

Rights Activist Struggles to Defend Herself

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I am a Syrian human rights activist. I dream of a more beautiful world which offers freedom, dignity and peace for all. Yet until recently, I had never imagined that before I could help others, I would have to help myself.

I graduated from Damascus University with a degree in pharmacy and got a job with the government. But I wanted more out of life. In private, I started learning English. After a while, I began to write unsigned opinion articles to raise awareness about various social issues.

Although I had a very busy life, I always felt like something was missing, until a chance meeting put me in touch with some young Syrians who worked in the human rights field.

Finally, I found a place where I truly belonged. This was my chance to prove that I had my own voice in a country and society that too often believes its citizens should be voiceless.

Unfortunately, I had to do most of my work in secret. Society in general and my own family would object to a 37-year-old unmarried woman engaging in such behaviour.

Then one day, all of my hard-won freedom was snatched away when the security service discovered one of my activities.

They brought me in for questioning and – worst of all – they called my father and brothers.

While I was lucky not to end up in jail, in many ways, my life after that day became even more restricted than that of a prisoner. My parents forced me to leave my job and sever all communication with my friends. They now watch me 24 hours a day. Everything I do is scrutinised.

To be an activist in a country like Syria is a great challenge, but to be a female activist is far greater. We live under political, social, and religious oppression.

For me, the oppressiveness of society is more restrictive than the political tyranny. Everyone, it seems, believes they have a right to control my behaviour and chip away at my humanity. I do not have the right to self-determination. Indeed, I am a hostage to my community and to my family.

My parents now play the role of despots. Every time I attempt to exercise my basic rights, they beat me. Every day, my relationships with people outside my restricted world slip further and further away. That is my punishment for exercising my free will.

As isolated and angry as I often feel, I refuse to give up. I still read, write and make plans for my future. If I

want to be a human rights activist, I must first defend my own rights and freedoms.

The author of this piece asked not to be named.

(Syria News Briefing, a weekly news analysis service, draws on information and opinion from a network of IWPR-trained Syrian journalists based in the country.)

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