

“My Life is No More Valuable than Yours”: Voices of Syrian Women

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The Syrian revolution is another example of how the image of women does not correspond to their real role. Exclusively focused on the armed degeneration of the conflict, the international media paint a "masculine" scenario without taking into consideration the fact that Syrian women not only anticipated the outbreaks of protest but also participate in the armed conflict that is destroying a people, without distinction between gender or age.

If we search for the terms “Syrian women” in Google we find that the first results take us to some news that spread like wildfire in the first days of January: some statements supposedly made by a Saudi religious leader who encouraged those fighting Bashar Assad’s regime to rape any woman over fourteen they came across. The news, which turned out to be false, is a good example of the exploitation of women in the propaganda of the conflicts. The trail it left in the Internet search engines contrasts with the poor media coverage of women in their context, where they play a fundamental role.

Continuing the search for news about Syrian women in English or Spanish, we find that the contents focus almost exclusively on exploitation and trafficking of women or on questions

concerning the hijab, articles and opinions written by foreign journalists. You have to search hard to find a female Syrian voice, like that of the writer Rime Allaf, who, while international attention focused on the latest speech by the current Syrian president,¹ wrote an article entitled “Syrian women, backbone of the revolution”:

On January 10 [2012], while President Bashar Assad addressed his supporters in Damascus, Syrian authorities handed the tiny tortured body of a four-month old baby girl to her uncle in Homs. Arrested with her parents a few days earlier, [...] baby Afaf had been thrown into a cell with her mother and submitted to horrific treatment, terrorizing her and her mother and leading to her untimely death.²

1. <http://www.rte.ie/news/2013/0107/un-syria-assad.html>.

2. <http://www.rimeallaf.com/articles/article.php?d=12&m=01&y=2012>.

Allaf explains that in the repression of any kind of opposition, the regime has made no distinction between men and women or between adults and children. “There has been equality in oppressing, and equality in suffering. But there has also been equality in protesting, albeit in varying degrees of visibility and in different forms.”

This reality contrasts with the scepticism that has characterised the international coverage of the Syrian revolution and of its evolution towards an armed rebellion, a coverage marked by the different geostrategic interests that have contributed to delegitimizing the people’s demands against a dictatorship of 40 years. This scepticism reflects the idea that women have been absent in the revolution, when in reality they have been crucial since its beginnings.

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In March 2011, fourteen children were detained and tortured in Daraa for graffiti against the regime. With this graffiti they were reacting to the arrest of their teacher, who had been taken to the security services because it was said that in class she had expressed her hope that the people’s uprising in Tunisia would reach Syria. The arrest of the teacher and her students in Daraa was the trigger for the mobilizations that have shaken the country since.

Shortly afterwards, a group of women organised a silent protest in Damascus to ask for the end of repression and the release of all political prisoners. They were beaten and

arrested by the forces of the regime. Among them was Fadwa Suleiman, one of the most recognised actresses in the country, who joined the revolution and broke from her family, devout Alawites linked to the regime. Images of her in the demonstration in Homs during the siege of the city, while she was being pursued and captured for her activism, went around the world and were essential in the first months of the protests.

If we look beyond March 2011, we can find another of the seeds of the Syrian uprising in another woman: the young blogger Tal al-Mallouhi, known as “the youngest prisoner of conscience in the world.” Al-Mallouhi, a Syrian of Palestinian origin, wrote poems in her blog, most focused on the nostalgia of being a refugee and the feelings awoken by her identity. Some of her poems must have annoyed the regime and the young girl of 17 disappeared in December 2009, accused of working as a spy for the United States. Her parents have heard nothing about her since. The indignation at this disappearance contributed to making visible the lack of freedom of expression in Syria and added to the breeding ground that provoked the popular uprising a year later. There have been petitions for al-Mallouhi’s release over the last two years, with campaigns such as “Free Tal al-Mallouhi before 27th of December 2012”³ in social networks, and the blogger has become a symbol of the repression in the country.

Women’s participation includes all spheres, but it has been especially intense in socio-political activism, with figures such as Suheir Atassi, one of the leaders of the Syrian secular opposition, and Razan Zaytouna, a key figure of the Local Coordination Committees. Zaytouna, who lives in hiding in Syria and, among other

3. <https://www.facebook.com/events/539688879391988/>.

4. <http://traduccionsiria.blogspot.com.es/2012/04/los-expertos-en-certificar-la-muerte.html> (in Spanish).

tasks, counts and certifies the victims of Syrian repression. With texts such as “Experts who certify death like us do not cry”,⁴ she transmits both the drama of the victims of the bullets and those who are obliged to observe and document it:

The details of death are interminable; they are in thousands of recorded videos. The experts in certifying death like us do not cry; it is enough to be witnesses with open mouths and furrowed brows. In specific moments, they hear a voice that howls within and always wonder if they, those who certify death through the screens of their devices or those who do so using their hands and fingers, will one day be “natural” beings again or if death will have left them in a kind of limbo forever.

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Women have also been essential in the discourse of non-violence and the Syrian civil disobedience movement. Notable among the latter campaigns is the “Brides of Peace”, led by four young women who photographed themselves in the Hamidia souk in Damascus dressed as brides and with a sign asking for the end of repression in Syria. The activists were arrested immediately. Rima Dali, one of the promoters of the initiative, had previously been arrested for the campaign “Stop the killing. We want to build a country for all Syrians.”⁵

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the Syrian Free Army, although their presence is a minority in the armed struggle; women like those interviewed by the activist Rami Jarrah (known as Alexander Page) in Idlib. “When I asked her if she was afraid of fighting,” explains Jarrah, “she mentioned that she had lost her son and smiled, making it clear that nothing could frighten her again.”⁶

There have also been voices of protest against the attempts to keep women away from the dangers of the demonstrations. “My life is no more valuable than yours!” shouted Yafra, an activist from Damascus, at the companions who tried to protect her from the bullets in a demonstration in the neighbourhood of Bara-mke. In an interview for the newspaper *Al Hayat*, Yafra adds:

*Many youths stop me from being in certain places or doing some things because I’m a girl. They say to me: “Don’t come with us to the Zabadani demonstration because the situation is dangerous, don’t get involved in the smuggling of blood bags because it’s risky.” As if we were going to the demonstrations for fun! And they often call on “the free” to move aside in the funeral processions and in the big demonstrations.*⁷

There are numerous examples and the participation of women is ubiquitous in the fight going on in Syria against the dictatorship. Knowing Syrian women and their involvement in attaining a better society for their country means listening to their voices, increasingly more accessible through different Internet channels and platforms, where many if not all are present. Through these channels they tell their own story while explaining critical moments for their country. Voices like that of the activist Dahia, from Damascus:

5. <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/04/09/syria-activist-rima-dali-arrested-in-damascus-for-calling-for-end-to-killing/>.

6. https://fbcdn-sphotos-e-a.akamaihd.net/hphotos-ak-prn1/523338_10151234258352873_643054744_n.jpg, source: Rami Jarrah on Facebook.

7. <http://traduccionsiria.blogspot.com.es/2012/03/activistas-sirias-se-rebelan-contra-la.html>.

I am not afraid of being arrested or being struck with truncheons or hands, or even with electrical charges. I have already experienced everything, but I am very afraid of being raped. Even so, the risk is worth it, my voice now guarantees my place in the Syria of the future.