

4. Arab Television News Coverage of Former Female Syrian Prisoners in Exile: The Intersection of Shame, Violence, and Stigma

4.1 Introduction

Millions have fled Syria and settled in neighboring countries since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011, while others have been detained and imprisoned. The Arab television coverage of the imprisonment and humiliation of Syrians aroused outrage and pity among viewers. Images of Syrian women being exposed to police brutality and sexual violence were widely presented on Arab television news. A study published by SNHR, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, revealed that:

“Almost 14,000 people have died in Syrian regime prisons since March 2011 when the civil war first erupted, while about 128,000 others still remain in detention. Torture by the Bashar Assad regime forces made up 14,070 of this number, including 173 children and 45 women. Some 14,227 individuals [including 177 children, 62 women] have died due to torture at the hands of main parties to the conflict in Syria from March 2011 to June 2019” (Daily Sabah, 2019).

The listed number of victims are among those that were identified by SNHR. In reality, the number of deaths and imprisoned individuals is most likely significantly higher (Daily Sabah, 2019).

Rape and gender-based violence—as a war strategy—were not only used by Syrian regime forces, but also by other militant groups, including the Free Syrian Army (known as ‘the opposition’ or ‘the rebels’) and ISIS. For instance, women became a source of *profit* for ISIS members. In 2016, the United Nations Human Rights Council revealed that women and girls living under ISIS

were being forced into sex slavery. They were physically abused on a regular basis, raped, and then resold. “If any of them tried to escape, she would end up being slaughtered or shot dead” (Chapman, 2016). In Syria, women who fell as victims of rape and sexual violence are most likely deemed as dishonorable by their families and communities.

Furthermore, although honor killing in Syria existed before the conflict, the number of incidents increased drastically during the conflict. An article published by *The Guardian* told the story of a fighter in the Free Syrian Army, who murdered his sister on camera amid adultery rumors (Carrie & Alomar, 2018). In areas controlled by the Free Syrian Army, human rights violations such as honor killing are not considered illegal. Many women who were victims of war rape have been accused of bringing dishonor to their families; others are stigmatized by their communities (Batha, 2013). As a consequence, many Syrian women were victims of honor killing, or deemed ineligible for marriage (Tuysuz, 2011).

All these incidents and circumstances increase the likelihood for Syrian women to experience trauma, “ostracism, shame, broken relationships, and health issues” (Porter, 2012). These common experiences among the female victims of gender-based violence are seldomly addressed in the Arab television news. Meanwhile, their agency is framed in the dominant media discourses as something that is entirely lost (Alhayek, 2015). Thus, this chapter attempts to determine whether news reports on the concept of violence reproduced a similar pattern of representation with regards to the notion of agency among the female victims of gender-based violence. Throughout the analysis, I focus on how the Arab television news framed the incidents of violence that have occurred in different locations such as bakeries, homes, checkpoints. Examples of these incidents of violence are public shaming, rape, torture, and detainment.

4.2 Research Data

To compile a record of the most frequent news reports on incidents of gender-based violence experienced by Syrian women during the recent conflict, I referred to the YouTube channels of three Arab television stations: *Al Aan*, *Al Jazeera*, and *Al Arabiya*. When using the search engine in the YouTube channels, I typed the following keywords: *Syrian women*, *Syrian conflict*, *violence*, *rape*, *torture*, *gender-based violence*, *sexual harassment*, *detention*, *imprisonment*, *shame*,

stigma, suffering, checkpoint, and prison. Seven news reports were collected in total; 2 news reports were published by *Al Aan*, 3 news reports by *Al Jazeera*, and 2 news reports by *Al Arabiya*. They were published between January 9, 2012 and March 7, 2018. The table below provides the name, duration, and broadcasting date of the news reports.

Table 5. News reports in the context of violence

Report	Television Station	Title of the News Report	Duration	Date Published	Chapter Section
1	Al Jazeera	There are More than 13 Thousand Female Detainees in Syrian Regime Prisons	2:03	January 26, 2017	4.3.1
2	Al Aan	Testimonies of Women Who were Raped and Tortured by Syrian Regime Forces	3:19	April 28, 2013	4.3.1
3	Al Arabiya	The Story of a Girl Who Was Raped During her Imprisonment in Syria	2:30	January 3, 2013	4.3.2
4	Al Jazeera	Rape Victims are Detained in Syria	2:24	January 9, 2012	4.3.2
5	Al Aan	A Former Female Prisoner Talks About How She was Tortured in Prison	3:55	February 20, 2014	4.3.2
6	Al Jazeera	Thousands of Female Detainees are Raped in Syrian Regime Prisons	3:10	August 29, 2017	4.3.2
7	Al Arabiya	Former Female Detainees Discuss How They Were Tortured in Syrian regime Prisons	2:41	March 7, 2018	4.3.2

In most of the news reports, female victims of gender-based violence are interviewed anonymously by the reporter. Notions such as shame and stigma are associated with the representations. Thus, in order to explore how the Arab television news represented the detainment, imprisonment, and public shaming of Syrian women, I deconstruct the Arab television media discourse

on gender-based violence during the Syrian conflict. To explore these media representations, I address the following questions:

1. How were the incidents of gender-based violence, that took place in different physical spaces such as checkpoints, bakeries, and homes, represented in the news reports?
2. How did the television reporting represent the notion of agency among the female victims who had been detained, imprisoned, and public shamed?

4.3 Analysis

4.3.1 Imprisonment, Sexual Assault, and Controlled Mobility

The news story from *Al Jazeera* published on January 26, 2017 reported on the large number of female prisoners in Syrian prisons. The reporter said:

“International human rights organizations have claimed that the regime’s prisons are considered among the worst prisons in the world. Another report from a different organization asserted that more than 18,000 male and female prisoners have died inside the prisons in Syria – the ones controlled by the regime – between the years 2011 and 2015. This means that 300 deaths occur every month.”

Afterwards, the report quoted Muhammad Alloush, a member of the Syrian opposition. Alloush said:

“There are more than 13,000 female prisoners in the regime’s prisons. The prisons are unique in nature because the regime does not differentiate between male and female prisoners. They apply the same torture methods to both men and women.”

An image of a group of Syrian women supporting the Syrian opposition is displayed. Referring to the image, the reporter claimed that these groups of women confirm the truth behind the human rights violations in the prisons. The reporter explained how female prisoners are tortured more violently than male prisoners. He said:

“Female prisoners experience more brutal measures than male prisoners. This is due to the psychological torture that they are exposed to. Female prisoners are beaten

up, raped, and assaulted in front of their partner or family members. Other female prisoners are forced to watch their relatives being abused and assaulted.”

The news report mostly focused on the gendered aspect of the violence committed. It did not highlight the *strategic nature* of the violence used by the Assad regime as a way to pressure the opposition. Instead, the viewer’s attention was diverted to how men and women are often equally tortured and violated, and how women frequently receive even worse treatment than their male counterparts.

The second news report focused on the detention and sexual violation that took place at checkpoints, homes, and bakeries. On April 28, 2013, the *Al Aan* reporter started the news story with the following statement:

“The Syrian authorities have applied brutal methods of torture to women, men, and sometimes children. This led many families to flee the country and cross the border.”

The reporter interviewed former female prisoners who had left Syria and who now reside in Tripoli, Lebanon. The reporter asserted that these women were targeted by the Syrian regime because they are politically aligned with a Syrian opposition group. He explained how the Syrian regime captured these women at checkpoints and detained them for their political affiliation. One woman was interviewed. Without hiding her facial features, she spoke to the camera. She said:

“I was on the street, the street got bombed, so I yelled Allahu Akbar. And then the man on the street yelled back ‘Allahu Akbar at you!’; so I responded ‘Allahu Akbar at you and at Assad!’. After two days, I was stopped at a checkpoint and detained. They investigated me, cussed me, and physically abused me. They tied my hands, threw me on the floor, and started kicking me. They cussed my whole family, my mother, my siblings. And they wouldn’t stop beating me up.”

The reporter commented:

“Some of the Syrian women interviewed in this news report refused to show their faces. They are scared the regime will target their relatives in Syria. But they wanted to speak up on television and tell their stories and what they have witnessed.”

Another Syrian woman was interviewed. She told her story on camera while covering her face. She said:

“When I was detained at the checkpoint, I was beaten up, cussed and forced to watch men being stripped of their clothes as they were tortured by the Syrian Arab Army.”

The reporter claimed that many women in Syria were forced to watch their relatives being killed at checkpoints. This is considered a form of public humiliation. He continued by saying that most of these women are usually taken to detention centers and are sexually violated in prison.

In this setting, the checkpoint is a unique physical space where power relations are revealed and the laws of the regime become visible. The checkpoint conceals and justifies the presence of laws that ought to be followed. Violent physical force is frequently used to enforce these laws (Mansbach, 2009). In the context of the Syrian conflict, sexual violence performed at checkpoints becomes a policing method used to enforce the laws of the Syrian regime. Syrian civilians passing through the checkpoint are reduced to one-dimensional subjects; they are moving subjects. If the sociopolitical background or identity of the moving subject is perceived as a threat to state security, the subject is seen as a “transgressor” (Kotef & Amir, 2011). Unique to this context, the only gaze permitted at the checkpoint is that of the army men. Hence, the makeshift checkpoint can be perceived as a *pre*-panoptic space,¹ in which the external gaze from the surveillance tower is somehow absent. As for the permanent checkpoints equipped with surveillance cameras, the space is akin to a panopticon. In this setting, both the army men and the transgressors are observed subjects.

During the Syrian conflict, the Syrian army operated makeshift and permanent checkpoints on a daily basis. If the dweller walking through the checkpoint is not perceived as a threat to the state, no direct physical force is exerted. However, this does not indicate that obedience and order were not created and maintained in this very moment. The regime’s control over the civilian (the dweller) is achieved; in this case, however, it is achieved in invisible forms (Foucault, 1984). Kotef and Amir (2011) described the power relations that take place at checkpoints. They asserted that:

“By making power transparent, making law visible and accessible, violence seems to disappear while, in actuality, it changes form, conceals itself and, thereby, becomes more permanent and sustainable: it becomes less erratic and more structural; it no longer brutally erupts in episodic incidents, but is, rather, a perpetuated structure of exploitation, expulsion, and oppression” (p. 73).

1 The Panopticon refers to direct State surveillance (Foucault 1975).

In other words, when violence does not occur through violent physical incidents of torture and assault, a more constant and structured form of violence is established and maintained. This violence is shielded by the law and by the right of the state to examine the identity of its residents. At the checkpoint, criteria such as the following may be applied: Who fits the status quo? Who poses a threat to the status quo? Who should be detained and who is free to go? This process is termed 'a local signifying practice', where the army men at the checkpoint have to solve the mystery of the resident's political (social and religious) affiliation. This usually requires the inspection of the resident's identification papers, which provide information on a person's place of residence, place of birth, family name, etc.

Another central role of the checkpoint is to control or hinder a person's movement. When movement is deterred, so are mobility and daily routines. In this case, checkpoints can make people feel less safe in their districts and homes. Such a situation appeared in the Arab television news when *Al Aan* reported on the government raids of the civilian homes. The raids included the rape and detention of women in their own homes – in their own private spheres. Here, the violence inflicted on women in residential areas may have caused an increase in (internal) displacement or a restriction in their movement

The final segment of the news story described an incident of physical violence that occurred at a local bakery in Aleppo. A displaced Syrian woman, who does not reveal her identity on camera, told the story of Huda, a female baker who was attacked by members of the regime in her own bakery. In the news report, the displaced Syrian women described the incident as follows:

“Huda baked bread for a living. She baked bread for the opposition (the people of the Free Syrian Army) in Aleppo. She was beaten in her own bakery. The men of the Assad Syrian army ripped Huda’s clothes off and exposed her breasts to the public. If the women in the neighborhood had not interfered as they begged for the sexual assault to stop, the men from the regime would have done worse things to Huda – publicly. In any case, it is too late, she had already been cussed, beaten up, and molested.”

In the news reports, there was a clear connection between the sexual assault of Huda and her act of providing bread to the Syrian opposition. Bread, as a staple food, plays an essential role during uprisings and conflicts. For instance, in Egypt and Tunisia, the accessibility and price of basic food items contributed to the uproar that prompted the uprisings. Similarly, in pre-conflict Syria,

a drought hit the agriculture sector in 2007, leading to a decrease in wheat production, which then increased “food prices by nearly a third in 2008 alone” (Beals 2016, p. 5). Granted, bread and wheat are part of the subsidized food provided by the Syrian regime. They are part of the social welfare services, other services include “free healthcare, education, and utilities” (Martínez & Eng, 2017, p. 135). Martínez and Eng (2017) asserted that:

“Since the onset of violence in late 2011, the Syrian government has tried to maintain the bread subsidy in areas it controls by ensuring that bakeries are open, well stocked with flour, and consistently distributing the foodstuff. Interestingly, various opposition groups have sought to gain civilian support by mimicking elements of the government’s welfare programs. Like the Assad regime, they interact and negotiate with local populations in exchange for their loyalty or compliance” (p. 135).

Thus, in times of war, the impact of subsidized bread is closely linked to the ability to maintain power and control over territories and its residents. In this context, by providing these social services, the Free Syrian Army is able to ‘perform the State’. On the other hand, by bombing bakeries, the Syrian regime attempts to destabilize the Free Syrian Army’s control over residential areas. Martínez and Eng (2017) claimed that:

“In targeting bakeries, the Assad regime limits the ability of opposition parties to execute emblematic state performances. This prevents relations between incipient rebel governing bodies and civilians from being formalized or stabilized. At the same time, the Assad regime’s provision of basic foodstuffs in territories it controls alleviates economic stress, averts popular unrest, and boosts morale among weary civilians, while subtly reminding them of the benefits of state power and administration” (p. 138).

From this point of view, I recognize two war tactics adopted by the Syrian regime. The first tactic could be described as “*dimuqratiyyat alkhubz*” (bread democracy). A term initiated by Sadiki (1997), “*dimuqratiyyat alkhubz*” describes a political contract or transaction between the state and the impoverished. This transaction grants the hungry the physical function of becoming unhungry, while the regime is able to transform suppression and yielding into a social and political reconciliation (Zureik, 2012). In Syria’s *bread democracy*—a euphemism for dictatorship—the notion of demanding freedom and political life is out of the question. The second tactic is the regime’s strategy to attack bakeries in areas controlled by the opposition. The attack signaled a mes-

sage to the civilians: the regime “is the only viable source of such necessities” (Khaddour, 2015).

Therefore, when a bakery becomes the target of state violence, the physical assault on the baker cannot be perceived as arbitrary in nature. Perhaps that was the underlying message behind *Al Aan's* news story about the bakery attack. Nevertheless, the social, political, and economic context of the bakery remains decontextualized in the news report. It is important to note that by physically attacking Huda in her own space — a space where she acts as her own breadwinner — Huda's agentic attempts are also directly attacked. The bakery is not only Huda's (private and public) space of work and income, but also a crucial and significant space for the public's survival. Bread is a fundamental need of life and a basic human nourishment for the working class. When the regime attacks Huda for providing bread to the opposition, the regime is not only punishing Huda, but also the working-class individuals need this bread to put food on the table. The attack on the bakery becomes a practice of expulsion of those who rely on the government's bread subsidies to survive. It symbolizes the act of selecting those who deserve basic human nourishment and those who do not.

The report concluded with the following statement:

“These women have sought a new home in a new country. By fleeing, these women have the chance to find a new and safe home that somehow helps them regain their feelings of hope, humanity, and safety.”

The news report ended by stating that some of the Syrian women who fell victim to gender-based violence have sought a new life in Tripoli, Lebanon.

In the upcoming section, I explore how the Arab television news represented the Syrian women who fell victims to regime violence and gender-based violence, specifically those who crossed the border and are now living in exile. In the analysis, I ask the following question: Does the émigré status of Syrian women end the stigmatization they have faced as victims of regime violence and gender-based violence?

4.3.2 From Being Shamed to Being Silenced

In the news reports surveyed in this section, the female victims were depicted in relationship to the patriarchal norms that stigmatized them as victims of gender-based violence, on the one hand, and as subjects of shame and family dishonor on the other hand. The notion of silence was mentioned regularly

in the news narratives. The representations of Syrian women demonstrated how: (a) The victims chose to hide their identity as they narrated their experiences of gender-based violence; (b) the victims *self-censored* their speech as they narrated their experiences in prisons; and (c) the victims chose to forget the past, chose silence as a ‘coping mechanism’ to endure the pain. I explore these three main representations in the news reports below.

The notion of silence appears in one of the news reports by *Al Arabiya* published on January 3, 2013. The news story focused on the coping mechanisms practiced by female victims of gender-based violence. The reporter in the news story said:

“There have been many news reports on Syrian women and girls who have been tortured and raped inside of Syria. To cope with those experiences, the Syrian woman is using silence as a weapon. Here, in Amman, the capital of Jordan, we found hope.”

The news story interviewed one of the victims without revealing her identity. The former female prisoner spoke on camera as she hid her face. She said:

“I was detained on the 20th of October 2012. The police took me from my own home. They took me to the investigation room. This is when my journey started. I was tortured and a lot more.”

Afterwards, the reporter continued narrating her story. He said:

“Amal (a pseudonym for the victim) was raped more than once. The victim spent 40 days in transportation, the regime transported her from one detainment center to another. She was exposed to torture and rape. She hides her face from a society that does not have mercy on her for being a victim of gender-based violence. Amal said that she lived and died more than three times. She never found any source to ease the pain until she met Umm Zaher; a woman from the Sham region, who embraced Amal and is supporting many former Syrian female prisoners in Amman.”

Umm Zaher, who established an organization to support former female Syrian prisoners, spoke about her project. She said:

“I named the organization Amal because I want to create hope for the women of Syria.² I want to encourage women to open up to society and to speak about their experiences in the regime’s prisons.”

2 *Amal* means hope in Arabic.

The father of the former female prisoner, Amal, was interviewed. The reporter said that the father wants to keep his identity anonymous in order to protect his daughter from being *shamed*. Without showing his face, he spoke on camera, while crying. He said:

"I am the father. God has given me this responsibility to protect my daughter. I need to protect my daughter. I am trying not to cry, but my daughter's experience was very difficult. When she experiences those tragic things, my daughter's pride and dignity were taken away from her."

The reporter ends the news story by saying:

"But Amal's willpower will never be taken away from her."

In this news report, the repressive social norms of shaming the female victim were not challenged, but rather reinforced by the father of Amal, Amal herself, and the news reporter. Amal and her father's decision to remain silent resulted in reinforcing those oppressive societal norms. Amal's "choice" to remain silent about most of her prison experience was perceived as a form of strength.

Similarly, a news story by *Al Jazeera* (January 9, 2012) reported on another former female prisoner. The reporter said:

"She is known as the martyr. She has no name and no identity. She chose to hide who she is. Staying anonymous is part of her healing process. Hiding her identity gives the victim determination and confidence in order to overcome the tragedy she is living through and she has experienced."

The reporter claimed that the anonymous female victim engages with an online platform created by Syrian refugee doctors. The reporter explained how the victims of torture and rape could benefit from this platform by anonymously reporting on their experiences online. The platform's database revealed that there are more than 1,500 rape incidents that have occurred since the outbreak of the conflict. The reporter interviewed one of the female victims; she had been to the victim of systematic rape and torture when she was caught at a checkpoint in Homs, Syria. She was detained afterwards. As she spoke on camera, her face remained hidden. She said:

"There are orders the Syrian Arab Army have to follow. If they are ordered to detain someone, torture and rape them, then they have to do it. This is a military order, those serving the military have no right to refuse any orders."

A relative of the victim was also interviewed, also covering her face on camera. She discussed how the victims should receive help after they leave prison. She said:

“She should be given financial support to find a safe accommodation. This is an important step for her security and psychological wellbeing. No one should pressure her into talking about her experience. She should be placed in an environment that makes her feel safe, and she should understand that many other women and men went through a similar experience as hers.”

Afterwards, the reporter emphasized how society and the family place a great deal of pressure on victims of torture and rape. They still consider such incidents a social taboo.

Afterwards, a Syrian female activist is interviewed, she said:

“Many women find it extremely difficult to communicate normally with friends and family. It is hard for them to integrate again in society. There are women who needed more than a month to start speaking again and to open up about their experiences in prison.”

At the end of the report, the reporter emphasized how women and children who have experienced rape and torture symbolize the greatest form of sacrifice in Syrian society.

At first glance, the news reports on violence may appear as a counter-discourse towards the acts of violation and violence in regime’s prisons. However, the incidents of torture and rape receive partial justification. The former female prisoner claimed that the men who committed these violations must abide by the military orders of Bashar Al-Assad’s regime. This statement legitimizes the repressive and violent measures committed by rapists, supposedly in the name of a military order issued by the Syrian regime.

Another news story from *Al Jazeera*, published on August 29, 2017, also addressed the issue of public shaming in the context of rape and torture in the regime’s prisons. The story revealed that the Syrian regime uses mobile phone footage during the torture, rape, and assault of Syrian women. These videos are used as a way to blackmail and public humiliate the victims. The news reporter stated:

“Many female victims of rape and torture are (threatened to be) publicly shamed, ever since the regime started using video footage of the victims being tortured and raped in the regime’s prisons.”

The reporter highlighted the story of Shahadah Zahira, a female prisoner, who was gang raped by five men from the Syrian regime army. Her rape was filmed using a mobile phone camera. Later on, the news report showed a video of a Syrian woman covering the lower part of her face as she addressed the public shaming of women who had experienced rape and torture in prisons. She addressed the men and women who argued these women were a source of dishonor to the family and in society. She said:

“You, the people who have claimed that the girl who gets detained is a girl who has hurt your honor. God only knows what this girl has gone through. What that girl experienced is a fate given to her by God. This is a life experience that God has chosen for her. It is a destiny. This is God’s way of testing the girl’s strength.”

In her speech, she addressed how women and girls are perceived as threats to the family honor and how they are shamed for being victims of gender-based violence and publicly shamed. The speech had a significant message; yet, the news reporter did not provide any commentary on the video. Instead, he shifted the focus to the traumas experienced by former female prisoners.

Another news report in this section was published by *Al Aan* on February 20, 2014. It contained an interview with Warda Salman, a female victim of sexual violence. She spoke openly on camera, showing all her entire face. She spoke about the violations she faced while she had been held for 18 months in the regime’s prisons. The reporter said:

“Warda was exposed to all kinds of torture. She was also exposed to other types of violations. She refuses to talk about them. She is currently working as a human rights activist. She wants to help her female acquaintances that are currently imprisoned in Syria under the regime.”

The report also revealed how the Syrian regime forced Warda to appear on camera and plot against all activists and members of the opposition.

The news report gave a detailed description of the torture she received, but the news reporter did not use the terms “sexual violation” or “sexual assault” to describe it. Nonetheless, it becomes clear to the viewer that Warda had been sexually violated after she mentioned that she had been exposed to “other types” of violence during her imprisonment. Warda described her experience. She said:

“Because of all the torture and pressure inflicted on me, I was forced to admit things that never really happened to me. I was forced to lie. I was forced to admit those lies.”

I was forced to say the names of many activists from the Opposition. These activists are not terrorists, but I was forced to claim them as terrorists. Of course, this was all a result of the torture and pressure they put me through.”

Afterwards, she mentioned that she would not be able to speak about this particular experience on camera. At this point, she self-censored herself, which is another form of silencing. Perhaps censoring parts of her story stemmed from her impotence to break a social taboo or to speak openly about her experience with sexual assault.

Similar to the previous news stories surveyed above, the news report concluded that many women remain silent about such experiences and refused to talk about them in public. Although Warda revealed her identity on screen, her identity was *hitherto* exposed publicly by Syrian regime; i.e., when she had been forced to record a video while in prison.

The last news report in this section is from *Al Arabiya*, published on Mar 7, 2018. The news story exposed in more detail the torture methods employed by the Syrian regime against female prisoners. The reporter interviewed three Syrian women who were previously detained in the regime’s prisons. The identity of the interviewees remained anonymous and their faces were blurred out from the television screen. The reporter started the report by saying:

“These women were tortured and raped after they were illegally detained in the prisons.”

The first speaker described the methods of torture she was exposed to by the Syrian Arab Army while in prison. She said:

“The men of the Assad regime never took a break. They tortured us day and night. There were no ‘specific hours’ for the torture. We could not differentiate between day and night. The investigation room had an iron bed. The prisoners were forced to lie on the iron bed. They would tie your hand and force you to sit down. You couldn’t move your body. I was only 24 years old when they threw me into this investigation room. They threw water on me and then electrocuted me, that was their method of torture. I was later on thrown into a room full of women. 43 female detainees in a room without a window. It had no ventilation. You could almost die from the smell of sickness. There were insects and worms everywhere.”

The speaker exposed how systematic violence is tied to routine or long hours of torture on a daily basis, revealing how the violence used by the regime became a weapon of war.

Public shaming is also another form of violence used as a war weapon. Tadroz (2016) argues that:

“Sexual violence is intended not only to shame the individual but the community at large. Public shaming has a collective impact because it destroys not only the victim but also the rest of the community who are often forced to watch” (p. 104).

This notion appeared in a speech by one of the interviewees in the news report. A former female prisoner told how she had been dragged out of her home and had her naked body exposed to the public. She referred to her experience of sexual assault by using the word ‘thing,’ not wishing to use the real name of the act in public or on camera. She said:

“There was a female student in the 9th grade, she had been raped by six men. I was also exposed to this ‘thing.’ There is no female prisoner who wasn’t exposed to this thing. My son was also investigated by the regime. They would grab my child, shake his body, and ask him: ‘Where is your mother? What does your mother do?’ My child couldn’t speak anymore because he was terrified. My daughter was two and a half old when they separated her from me. They forced me out of my house, I wasn’t wearing my headscarf; I wasn’t wearing my Abaya either, nothing. I had nothing on me!”

The third speaker told another story that occurred in a detention center:

“There was also a woman who was only six months pregnant. Due to the harsh torture methods inflicted on her, she gave birth in the middle of the investigation. Her child died. They shot the baby in front of her. This woman became crazy. She remains mentally ill until today. Her parents always lock her up in a room, they don’t let her go out in public.”

This part of the story insinuated that the so-called ‘mentally-ill’ female victims will most likely be barred from public life. Excluding traumatized former prisoners from public life and from their right to re-integrate in public circles after they are released from their detainment, this fact exemplifies how society values the concept of honor more than the victims’ wellbeing. Once again, the news report demonstrated how family honor is secured in the name of ‘protecting the victim.’

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter illustrated how the news reports surveyed above, in the context of violence, were solely directed at the violence inflicted by Bashar Al Assad regime. The dominant discourse in the news reports was materialized in two main ways: by attacking the acts of violence committed by the Syrian regime and by highlighting and representing the victims of these acts. These two reporting approaches sometimes overlapped; at other times the reporting did not emphasize one aspect over the other. At first glance, the news reports on violence may have appeared as a counter-discourse, one critical of the violence committed by the Syrian regime. However, the chapter revealed that this counter-discourse has an undermining nature when critiquing the Assad regime's violent war strategies.

The news reports largely focused on portraying Syrian women who had been exposed to torture, detention, and sexual assault. While the news stories frequently reported on the phenomenon of sexual violence committed by the Syrian Arab Army, news report analysis showed that there are two factors that undermine the violence highlighted in the television news. The first factor is that the news reports did not investigate or highlight the strategic nature of this violence and the nature of the spaces in which these violent acts have taken place. The second factor is that most of the news stories tended to focus on the gendered aspect of the acts of violence. I regard this as a limitation in the reporting.

Furthermore, the chapter demonstrated that the experiences of rape, public shaming, and sexual assault were perpetuated as a public spectacle in the Arab television news. This strongly contributed to the humiliation of Syrian women. We cannot perceive these acts as merely violent or patriarchal but, more importantly, as political.

The general output of the reporting implied that female victims of rape and sexual assault 'chose' to remain silent about their past or remained silent because they feared being dishonored by their communities. None of the news reports mentioned the threats of honor killing facing Syrian women, carried out a form of punishment inflicted by the communities or families. Instead, the news reports only shed light on how silence became a weapon among these groups of women.

Another issue that has been overlooked in the television reporting is the issue of suicide among the victims. In some cases, suicide becomes another way of regaining dignity among women who had been raped during their impris-

onment (WITW, 2016), especially among groups of women who were publicly shamed by their communities and by the Syrian regime. During those difficult times, suicide may become a desperate attempt to regain dignity among the victims.

In the news reports, the former female prisoners and the victims of gender-based violence were represented in relation to how they escaped to a neighboring country or how they were dismissed by their own community. These narratives portrayed those incidents as a form of *failure*. Granted, the displaced Syrian women's experiences of loss, dishonor, rejection, and exile presented in the television news reflect on "how people are living with shame and defining and transforming who they are" (Georgis, 2013, p. 238). Having been or having chosen to be expelled from the country, are these groups of women able to offer alternative ways of thinking about the dominant social structures they inhabit?

In her book *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love (2009) argues that valuing and reclaiming the "depressing" past can be a productive act to counter this same stigma – especially if the subject incorporates society's stigmatization on themselves. This notion is stemmed from Michel Foucault's philosophy in *The History of Sexuality*, which discusses the "reverse" in discourse or the ways the subaltern may take advantage of the reversibility of power. "While discourse produces power," it "also undermines and exposes it; for those alive to the fragility of power, there are many opportunities to turn situations of domination to their advantage" (Love, 2009, p. 2). Reclaiming the past through painful stories on stigma is a type of 'reverse' discourse displaced Syrian women may have adopted after beginning a new life in exile. While they remain visible and fragile to power, their recognition to their vulnerability, their reclamation of the past, and their expression of loss and rejection can be an alternative form of power.

While the 'masculinist' model of acquiring agency is implied and practiced when one attempts to overcome one's state of vulnerability, Butler (2016) contends this notion by asserting that agency is employed when vulnerability is mobilized, rather than overcome. Throughout the news reports analysis, we saw images of Syrian women crossing checkpoints and exposing themselves to harm. We also saw Syrian women working in bakeries under siege to feed civilians, acknowledging the possibility of a government raid on the bakery. We saw a Syrian woman making a public appearance through a video that was circulated across public mediums, speaking directly to the men and the communities that shamed Syrian women for being publicly shamed and for

being victims of sexual violence. These acts have increased the Syrian woman's visibility, making her even more vulnerable to the power that previously stigmatized her and continues to do so.

In the next chapter, I survey the news reports in the context of vulnerability.