

The Syrian regime tried to destroy her body; in Lebanon, Mariam is trying to rebuild her spirit



Mariam, a torture survivor from Syria, sits at her desk in the NGO where she works in Lebanon.

NEWS



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Enveloped by the leaves and the scent of jasmine trees, Mariam* used to love sitting on a mat in the garden of her family's home in [eastern Ghouta \(https://www.equaltimes.org/ghouta-syria-surviving-under-siege#.XZ2acEZKg2y\)](https://www.equaltimes.org/ghouta-syria-surviving-under-siege#.XZ2acEZKg2y). At sunset, they would gather to drink maté and listen to the melodies of Lebanese singer Fairuz's *Lama Al-Bab* or *Waraq Al-Asfar*.

Today, the thought of sitting on the floor makes Mariam feel sick.

Sitting became a privilege in the four-metre-squared cell that she shared with 24 women during her eight months in a Syrian prison. "We would only sit on the floor if we came from the torture room," she says.

Mariam, a 33-year-old from Damascus, is one of 1.5 million Syrians that sought refuge in Lebanon after fleeing a conflict that has already claimed more than 500,000 lives. She was one of the 95,000 people forcibly disappeared by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, although she managed to evade the fate of the 14,000 people that died under torture in Assad's prisons.

One February afternoon in 2013, Mariam was on her way back home from the school where she taught Applied Arts, when Assad's soldiers arrested her at a checkpoint.

A few days earlier, rebel fighters had kidnapped three Alawite families; they were from the minority sect as the president. Mariam, a Sunni, was one of a number of people kidnapped in retribution. She spent two long nights in detention until a prisoner exchange took place.

She was the only one in her cell that did not receive food because she "answered back" to the soldiers. "They called me rebellious," Mariam says proudly.

In 2011, she joined the revolution by coordinating demonstrations against the Syrian regime, and later, when the protests turned into armed conflict, she helped opposition forces by transporting medicines and phones. "The role of women was crucial because they [the Syrian regime] did not expect us to participate," says Mariam. As of November 2018 at least 8,000 women (<http://sn4hr.org/blog/2018/11/25/52880/>) remained in detention in the regime's prisons, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR).

Her second spell in detention, again after being arrested on her way back from work, was at the hands of the *shabiha* – pro-Assad militias formed in the wake of the 2011 uprising. They hit her head with a rifle butt, causing her to collapse and black out. The militia accused her of transporting weapons. She says she was carrying a kilo of almonds, medicines and paperwork. They also accused her of riding a tank. "When they read me that conviction I laughed so hard," she says. "I don't even know how to ride a car or a bicycle."

Torture as a state policy

Between March and November 2013, Mariam was held in a prison ran by the Air Force Intelligence, considered the most brutal (https://trialinternational.org/latest-post/___trashed-5/) of Syria's four intelligence services. "All of us knew we would never get out," she says. One day, when she was being taken to her cell, her blindfold fell a bit and she caught a glimpse of a trunk with dead bodies outside the building. "What will you do with them?" she asked the guard. "Bury them," he answered.

The world got a glimpse of the horror of Syria's jails when in 2014 the military defector 'Caesar' smuggled photos showing 6,789 bodies that bore the traces of beatings, electrocution and starvation. The United Nations (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/iicisyria/pages/independentinternationalcommission.aspx>) labelled the "rampant use of torture" a policy of "extermination."

Mariam's darkest memory is the electrocution. They would throw water on her and then beat her with electric sticks. She also remembers being beaten with barbed wire until her skin ripped. Today she remains scared of electricity and the sight of barbed wire.

In the torture room, Mariam used to laugh. The interrogator would ask her: "Am I telling a joke?" And she would answer: "Yeah, maybe." Her laughter was an 'adaptive response to stress', according to psychologists (<https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/dacherkeltner/docs/keltner.laughter.jpasp.1997.pdf>). In August 2013, while she was still in detention, her father died in the chemical attack in Ghouta. When she found out he had died, again Mariam laughed.

Her cellmates were astonished. "They would always tell me: 'Even if you are being beaten or tortured, you still laugh and manage to be optimistic, why?'" she remembers.

Mariam attributes that resilience to her being used to “being beaten at home.” For her, being in detention was “just another injustice” in her life as a woman. Her family and a conservative society cut short her dreams of becoming an actress or an engineer, but she fought back until she became the only one of her four siblings to pursue a university degree.

Most of Mariam’s fellow cellmates were educated and married, whereas she was single. The married ones “were scared of their family or in-laws,” explains Mariam, because after release, some detainees faced social rejection and even so-called ‘honour killings’ if they were assumed to have been raped in detention.

The Syrian regime has been condemned by the UN for using rape as a “widespread and systematic attack” (<https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/press-release/un-special-representative-on-sexual-violence-in-conflict-pramila-patten-condemns-the-use-of-rape-and-other-forms-of-conflict-related-sexual-violence-committed-in-syria/>) against detainees. Mariam used to ask her cellmates “to be strong and not feel ashamed.” But the suspicion of rape also looms large for unmarried women. “Because of my time in detention, I might not be a mother,” Mariam says, without a smile.

In November 2013, Mariam was finally released. After enjoying the sunlight for the first time in eight months, she took out a sim card hidden in her bra and called her family. She went to her uncle’s house in Damascus. They saw the scars on her body. She saw the pity in their eyes. “I wasn’t ready [for their questions],” she says. Her mother asked her directly if she had been raped. Upset, Mariam told her: “You can get a legal doctor to check if I got raped.” She didn’t want to answer the question. After a month in her bedroom, spent pretending to be asleep to avoid contact with her family, she crossed the border to Lebanon on her own, seeking peace and safety.

The path to recovery

Along a dusty road in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley, 20 kilometres from the Syrian border, sits Mariam’s safe space – the Syrian NGO [Women Now](https://women-now.org/) (<https://women-now.org/>), a centre that offers vocational training, workshops and psychosocial support for Syrian women.

In May 2014, five months after her arrival to Lebanon, Mariam first joined the centre to take a beauty course, followed by a nursing course. “I got the highest grade of the class,” she says with a smile. Eventually, Mariam would start joining group discussions with other Syrian women to talk about their problems. But even here, she felt judged.

“Women talked about me behind my back, they would feel pity for me.” Mariam remembers how, in one session, she exploded and started shouting: “Stop talking about me! This could have happened to anyone of us, I did not go to the detention centre by myself!”

Eventually one of the psychologists at Women Now advised Mariam to go to therapy. Mariam began her treatment in 2015, yet it wasn’t until her ninth session that she mentioned that she had been detained. It was the first time in two years that Mariam had talked about her torture in detail.

The more a torture survivor speaks about and relives a traumatic experience, the more the trauma fades. That’s the idea behind the Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET).

Lebanese psychologist Stephanie Haddad – who works at the Beirut-based Centre Nassim for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture, which has helped more than 450 torture survivors – explains that the idea is to “try to think the feeling and not feel it, to make it more logical.” So when a survivor remembers an episode of torture, they will eventually stop feeling anxiety or fear.

Nancy Jabbour, a NET specialist working at Restart – a torture rehabilitation centre with offices in Beirut and Tripoli – explains they ask the patient to give “every single detail of what he saw, heard, felt and thought”, as if re-creating a movie scene. Some patients are reluctant because they don’t want to relive the experience, but Jabbour tries to make them see that it is like a wound: “If you cover it and you don’t treat it, it becomes worst”.

The therapy helped Mariam ground some of her moods to her detention, such as her sudden outbursts of anger, isolation and aversion to talking about her fears of electricity, fences or sitting on the floor.

Haddad explains that torture survivors can also suffer from “anxiety, depressive moods, flashbacks, insomnia, poor appetite and intrusive or suicidal thoughts.”

The treatment made Mariam less concerned about the way people looked at her. “Now I don’t care,” she says, adding that the “nice words” of her therapist were also crucial. “He would tell me: ‘You look better than in the last session, you are stronger.’”

First, they would meet weekly, then monthly, now they meet whenever she needs some support. Mariam says she no longer remembers much of her time in detention. The goal of therapy is not to “erase memories, but to adapt, to be able to remember without having all those negative feelings,” explains Haddad. Recovery means that survivors can focus on the present and not the past, but, to do so, stability is needed. And stability is increasingly a chimera for most Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

A suffocating time for refugees in Lebanon

Mariam faces a US\$1,000 fine for failing to pay her residency permit over the last four years. Like many Syrian refugees in Lebanon, she can’t afford the US\$200 annual residency renewal fees. In fact, some 74 per cent of Syrians lack legal residency in the country, putting them at risk of detention.

Amnesty International has denounced the “constant raids on refugee camps and mass arrests” (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/06/lebanon-wave-of-hostility-exposes-hollowness-of-claims-that-syrian-refugee-returns-are-voluntary/>) as a tool to make the life of refugees in Lebanon unbearable (<https://www.equaltimes.org/syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-if-we#.XZ2btUZKg2x>). Six per cent of the prison population in Lebanon are Syrian nationals charged with “being unlawfully on Lebanese soil,” according to the head of Lebanon’s prisons administration, Judge Raja Abi Nader.

With the Syrian conflict now in its ninth year, anti-refugee rhetoric in Lebanon peaked this summer. In June, the Christian Free Patriotic Movement distributed flyers reading, “Syria is safe for return and Lebanon can no longer take it”, joining a host of political parties calling for Syrians to go home.

Only US\$457 million (https://fts.unocha.org/countries/124/flows/2019?order=directional_property&sort=asc) of the US\$2.2 billion promised by the UN to alleviate the cost of hosting 1.5 million refugees has arrived. Lebanon’s population is four million, and already hosts 240,000 Palestinian refugees according to a 2017 census. (http://www.cas.gov.lb/images/PressRoom/census%20findings_2017_en.pdf)

More recently, following a “crackdown on undocumented labour,” the Ministry of Labour warned that those employing Syrians without work permits would face fines of up to US\$3,300.

Many undocumented Syrians are now scared of being arrested at checkpoints and some women have even stopped going to the Women Now center for fear of being detained. But after a while, “they feel so stressed and depressed in their houses that they decide to risk it and come,” says Yasmine. The English classes and computer lessons are help the women escape their harsh reality in the camps, and memories of torture back in Syria.

Moving on

Yasmine has witnessed the evolution of Mariam since she arrived at the centre four years ago. Before she was an isolated and tearful young woman who was battling depression, anger and anxiety. Although everything isn’t perfect, today she goes out with friends and participates in many workshops.

Mariam overcame the social stigma attached to seeking mental health, like the 2,000 torture survivors that pass through Restart’s Beirut offices each year. But they are a minority – most torture survivors refuse to get help for fear of being stigmatised.

Today, Mariam works in the human resources department of a local non-profit, and supports 13 members of her family in Syria with her wages. She always wears a smile, and she says that when she is absent “her co-workers get lost.”

Psychologist Haddad says that someone can be considered recovered when the person is able to reengage with society without being affected by their bad memories. Mariam now dreams of building a centre of her own, an orphanage, in Syria.

But the prospect of going back is grim: her name is on a blacklist. And even among the 250,000 refugees that decided to return to Syria, 1,916 people including 175 women have been detained, according to SNHR.

Mariam says she would “feel good” if the perpetrators were held accountable. Inside her prison cell, she asked God to punish her torturers. Germany has issued an arrest warrant for the head of Air Force Intelligence, Jamil al-Hassan. And yet, it remains to be seen whether high-ranking Syrian regime officials will be held accountable now that pro-Assad forces have reasserted control over much of the country. (<https://www.equaltimes.org/strategic-destruction-to-make-way#.XZ2cCUZKg2x>)

Psychologist Yasmine rejects the ‘conflict is over’ narrative. Her brother is still detained by the regime. “If we come back, we live in fear of detention,” says Yasmine.

Still, Mariam – who has two brothers disappeared in Assad’s prisons – remains optimistic. “I will find a solution to go back to Syria, because I want to see my sick mother and my nephews.”

Sitting on the floor still makes her anxious. But she is on her way to healing her wounds.

* Mariam’s real name has been changed for security reasons.

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