

SURVIVING & THRIVING: COMMUNITY-BASED VIOLENCE PREVENTION & HEALING FOR SYRIAN WOMEN REFUGEES

Antakya, Turkey

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BACKGROUND

Since the start of the uprising in Syria in March 2011, more than 100,000 Syrians have lost their lives. While wide-scale efforts by governments, rights groups, and community organizations to provide basic necessities for survival including food and shelter are crucial, such general approaches prevent focus on how refugee crises impact certain sectors of the population differently. Wars disproportionately target women in specific gendered ways. With the rapid deterioration of security, societies become hyper-patriarchalized through violence, marginalizing women and threatening their security. There are more than nine million Syrian [IDPs](#) and [refugees](#). [Two-thirds are women and children](#). [Problems do not subside for refugees once they escape war zones](#); instead women who cross the border hoping to evade armed violence frequently find themselves in dangerously unstable situations with few supportive outlets.

Syrian women refugees experience serious and complex challenges to their livelihood. Among the many issues they face include horrendous accounts of organized sexualized violence. Rights groups, including [Women Under Siege](#) and the [International Rescue Committee](#), have documented how [rape is being used as a war tool](#) in Syria and is one of the main reasons women are fleeing the country. However, less focus has been given to how gender-based violence and insecurity persist outside of Syria, through [exploitation in public spaces](#) as well as in [housing projects](#) lacking security. One Syrian-American activist who recently worked in refugee camps on the Turkey-Syria border noted how the threat of violence kept women from carrying out ordinary necessities like using the restroom or walking out for a medical emergency. She remarked, “The women definitely had issues of defense and safety in camps, especially at night. There are no lights and going to the bathroom is a dangerous endeavor” (Personal interview. Haydar, Noor). For many women refugees, such habitual necessities become points of struggle, yet these concerns go unanswered as women lack representation in refugee housing councils.

OBJECTIVES & EXPECTED OUTCOMES

In order for transformational processes of peace to occur, security must be assessed at the level of the community, family and individual. Scholars in this field of study have found that the most successful violence prevention initiatives are led not by powerful experts or state actors, but by communities asserting power (Mattingly). We propose creating a combined space of violence prevention training and emotional healing for Syrian women refugees in Antakya, Turkey. Our goal is two-pronged and looks at immediate and long-term approaches to violence prevention in ways that fully affirm community members’ self-determination. First, we hope to work with Syrian women refugees to develop an understanding of contemporary personal violence prevention, with a special focus on sexual assault prevention and self-defense issues in refugee spaces. We will familiarize participants with responses to interpersonal violence, bystander intervention, and community-wide anti-violence mobilization. In doing so, we also hope to mainstream issues in the wider refugee housing community of personal security and peace. Alongside self-defense training, we hope to create a space of individual and collective healing based on confidential storytelling, affirmation activities and narrative exchanges. Many of the refugees have experienced horrific trauma, whether through violence enacted on them directly or observed by them. We will work with them to provide an outlet for coping through therapeutic expression for those who wish to partake anonymously or openly.

PROJECT PLAN

We will partner with the nonprofit organization, [NuDay Syria](#), to benefit from networks they have established with refugee communities in Antakya, Turkey. In addition to meeting basic needs like medical relief and water provision, NuDay Syria has focused on multiple avenues to empower Syrian women refugees. One project NuDay Syria has which aligns with our goals is the Female Breadwinners initiative. The organization works to help move Syrian women —often mothers whose husbands have been killed or

detained—out of Syria. Once the women are relocated, NuDay Syria steps in by sponsoring food and housing, and providing support to start small businesses like knitting and handiwork in order to earn an income. We will take the lead of the NuDay staff in understanding the priorities and needs of the populations they serve. We hope to form a partnership based on our mutual mission of empowering Syrian women refugees to be active agents in their community's security. We have already begun forming a relationship with the founder and director of the organization, Ms. Nadia Alawa (based in D.C.), who has expressed great interest in our proposal and has connected us to NuDay's main contact in Jordan.

Our project has two main components:

Self Defense: Our project proposes a model of violence-prevention that centers the individual in a communal context. We will look at efforts to prevent first occurrences of sexual assault perpetration as well as efforts that focus on immediate and long-term responses to violence in order to address the emotional trauma of the survivor. The course taught as part of this project will thoroughly teach how to avoid, de-escalate and escape conflicts, as well as how to fight back against an attacker in different contexts (e.g. an intimate partner vs. a stranger).

Healing Circle: This portion of the project aims to function as a healing space for survivors and those impacted by violence, whether it occurred in their native Syria or in their new refugee homes. We hope this space will cultivate trust and intra-group solidarity among women in the Antakya NuDay Syria housing project. We all have facilitation experience, which we will use to create an environment that encourages individuals to share and be affirmed both [through creative expression prompts as well as unstructured open narration.](#)

Timeline and support: We have registered to attend a three day campus-based intensive personal safety workshop in February organized by [IMPACT Chicago](#) in order to begin to conceptualize how we can teach others to prevent, minimize and stop violence. In addition, we will spend the month of May training to receive the [RAD \(Rape Aggression Defense System\) Advanced Instructor Certification](#) so that we are equipped to teach violence prevention methods to others. Afterwards in June, we will prepare a weekly curriculum so that we have a defined timetable for this six-week project that will begin mid-July and end in August. (Travel will be set after confirming the project dates with our community partner.)

We will receive guidance through this planning process from self-defense instructor Katy Mattingly, a violence-prevention professor at the University of Michigan and author of *Self-Defense: Steps to Survival*. Also during this time, we will work with Syrian-American Michigan-based therapist Loubna Al-Khayyat, who has worked in Syrian refugee camps in Antakya counseling and providing trauma therapy to the refugees. She will teach us about the nuanced forms of trauma common among refugee communities and provide expertise on how to effectively create a receptive healing space. All three of us speak Arabic fluently and have experience in women-centered organizing, making us equipped to communicate with the participants.

PROSPECTS FOR FUTURE IMPACT

Throughout this project, we hope to create meaningful and sustainable relationships with the women in the Antakya NuDay housing project. We will provide each participant specifically crafted, accessible resources (text and audio/video) that they can take with them upon completion. In addition, we will invite 3-5 women who would like to be trained to teach self-defense and carry on the healing circle so that they may begin a new cycle for other refugee women and create a space of lasting healing, empowerment and safety. Finally, we will make a visual blog once we are back that will include images, videos and testimonials of the participants as well as our own reflections to give visibility to the narratives of these women that are often lost in portrayals of the Syrian crisis.