



**No matter how long agony continues,
joy will come one day**

Fatma's story

Trigger warning: this story contains graphic descriptions of torture

Resisting the influence of years of grief and oppression made me call my youngest daughter 'Farah' [i.e. joy]. In spite of all the pain, I still prefer to be optimistic. Perhaps life would finally offer me what I dreamed of and wanted, it might give me what I deserve and what I struggled for. May life truly bring me joy, after the name of my daughter, someday.

In a beautiful house in the city of Raqqa, I was born to a father and mother who preferred males over females in everything. I lived for twenty-eight years in a family that had a magic lantern devoted to males, while the girl was for them an unknown, marginalized and weak creature who brought them nothing but worries.

We were six girls and three boys. My sisters and I were deprived of completing studies, and we were prevented from leaving the house. We lived isolated from society, and our beautiful home became a prison we wait the first opportunity to escape from. Of course, ways of discrimination my parents treated us with passed on to my brothers, who did not hesitate to discriminate against us and more. They treated us like servants at all times, and we didn't hear a word of thanks from them.

But I never hated being a female. Rather, I loved and believed in myself.

The more cruel they were, the stronger I became. I met their unjust behavior with discussion and confrontation and demanding my rights. I have accumulated all my strength and courage in my heart, despite their attempts to convince me that I am a vulnerable creature just because I was born female. My goal in life became to prove to them that girls can also be strong, intelligent, able to live, befriend and love without making the mistakes that society makes us believe to be inevitable.

My little sister and I endured our harsh conditions at home. We were shoulder to shoulder encouraging each other, without being weakened by what my parents and brothers always said to us; "You are a girl and he is a man, you have to stay at home until someone comes to marry you!"

I was eager to discover life, but at the same time I was sad to have a lot of clothes in my closet without being able to wear them because I was forbidden to go out, except for the few times we visited relatives. However, everything we did was put under the spotlight, and the eyes of my parents would always be on us throughout the visit. We were surrounded at all times.

We dared and rejected that situation, we demanded equality, and we did not fear the abuse or beating we were subjected to when we confronted them. However, despite our long journey of objections to what we were told to be shame, forbidden, prohibited and that was imposed upon us, but not imposed upon males of course, that struggle at home did not bear fruit and we could not change anything in our reality.

When completing school became a distant dream, I dreamed of being loved and loving an educated man who I can marry.

My father, was less controlling than my brothers. He always gave me advises and he might have trusted my options. So, when I loved a man who came to ask my father for my hand in marriage, then indeed we got married in 2005, I felt that I was up to my father's faith in me.

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After the eruption of the revolution in Syria, and when the Free Syrian Army entered Raqqa, I had three children at the time. The Syrian regime's bombing of houses intensified, so we fled to Ain Issa, a town north of Raqqa. We stayed there for a week, then we returned to the city and rented another house. But the bombing became more intense, and reached the area around our house, so we flee to Turkey. In Turkey everything was difficult, even securing a loaf of bread. We stayed in Turkey, and I went back to Raqqa on separate visits, to see my family.

On my first visit to Raqqa, after ISIS took control of the area, I went through the al-Naeem square. I saw severed heads hanging on the iron bars installed in the square, and blood was everywhere. We were forced to attend the burning and stoning ceremonies of people. They were horrific scenes and crimes that no one could describe well the horrors of those acts.

Coalition planes in the sky and ISIS is on the ground, were both killing civilians. I felt that parts of my consciousness and mind were withering with each missile.

As ISIS was taking over homes, parts of my memory were erased with every precious thing was stolen away from us. I wish they only kept the pictures, and did not hijack an entire history from my memory.

Masked ISIS members told me that they “put their hand on my home and said “Allahu Akbar” on it so and became property of ISIS.” When I objected to that unfair act I was subjected to, they threatened to get me flogged.

Everything became difficult and complicated in Raqqa. We had to think well before uttering any word and to be careful for every action or movement. The strong there would destroy the weak, and no one would be able to prevent anyone from wronging another individual.

We were afraid that we would turn into monsters and oppressors like them.

In that period, my father died. Because of the difficult living conditions I had in Turkey, I had to request my inheritance from my brothers, but they refused. ISIS prevented me from returning to my husband and children who were waiting for me in Turkey, under the pretext that I was “going to the land of infidelity.” They said to me that the punishment for fleeing the lands of the “Islamic State” could amount to beheading! Neither my brothers nor the “Islamic State” gave me my rights.

I fled from Raqqa at night, spending three days on the way back to Turkey. On the Turkish Syrian border, we slept in the cold. We were surrounded with illness, fear and gunfire. The eyes of Syrians fleeing the war were begging for the mercy of the Turkish gendarmerie. I finally arrived in Turkey, where there were no war jets over our heads, no severed and hung heads, no humiliation, sadness or fear in the eyes of people.

In 2015, I spent several months in a terrible situation of worry for my family as I could not know anything about what might have happened to them. But, when I finally heard about them, I have been traumatized, and I could not get over that until today. They all died in an air strike by the "Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS", along with 500 other people on that day!

My entire family died there, except for my sister, who received some burns and injuries and parts of her body were maimed. Her soul died after the death of her husband and children under bombardment. My mother, my brothers and sisters, their husbands and wives, my uncles and their children, along with friends and neighbors all died in that incident. It was reported that elements of ISIS ran to hiding after they put people in a five-story building which was destroyed completely. The building was marked by a tracking device.

I could not believe the news of their deaths, I demanded to see evidence, so I received pictures of their burned bodies showing how their flesh melted on the bone. My sister, whom I consider to be like my daughter, she is living alone now, in poverty and humiliation, and I am not able to offer her any kind of help.

I started to go regularly to doctors and hospitals, as I began to suffer from neurological diseases, hypertension and constant headaches. I cried my eyes out, I isolated myself from people, I became miserable and I tried to commit suicide three times. I dressed myself in black. I faced indescribable moments of sadness; the pain and agony that is tearing me apart, along with the harsh living conditions in Turkey prevent me from forgiving all parties involved in this tragedy.

In Turkey, we don't have proper mattresses, so my husband and my children sleep on thin mattresses made of sponge that are not so good

in terms of providing comfort or protect us from the cold and solid floor. In such moments, I remember my house back in Raqqa, the blankets and the beds that we had there.

My children do not go out to play in the street, but are confined to the house, just like me when I was young, but for different reasons. In Turkey, Turkish children bully my children because they are Syrians. My children can not even play inside the house, so they do not make noise that may disturb our neighbors. I have to keep silent and ignore abusive phrases that Turkish children make as I walk down the street, just because I am Syrian.

But it has not been so bleak all the time. There are also people who help me, whether it is through psychological support services, or therapy sessions that I received in the 'Family' Center. In this center I received support that made my life better, I found the family that I lost, which made me feel at home in the Family Center, or as I like to call it "my family's home" that shows compassion, love and respect. It helped me get back on my feet again.

It is true that my phone was stolen, and I lost the photos of my family members' corpses, but I think that perhaps this helped me forget their maimed pictures that haunted my dreams. One day I may recall a memory of a happy moment I spent with them with their smiling faces.

Perhaps I will overcome these ordeals. Perhaps the ongoing traumas will not cause me to lose my mind, or weaken me. This chapter of my life will belong to the past, and I will enjoy the comfort, reassurance and joy that I have always sought, and spread joy around me, especially to my sister and children who are the only family I have now in this life.

رابطة معتقلي ومفقودي سجن سيدنايا
Association of Detainees & The Missing in Sednaya Prison

