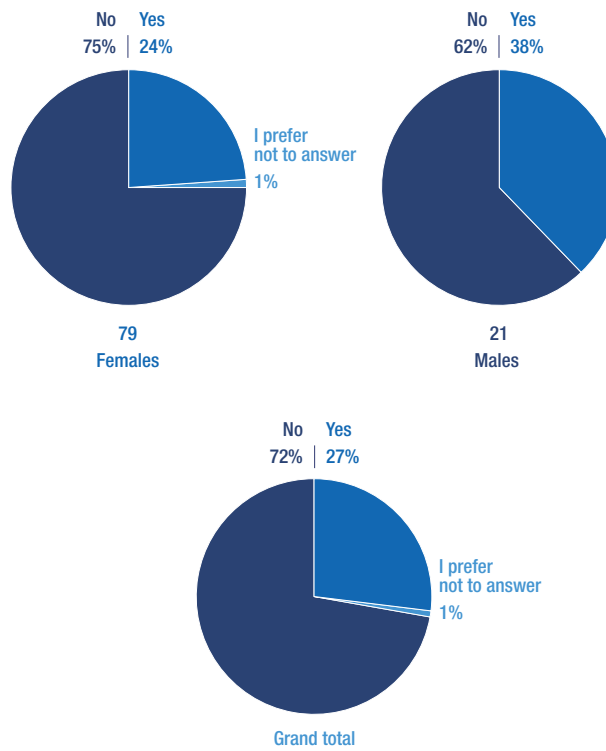


Figure 6: Distribution of respondents based on whether or not they were threatened by prison authorities to rape a family member

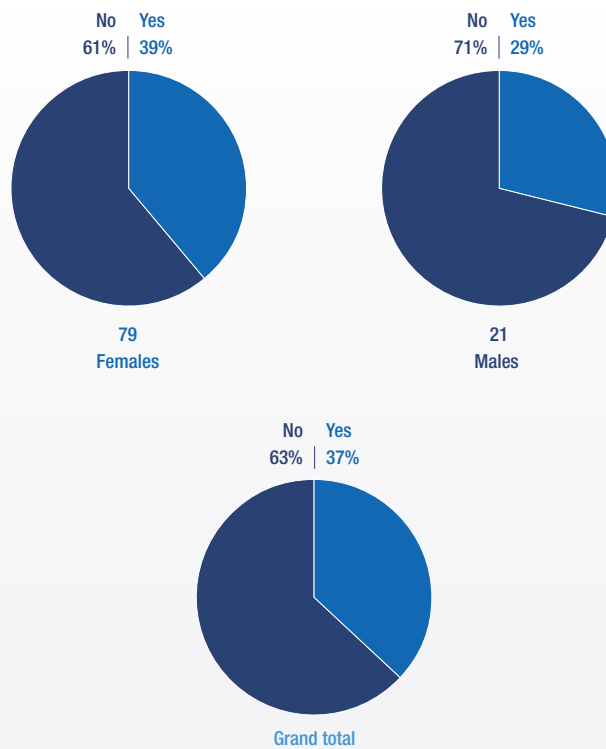


Figure 7: Distribution of respondents based on whether or not they were threatened by prison authorities with rape





It is also noteworthy that molestation—touching (63% women compared to 5% men), and lack of access to reproductive care (women-applicable only, 65%) were the two most common SGBV associations with women detainees.

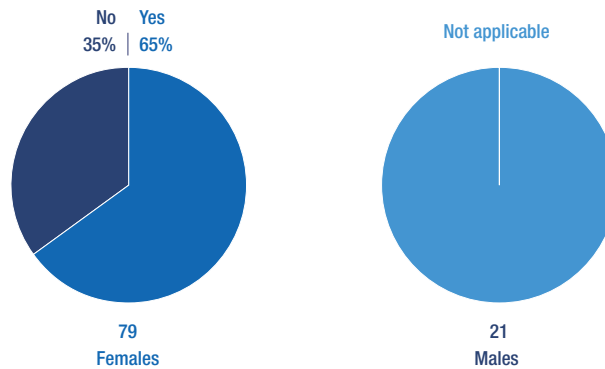


Figure 8: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were given access to reproductive care (sanitary pads). Applicable only to women detainees.

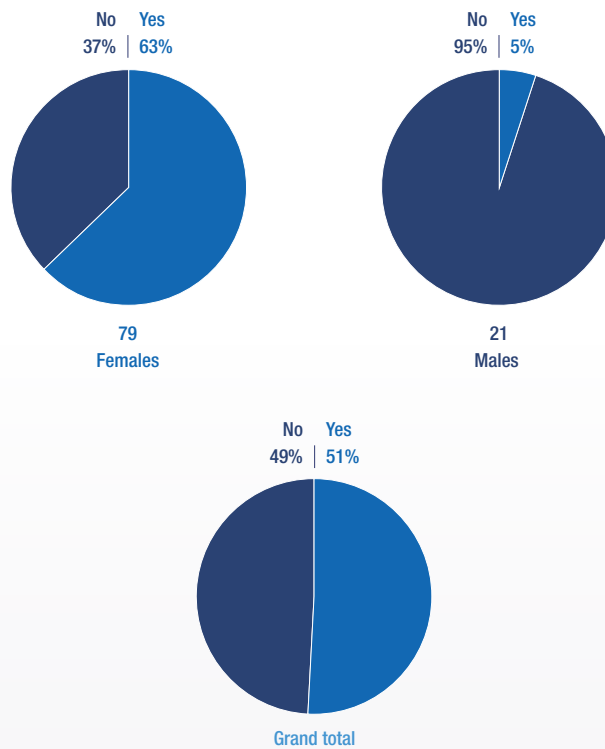


Figure 9: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were molested (touched) or not

Regarding SGBV-related torture with electric tools, 48% of male respondents (10 of 21) said they were subjected to this type of torture, compared with almost 19% of female respondents (15 of 79). Overall, 25% of respondents were subjected to this form of torture. As the data indicates, this practice is more commonly committed against male detainees than females.

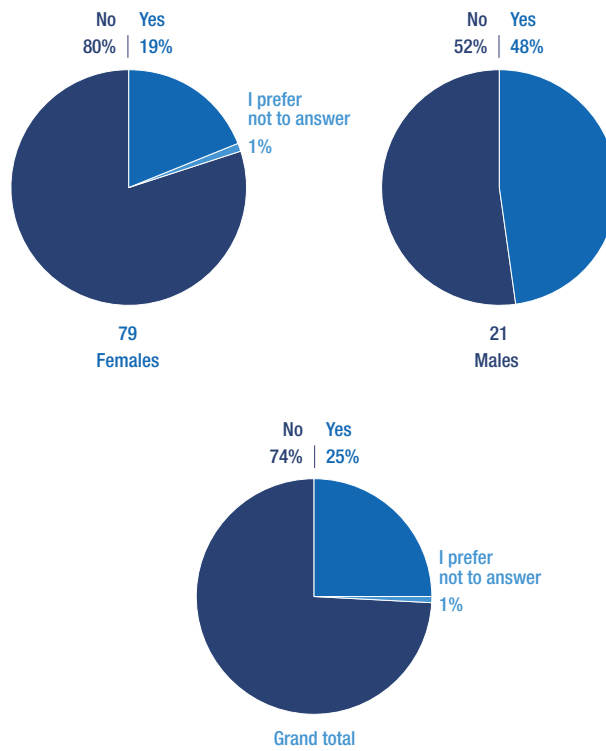


Figure 10: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were subjected to torture with electric tools placed on their genitalia

Sixteen percent of female respondents reported attempted rape, compared to 5% of male respondents. Eight percent of female respondents reported rape; 0% of their male counterparts reported rape.

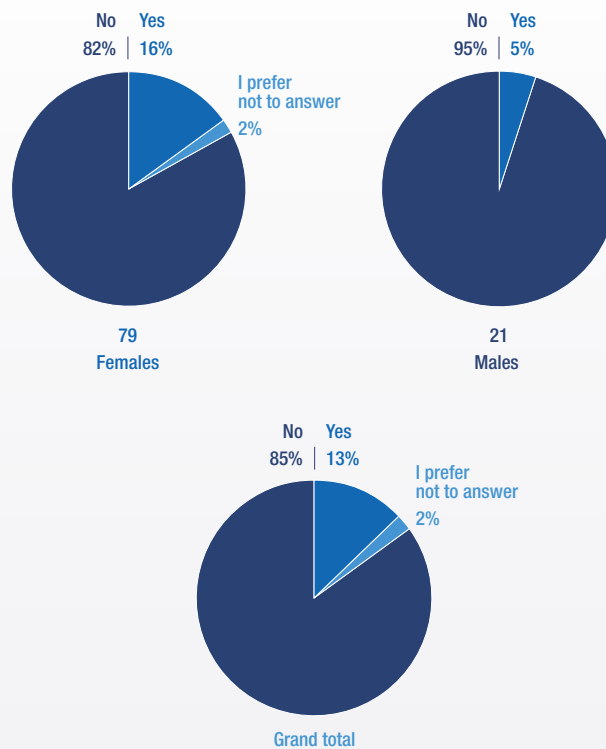


Figure 11: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were subjected to attempted rape or not



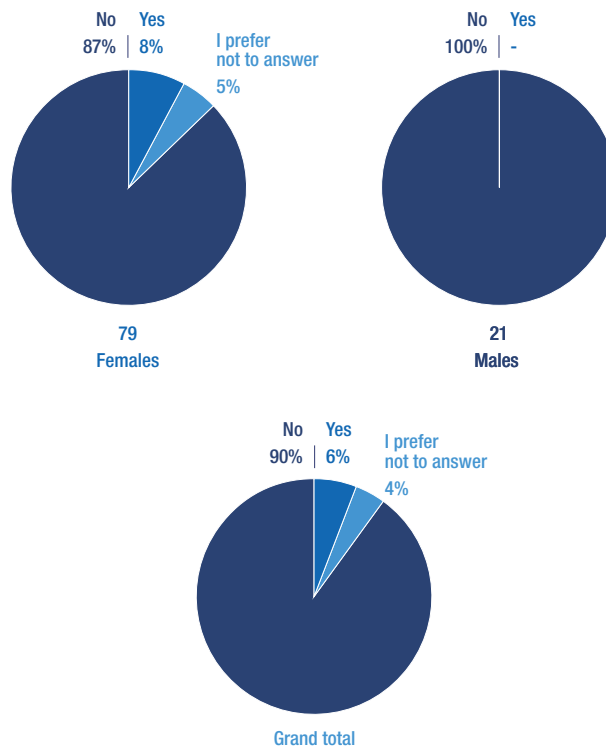


Figure 12: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were raped or not

Fewer respondents mentioned being forced to provide sexual services to prison staff in the context of detainment (13% of the total sample), but the fewer numbers do not mean that these incidents stopped or decreased.

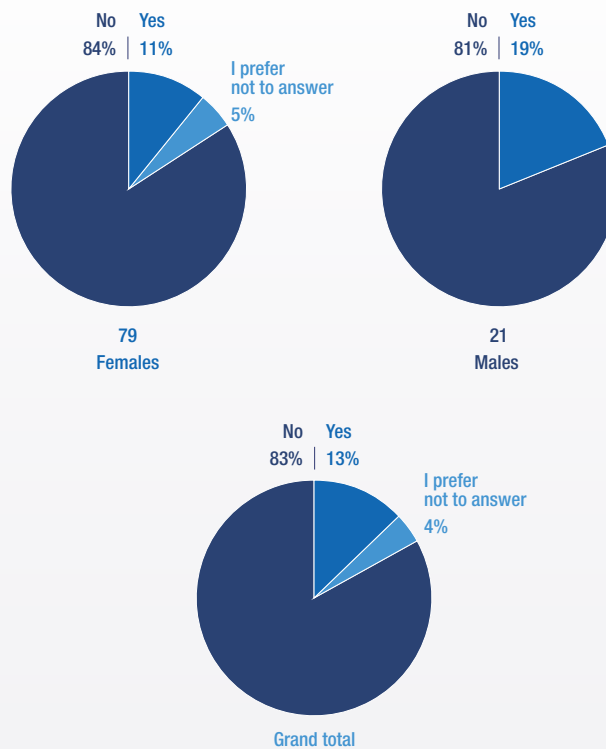


Figure 13: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were forced to provide sexual services to prison staff or not

As for being forced to watch the rape of another detainee, 14% of respondents said yes, they experienced such. However, threatening to rape/molest/harass family members while detainees watched was less frequent, and only 4% of respon-

dents (all of whom were female) confirmed such incidents. Often, such SGBV violations committed by prison staff in regime prisons are characterized as government abuses against detainees.

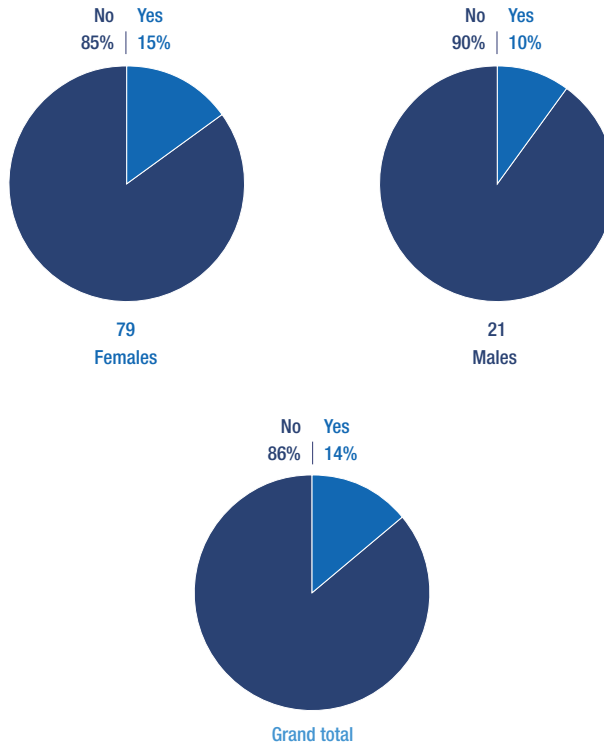


Figure 14: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were forced to watch another inmate being raped

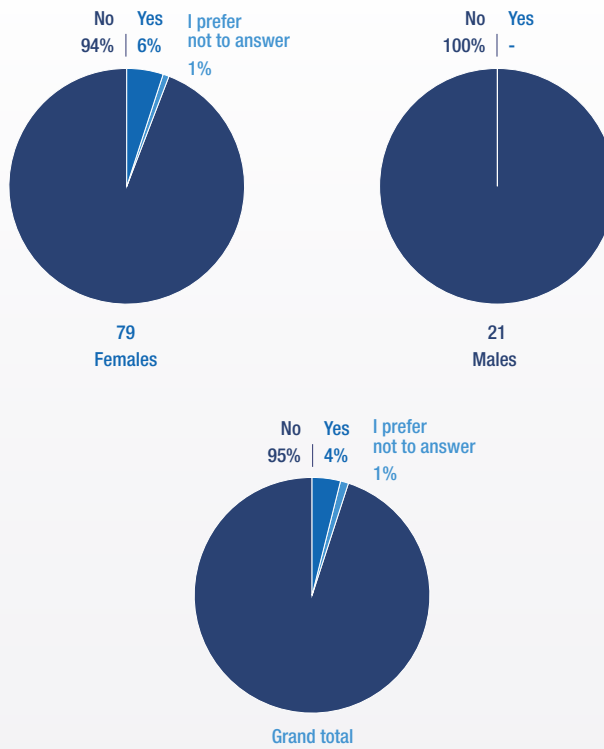


Figure 15: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were forced to watch another inmate/family member being harassed





2. Consequences of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence/Violations Post-imprisonment

Respondents' associations with SGBV following their release from prison were overwhelmingly connected with trauma and mental health. Less overt were physical ramifications for women who were impregnated as a result of rape (1 respondent), or forced to abort their baby as a result of rape during imprisonment (3%).

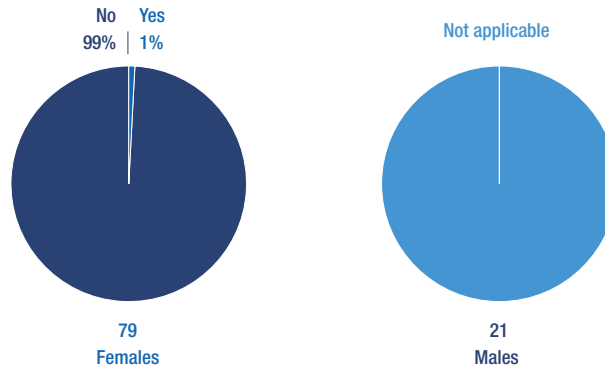


Figure 16: Distribution of respondents based on whether they became pregnant as a result of rape (women detainees only)

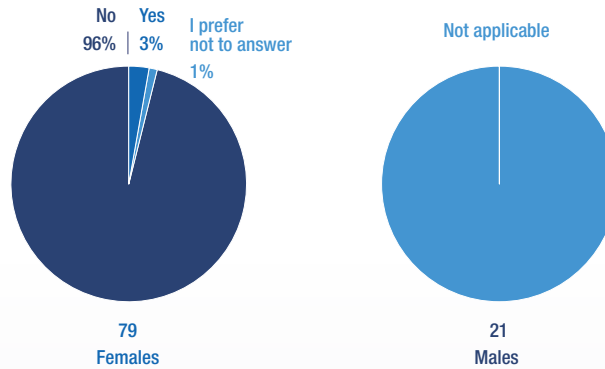


Figure 17: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were forced to abort their fetus when they became pregnant as a result of rape (question applicable to women detainees only)

Respondents, both male and female, overwhelmingly expressed that they suffer from PTSD symptoms. Ninety-two percent of respondents confirmed that they continue to suffer from mental health complications.

“I still suffer from night terrors that I’m inside the prison, and I blame myself for leaving while there are still detainees in there.” - **Former male detainee and SGBV survivor, 37**

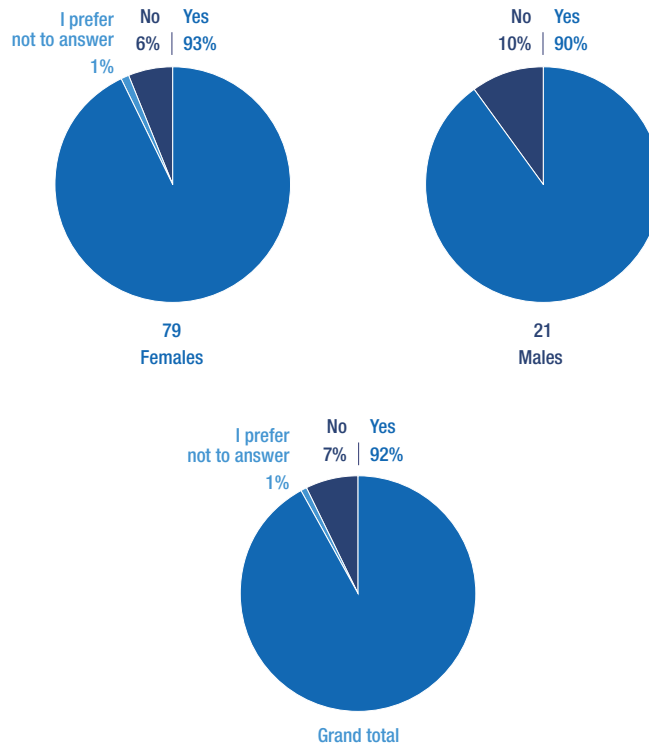


Figure 18: Distribution of respondents based on whether they suffered from PTSD following their release from prison

Almost a quarter of respondents (23%) said they suffered from marital problems post-detainment, with women respondents exceeding the women-men ratio in the sample size—20% of the response ratio as compared with 11% of the sample ratio.

“My husband and his family and my community did not believe that I wasn’t raped in prison, and they treated me very badly, which prompted me to leave them, and so I fled to Lebanon.” - **Former female detainee and SGBV survivor, 29**

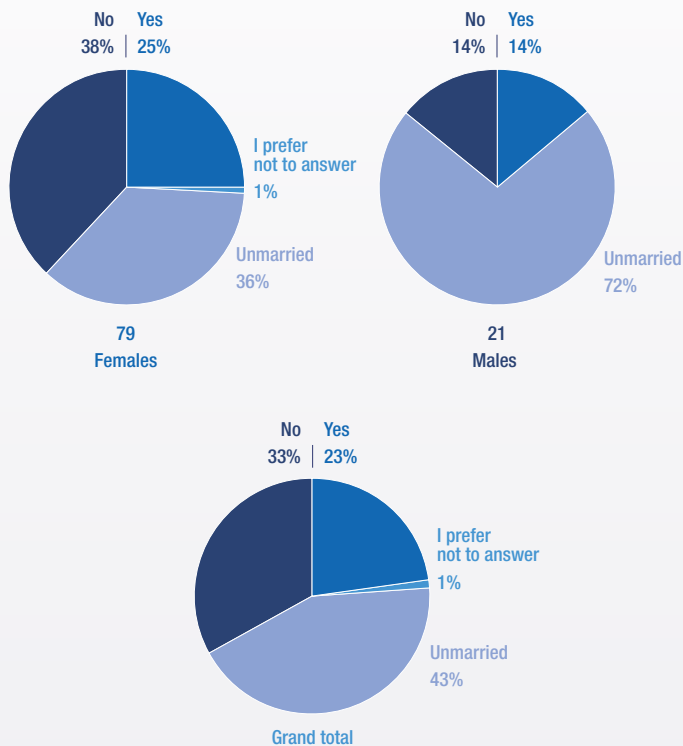


Figure 19: Distribution of respondents based on whether they suffered from marital problems following their release from prison





Twenty-eight percent of respondents, most of whom were women, said they had difficulties dealing with their children post-detainment. Further, 11% of respondents said they got divorced from their spouse. This may be due to the psychological vulnerability of the survivors— who may suffer from depression, anxiety, compulsive behavior, emotional instability, and sexual dysfunctions. All these factors may lead to negative consequences such as divorce, where the newly released spouse is not able to function properly in day-to-day life, and such effects are exacerbated by the community who stigmatizes former detainees in general, and SGBV survivors in particular (as shown in some aspects of this study). In fact, 36% of the respondents cited “social stigma” as the reason for their divorce following their release from prison.

“I was tortured in the prison. And then my society’s lack of acceptance of me, and my husband divorcing me after I was released, led to my nervous breakdown and my suicide attempt.” - Former female detainee and SGBV survivor, 32

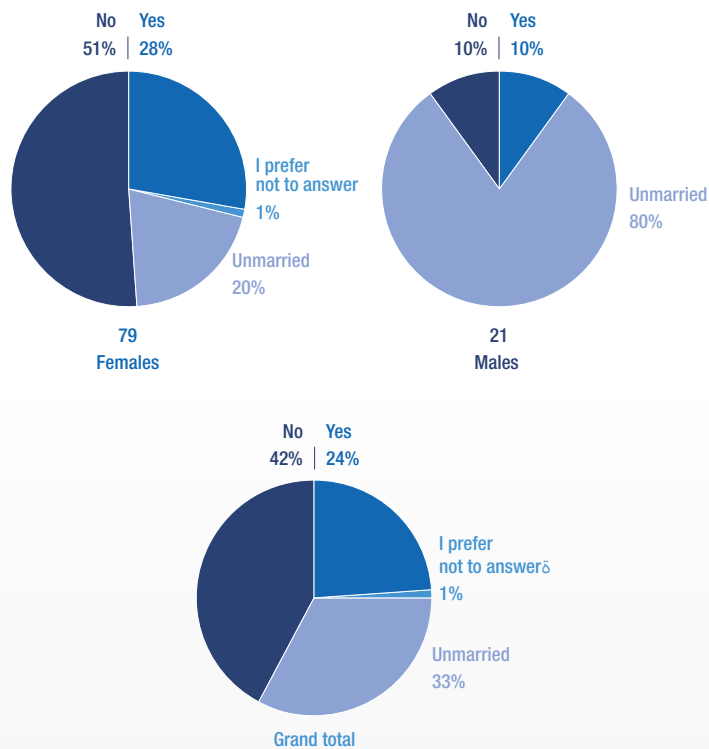


Figure 20: Distribution of respondents based on whether they experienced difficulties dealing with their children following their release from prison

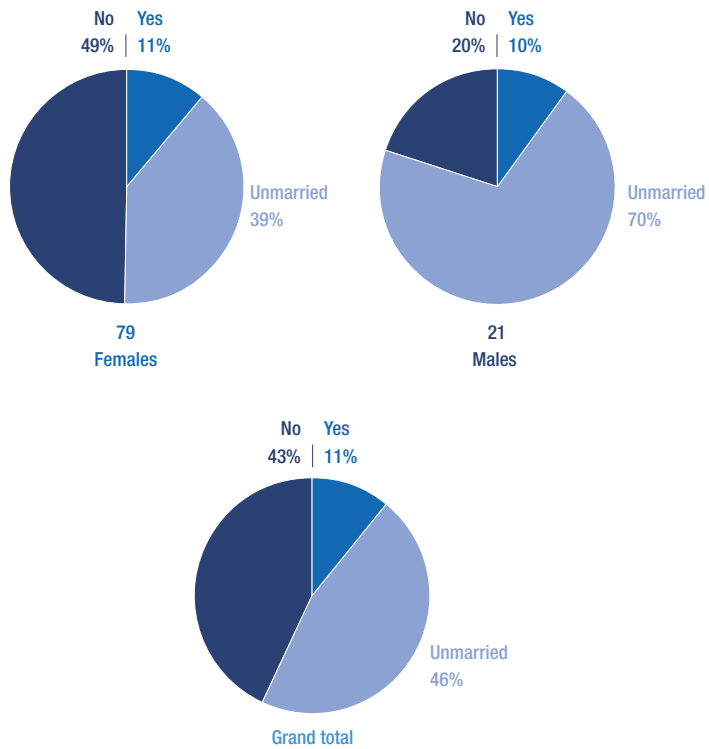


Figure 21: Distribution of respondents based on whether they got divorced from their spouse following their release from prison

Thirty-six percent of respondents reported that community members make it difficult for survivors to re-integrate into their community. However, the data suggests that it was largely women who reported this (41% compared to 20% of the men).

“I found those outside prison worse than those in it. I did not expect for my community to reject me to this degree.” - **Former female detainee and SGBV survivor, 28**

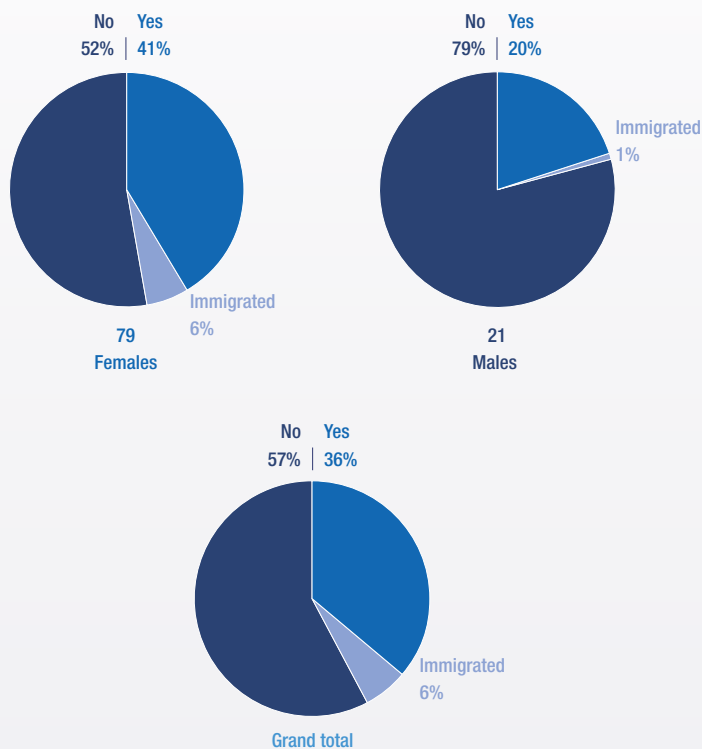


Figure 22: Distribution of survivors who stated that their community members make it difficult for them to reintegrate





Only 10% of those interviewed said they lost communication with their families—both men and women overwhelmingly reported that they did not. This shows that traditional, religious, and cultural elements in Syrian society still serve as a moral compass for family values. Similarly, only 12% of respondents said their families refused to take them in after being released from prison. One respondent cited the reason for her family refusing to take her back to live with them:

“Because of the customs and traditions that are against former women detainees, and because I had sisters who were single and ready for marriage, my family did not want to tarnish their reputation because of me” - **Former female detainee, 32 years, citing the reason why her family refused to take her back to live with them after she was released.**

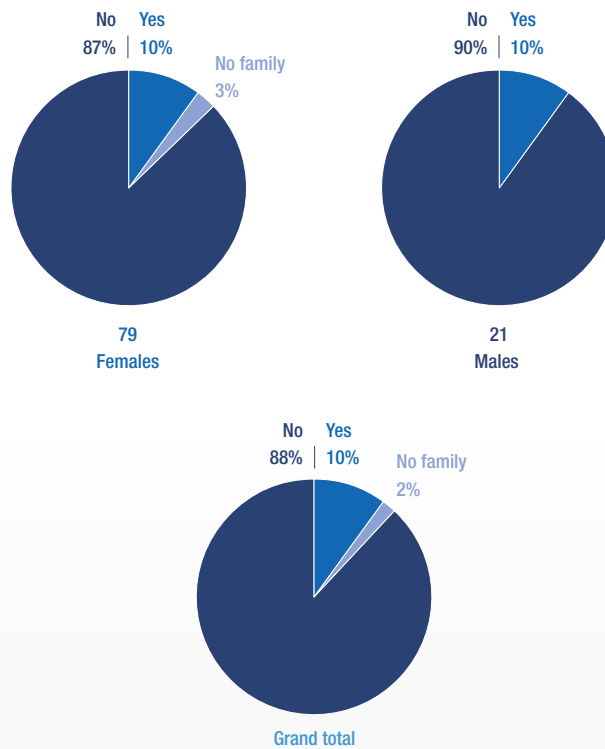


Figure 23: Distribution of respondents based on whether they cut ties/lost communication with their families or not following their release from prison

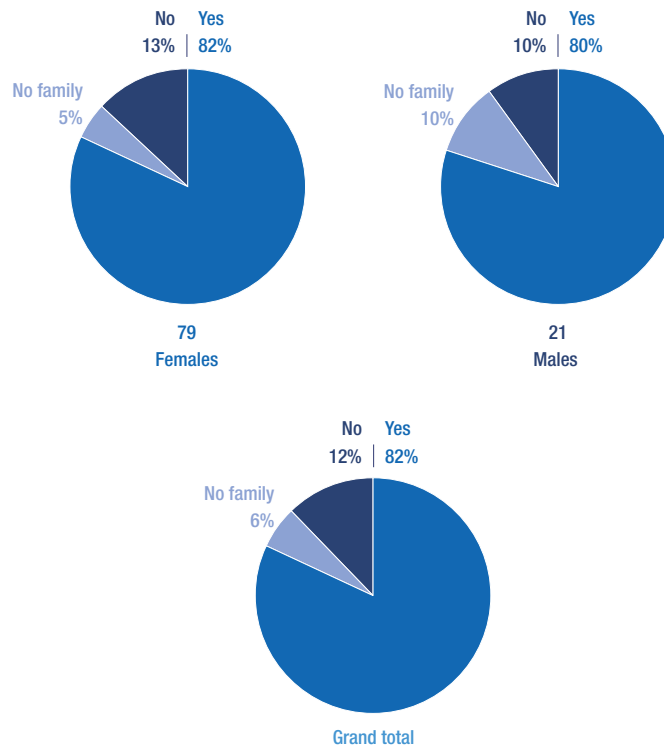


Figure 24: Distribution of respondents based on whether their family took them back in to live with them following their release from prison

Eighteen percent of female respondents said they faced difficulties following their release by being the breadwinner of the family, due to their husbands' absence. This indicates that submissiveness and adherence to patriarchal customs are still very much common in Syrian communities, where women feel vulnerable without a man to support them.

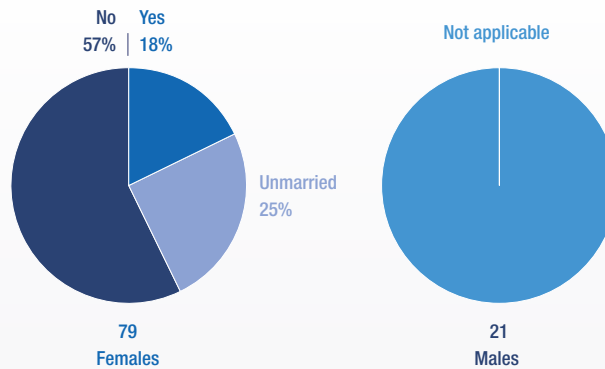


Figure 25: Distribution of female respondents based on whether they faced difficulties becoming the breadwinner due to absence of their husband

Eighteen percent of female respondents said they were subjected to sexual harassment at the hands of members of the community or family members, indicating direct mistreatment from the community and/or family post-detainment. Additionally, and in the same context, 14% of women respondents reported being subjected to escalated violence from family members after they were released, compared to only 0% of men. (It is worth noting the possibility that men were unlikely to share such experiences, as they may feel their honor/dignity/masculinity would be compromised.)

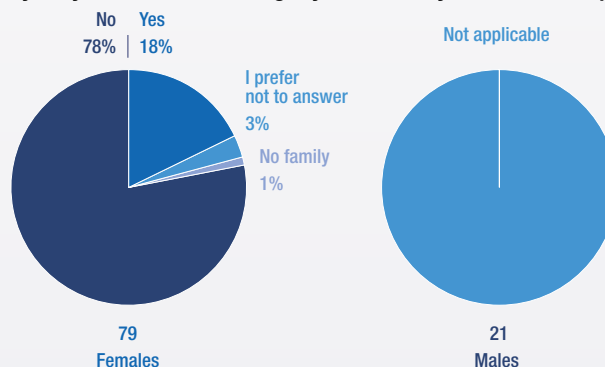


Figure 26: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were subjected to sexual harassment by family/community members following their release from prison



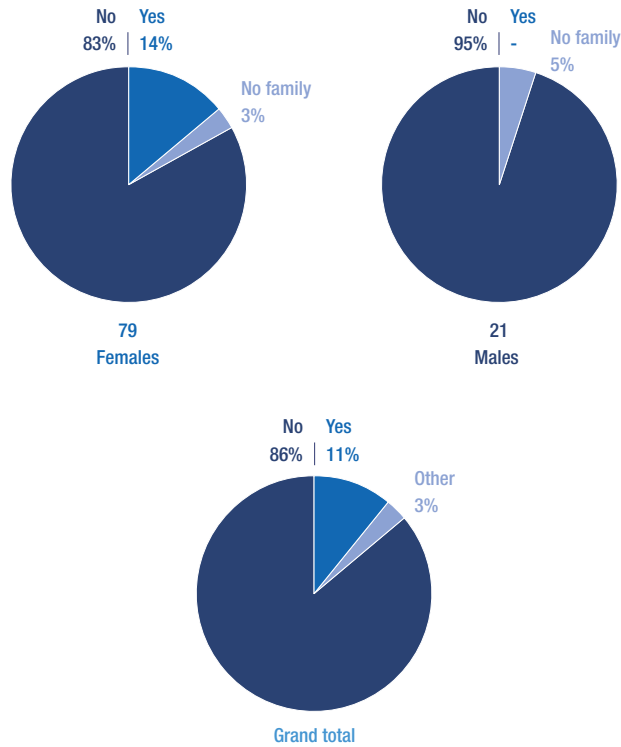


Figure 27: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were subjected to an escalation of violence by their family members following their release from prison

Female respondents reported with greater proportion that they were forced into marriage by their families (8%). Harmful gender-based traditional practices like early or forced marriage have negative effects on the psychological and personal growth of women, and prevents them from developing themselves professionally or educationally.

“I was not in a state of awareness, and in a terrible psychological state, and I was coerced into signing a marriage contract” - **Former female detainee and SGBV survivor, 25 citing the reason why she was forced into marriage.**

“I was forced into marriage because of the bad situation of my arrest” - **Former female detainee and SGBV survivor, 31 citing the reason why she was forced into marriage.**

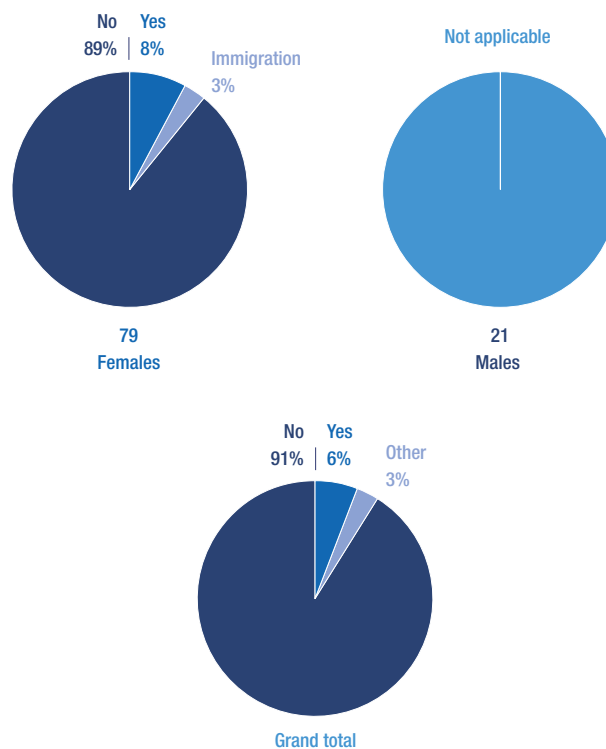


Figure 28: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were forced into marriage/divorce by members of their families following their release from prison

While respondents' answers almost unanimously indicated that female survivors in general were mostly mistreated by the community following their release, the data was more ambiguous about the fate of male survivors. Due to cultural reasons, it is highly probable that male survivors were likely to keep information about SGBV attacks to themselves and suffer psychologically, which was the case when 19 of the 21 male respondents affirmed that they suffer from PTSD symptoms.

“My younger cousin was raped in front of me” - Former male detainee and SGBV survivor, 24, the trauma inflicted on him in prison.

Interestingly, life after imprisonment had a severe socio-economic impact on the survivors, with 25% of female respondents saying they had to work a job they wouldn't have accepted doing prior to imprisonment, and 48% of male respondents citing the same. Thirty percent of the overall sample of respondents said they had to work in jobs they would not have accepted before imprisonment. Respondents cited various reasons, such as accumulation of debt, social stigma, scarce job opportunities in countries of asylum, single mothers needing to support their children, and psychological challenges preventing the survivor from functioning normally.

“Originally a hairdresser, after getting out of prison, I couldn't stand for long periods of time and I also developed a tremor because I was tortured with electric tools, resulting in a neurological problem. Therefore, I settled for a job selling balloons in the street.” - Former male detainee and SGBV survivor 38.

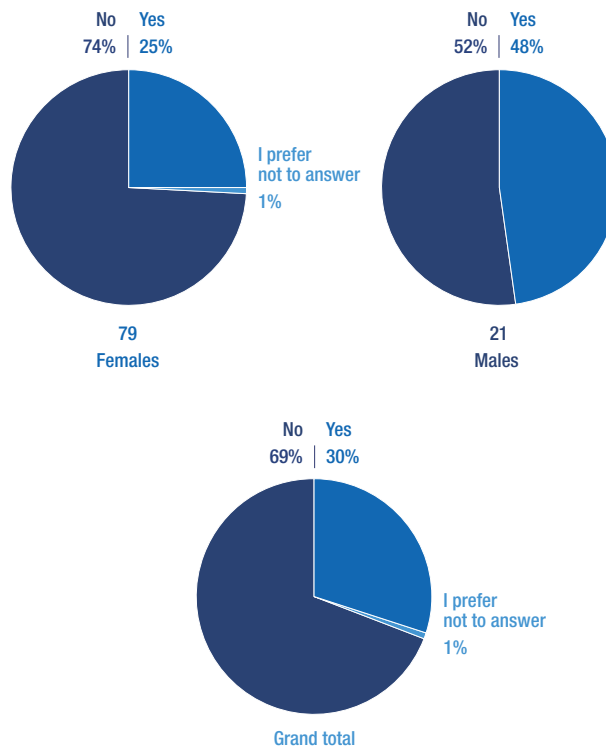


Figure 29: Distribution of respondents based on whether they were forced to work a job they wouldn't have accepted prior to imprisonment

ANALYSIS

While documentation of the actual impact of SGBV in Syria is inconclusive, this report suggests that SGBV is widespread in Syrian prison facilities, and is being used as a weapon of war by the Syrian regime. Survivors of SGBV suffer doubly: first from the attacks, and later from the abuse of those around them and severe psychological ramifications. Lacking adequate support services, survivors may seek revenge or become perpetrators themselves—hence, the multiplier effect.

In addition, there is a general poor understanding of SGBV within communities. This report identified a number of barriers to survivors being willing to disclose SGBV incidents and being able to access SGBV services. These barriers include:

The social stigma surrounding sexual violence; e.g. not being accepted by their communities following their release from prison. The social stigmatization of male and female SGBV survivors implies numerous impacts on them, such as isolation, avoidance of social relations, and a lack of engagement in the community, in addition to a sense of being unaccepted by your own community. This societal blame on the survivor enhances self-stigma, and makes them less willing to engage.

“People immediately assume that I was sexually assaulted or raped in prison because I’m a woman.” - **Former female detainee, SGBV survivor, 36.**

Acceptance of early or forced marriage by women and girls as an offering of effective social and financial protection; women are then discouraged from speaking about their experience, as they perceive marriage as the ultimate solution to their problem (being an SGBV survivor and all the stigmatization it entails).

“I was forced into marriage for protection from society.” - **Former female detainee and SGBV survivor, 28, citing the reason why she was forced into marriage**

An increase in negative coping mechanisms (e.g. poor relationship with children, spouse, community) and enhanced feelings of isolation and rejection result in escapism and make it difficult for survivors to trust family/community members or to be able to talk about their experience.

“I’m isolated. I do not talk to anyone all day, and stay in my room in constant fear of any security or police element, even in the country in which I live.” - **Former male detainee, 33**





Conclusions and Recommendations

Because this report presents information in the context of abuse suffered by detainees in Syrian government prisons and detention centers, The Day After recommends the following for supporting survivors:

Acquiring the support of local leaders (including local women leaders) as a crucial first step in gaining acceptance of culturally sensitive programs (such as psychosocial support for SGBV survivors) at the grassroots level to reduce risk of backlash against the survivors.

Building strong relationships with community members, which takes time and trust, and establishing processes for regular consultation on SGBV issues, rather than single-cycle programming.

Finding the right organizations with the knowledge, expertise, and resources to establish effective strategies to challenge SGBV and sexual harassment. These organizations can engage on violence against women and girls and men and boys at the community level, such as local and international NGOs, CSOs, and women's organizations. Local NGOs such as Kesh Malek, and international NGOs such as Save the Children, have specific programs in Syria to address SGBV issues and prioritize SGBV within the protection sector.

Strengthen informal community support networks, to develop support and referral networks for women and men who experienced SGBV in prison.

Further research is needed to determine which communities are likely to be friendlier than others toward SGBV survivors. An approach that would facilitate this could involve structuring a survey based on respondents' native provinces rather than their location in Turkey, and would therefore have to be conducted with survivors still living in Syria

Keywords/Acronyms (glossary)

SGBV—Sexual and Gender-based violence: any act that is perpetrated against a person's will and is based on gender norms and unequal power relationships.

PTSD—Post-traumatic stress disorder: a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, or rape, or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence, or serious injury.

Rape: the penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.

Survivor: a person who survives, especially a person remaining alive after an event in which others have died.

Sexual Violence: any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act by violence or coercion, acts to traffic a person, or acts directed against a person's sexuality, regardless of the relationship to the victim.

Domestic Violence: a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain control over another intimate partner, in a domestic setting, such as in marriage or cohabitation.

Forced Marriage: a marriage in which one or more of the parties is married without their consent or against their will.

Social Stigma: the disapproval of or discrimination against a person based on perceivable social characteristics that serve to distinguish them from other members of a society. Social stigmas are commonly related to culture, gender, race, intelligence, and health.

Taboo: a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing.

APPENDIX (Questionnaire)



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لدعم الانتقال الديمقراطي في سوريا



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