SNHR Holds an Event on Violations Faced by Syrian Women in the Course of the Conflict in Syria

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyzes in Syria.
On Wednesday, February 14, 2024, the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) hosted an event entitled, ‘Unshakable Voices: Syrian Women’s Struggle for Rights and Accountability’. The event, which was held in The Hague, the Netherlands, featured Nicole Chaaya, Gender Focal Point at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights’ (OHCHR) Civil Society and Technical Cooperation Unit; Kathryne Bomberger, Director-General of the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP); Marie Forestier, Senior Syria Advisor at the European Institute of Peace (EIP); Alaa Aljizawi, a Syrian woman activist and survivor of arrest and enforced disappearance; and Fadel Abdulghany, SNHR Executive Director, with Razan Brghol, Head of Program at Baytna, serving as moderator.

The event saw the launch of SNHR’s latest report, ‘Unshakable Voices - Syrian Women Who Overcame the Trauma of Detention and the Tribulations Following Their Release’ which outlines the most prominent challenges faced by women in Syria. Despite facing such daunting challenges, however, these women have continued the fight for freedom and democracy and confronted the additional obstacles that followed their release, going to become inspiring and extraordinary success stories.
The event also featured an exhibition of portraits of women still missing in Syria in an attempt to further highlight the continuing nature of enforced disappearance in Syria, and how this issue affects the return of refugees.

Razan Brghol opened the event, welcoming the panelists and attendants, as well as outlining its theme and goals, before yielding the floor to Fadel Abdulghany. The SNHR head officially declared the launch of SNHR’s report and summarized its details. In his address, Mr. Abdulghany stressed SNHR’s firm belief in the instrumental role of women in the fight for their rights, and the group’s focus on violations against women in particular. He also underscored that the compounded consequences of such violations also extend to women’s entire families and to wider society. SNHR’s emphasis on women’s rights is underscored by the group dedicating two extensive reports annually, which are released on International Women’s Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women of every year.

Mr. Abdulghany explained that this latest report aims to shed light on the most prominent challenges faced by women in Syria, emphasizing how, despite everything, Syrian women have remained steadfast in their fight for freedom and dignity, making for inspiring success stories. The report showcases a number of accounts by Syrian women who accomplished unique and outstanding achievements in their activism, playing a central role in their communities, before being subjected to the horrific trauma of arbitrary arrest and imprisonment in the Syrian regime’s detention centers, which includes torture of all kinds, including sexual violence, and enforced disappearance. Those women were targeted by the regime for their courageous and notable activism in the course of the popular uprising for democracy from March 2011 onwards. In this, the report specifically focuses on the harrowing suffering these women faced and their incredible steadfastness in the face of these brutal conditions and daunting challenges, whose effects are still seen and felt in their lives to this day.
The report, Mr. Abdulghany adds, also includes an outline of the toll of arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, and sexual violence against women as documented on SNHR’s database.

The next speaker, Alaa Aljizawi, a survivor of detention and enforced disappearance in the regime’s prisons, spoke about the violations she experienced from the very first moment of her arrest: “They started beating me in the street at the moment of my arrest,” she said. “I was then taken to Branch No. 215, when I first was beaten by the head of the branch. The head of the prison inspected me when I entered. I was given the choice of either him [alone] inspecting me or several officers together.” Then came interrogation: “I was beaten by the interrogator with cables all over my body, and I was also molested.” Aljiazwi added that another interrogator came in, and she endured many long hours of terrifying interrogation, during which the interrogator did nothing but psychologically abuse and intimidate her. That is, until the interrogator threatened to publish private of photos of her unless she would confess, falsely, to being responsible for a bombing that took place in May 2012 in al-Qzaz area in Damascus city. A few days later, she was summoned again for interrogation, and the officer asked her again if she would confess, to which her answer was still no. After some more days had passed, an official came to the cell with ten documents and forced her to sign them with her fingerprints without knowing their contents. She was then transferred from Branch No. 215 to the Military Police branch in al-Qaboun area, where she was informed that she would be referred to the Military Security in Homs city. Aljizawi said that she lasted 63 days in regime detention centers, until her release as part of a prisoner exchange deal.

Today, Alaa believes that it is important for her to speak out about her experience and expose the violations taking place in regime detention centers, especially against women.

Nicole Chaaya, Gender Focal Point at the OHCHR’s Civil Society and Technical Cooperation Unit, spoke next about why it is important to shed light on the violations being committed against women in Syria, and SNHR’s integral role in this process by releasing reports and data, which are a source for the OHCHR. “We have to speak more about the issue of accountability at the UN, which is an obsession for us all,” she said. “How can we hold the perpetrators of those violations accountable?” Ms. Chaaya also underlined the importance of cooperation between UN agencies and civil society organization in this context. She further stressed that “About 9.6 million Syrians have been forcibly displaced, over than half of them are women.” The UN official also highlighted, in her address, that violations are still being committed against refugees returning to Syria, especially women.
Marie Forestier, the Senior Syria Advisor at the EIP, took the floor next, and talked about the violations against women in the context of housing, land, and property (HLP) rights. Ms. Forestier also shed light on the challenges and convoluted procedures women must go through to secure their rights. “As a result of the conflict, 70 percent of refugees and internally displaced persons [IDPs] have no property documents,” she noted. She also spoke about the laws on seizing properties that have been promulgated by the Syrian regime since the outbreak of the conflict, which further complicates the matter of protecting HLP rights.

In her address, the final speaker Kathryne Bomberger, Director-General of the ICMP, touched on the massive scope of the issue of missing persons in Syria and the importance of establishing cooperation between the UN agencies and civil society to tackle this issue. “The Syrian regime is making no effort to reveal the fate of forcibly disappeared persons and missing persons,” she noted, adding, “The Syrian regime is treating this issue with derision. In every case of death under torture, the regime issues a death certificate with a ‘heart attack’ as the cause of death.” Ms. Bomberger also shed light on the missing persons cases occurring outside Syria on the routes of irregular immigration used by refugees fleeing to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea.

At the conclusion of the event, the panelists answered questions from the audience. The event can be watched full on our Facebook page on this link.