

Syrian Women Refugees Facing Exploitation and Harassment

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The whole world was way too small to contain the joy of Abu Ghassan when he was contacted by a rich sheikh, seeking his assistance to distribute aid to displaced Syrians in one of the Lebanese regions. Abu Ghassan is well-known among a large segment of the destitute displaced population who hardly receive any assistance. Abu Ghassan works hard to find people to help those destitute refugees and direct them to organizations and centers that provide services for refugees; he also collects money from benefactors to distribute among the refugees.

Abu Ghassan explained to the “generous benefactor” the tragic situation of the Syrian families, and started preparing a file containing all the information the sheikh requested. The sheikh, whose name, phone number, and photograph were kept anonymous by Abu Ghassan, explained that he wanted to help single mothers and widowed women who were heads of households because according to him: “they were poor women who have no one”. Abu Ghassan sent the sheikh details on the situation of around 20 families that were headed by widowed women or by women whose husbands stayed behind to fight in Syria. Upon receiving the information, the sheikh asked for photographs of the women with their children. To justify his request he explained that he wanted to show the photographs to wealthy people in the Gulf who could sponsor one or two families, “each according to his abilities”.

Abu Ghassan accepted to do so and persuaded the women to comply after explaining to them the necessity of photographing them with their children. He then sent the photos to the sheikh. Two days later, Abu Ghassan received the promised call and this time from a Lebanese mobile phone number. Abu Ghassan assumed the sheikh had arrived “and he had the money and the solution to the problem of these poor families”. First, the sheikh asked to pay a quick visit to the families, and gave Abu Ghassan a large sum of money, enough to pay the rents of about 20 families for one month, and he expressed the desire to inquire into their situation himself.

Abu Ghassan felt that “something smelled fishy”. He noticed that the sheikh spent a long time in the houses or tents of pretty widows or other young women, but hardly any time in the houses of older women or those “whose looks didn’t appeal to him”, as the man put it. The sheikh was also keen on establishing direct communication with the women.

One day passed... two days passed... Abu Ghassan's phone did not ring. He said to himself, "perhaps the sheikh is waiting for the funds to be transferred from the Gulf; he will call afterwards". But the call came from the least expected. Crying over the phone, one of the widows called and asked Abu Ghassan to come immediately to her house. She informed him that the sheikh returned alone to her house offering to rent out a decent apartment for her and her children and to take it upon himself to provide for her and take care of her five children in return for an "external secret marriage contract". Another woman also recounted a similar story. He learned, also, that a widow had disappeared with her daughter aged 13 years: "She went with the sheikh", said one of her neighbors. The same neighbor then added that the girl ran away from her mother's apartment after one month because her mother was not content to have a relationship with the sheikh, but instead made her daughter marry him (temporary marriage contract). The neighbor goes on to explain that "the poor girl", "the child bride" is now a "street girl". Abu Ghassan says he followed up on the issue of the sheikh carefully and learned that many women accepted his offer. He was certain that the sheikh was still on Lebanese territory "and perhaps other men from his country have ganged up with him".

Displaced Women Outnumber Displaced Men

The suffering of displaced Syrian women is no secret or discovery. The figures of those registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicate that the percentage of displaced women is higher than that of men. Simultaneously, the majority of war victims in Syria are men, and men are the fuel of the ongoing war there on both sides. Furthermore, the percentage of displaced males who belong to the age group ranging between one day and 17 years (i.e., children) exceeds 65 percent, while those aged 18 years and above, do not exceed 50,000 out of 450,000 males who are displaced, and registered or in the process of being registered. These numbers indicate that women are the ones who are shouldering the greatest responsibility, not to mention that some of these women, according to the report of international organizations, endure all types of violence namely military, physical, sexual, economic, and societal. For example, there are confirmed cases of rape, and the legalization of their treatment as slaves "*sabaya*" as per the *fatwas* of radical religious clerics. The media and the international community documented assaults on women in Jordanian and Turkish camps causing further conflict. For instance, following the rape of a displaced girl in Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, clashes broke out between the Jordanian security personnel and some of the displaced men.

In the midst of this violence, the pain endured by Syrian women is hundredfold. They are the mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters who are deprived of or have lost their men on both sides of the conflict. They are used as a weapon of war by men to "humiliate" one another through rape or enslavement. These women are also victims of the humiliated and battered men, who let out their frustrations on them.

Women are the ones responsible for the livelihood and protection of their families, whether they were living in Syria, displaced, or in the countryside on the borders between Syria and Lebanon living in dangerous and sometimes fatal conditions. It can be argued that Syrian women, with their children, are paying a high price for what is currently happening in Syria.

Wives...for Sale

“God bestowed his blessings upon your friend by granting him a beautiful and satisfying wife, don’t you want one?” one of the sheikhs asked a 30-year-old man married for four years. The young man was struck by this question and did not take it seriously, until the sheikh added that, “she would not cost you more than one hundred fifty dollars”. Disclosing our research identity, we asked the sheikh, imam of one of the mosques affiliated with an Islamic association, about the veracity of this information, he confirmed that such marriages that were arranged by him, indeed occurred: “I do not look for them, they come to us”.

The sheikh asks about “the age, and the confession” of the man who seeks a wife. He refuses a groom from a different confession presuming that, “Syrian girls shall not be married to believers of other sects; you cannot trust them: some of them sanction temporary marriage (*zawaj al mutaa*)”.

He explains that “dowry is normal and legitimate”, but he does not specify its amount, as “it depends on the case”. He denies that Syrian families “are selling their daughters”, but concedes that, “living conditions are hard for people, and marriages are concluded in accordance with the Holy Book of Allah and the Sunna of His Prophet”.

The imam of the mosque, who is around 35 years, promises to find a Syrian bride suitable for a 60-year old man: “There are widows, women with children, but a young single girl is a bit hard to find for someone his age; we can find him a woman in her forties”, he explains. He also gives an example confirming his words: “There is a young man, in his thirties, who proposed to a 15-year-old girl who rejected him, so there is no chance she would accept to marry a 60-year old man; the age difference is huge”. The sheikh is not the first, nor the only one to believe he is contributing to “preserving the honor of Syrian women and girls”. There is a list of mosques in different areas of Lebanon where the imams undertake a similar task.

But what is dreaded in this case is not the “arrangement” of marriages, under the pretext of “virtue preservation”, but rather the danger that lies in marrying off underage girls, and with the acceptance by some families of money, “as a price for their daughters”, as dowry. Polygamy has become too easy and cheap. The Mufti of one of the regions declared that he had sent a circular to the sheikhs within the scope of his authority “prohibiting them from holding marriages for girls under the age of 16 years”. However, he confirmed the conclusion of about 20 marriage contracts every month among the Syrians themselves, and between Syrian women and Lebanese men. The Mufti noted that most of the contracts lacked the necessary paperwork to allow their confirmation in religious courts, “as it is impossible for some people to get the supporting documents and identity cards because of the events in Syria”. The Mufti anticipates many social problems because of this, starting with the fate of the children born of these unions and safeguarding the legal rights of the wives. For example, there are countless cases of pregnant women or women who have recently given birth, having no evidence of the father’s identity, “Therefore”, says the Mufti, “we cannot verify the identity of the father, or his actual existence”. Some security reports show that a significant part of the prostitution networks begin with “pimp marriage”, involving marriage to young girls in exchange for money; soon afterwards the girls are forced into prostitution.

It is to be noted that heads of some municipalities hosting large numbers of displaced Syrian women affirm the remarkable increase in the rates of prostitution in their municipal zone, to the extent that it was necessary to hold special meetings to discuss ways to combat the situation.

Cheaper than Maids

The lady waiting for her turn in front of an international organization did not want to participate in the ongoing talk about marrying Syrian girls, even though she was eavesdropping on the conversation. It is just a matter of moments before her neighbor asks her to relate what happened to her daughter. "Leave me alone", she said. Then the neighbor started speaking, telling the story of Um Samer (a pseudonym) who fled Syria with her husband and eight children. The husband was seriously injured during the war enough to disable his right hand and semi-paralyze the other. The family lives in a tent in the plains adjacent to Lebanese residential areas.

The mother and the three girls, the eldest of whom is 22 years old, harvest vegetables and sometimes clean houses for a living. One day, a lady stopped her on the road and asked her directly: "May the name of Allah protect you, are you willing to marry any of your young daughters?"

After a lengthy discussion, the lady said that she lived with her crippled son in a neighborhood far from the tents area, and she wanted him to marry a "decent and not demanding young girl". They concluded an agreement, consisting, among other things, of paying three million Lebanese pounds as a dowry to the family. One week after the marriage, the Ethiopian maid who had been serving the groom and his mother was deported: "It means that my daughter has replaced the maid", lamented the lady.

A lady carrying a nursing baby in her arms appeared to be in her forties. She was looking for a room to rent or to work as a caretaker in a building: "I just want a place to shelter me and the children". Ten months ago, the lady and her five children were displaced from Maarrat el Noaman, following the death of her husband in the battles that took place there. Her husband fell as a martyr with the Free Syrian Army. Accordingly, she seeks refuge in an area in Lebanon that is supportive of the Syrian Revolution. A farm owner suggested to her eldest son, aged 16 years, to work on his farm, and told him there was a room with annexes where he could live with his mother and siblings. He did not hide the fact that there was a Syrian worker living in that room. However, he assured him that the latter would leave in a week, and that in any case, he would not be sleeping with the family in the same room but "in a nearby shack". The lady agreed to go with her son for she was tired of searching for a shelter.

The Syrian worker did not leave a week later as the employer had promised her son; instead, he started sharing the bathroom with them. They also had to allow him to bathe daily in the same bathroom. The worker had an eye on the lady's daughter who was not yet 15 years old, and he asked to marry her.

The girl and her family refused categorically: "We don't know his origins, how would I let him marry my daughter?" Over and above that, the employer himself came to her one day, when her son was in the field, offering her a temporary marriage contract,

explaining that “there is nothing wrong with that; this is a legitimate contract and it is not prohibited (*haram*)”. Her next-door neighbor laughed and made fun of her, saying “You deserve it, what took you to the Shi’a?” The lady looked at her neighbor with tearful eyes, “Do you think that Sunnis or Christians are any better?”

The owner of the shop located near the farm asked her to conclude a temporary marriage (*misyar*) or customary marriage (*urfi*) contract with him. Similarly, she maintains that a Christian man working at a relief organization promised to provide her with food aid if she agreed to have sex with him. The lady is now suffering from the advances of these men: “Who do they think they are? I swear I am still mourning my husband’s death”, she says, her tears washing her face.

The Syrian worker started to instigate trouble with her son and refused to leave, insisting on sharing the bathroom and kitchen with them, pursuing his repeated attempts to entrap the daughter. In parallel, the employer did not tire of trying to lure the mother with the offer of a “temporary marriage”, coupled with promises to “bury poverty”. As for the shop-owner, she stopped buying her necessities from his shop, while the generous relief worker removed her from the list of needy families. The lady maintains that what happened to her only increased her determination to confront everyone: “They have to understand that people have dignity!” And for her to preserve her dignity, she has never missed an opportunity to work in agriculture or domestic service, in return for an allowance not exceeding 3,000 L.L. (US \$2) per hour of cleaning, and 1,500 L.L. (US \$1) in picking vegetables. The only condition is “to be accompanied by my daughter to protect her from the man who insists on marrying her no matter the price”.

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