



This is my story and I want justice

Sammoura's story

Trigger warning: this story contains graphic descriptions of torture

*Sammoura is a pseudonym for security reasons

I am from Aleppo. I spent part of my childhood in Akhtarín town in Aleppo countryside. I come from a conservative home, because my father is strict and hard. He didn't let me continue my studies beyond the sixth grade. My mother was passionate and she loved me and I loved her very much, so were my sisters and little brother, but I hate my father and I am not ashamed to admit it.

I was good at school and I loved it. When my father decided I had to leave school, I knelt before his feet and kissed them, begging him to allow me to continue my studies. But he remained adamant and refused to recognise my right to leave the house.

When I was twelve or thirteen years old, I met a guy who showed me tenderness and interest. He spoiled me and he used to bring me gifts. When my father discovered this relationship he punished me hard. He hit me and cursed and shouted at me, then he locked me in a room and deprived me of food for two weeks.

After the first week in that room, he moved me to be locked down in the bathroom and then to a tiny warehouse. My mom used to bring me food behind his back when he wasn't around, and sometimes she let me out of my confinement, but he would just change the place of my detention as soon as he found out.

This detention punishment only ended when a stranger came and asked for my hand in marriage. My father agreed, even though the man was thirteen years older than me. So I was just fourteen years old when I got married. I was just a child and I didn't know the meaning of marriage and its responsibilities, but my husband took me with him to Aleppo city.

My husband was a cruel person and we had a very difficult marriage full of problems and arguments. Nothing had changed for me – I had moved from my father's oppression to my husband's.

After only ten months, I gave birth to my first child. By the time I was nineteen I had already given birth to four children. Leaving my husband was not an option, because my father threatened he would kill me and take my children away if I did.

In late 2010, my husband died in a car accident. After that I was alone in my responsibility for our four children, as my family was living far away and my sisters were all married, each one living in a different place. One of my daughters had cerebral palsy, which was even more of a responsibility.

My husband's family abandoned me because, in their opinion, I was responsible for my husband's death because of my prayers. Indeed, I did mention him negatively in my prayers because I didn't love him – for all of his cruelty, yelling and insults.

About three months after my husband died, the demonstrations began in Aleppo. A year later, the Free Syrian Army entered al-Haidariya where I lived. Aerial bombardments began and many residents of our neighborhood left, but I didn't have the means to leave and I was left alone with my children.

Even my sister, whose house was in the same neighborhood, left with her family and didn't even call me to offer that I could go with them. My mother-in-law did the same. They all had cars, and none of them remembered to take me with them on this displacement journey. My children do not know their uncles and aunts on their father's side. It is as if they have no family at all.

We spent a week under bombardment with no food or water left. My children screamed in horror whenever they heard the sound of a warplane. The regime withdrew from the neighborhood as soon as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) entered, but the bombardment didn't stop and we couldn't sleep at night.

We lived like this for three years and no one ever asked about me or showed me any interest. Some of the neighborhood's residents began to return to their homes, but they would flee again whenever the bombing intensified.

It was a very difficult time and we lived in fear and hunger, but the ultimate horror was when a shell landed on our house. I cannot describe the terror of those moments. Half of the house fell down and we all crumpled together in one corner. My son's hand was injured and he had a slight head injury. The most difficult thing was that I did not have any way to improve our situation, and I didn't have any trusted person to call on.

Sometimes, I would dare and ask FSA fighters for bread and water. Some of them responded kindly, but others said that they couldn't give me anything. We lived in hunger and I had to feed my baby daughter bread and tea, the same meal her siblings had, because I didn't have baby milk, nor the money to buy it.

During that period, we were living without any electricity at all. One night I lit a candle so my children wouldn't be afraid of the dark before going to bed. I don't know how I fell asleep, but when I opened my eyes, the room was flooded with light. I thought that the electricity was back, but after a few seconds, I realized that it was a fire!

The house was on fire and my children were suffocating. The clothes, the drawers, the TV, everything was burning and my sick baby daughter was choking. I screamed and shouted for help, but there was no one in the whole neighborhood. I held my three daughters close and got them out of the house into the street, then I ran back to put out the fire with the help of my six-year-old boy. I didn't have a phone to call anyone or speak with my mom and sisters about what happened.

After the fire, to my relief, my father surprised me and came to take us to his house in Akhtarín. He explained that he hadn't been able to come any earlier because the regime had prevented access to Aleppo during those past difficult months. But even my father was unable to provide the baby milk recommended by doctors, so we were forced to feed my baby girl cow's milk and yogurt, which made her health deteriorate.

I took her to the doctor and he said that she needed to undergo an operation to cut off a portion of her stiff intestine! It was one of the most difficult moments of my life when the doctor showed me my baby's intestines.

I talked with my father about wanting to travel to Turkey to save my children from the hell they were living in, and to establish a new life where I could work, make money and take care of my children. My father agreed and allowed me to go and my trip to Turkey was surprisingly easy – we arrived at the border area on three motorcycles, and I paid the smuggler three thousand Syrian pounds.

On the other side of the border, my children and I took a taxi to the city of Marash. When we reached the city, I didn't have a specific destination in mind to go to, and I didn't know anyone, so I went to one of the mosques. The imam was a kind-hearted man and he received me and hosted us in a room annexed to the mosque. Three days later he found me a house I could rent for 180 Turkish Liras.

I found a job in a shop that made rosaries, threading the beads onto string, but my joy in finding a job did not last long. One of the shop owners harassed me and tried to sexually assault me, so I quit and I didn't even get my wage for the days I worked.

That day, I went back home and fell into tears – my luck was still miserable even here in Turkey! When my Turkish neighbors found out what had happened to me, they sympathized with me. They told me that I did not have to work and that they would take care of me financially. Indeed, they did their best and they provided for our needs.

I managed to find a job for my son in a sewing workshop, and I found work in a restaurant, but again, I was sexually harassed and I left the work. After a year, my sister arrived in Turkey and her husband opened a shoe workshop where my son and I worked for a year and a half. Then I left that work because we had some disputes about the terms of my employment.

After three years of living in Marash, I moved again to live with my parents who had entered Turkey and settled in the city of Kayseri. I lived with them for about two and a half years, and my father settled back into his habit of interfering in all the tiny details of my affairs. My mother defended me all the time, and she even asked him for a divorce to stand her ground on my side.

However, all that melancholy caused her to have a heart attack, which she didn't survive. When my mom died, I told my father that I could not stay with him anymore and I left for Gaziantep where I am living right now. Now here, I have learnt hairdressing and opened a hairdressing shop in one of the rooms of my house.

In Gaziantep, I met a person that I fell deeply in love with. He was single, good-hearted, pious and only a year older than me. He asked my dad for my hand in marriage and my dad accepted under one condition – that the groom's mother approved.

But his mother did not approve our marriage because I was a widow with four children. He tried several times, but my father and his mother kept refusing. I suggested that he should just marry another woman, so we would become equal in having been married already, and then he could marry me.

Indeed, he did get married to another woman and they had a son. After another year, I asked him to try again to marry me, but he started to stall and make excuses. I threatened to get married to another man if he did not propose. In the end, I did have to marry someone I didn't even know, who had asked my dad for my hand in marriage.

Only when that happened, the man I loved went crazy and threatened us

with a gun! All my neighbors, as well as my family and his, knew about the incident. The man I had married wanted to stay out of this complex story, so he divorced me on the second day of our marriage.

After the waiting period ended, the man I love did return and asked my father to marry me. My father stuck to his condition that he required the consent of the man's mother, and the mother still did not agree! So our relationship continued without a marriage, and everyone knew that, including his other wife, who agreed to it.

My life is a long series of oppression and injustices. Since my childhood, I have been subjected to oppression by everyone; my father, my first husband, his family who abandoned their son's children, the employers who forced me to leave work, as well as the conditions of war and my suffering in my home in Aleppo under bombardment. I console myself by saying that God is testing me because he loves me, and that this affliction atones the sins that I may have committed one day.

Throughout my journey in this cruel life, my son was my support. But even he left me and went to live at my father's house when I got married and all the problems I mentioned occurred. We do not communicate anymore, but I hope that he reads my story and he understands what has happened to me. I hope that he knows that I have endured a lot of oppression for his sake because I love him.

I get my strength and determination from my daughters who are respectful and kind. Whenever I look at them I feel strong, especially the little one. I feel that God is giving me strength for them. I also felt comfortable when I found out about the «family center» and started to attend their psychological support sessions. I was able to speak, vent out and relax. Especially about intimate things that it is not possible

to speak about with my neighbors and other people around me. The sessions gave me support I so badly needed, and gave me the feeling that someone was standing next to me. I got stronger and I was no longer afraid of anything.

Justice will only be achieved by ending oppression and shouting in the face of the oppressor. I hope to be able to teach my daughters this so they can become better and stronger than me. I don't think about marrying them off, because marriage is not important. Studying is everything. They should pursue their studies so they won't be subjected to the torment and suffering that I have suffered in my life.

Just as much I have been wronged, my country Syria was wronged. Syria does not deserve the destruction and devastation that has happened to it. Syria deserves the best, but the people of Syria contributed to destroying it. I hope one day that it will come back stronger. I hope to go back to our homes, and that the war comes to an end and to see no poverty in the world. Syria is our country, our tragedy, but no matter what, Syria is our homeland.

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

