



Middle East Forum
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Obstacles to integration

of Syrian women survivors of detention
into local society

A field study in the regions of northern Syria






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Middle East Forum For Policies and Future Studies

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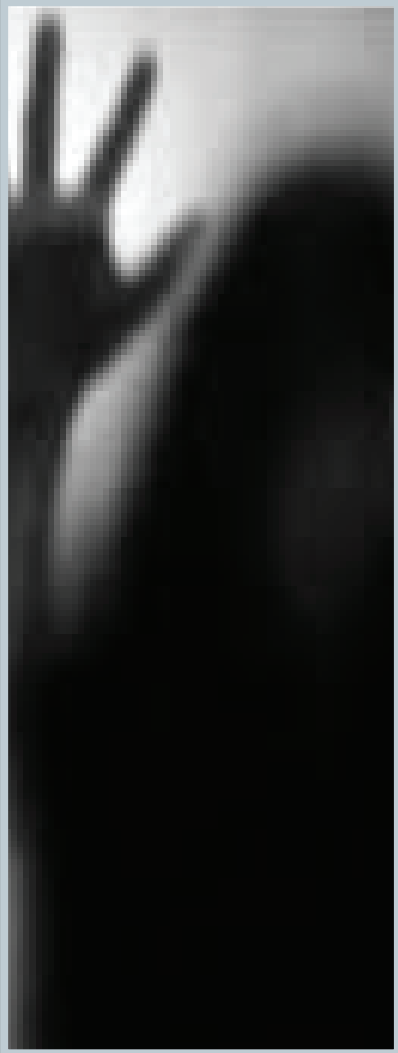
www.policiesforum.me

info@policiesforum.me

 +0908508403999

  MEPoliciesforum

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Executive summary:

This study aims at identifying the most important obstacles that could play an obstructing or motivating role in the process of re-integrating female ex-detainees/survivors from the prisons of the Syrian regime into their local communities and their surrounding environments.

To enrich the study, (68) female ex-detainees survived the Syrian regime detention were interviewed and a specially designed field-based survey is adopted as well. The above-mentioned steps were taken for the purpose of detecting and revealing the social, economic and psychological/personal obstacles facing the survived female detainees in social integration.

As a result, several findings are included within the study, which are related to the social, economic and psychological factors that constitute an obstacle that would face the ex-prisoners to return to their normal lives socially, at least as they used to be before the arrest.

However, a range of social barriers intertwine from the value system, customs, norms and behaviours prevailing in local communities continue to prevent such groups of surviving prisoners from returning to their social lives; especially if we take into account the state of instability in Syria, in most cities and regions, and this matter's role in curbing the motives for integration in light of the military/field, political and economic situation that at least can be characterised as thorny and confusing.

Therefore, it is not possible to talk about the relationship of the local community with the survivors without considering the whole previous mentioned situation; so that the survivor woman remained captive to those preconceived notions by the surrounding society.

The first chapter

the methodological framework of the study First – The problem of the study

It goes without saying that women in Syria, more than other segments of society, have borne the consequences of the revolution and the war that followed and the increasing violence accompanying battles. The female element, in particular, was exposed to various types and forms of violence initially in detention and consequently in dealing with the surrounding community.

With the increase in the number of women who were detained by the regime's security branches, "according to reports of local and international organizations," many testimonies were recorded by those who were subjected to various forms of abuse while they were in detention¹.

However, most of these reports were limited, for the most part, to recording testimonies or telling individual stories of women who were subjected to violations, in contrast to the absence of academic systematic studies and research concerned with the reality of ex-women prisoners "survivors" and the obstacles they faced in order to live a normal life like other women who were not subjected to such experiences. In the interest of fairness, there is only one academic study that was used systematically².

In fact, the social milieu surrounding the survivors, which should be the fostering community, to which the released women belong as former victims of violence in Syrian detainees, plays a major role in increasing or mitigating the effects of the detention these women were subjected to. This is linked to the pattern of social, religious and cultural values specific to each social environment, and the position and place of individuals in that value system.

1 - Sila Wafi, Syrian former women detainees, victims in prisons, defendants in society <https://www.aljazeera.net/women/2019/3/11/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8>

2 - Dr . Hossam Al-Saad, Dr. Talal Mustafa, Women Survivors of Detention and Problems of Integration into Syrian Society: A Field Study, Starting Point Organization, 2017. Translated into English and Turkish



Many of the testimonies indicated that the surviving detained women were subjected to many societal pressures, for example, being stigmatized, that many of these women invoked as a reason for silence and sacrificing their rights in the present and the future³.

Based on the foregoing, the subject of the study is determined to identify the social and personal obstacles that survivors face in social integration in their local communities, by answering a set of questions:

- 1- What is the role of the survivor's family in her social integration?
- 2- What is the role of relatives, neighbours, friends, and work colleagues in the social integration of the survivor?
- 3- What is the role of civil society organizations and others in the social integration of the survivor?

3 Syrian female detainees between the criminality of the regime and the rejection of society, Al-Jazeera Net website , <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/rest-of-the-story/2017/2/3/13>

Second- the importance of the study:

It is essential to conduct systematic scientific studies that abandon the prevailing viewpoints and stereotypical opinions based on rumours and social media feed. Studies as such must be built on the foundations of solid scientific research, in which these women's reality and position in the local community are the central points. The studies also must highlight the impact of social factors and social values, whether they are harsh or flexible in achieving the social integration of women in the post-arrest stage.

Moreover, the practical importance stems from the importance of the recovery of large numbers of Syrian survivors and their integration into the local community, that is, to become economically and socially active and not to be neglected and thus multiply the violence they received in detention centres. What is required is to mitigate the effects of this violence through the warm social embrace of the community circles surrounding them.

Third - Research objectives

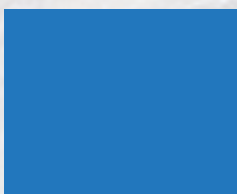
1. To identify the social obstacles facing the Syrian women surviving prisoners.
2. Identify the psychological obstacles facing the Syrian women surviving prisoners.
3. To know the conditions and challenges experienced by the Syrian women surviving prisoners.
4. Coming up with proposals to help the Syrian women surviving prisoners integrate into society, support them, and qualify them for work.

Fourth- The field research:

The study methodology:

The study relies on the "analytical descriptive approach", which describes and interprets the phenomenon under consideration. It is considered the first step towards achieving a proper understanding of the social reality through the tool (questionnaire / form) in order to achieve this goal, by linking many variables that would reveal the relationship between the surrounding society and the surviving woman in the post-arrest stage.

A questionnaire was designed to identify the obstacles to the social inte-



gration of survivors of detention from the prisons of the Syrian regime. The questionnaire took into account the representation of the variables that contribute to enhancing or inhibiting the process of social integration of the survivors.

The questionnaire included (31) questions divided into four sections: (general data/data about the detention period/social determinant of integration/psychological-personal determinant of integration).

The data collection process was carried out by a group of field researchers, either through a face-to-face interview or via the Internet.

The study sample

The sample of the study was (68) female survivors, who were met either through a direct (in-person) interview, or through electronic technology, regardless of their distribution in northern Syria.

The sample was distributed among various local environments, namely: Homs and its countryside, Damascus and its countryside, Hama and its countryside, Aleppo, Idlib and its countryside, Daraa, Deir Ezzor, Jableh, and Lattakia.

Fields of study

- The human sphere: women survivors of detention from the age of 18 and above.
- Temporal domain: We started our search on October 10, 2022 and ended on December 15, 2022.
- Geographical area: The research targeted female survivors in northern Syria, from the countryside areas of Aleppo and Idlib.

Fifth - Study Concepts

1- Barriers to integration: It is a set of factors (social, economic and psychological/personal) that determine the difference, compatibility and integration of female survivors into their local communities. In other words, it is a set of circumstances that drive or inhibit the survivor's return to her normal life.

2- Women survivors of detention: Every woman who was arrested by the Syrian regime or its affiliated militias during the Syrian revolution and then



she was released. The term (woman survivor) is preferred to be used in general in the psychosocial support sectors, because a term as such suggests resilience and challenge, while the victim is used in the legal and medical sectors.

3- The local community: It is a group of people in a specific geographical area that is governed by values and standards that apply to all its members; as The position and the status of the individual in it is determined by those values and standards.

4- Social Integration: In this study, we mean the return of the surviving female prisoners to live according to her previous social status without the experience of detention forming a stigma or a negative characteristic that prevents her from engaging normally in her local community. The social sciences literature acknowledges that integration is basically a set of interactions between different members within a group, which leads them to feel that it is necessary to be similar and harmonious through different and varied mechanisms and methods. Therefore, integration refers to the location of an individual, group, or social segment in interaction with other individuals or other groups that share the same values and standards within the societies to which they belong. In this sense, what corresponds to the concept of integration is symmetry, communication, harmony and interaction. These concepts may represent a complement to the concept of inclusion in the study of social pathways.

Integration is expressed through the various interactions between the members of a particular social group, and it is linked to many factors such as the family as an institution of socialization, and to work as an essential factor of integration, and psychological preparations as well⁴.

4- For more on the concept of integration, you can see the book: A group of authors, *Controversies of Social Integration and Building the State and the Nation in the Arab World*, Arab Center for Research and Studies, Beirut 2014.

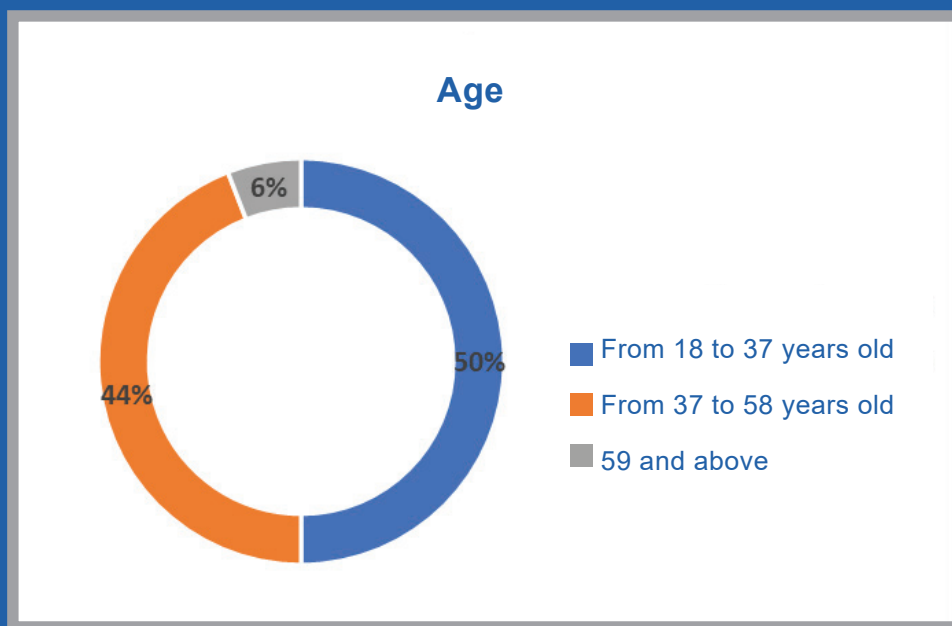
The second chapter

the results of the field study

First - the general characteristics of the study

Age group

Figure No. 1 shows the age group of the women survivors of detention

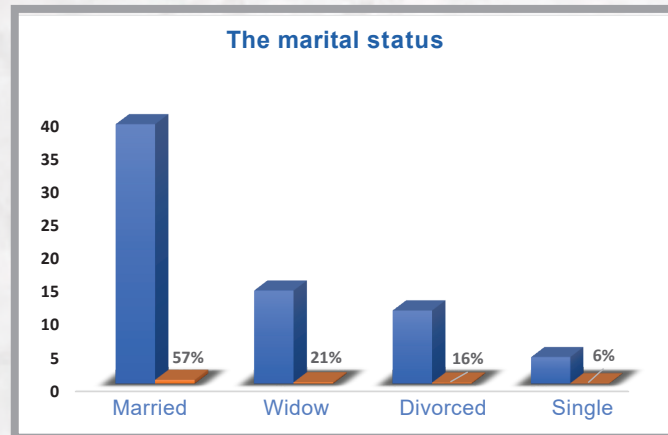


Field data showed that the study sample was concentrated in the age group (18-37) by 50%, in the age group (38-58) by 44%, and in the age group (59 and above) by 6%.

On the one hand, this indicates that girls have entered the age of cognitive and social maturity and are aware of the events that are taking place around them in the arena of the revolution. On the other hand, the numbers indicate that the violence practiced by the Syrian regime was not limited to a specific age group, rather all age groups of women were vulnerable to arrest and from all Syrian cities and regions. (See Figure 1).

The marital status

Figure 2 shows the marital status of the study sample

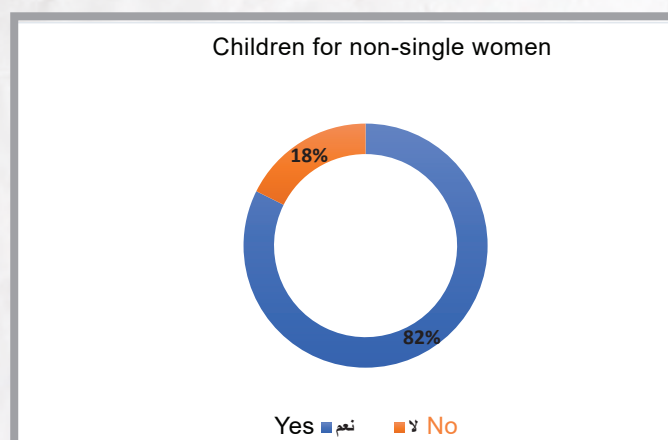


The field results showed that 57% of the women survivors - the study sample - are married, 21% are widows, 16% are divorced and 6% are single.

It is noticeable from the results that they are contrary to the normal situation, which is that the percentage of married women is greater in revolutionary activity. This is due to the nature of the authoritarian security system, as it arrests wives and mothers of political opposition activists with the aim of pressuring them to surrender themselves to the security services (see Table No. 2).

The number of children for married women

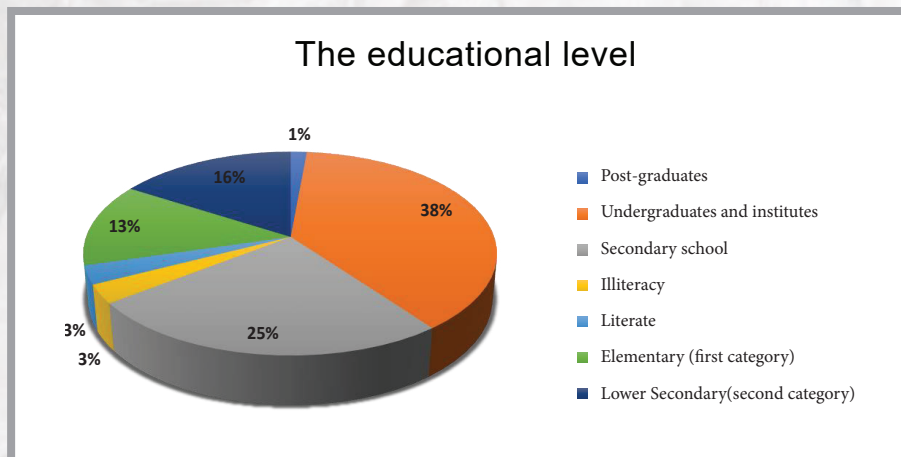
Figure No. 3 shows the percentage of married women who have children



It was found that 82% of the married respondents had children, compared to 18% who did not

The educational level

Figure No. 4 shows the educational level of the study sample



The field results showed a high educational level in general among the study sample, so 38% had university degrees and intermediate institutes, 25% had secondary certificates, 13% had elementary school - first category- and 16% had lower secondary- second category and 3% are literate (reading and writing) and 3% illiterate.

This confirms that the women who participated in the revolution are mature on the social and cultural level. This also indicates the importance of the revolution that took place to achieve their dream of change. (See Table No. 4).

Second- Violence against female survivors of detention:

From the responses of the female detainees who survived in the study sample, it was noticed that the period of detention was reduced compared to the period of detention of males by the security services.⁵

Furthermore, it turned out that most of the charges that were behind the arrest of the surviving women from the research sample were related to the provision of food, medical and humanitarian aid to the Syrians during the protests, as well as the charge of supporting and financing terrorism for all by the security services, whose members used to accuse every Syrian dissident of being supporters and financiers terrorism.

5 - Sila Wafi, Syrian former women detainees, victims in prisons, defendants in society <https://www.aljazeera.net/women/2019/3/11/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8>

- Dr . Hossam Al-Saad, Dr. Talal Mustafa, Women Survivors of Detention and Problems of Integration into Syrian Society: A Field Study, Starting Point Organization, 2017. Translated into English and Turkish

Syrian female detainees between the criminality of the regime and the rejection of society, Al-Jazeera Net website . <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/rest-of-the-story/2017/2/3/13>



There were many forms and manifestations of violence practiced by the security services, such as verbal abuse and insults, threats of rape, threats of death and killing, as well as physical violence practiced on female survivors during arrest, beatings with hands and feet, and slaps on the face for all female detainees, hitting them with a cable and a rope at a rate of 81% (see figure no 5).

It must be noted that many female detainees do not declare rape or cases of sexual harassment, either in an attempt to forget and overcome the psychological effects of rape and sexual harassment, or because of the social stigma attached to the detained woman and her entire family.

This violence affected the life aspects of the woman survivors by 82% of the sample (see Figure 6).

Figure No. 5 shows the percentage of women who have been subjected to violence in all forms.

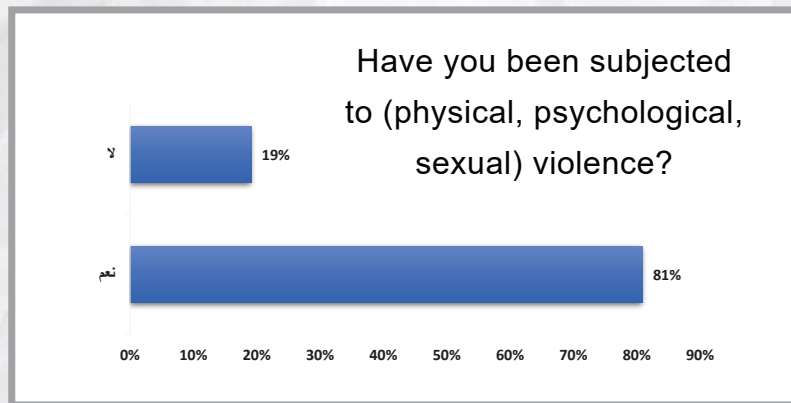
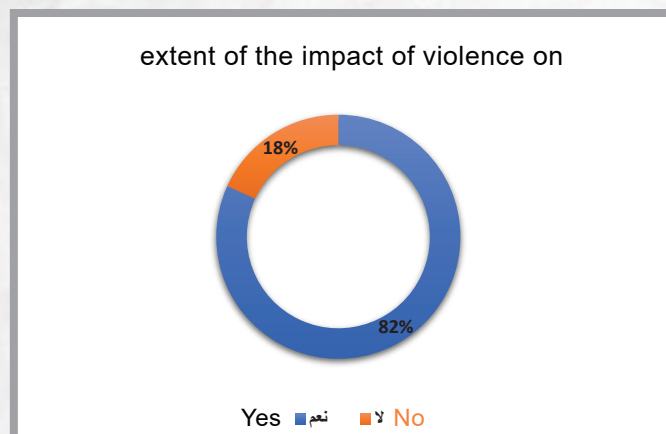


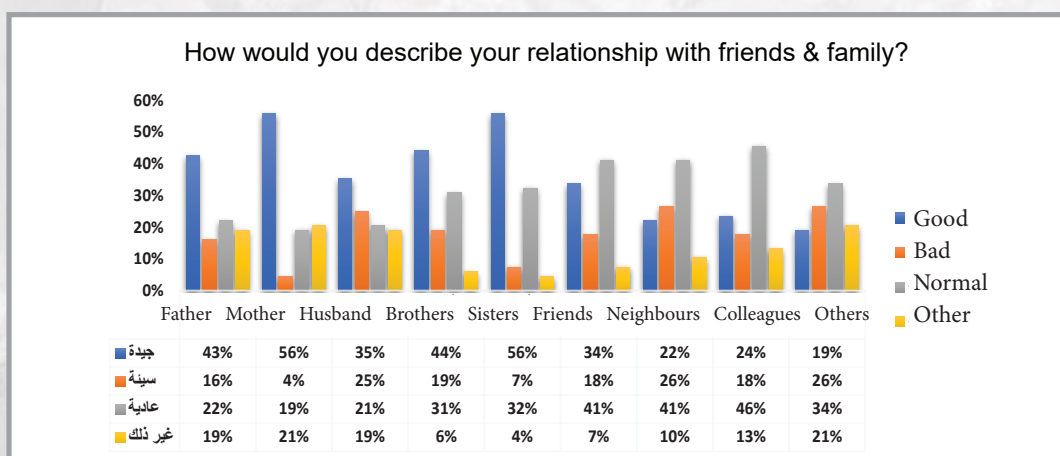
Figure No. 6 shows the extent of the impact of violence on the social life of women survivors of detention



Third - the relationship of the women survivors with the social milieu

The field results showed that the relationship of the female survivors with her social milieu is good, primarily with their mothers with a percentage of 56%, 56% with their sisters, and 44% with their brothers. On the other hand, the relationship is good with their friends only by 34%, 22% with their neighbours, and with their colleagues at work by 24%. This is due to the Syrians' fear of arrest as Syrians in general believe that if anyone has a good relationship with surviving female detainees, this may lead to arrest her/ him on charges of supporting them. This requires the involvement of civil society organizations to educate Syrians on issues of supporting the social environment of female survivors. See Figure 7.

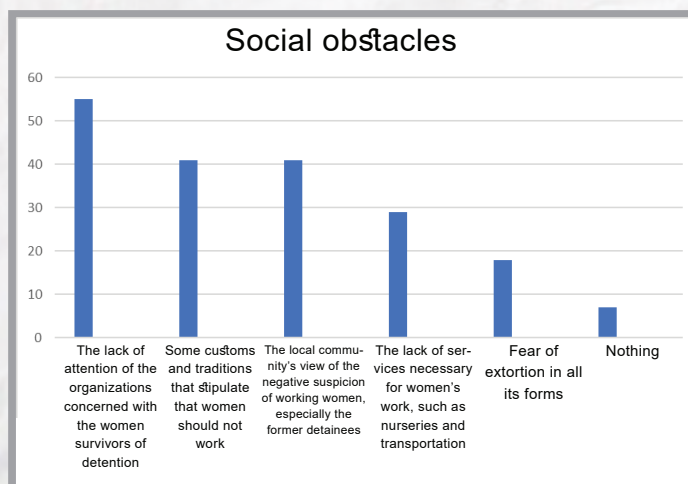
Figure 7 shows the survivors' relationship with the social environment



Fourth - Obstacles to social integration

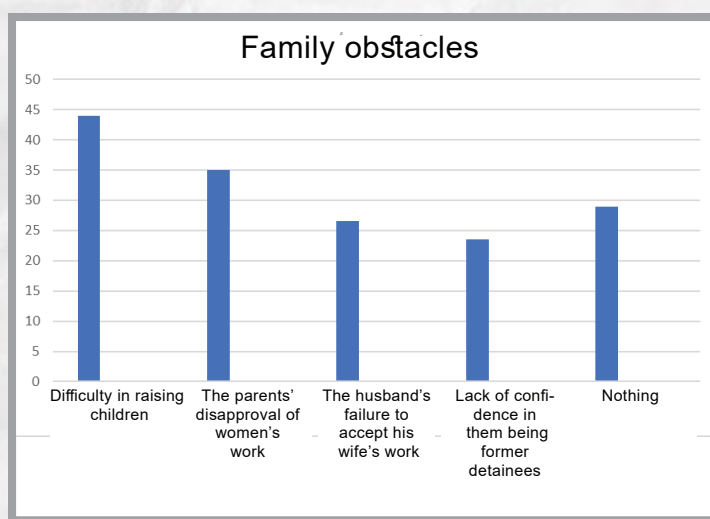
a- Social obstacles

It was found from the interviews of the study sample of female surviving prisoners that the most important social obstacles that they face in the process of finding a job opportunity or training and rehabilitation and thus achieving social integration in the local community was the failure of the finding job opportunities' organizations in training by 55%. That is to be added to some customs and traditions that not wanting women to work outside their homes by 41%. The same percentage of the respondents said that the local community looks suspicious and negative towards women working outside their homes, in addition to the lack of necessary services that help women to work outside their homes, such as the lack of nurseries, transportation and others. In addition, 18% are afraid of being blackmailed and 7% of respondents stated that there are no obstacles.



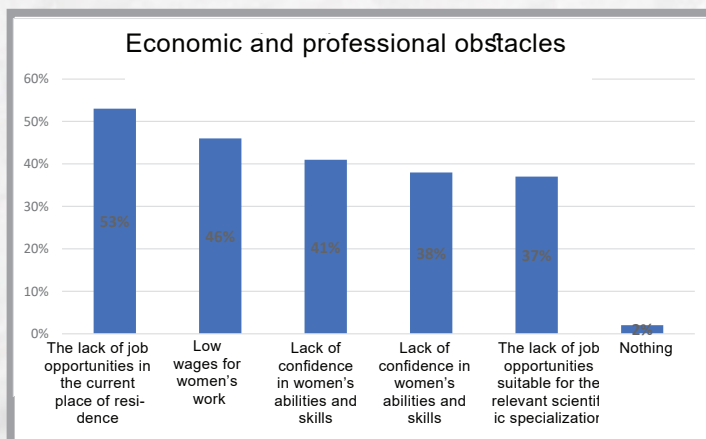
b- Family Obstacles

The results of the interviews with a group of women survivors of prisons as a sample showed that one of the most important family obstacles they face in finding employment opportunities or job training were the difficulties of reconciling raising children and working outside the home at a rate of 44%. Who said that families do not agree that working outside home is acceptable for women come next with 35%, and 26.5% of responses refers to respondents who said that husbands do not accept their wives' work. 23.5% of the respondents talked about the lack of confidence in them by the community because they had been arrested previously, and 29% said that there are no family obstacles. In fact, this calls for making great efforts with the women survivors in line with their families to raise awareness of the need to enable the former women inmates to positively integrate into society.



c- Economic and professional obstacles

The results of the interviews of the study sample of women survivors of prisons showed that the professional difficulties they face at work were the lack of job opportunities in the current place of residence by 53%, as well as the low financial return for women's work by 46%, and choosing specific professions for women such as teaching and nursing only by 41% as 38% of them said that there are no job opportunities meet their specializations. Furthermore, 37% of them stated that they do not trust their own abilities and skills.



d - Personal obstacles

Among the personal obstacles facing the work of women survivors of prisons, according to the interviews results, is the inability to reconcile family responsibilities with work at a rate of 34%, followed by 37% who said that the qualifications and experience of the former women inmates are limited, and lack of confidence in the capabilities and skills of the women survivors as well as having poor career skills at a rate of 31%. Moreover, 21% of the respondents said that psychological obsessions such as fear of arrest for going to work. Also, 20% of them stated that there are no obstacles.



Conclusions

1- With regard to the demographic characteristics of the women survivors of prisons in the research sample, field data showed that within the study sample, there is 50% in the age group of (18-37 years), 44% in the age group (38-58 years), and 6% in the age group of (59 and above). Concerning with the marital status, the field results showed that 57% of the survivors - the study sample - are married, 21% are widows, 16% are divorced, and 6% are single. As for married women, who have children, it was found that 82% of the married respondents had children in exchange for 18% had not. As for the educational level, the field results showed an increase in the educational level in general among the study sample; as 38% of them are university and intermediate institute graduates, 25% have a secondary certificate, and 13% have primary school graduates and 16 % of secondary school graduates, 3% are literate (reading and writing), illiterate, and the same percentage is illiterate.

2- Regarding the relation of the women survivors of prisons with the social milieu surrounding them, the field results showed that the relationship of the female survivors with the social milieu was good, primarily with their mothers by 56%, female brothers by 56%. And to lesser extent, the former women inmates have good relations with their fathers by 43% and male brothers by 44%, while the percentage decreased as for their relations with friends by 34%, neighbours by 22%, and work colleagues by 24%.

3- As for the most important obstacles to the integration of former women inmates, it was found that it is quite difficult to find job opportunities, join training and rehabilitation courses, or achieve social integration in the local community. Moreover, it was found that the specialized organizations failed to provide job opportunities through training by 55%, while 41% is due to some customs and traditions that stipulate the unwillingness of women to work outside the home, and 40% said that the local community looks suspicious and in a negative way towards women working outside the home, in addition to the lack of the necessary services that help women to work outside the home, such as the lack of kindergartens, transportation, and other obstacles.

4- The results of the interviews for a sample of women survivors of prisons showed that one of the most important family obstacles they face in finding a job or join job training was the difficulties of reconciling raising children and working outside the home at a rate of 44%, followed by 35% who said that parents do not accept women's work, 26.5% said that husbands do not accept his wife's work, and 29% said that there are no family obstacles



5- The results of the interviews of the women survivors of prisons from the study sample showed that the professional difficulties they face at work are related to the lack of job opportunities in the current place of residence by 53%, as well as the low financial return for women's work by 46%, and the choice of specific professions for women such as teaching and nursing only by 41%, while 38% said that there are no job opportunities that suit their specialties.

6- Among the personal obstacles facing the work of women survivors of prisons is the inability to reconcile family responsibilities with work at a rate of 34%, followed by 37% who said that the qualifications and experience of the women survivors are limited, and lack of confidence in the abilities and skills of the survivors as well as poor job skills by 31%, and 21% said that psychological obsessions such as fear of arrest for going out to work.



About The Findings:

The field study showed that the obstacles that stand in the way of the social integration of the former female detainees who survived in the study sample seem to be related to the role of the local social environment (family, relatives, friends, neighbours) through their vision of women's detention as well as their work outside the home. It was found that many of the survivors work in various professions (as teachers, employees in private companies, in clothing stores, in beauty salons, as domestic workers, in relief work, media activity, and in nursing and first aid).

It was found that many of the survivors work in various professions (as teachers, employees in private companies, in clothing stores, in beauty salons, as domestic workers, in relief work, media activity, and in nursing and first aid.

As for the reasons why, the former inmates did not get any work, it is due to the family's prevention of the women survivors of prison from working, in addition to the unemployment that prevailed in the Syrian labour market and thus the lack of job opportunities. Actually, if there were any job opportunities, the employer did not favour employing a girl who was detained for reasons related to the way society views former women detainees in general, let aside the security concerns.

Women survivors of prison faced great difficulties in re-engaging in the social activities that they used to do before arresting them. That is because of what the immediate post-arrest experience left on their general mood, in terms of frustration, nervousness, difficulty in communication, and reservation. All of these are also factors resulting from the experience of detention; what made things worse is that these women experienced a stage of difficulties that if they were not accepted by the local community.

Despite these circumstances however, this did not prevent the emergence of positive behaviours among some of them (a sense of equality/daring in expressing opinions, etc.). We think this is due to the intertwining of more than one factor, including individual differences in receiving the experience of detention, the role of the society surrounding them, and how they view life in general.





Proposals to overcome the obstacles to integration

1- Educational work with the social milieu (families, neighbors, co-workers, etc.) regarding the acceptance and support of women survivors of prison with the aim of positive interactive integration into the local community.

2- Empowering women survivors of prison through training in contemporary professions related to technology, such as computers, foreign languages, electronic communication skills, and others by civil society organizations and others.

3- Securing suitable job opportunities for women survivors of prison by specialized organizations.

4- Training to restore confidence through psychological support.

5- Providing the necessary services for working mothers, such as nurseries, transportation, etc.

6- Securing small economic projects with the participation of, at least, three female survivors of detention.



Annexes

A survey about women survivors of detention and the problem of integration into the local community

It is a survey for scientific research, and no information will be used outside this purpose. There will be no information or indication of the identity of any of the participants.

Survey no.

First - General information:

Questions			
1-	Age	1- From 18 to 37 2- From 38 to 58 3- 59 and above	
2-	Current place of residence / city / village		
3-	Place of original residence / city / village		
4-	Marital status	1- Single (go to question 6) 2- Married 3- Divorced 4- Widow 5- 5- Others:	
5-	For ones who are not single: Do you have any children?	1- Yes. 2- No.	
6-	Education level (which you have completed)	1- Illiterate 2- literate 3- Elementary 4- Preparatory 5- Secondary 6- Intermediate institutes and universities graduates 7- Post graduates	
7-	The standard of living of the family in your opinion	1- Low 1- Average 2- High	



Second - The conditions of detention:

Questions		
8-	What is the total number of detention periods?	4-
9-	What was the background to the arrest? And what are the charges against you?	
10-	Were you subjected to violence in all its forms during detention (psychological / physical / sexual?)	1- Yes. 2- No.
11-	If yes, did this violence affect your social life?	1- Yes. 2- No.



Third – The social relations:

Questions					
12-	How would you describe the relationship with your family and with others after you are released from detention?	1. Bad	2. Good	3. Normal	4. Other
	Father:				
	Mother:				
	Husband:				
	Brothers:				
	Sisters:				
	Friends:				
	Neighbours:				
	Colleagues:				
	Others:				
13-	How did such relationships affect your integration into the social milieu surrounding you?				
14-	Has there been a change in your social status after you left prison? If yes, say it please.	1- No changes. 2- Got divorced: 3- Someone made a marriage proposal: 4- Other (say it please)			
15-	Has this change affected negatively or positively on your integration into the social milieu surrounding you?	1- Yes. 2- No.			



Third – The social relations:

Questions		
15-	Has this change affected negatively or positively on your integration into the social milieu surrounding you?	1- Yes. 2- No.
16-	Are there any organizations that supported you in order to train for a profession or to obtain a job / financial assistance / job opportunity/ relief aid / housing or others?	



Fourth - The psychological personal aspects:

Questions		
17-	How would you describe your daily personal behaviour as a former inmate who survived detention? (more than one answer please)	
	1- Social withdrawal	
	2- Anxiety about the future	
	3- Eager to express opinions	
	4- Self-reliance	
	5- A change in mood	
	6- Peer-to-peer principle toward others	
	7- The sense of disappointment	
	8- Cases of depression	
	9- Others (say it please)	
18-	Has this condition affected your social life with others?	1. Yes.
		2. No.
19-	Do you think that your arrest experience was an advantage or disadvantage over others in your social milieu?	1- Advantage
		2- Disadvantage
		3- None
		4- Others (say it please)



Fifth - About work

Questions			
20-	If you were working before the arrest, did you return to your previous job?	1. Yes. 2. No.	
21-	What are the reasons in both cases?		
22-	Currently: Do you work with a fixed income?	1- Yes. 2- No.	
23-	If yes, What do you work?		
24-	If no, why?		
25-	Have you benefited from previous training courses?	1- Yes. 2- No,	
26-	If yes, what kind of this training?		
27-	What are the social obstacles facing women (who were arrested and released) deprived them from training and work? (You can choose more than one answer)	1- Employers refuse to recruit former women inmates, thinking that these women might cause problems for employers, as they were previously arrested. 2- Some customs and traditions that state that women are not obligated to work. 3- Gender discrimination in	



Fifth - About work

employees to be males).

4- The local society's view on the issue of working women with negative suspicions, especially the former detainees.

5- The lack of social services provided to working women (lack of nurseries) and transportation, etc.

6 - The lack of interest of the community and the specialized organizations in conducting the necessary training to support the former women inmates to find jobs.

7- Fear of exploitation and blackmailing in all forms by employers and middlemen.

8- There are no obstacles

9- Other obstacles:

28- What are the family obstacles facing women's work (the former inmates)?

1- The family's lack of acceptance of the woman's work.

Fifth - About work

		<p>confidence in her, being a former detainee.</p> <p>3- Difficulties in raising children if she has any.</p> <p>4- Her family does not need money.</p> <p>5- The husband's lack of acceptance of her work.</p> <p>6- There are no obstacles</p> <p>7- Others:</p>
29-	What are the economic obstacles facing the work of the woman survivor of detention?	<p>1- Inequality in pay for men and women.</p> <p>2- Choosing women for specific jobs (teaching, nursing).</p> <p>3- Lack of confidence in the abilities and skills of women.</p> <p>4- The lack of a job opportunity commensurate with the scientific specialization and job skills.</p> <p>5- The lack of job opportunities in the current</p>

Fifth - About work

		<p>6- Low financial returns (low wages).</p> <p>7- There are no obstacles</p> <p>8- Others:</p>	
30-	What are the personal obstacles?	<p>1- Lack of confidence in her abilities and skills.</p> <p>2- Inability to reconcile her family and work responsibilities.</p> <p>3- Poor job skills.</p> <p>4- The limited qualifications and experience of the woman survivors of detention.</p> <p>5- Having a physical or medical disability that prevents her from working outside the home.</p> <p>6- Psychological concerns such as fear of the consequences of leaving the house.</p> <p>7- There are no obstacles.</p>	



Fifth - About work

31-	In your opinion, how can these obstacles be overcome (what are the solutions?) (More than one answer)		
32-	What are the fields available for the work of a woman survivors of detention in the labour market (more than one answer)		
33-	How could you develop your skills for work and what are the tools? (Provide some appropriate proposals (more than one)		

Open-ended question:

What are the social issues that you find important in relation to the integration of women survivors of prisons into the local community as former inmates, and that you would like to talk about and were not included in the questions?

