

Speech: We need to knock down the wall of silence around Syrian women: by Lord Ahmad

Today the world marks the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict. Around the world, sexual violence continues to be used as a weapon of war on a scale that is truly appalling. This is particularly true of the tragic war in Syria: according to a UN Commission of Inquiry report earlier this year, “no one had been unaffected by sexual and gender-based violence during the Syrian conflict”. This horrifies us all – based on the UN’s findings, we are talking about a whole generation of people affected mentally and physically by these violent crimes.

However individuals and communities, with the UK’s assistance, are working to give voice to survivors and support them to secure justice and we are at the forefront of the international community’s efforts to secure justice for survivors, shatter the culture of impunity, and tackle the stigma faced by survivors. In 2014 we hosted the largest ever summit on preventing sexual violence in conflict, bringing together governments, NGOs, experts and survivors to begin to change global attitudes to these crimes. In Syria, we have given £10 million through our Conflict, Security and Stability Fund to support gender-related projects since the start of the crisis, including supporting Syrian organisations to raise awareness of women’s rights, to treat survivors of sexual violence, and to document medical evidence for use in any future prosecutions. We have also provided £30 million to the UN Population Fund in Syria to help reduce and mitigate gender-based violence, and provide life-saving sexual and reproductive health services.

The lawyers and doctors working on the ground in Syria to support survivors and bring their cases to light deserve all of our admiration. Their stories, shared here for the first time, reveal the importance of documenting sexual violence in conflict to build up a body of evidence for prosecutions, to hold perpetrators to account, and to help deter future sexual violence. On this International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, we honour their dedication in seeking justice for survivors.

A lawyer working on documenting sexual and gender based violence in Syria.

All our work documenting sexual violence cases is confidential. Names are kept concealed, and files are codified. The documented cases constitute a file on which legal action could be based in the future. It is the right of these women to have justice done, and to punish the perpetrators of these acts. There is a real fear of attack or threats to doctors involved in documenting these abuses.

There is no denying that there were acts of violence, rape and sexual abuse

before the revolution, but numbers then were meagre as there was law and punishment in place then. Since the revolution, huge numbers of cases have been reported from the detention centres. Most of the documented cases are of female detainees held by the regime. The acts of violence ranged from sexual harassment to forceful stripping of clothes to rape and further worse instances. Sexual violence was practiced in some areas as a weapon to intimidate a particular group to move to another area. There were also cases from the refugee camps because no accountability system was in place.

We focus on educating women on their rights. We need to try to change stereotyping in the community, to knock down the wall of silence of women and rid them of the social stigma attached to victims. When a son is detained and then released, society tells the father "be proud of him and keep your head high because he was a detainee" Why not so when the detainee is a woman? She was detained, and she could have done nothing to prevent it. And when she was abused violently outside jail, she was the victim, not the perpetrator. We need to alter the way society views these women.

A Doctor providing medical treatment to survivors and documenting evidence in Syria

The organisation I work for specialises in documenting cases of sexual violence that have taken place in detention centres. This not only includes regime detention centres but also those that belong to other armed groups that are present within Syria. We also receive cases that require medical, psychological services or legal assistance, and we try to help them with that too, referring them to other organisations who can help.

I do this work in my spare time, usually a day or 2 a week. For security reasons I cannot discuss the nature of my work with anyone, even those closest to me are unaware of what I do. Just by meeting with someone who has just been released from a regime detention centre I am putting myself in danger.

Due to the stigma surrounding the issue, women who have suffered from sexual violence whilst in detention often have no one to support them, and are often turned away by their families. They hear about us through other survivors, nurses or first aid centres. They do not tell anyone about what has happened to them as they worry about the community's perception. We are most often the only people who have heard what they have been through.

During the year and a half that I have been doing this, there are two cases that have really touched me personally. When I was receiving my training, I attended the case of a woman in her fifties who was gang-raped by teenagers. She said they were the age of her children. The second case was of a woman who had just been released from a Daesh run detention centre. She told me that you could be walking in the street and suddenly they pick you up, beat, whip you and undress you on the street. She eventually ran away with her children, leaving her husband behind. Their words still echo in my ears and I cannot get the images of them out of my mind. Each story I have heard is painful. These stories must come out to the public. These injustices must be

stopped once for all.

Syria has been under tyranny and oppression for 20 or 30 years. I do not want my children to go through the same thing. There are individuals who have been in jail for months or years, in unimaginable conditions. I do not want us to continue to live under fear of torture and violence from the police-state regime – not being able to raise our voices in protest. One day I hope that we will be able to live freely like a normal country.

Sometimes I feel like this hope is a bit far-fetched, but when I look at other countries which have experienced civil wars like us, or even when I look at the First and Second World War, places where people's lives eventually came together again, I regain some hope.