

Stories of Syrian women, their family and property



Stories of Syrian women, their family and property

Written by the Norwegian Refugee Council and UNDP Syria

Illustrated by Helen Patuck



NRC in Syria

The Norwegian Refugee Council (www.nrc.no) is an independent, international, humanitarian non-governmental organisation which provides assistance, protection and contributes to durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced people worldwide. NRC works in more than 30 countries including Syria to support people affected by forced displacement (IDPs, returnees, host community etc.) so that they can have access to timely and effective assistance, to cope with the crisis and when the crisis ends, to return and rebuild their lives.

NRC will continue to apply an integrated programming approach, in which Education, capacity building, Shelter/WASH, and Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL) programmes work together to enable displacement-affected populations to meet their basic needs, enjoy their rights, and benefit from pathways to durable solutions.

This story booklet was co-funded by the UK Government and the European Union. The views expressed and information contained in the story booklet are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, the UK Government and European Union.



NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL



UNDP in Syria

UNDP works in about 170 countries and territories, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. We help countries to develop policies, leadership skills, partnering abilities, institutional capabilities and build resilience in order to sustain development results.

Since the onset of the crisis in Syria in 2011, UNDP has responded to the huge needs that emerged by implementing a unique resilience programme to support the Syrian people. UNDP goes beyond humanitarian assistance in the sense that it strengthens the resilience of the Syrian people by enhancing positive coping mechanisms, that enable them to rely on themselves and rebuild their livelihoods, rather than remain dependent on humanitarian assistance. Within the UN Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), UNDP's interventions are focused on the rehabilitation of basic and social infrastructures, providing livelihoods support, enhancing economic recovery and social inclusion, and strengthening social cohesion with deep gender lence.

UNDP works with local committees consisting of local partners, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), Faith-Based Organisations (FBOs), as well as beneficiaries and representatives from the host communities to ensure that all voices are heard.

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	p. 5
Safiya's Story	p. 6
Layla's Story	p. 12
Razan's Story	p. 18
Aiysha's Story	p. 24
Azhaar's Story	p. 30



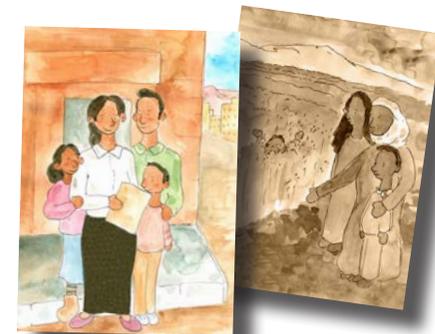
This anthology contains five true stories told by Syrian women throughout 2019 and 2020 as part of NRC and UNDP's work on women's Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights in Syria. These stories aim to bring women's experiences to light through their own voices, as they talk about their struggle to claim their property rights.

Property rights are central to a woman's survival when the household breaks down, whether in the event of death, divorce or separation, all of which have increased during the conflict. The ability to control and benefit from having a place to call 'home' can empower women, increase their sense of security and ensure that they are included in the future of Syria, especially because violence and displacement continue to disproportionately affect them. Rebuilding Syria presents an opportunity to address the long-standing gender inequalities in women's Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights that are illustrated by these stories.

While Syrian laws regarding property rights are biased towards men, they do recognise women's right to property and set out the conditions for women's inheritance according to Sharia and different personal status laws. However, traditional customs have long ignored these protections as described in the stories. The stories and family trees included in the anthology illustrate how discriminatory practices have been passed down from one generation to the next causing women to give up their inheritance. Azhaar's story shows how the circumstances stemming from the conflict in Syria have exacerbated women's inequality. However, the stories of Layla and Safiya are emblematic of how property rights can empower women and their families over generations.

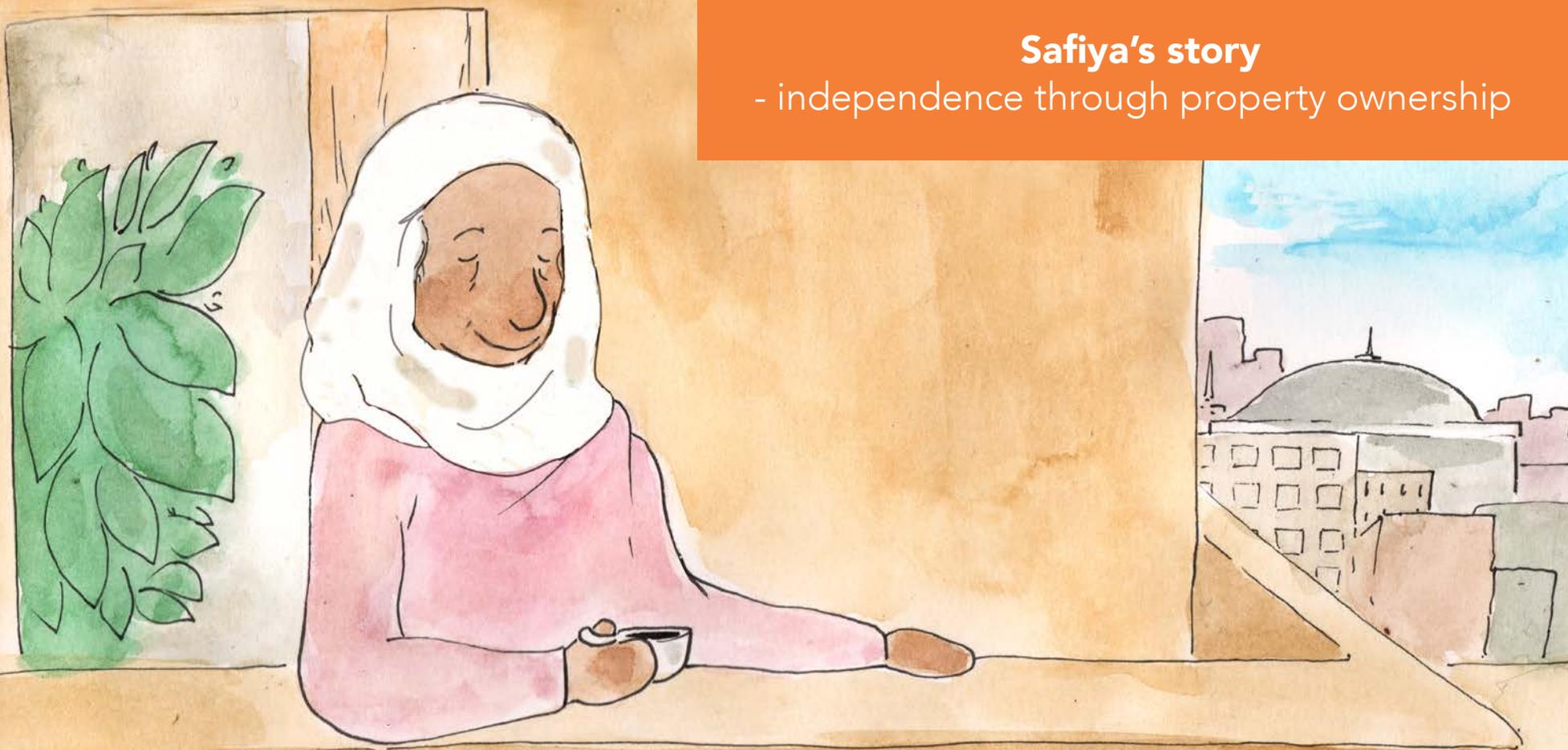
This anthology is dedicated to all Syrian women in search for a place to call home where they can live securely; to all women who are claiming rights for their survival and their survival of their children; and to all men who are taking action to ensure their wives and children can enjoy HLP rights. This anthology offers a tribute to Syrian women and their resilience and courage.

We would like to acknowledge and thank everyone who made sharing these stories possible. We publish these stories in the hope that all Syrian women aware of their rights, are inspired and encouraged to exercise them or, if necessary, demand them, and to foster a sense of solidarity and community.



Safiya's story

- independence through property ownership



Safiya is a member of one of the Damascene families well-known for ensuring their women are educated and their rights are preserved. Safiya lives in Damascus where she used to work as an engineer's assistant.

Although many asked for her hand, Safiya never married. She enjoyed her work and felt more independent that way. She owns a car and a large house in the one of the wealthy neighborhoods in Damascus. She also owns a large share in a café in Damascus' Old City.

This significant inheritance was left to her through a family tradition that ensures that women inherit their legitimate share as set out in Sharia. According the family practice the women in Safiya's family inherit half the share of each man except when the daughter is not married. In this case, an unmarried woman can inherit an equal or more share than man to ensure an independent dignified life.



The café in Damascus Old City: a family heirloom

The café belonged to Safiya's grandfather, Kamal. Kamal's father, Taha, had owned a house and a fabric store in the Old City. After Taha died, Kamal and his sister Omayma inherited the fabric store and a house in the Old City. They sold the properties and divided the inheritance between them according to Sharia. As per Damascene tradition, when their mother died the gold was left to her daughter, Omayma.

Grandfather Kamal worked in wood trading and his business flourished. He developed his skills in trading by watching his father in the fabric store. He used his inheritance and his trading profit to buy a large house in a modern neighborhood in Damascus. He also bought the café in the old city of Damascus.



Safiya's father Ahmad: Three brothers run the café

Kamal married Naziha, who had inherited shares from her family's house and gold from her mother which she used to support her husband's trade. Together they had five children: three sons, Ahmed, Akram and Ali, and two daughters, Amal and Dalal.

After Kamal's death, his wife, sons, and daughters shared the inheritance according to Sharia. The sons bought their sisters' and mothers' shares of the house and the café. The three brothers ran the café together and shared the profit every month.

Safiya's father, Ahmad, owned one third of the café and took on the role of manager. He also bought a house and a car with his father's inheritance. Ahmad married Mufeda and they had three children: two sons, Bassam and Hassan, and one daughter, Safiya.

Safiya's mother Mufeda: Securing inheritance for her unmarried daughter

Sadly, Ahmad developed cancer and before his death he transferred his share of the café, car and house to his wife, Mufeda. He wanted her to be responsible for his properties and the café income, since his children were under eighteen and could not become the appointed legal guardian of those assets. Mufeda continued to manage her share of the café with the shares of her sons. Tragically, her youngest son, Bassam, died young, before he could inherit anything.

Every month, Mufeda shared the profits from the café equally between her and her remaining children, Hassan and Safiya. When Mufeda felt that she was approaching death, she transferred ownership of the car, half of the ownership of the house and her share of the café which she was supposed to inherit from the husband and the dead son, Bassam, to Safiya. She also gave Safia the gold that she had inherited from her mother. She did this because Safiya was not married.

When their mother died, Safiya and Hassan divided the remaining inheritance legally between them. This meant that in addition to the shares that her mother had passed to her before she died, Safiya now inherited part of the other half of the house – bringing her share total to 75 per cent and effectively giving her control. She also inherited more shares in the café.

After many years, Safiya's uncles, Akram and Ali, passed away, and because profits were not as good as before, the family sold the café. Safiya and Hassan took their shares in accordance with their mother's wishes and their cousins divided their shares in their family according to Sharia.



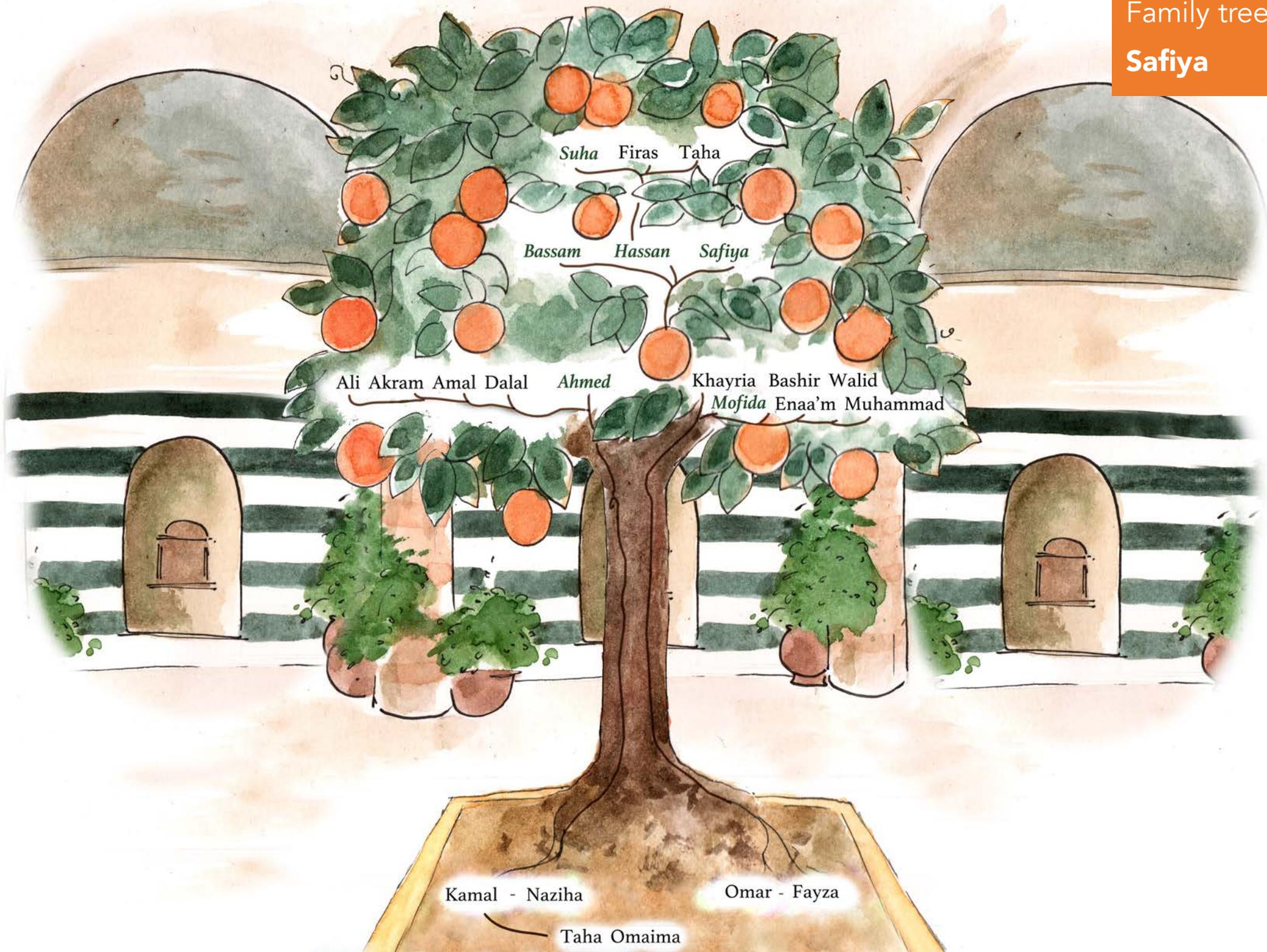
Safiya's share: an exceptional case, but not everyone agrees

This tradition of taking care of unmarried women in the family, while common in Safiya's family, is not common among others. The family took this approach because they were worried about the future of their unmarried daughter. Safiya's parents wanted to ensure she would have a home and source of income. However, Safiya's brother, Hassan, and his daughter, Suha, think that Safiya's inheritance was unfair because it did not follow Sharia rules where women receive half the amount allocated to men.

Suha studied law and works as a lawyer. She thinks her father should have had a greater share of the family inheritance instead of it being divided between his sister and mother. She knows they did this to provide Safiya with a good standard of living, and to preserve her dignity. However, Suha believes that the family already takes care of the future of unmarried women within the provisions under Sharia and Damascene traditions of educating women and protecting their rights. She also thinks that some of the Damascene traditions should be preserved, like the tradition of giving mother's gold to daughters, as this is part of women's inheritance for some Damascene families.

Nevertheless, Hassan kept a good relationship with Safiya as he felt socially responsible for his sister. He has never interfered in her financial matters in order to maintain this peace, even though he has been in a difficult financial situation since the war.





Layla's story of hard work and investment

- inspired by aunt Haleema



Layla and her son Karam fled from their home because of the crisis in Syria and came to live as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in a small village. Layla also has five married daughters who are refugees in different countries. Her story of property inheritance through three generations of her family is a story of women's empowerment, disrupted by war.



Building the family fortune – Layla’s great grandfather

Layla’s great grandfather was a farmer in a village and owned a large area of agricultural land – 1700 donums (170 hectares) – outside of Homs. When he died, his son, Alla’uddin, who was Layla’s grandfather, inherited all his property and built a pottery workshop in the city. Alla’uddin married Roquaya and they had a daughter and two sons – Haleema, Sadiq and Kareem. Kareem is Layla’s father and Sadiq and Haleema are her uncle and aunt.

Aunt Haleema develops the family business

After Roquaya’s sudden death, her daughter Haleema took care of her brothers. When their father also died, Haleema took over the farmland and pottery workshop and developed the family business into a successful brick workshop. Haleema and her brothers decided that Sadiq would move to the village to take care of the agricultural land, Kareem would stay in the brick workshop and Haleema would run the business.

The siblings later shared out the inheritance from their father according to their roles in the different aspects of the family land and businesses. Sadiq took the farmland and Kareem took the brick workshop with the family home. Aunt Haleema received 340 donums of the farmland, a share in the family home and share in the brick workshop. Kareem decided to give his share of the farmland to his brother in exchange for a greater share of the brick workshop and the family home. So Sadiq received 1360 donums of land. The ownership then was transferred as agreed and formally registered.

Aunt Haleema moves in

Aunt Haleema got married and moved out of the family home. But she was unlucky. She couldn't have children and her husband married a second wife. Haleema asked for divorce after twelve years of marriage and came to live with her brother Kareem, Layla's father. Luckily, Haleema's husband divorced her and did not ask for compensation as happens in a khul'a case and so she could keep her property.

Kareem was happy to welcome his sister and after a while built a second floor on his family home so he could leave the ground floor for his sister. As the ground floor was spacious, Kareem invested and turned one of the rooms into a shop for Haleema so she could create her own income. As the years passed, Kareem had five sons, Ayoub, Naji, Jalal, Husam and Emad, and three daughters, Layla, Kawthar and Alia. Haleema remained living in the house as a much-loved aunt.

Before she died, Haleema transferred the ownership of the family house to Kareem, Layla's father, on the condition that she could use it during her lifetime. Kareem bought Haleema's shares in the brick workshop and developed it into a brick factory. After Kareem died, Layla's mother, Layla and her siblings all inherited the house, the brick factory and half of Haleema's lands in rural Homs. Sadiq's children inherited the other half of Haleema's share in the rural lands.





Family conflict

But then the disputes began in Layla's family. Layla's brothers wanted to take the house and factory in Homs city and leave the farmland to the sisters. The sisters refused because the value of the land was less than the value of the city house and the factory. After some time their eldest brother, Naji, returned from Europe and decided to distribute the inheritance in accordance with *Sharia*. This meant that each brother received twice as many shares as their sisters.

Selling the family business

No one was able to buy the factory on their own because the business had grown so much in value over the years. The family decided to sell it and the brothers, sisters and cousins received their share in cash according to *Sharia*. Three of the brothers took the house and gave the two other brothers and three sisters their share of the house value in the form of money or a portion of the land. Each one of the heirs used the inheritance as they wished – some of them sold their land, while others kept it.

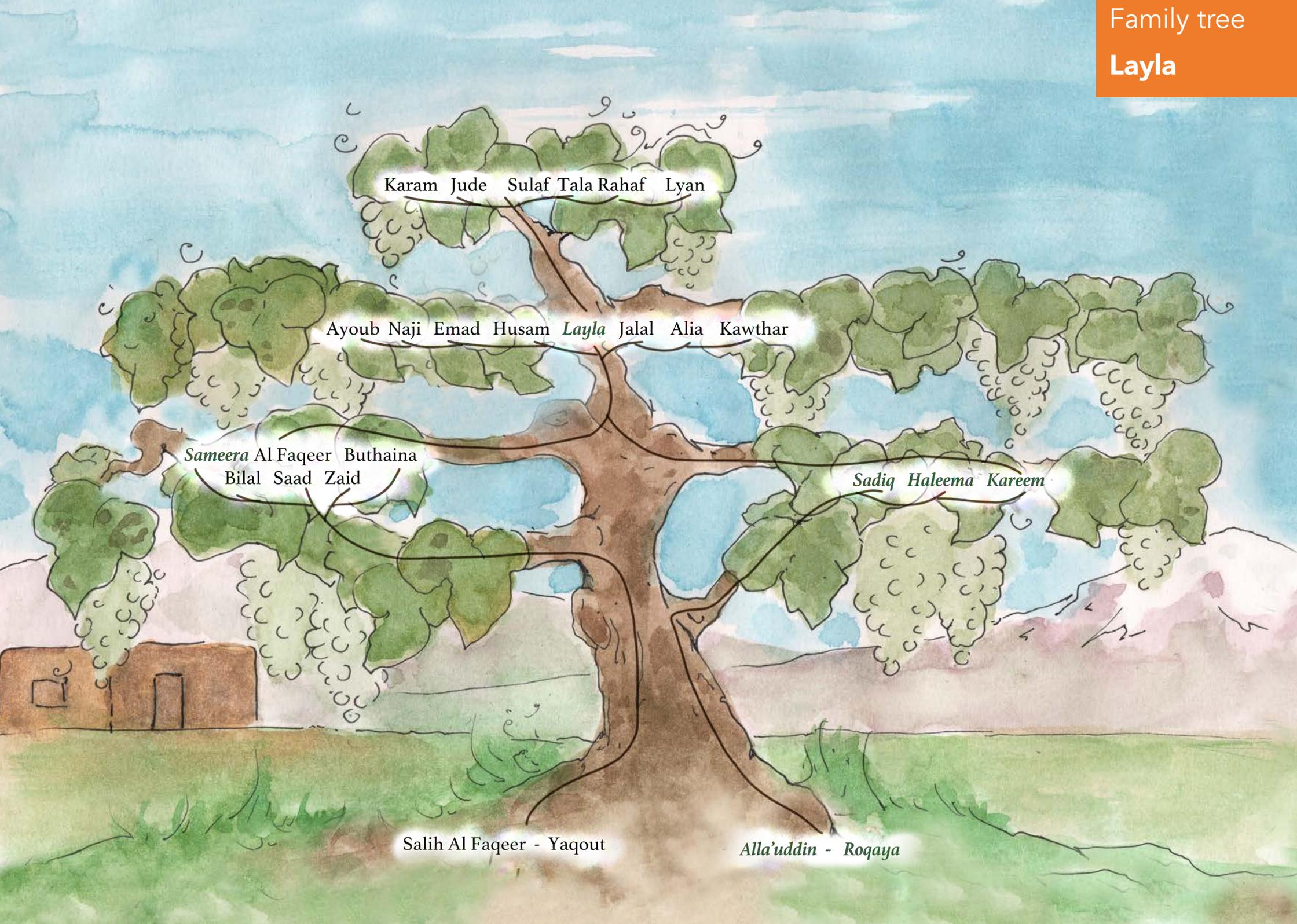
Left behind: Layla dreams of property for her children

Layla sold her share of the lands and used the money to buy a house in the city. She used the rest of the money as a first installment in a subsidised housing program to purchase another house in Homs. She rented out the house she bought in the city to pay the remaining installments. She also bought a library and her husband had a store.

However in 2012 everyone fled from Homs, leaving behind all of their properties, which are now either damaged or looted. Now in displacement, Layla thinks about her five daughters and son. She had hopes for each of her children to own a property to help support them in the future.

Still, Layla hopes to go back one day, and the story of her father, uncle and aunt Haleema reminds her how strength, solidarity and family support can survive time and change.





Karam Jude Sulaf Tala Rahaf Lyan

Ayoub Naji Emad Husam *Layla* Jalal Alia Kawthar

Sameera Al Faqeer Buthaina
Bilal Saad Zaid

Sadiq *Haleema* *Kareem*

Salih Al Faqeer - Yaqout

Alla'uddin - *Roqaya*

Razan's story

- not a common decision in the past



This story begins with Razan's paternal grandmother and grandfather – Saleema and Hamza. They lived in the village with their family and Hamza's first wife, Zainab, and their children Hayfa'a and Mustafa. When Hayfa'a was old enough to marry, her family did not approve of the man she loved, Rakan, so Hayfa'a and Rakan eloped. Hamza felt great shame over this and blamed Hayfa'a's mother, Zainab. Hamza left Zainab and he and Saleema moved to another area.

A foreigner in his own Land: Razan's grandfather and father

In the new village, Grandfather Hamza and Grandmother Saleema had three daughters, Amina, Sua'ad and Sukaina, and three sons, Basheer, Sami and Adnan, Razan's father. At that time there was an agricultural reform by the government involving land redistribution. Hamza was given 15 hectares of land (150 *donum*) by the government with the help of his friend who was well connected with the *mukhtar* in the village. In 1962, however, the family lost their Syrian citizenship and became *ajnabi*, which is a term used to describe a group of stateless Kurds and which literally means 'foreigner'. This was because they hadn't registered during a special census. After becoming stateless the family found it hard to get education, employment and other services. In 2011 the Syrian government issued a decree allowing *ajnabi* Kurds to apply for Syrian nationality, which the family applied for and were granted.

When Hamza died his fifteen hectares of land were divided equally between his sons with Saleema, including Razan's father Adnan. Zainab and her children were cut out of the family inheritance. Saleema had also acquired five hectares of land during her lifetime and her sons also divided this between themselves when she died. Razan does not know how her paternal aunts – Saleema's daughters – felt about this division of land, but she knows that although women have the ability to claim their rights under *Sharia*, traditions and customs often stands in the way.





We need our brothers and husbands: Razan's own family

Razan's father Adnan, and her mother, Hajar, had seven daughters, including Razan, and three sons. When her father Adnan died, her brothers divided his seven hectares of land between themselves – the sisters did not receive any inheritance. Her mother and her unmarried sisters live with their youngest brother in their family home and can stay there until they marry.

Daughters growing stronger: Razan's mother, Hajar

Razan's mother, Hajar, also did not inherit any property from her family. Hajar's father, Omran, was a farmer who owned thirty hectares of land and was considered one of the wealthiest landowners in the area. He had two wives – Hafsa, with whom he had one son and one daughter, and Sarah, with whom he had four sons, Mohamed, Omar, Adbulrahman and Abulkareem, and two daughters, Samira and Razan's Mother, Hajar.

Sarah helped Omran to farm the land and tend to their sheep. Their land was not registered because they lived close to the border and there are restrictions on the registration of borderlands. When Omran died, his son Mohamed managed the land and lived in the family home. When Sarah died, the sons divided the land among themselves, but left out their sisters, Hajar, Razan's mother and Samira. Hajar and Samira were not happy about this but felt there was little they could do.

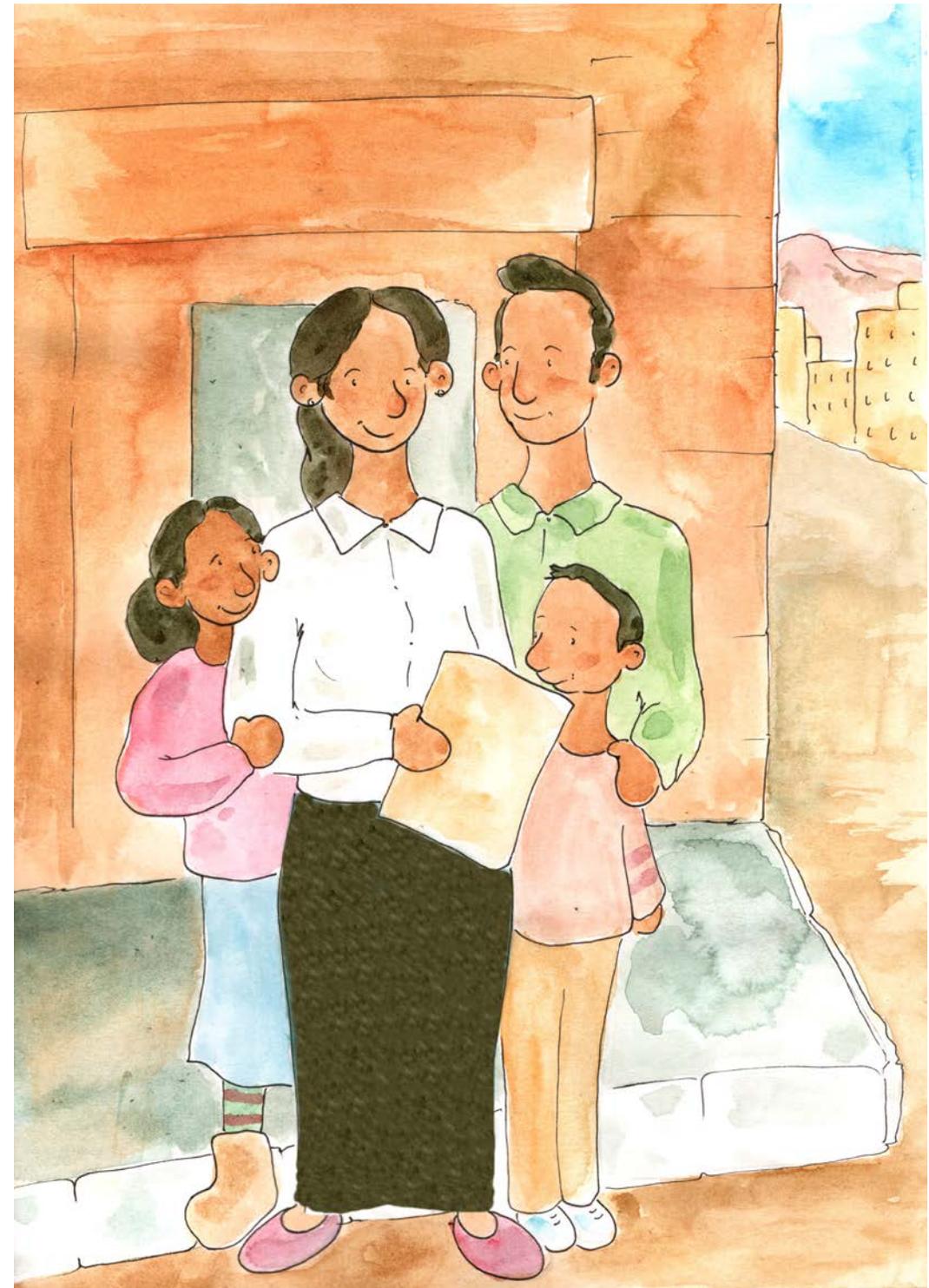
It is a common tradition in the region that women do not inherit any property such as land or buildings. Often instead, families use the proceeds from farming to provide female family members with something. These traditions and customs are so common that they have more influence than the law.

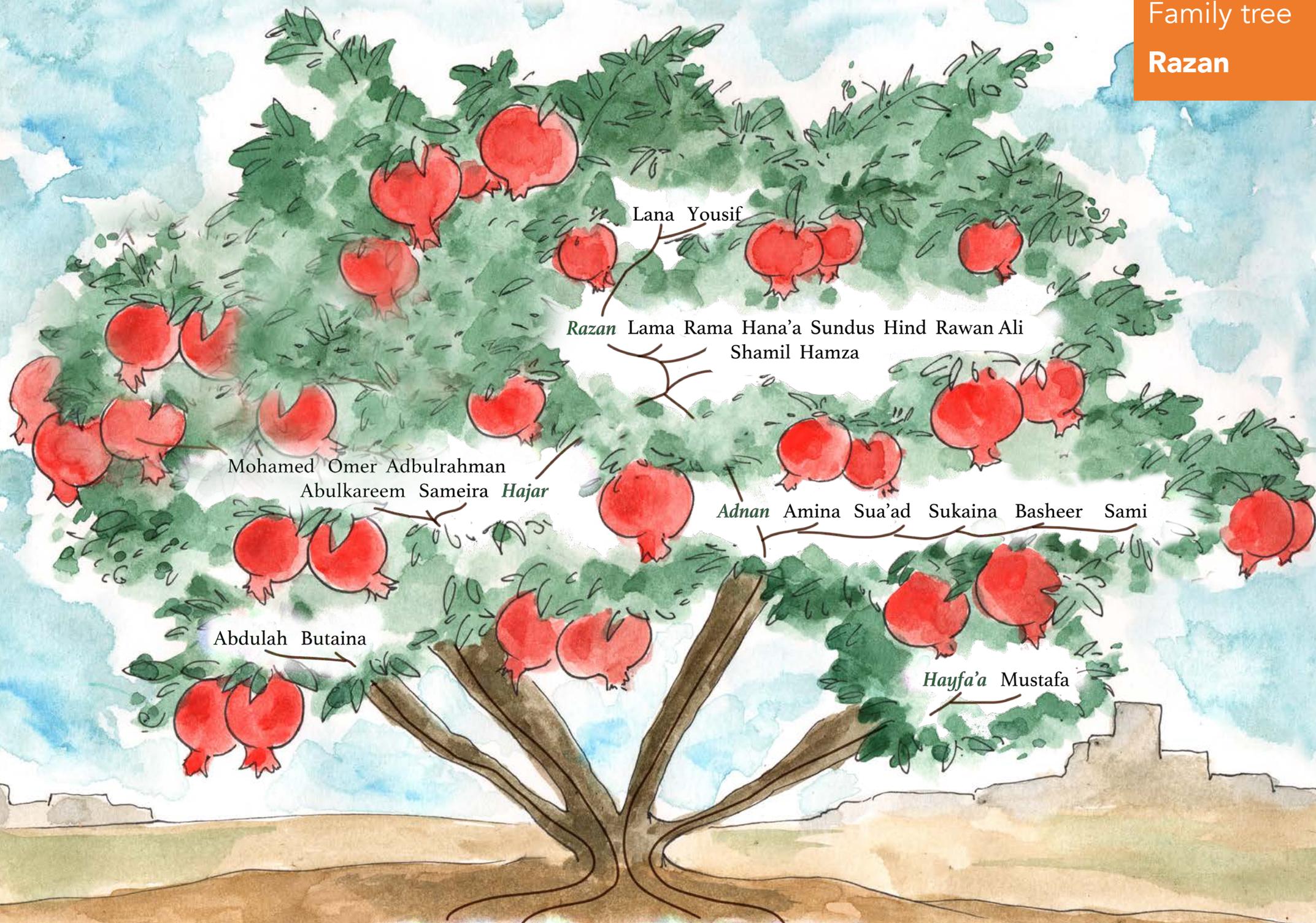


Razan tells us that tradition says a husband has responsibilities to earn a living for his wife and she is happy that her brothers will take everything because she believes that when her sisters want their share, her brothers will immediately provide them.

Razan does not want this for her children, however. She says she will ensure that both her daughters and sons inherit equal shares of her property. Razan owns a house in her name and an office that her husband registered in her name. This was a joint decision to protect Razan's property rights. Razan and her husband feared that should something happen to her husband, his family would try to take everything, even from the children. Razan is in a different position to many women in previous generations: She is a lawyer and she knows how to protect her rights and she is not afraid to.

Razan feels that attitudes are evolving more quickly now given the changes in Syria as a result of the crisis. She believes the next generation of women in her family will begin to claim their rights.





Aisha's story

- taking courage from her grandfather

Three houses, three wives: Aisha's mother, Mariam

Aisha's mother, Mariam, had twenty-three brothers and sisters because her father, Abdirahman, married three times.

Abdirahman was a farmer in a village and a *sheikh*¹ of a local tribe when he married Mariam's mother (Aisha's grandmother), Falak, from the Aleppo countryside. Together they had four sons and seven daughters. Abdirahman owned 200 hectares², a portion of which was taken by the Syrian government for redistribution amongst farmers as part of the agricultural reform that was happening at the time.

Abdirahman built houses for each of his three wives: Halima, Khadija and Falak in the compound where they lived. He also built houses for his sons except for three of them – the youngest sons of each wife.

When Abdirahman died, his land was divided equally between his sons. The youngest son of each wife inherited his mother's house. But neither Abdirahman's wives nor his daughters inherited anything. They were allowed to stay in the houses until they were married or died, but none of the women in the family had any rights over the properties which now belonged to Abdirahman's sons.

¹A leader of tribe or a branch of it (not religious).

²200 hundred hectares equal 2000 *Donum*.



Although they protested against this and Aisha spoke to her uncles citing the Quran and what it says about the rights of women, the family's high status in the tribe meant that people considered it shameful for women to discuss their right to inherit land. Aisha's uncles explained that some of Abdirahman's daughters had married outside of the family and village, which would mean the land would be inherited by strangers and they did not want that, even if these strangers were from the same tribe.

Only Abdullah, one of Halima's sons, spoke out. He had studied law and worked as a judge and supported compliance with the law. He told his brothers that he was going to provide his sisters with their rightful share of the properties their father had left to their brothers. However, his brothers did not agree, and to this day, Abdirahman's land remains registered in his sons' names.



Standing up for our rights: Aisha's father, Abdulatif

Abdulatif was Aisha's father. Her paternal grandfather Abbas married Layla. They had two daughters and four sons – including Abdulatif – and lived together in Abbas' village. Abbas was a farmer and owned seventeen hectares of land. He farmed sheep and worked the land. He owned a house in the village where he lived his whole life and another in a nearby town.

Beyond these seventeen hectares, Abbas bought an additional four hectares close to his land which was not officially registered in his name. Even though the transfer of ownership had not been registered when he bought the land, there were no problems while the previous landowner, Mohamed, was alive. But after his death Mohamed's son started a dispute, claiming that the land was his. One day, Mohamed's son brought armed men to the land and started cultivating the additional four hectares.

When they heard about this, Aisha's father Abdulatif and three of his brothers, Yousef, Falah and Suleiman, went with sticks and guns to defend their father's land. The armed men killed Yousef and injured both Abdulatif and Suleiman. Sadly, Abdulatif later died.

Aisha's uncles, Suleiman and Falah, disputed the land ownership in a court in Aleppo but ended up signing a settlement agreement giving up their claim to the disputed four hectares of land. As compensation for the deaths of Aisha's family members, the settlement granted twenty hectares of land to the family, leaving a total of thirty-seven hectares to be divided when Abbas died.



According to custom, this land would be left to the surviving sons of the family. However, before he died, Abbas was asked by Yousef's wife to provide for her daughters who no longer had a father. Saddened by the loss of his sons, Abbas went against tradition and registered five hectares in the names of Yousef's children and five hectares in the names of Abdulatif's daughters.

Aisha reflects on how her father and uncle had been killed because her grandfather had not registered his land. She inherited one hectare of this land and knows where this land is, how to get there and even what she could grow there, but she cannot access it. She is forbidden from going there by her uncle, Suleiman and her mother's new husband Khalid, who is the son of her deceased uncle Falah. When Aisha and her five sisters turned eighteen, Khalid expected them to hand over their land to him, but they refused.

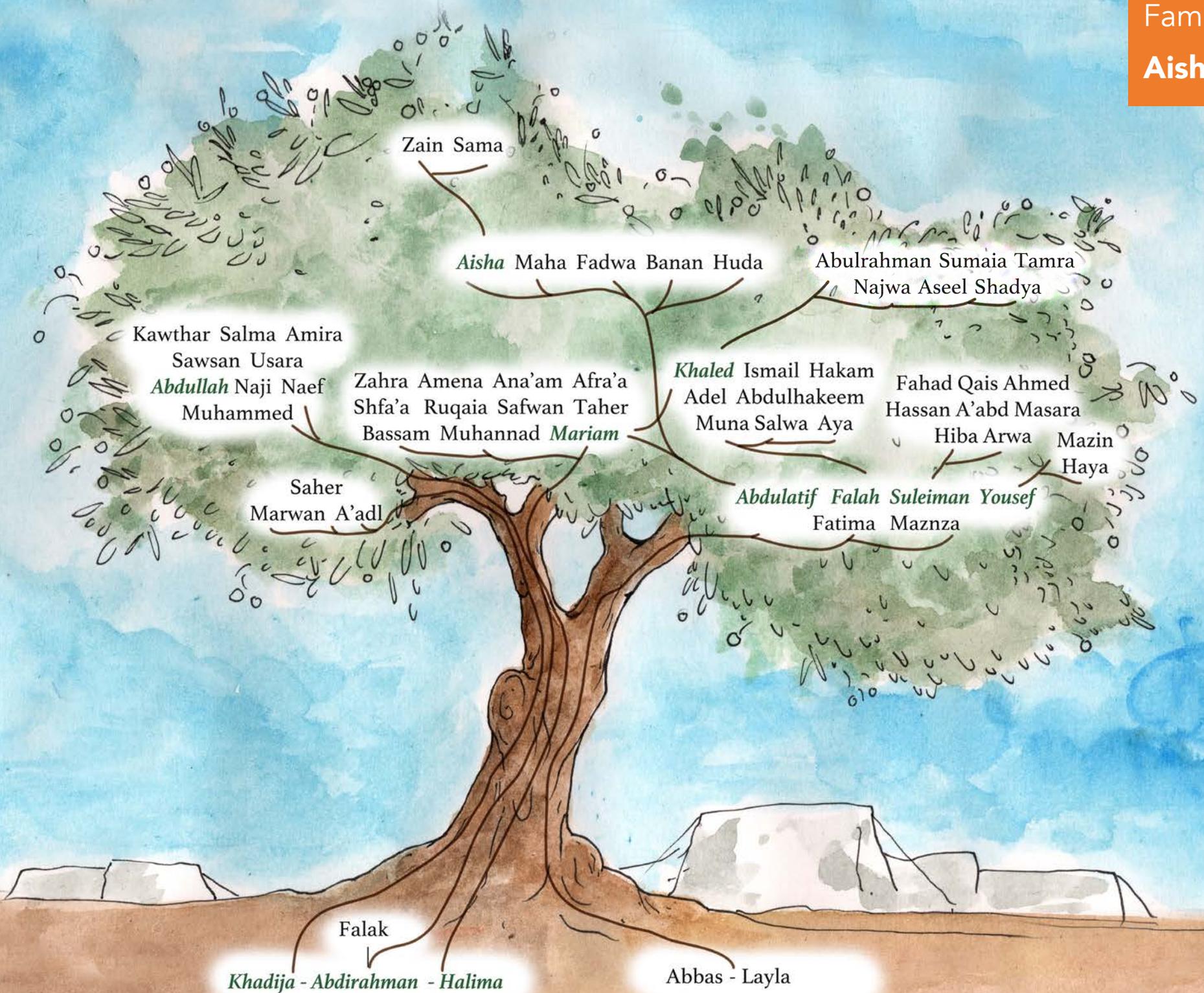
Aisha and her sisters are now also seeking their share of their grandfather Abbas' house in the town. They began a court case which is still ongoing as their uncles do not wish to give the women in the family their share. Aisha and her sisters succeeded in formally registering her grandfather's death and obtaining an inheritance deed through a Government of Syria Sharia court. Following this, Aisha filed the inheritance deed in the land registry. Through the civil court, she was also able to register that this property is under dispute. This means that potential buyers will be warned that there is an unresolved dispute over the house.





As claiming their rights is considered shameful for women of Aisha's tribe, Aisha and her sisters have faced hostility from both male and female family members. Aisha's mother is in a difficult position because her husband, Khalid, forbids her from visiting her daughters. Aisha and her sisters have not been allowed to talk about inheritance in front of their stepfather and have been treated badly for taking action to claim their rights. Aisha and her sisters agreed between themselves that Aisha would take the blame for pursuing her rights through the court so that her sisters can have contact with their mother. Khalid has threatened to divorce their mother if Aisha and her sisters do not give up their claims. He has also threatened Aisha's husband, who supports Aisha because he comes from a family which respects women's rights.

Aisha carries blame for all of this and although she feels sad, she also feels strongly that it is important that she and her sisters try to claim their rights. She misses her mother but she knows she cannot see her. Aisha draws courage from her father who did not give up his rights. Her study of law, her legal colleagues and her work with women's associations encourages her to claim the rights she sees other women like her claiming every day.



Khadija - Abdirahman - Halima

Abbas - Layla

Azhaar's story

- fighting for her rights

Azhaar is from Hama. It has been six years since she first fled the war that has ravaged her country.

Azhaar hasn't inherited any property from her father and mother because they are still alive. In her hometown real estate is never passed to children before their parent's death. Azhaar believes that parents should distribute inheritance when they are alive to guarantee that both sons and daughters receive their rights. She says such things are practiced in the city, but not the village, where customs and traditions prevail. Azhaar believes a woman should receive her share of inheritance in accordance with Sharia.

Azhaar's mother: murada cash shares instead of land and property

Azhaar's mother received a cash share of Azhaar's grandfather's land and gave the money to Azhaar and her sisters. When Azhaar asked her brothers if she could build on their father's land in the future, they all responded with the same solution: they would offer her a cash share, because they already planned to build on the land and because it was expected that Azhaar's husband would buy land for her elsewhere. It shocked Azhaar that her brothers would treat her in this way.

According to their traditions, sons are prioritised for inheritance because they are responsible for providing a living for their family. The assumption is that the woman has no responsibilities and will instead become the responsibility of her husband. instead become the responsibility of her husband.



Mahr: the dower that she gave away

When Azhaar married she received 200,000 Syrian pounds as an advance dower. It was agreed that she would also receive 200,000 Syrian pounds as a deferred dower from her husband and his family. The use of dower is usually governed by traditions and customs and in Azhaar's village they refer to the 'gold rule'; meaning that the dower is used to buy gold for the bride.

As her husband's financial situation was not good when they married, Azhaar sold most of the gold she had bought with the dower to help him open a clothing store. They worked together in the store and although they shared living expenses, Azhaar's husband never bought her more gold because he believed that "the richer the woman is, the stronger she becomes" and then she is hard to deal with.

Azhaar also sold her gold to buy a house with her husband. She spent most of her dower and her savings on the house and store she left behind. Looking back, Azhaar regrets selling all of her dower gold to pay for their house, furniture and her husband's shop, because all of this was in her husband's name. Even worse, after they fled from the fighting they lost the shop and all properties. If she could go back in time, she says, she would ask to register the property in their names together.



Fighting for her rights in displacement

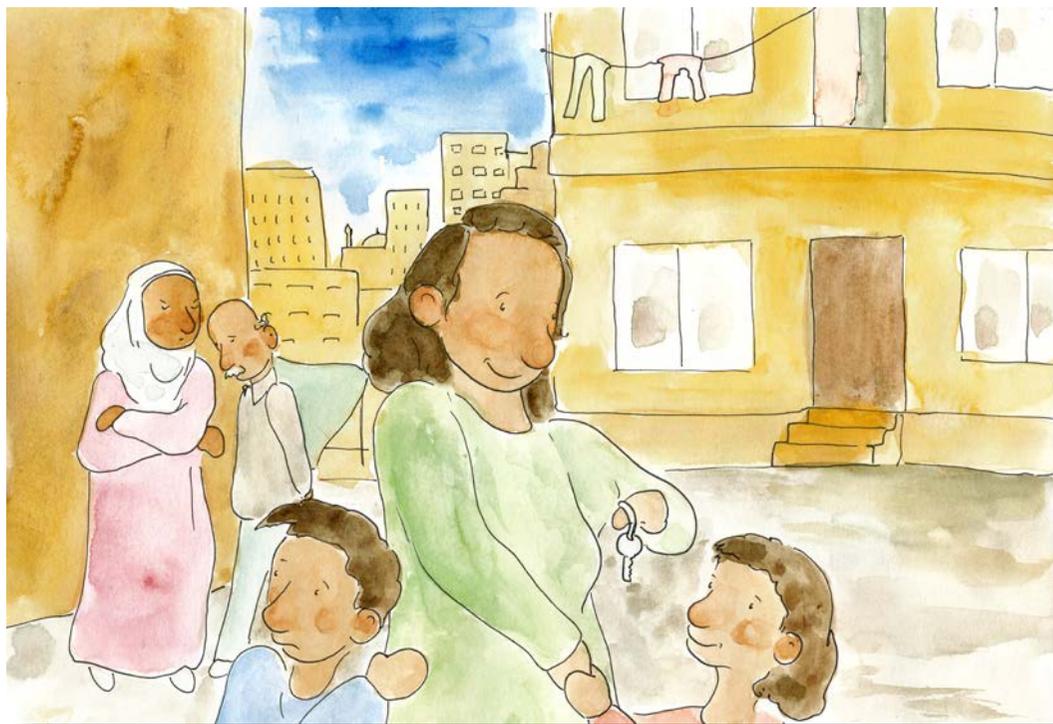
Azhaar has also faced challenges since she has been living in displacement. Once she experienced a dispute when her neighbors encroached on her land border by two meters and started building. The matter was resolved with the support of a sheikh and the disputing parties agreed to amend the border by building fences. Fortunately there was no violence.



The stigma of divorce

Married life became even more difficult in displacement and problems arose between Azhaar and her husband. She couldn't continue her life with him and decided to leave. To gain her divorce, Azhaar was forced to give up the deferred dower as well as her investment in the marital house and furniture. Tragically, she even had to relinquish custody of her children. She had to do this to gain her freedom. Her children lived with her until the last phase of divorce, the *mukhala'ah*, when she had to give them up to her husband because he threatened to kill some of her family. She had no choice but to give up her right to bring up her children.

However, when her divorce was granted, Azhaar filed a lawsuit against her husband and claimed her children back. "Women should never be ashamed of their rights," Azhaar told us. She says women should be aware of what might happen to them in the future. She regrets every right she gave up because she believes these were also her children's rights.



After Azhaar's divorced, her situation changed. She worked as a teacher for four years to support her children and save money to buy a house for them. "Displacement is exhausting," she told us, moving from one house to another and one village to another. When she could finally afford to buy a house for her children, she faced judgement by a society that did not look favourably on divorce. According to some people it was shameful for a woman to own property.

"How is she able to live alone?" some asked, despite Azhaar needing a safe home for her family. As Azhaar was in the *idda*, a 'period of waiting' that comes after divorce, she faced judgement from her community. Even still, she bought a house and, with the help of a lawyer, registered it in her name in the land registry.

Knowing her rights: Women are aware of their rights, but also of tradition

Azhaar knows what her housing, land and property rights are. It is the reality that must be changed, not the awareness of rights, she argues. Azhaar observes that in an environment where “the strongest is the most deserving” and the “strong prey on the weak”, customs and traditions can rule people more than the law and reality. For example, Azhaar knew she was entitled to *nafaka* following her divorce – alimony from her husband for herself and her children – but she chose not to pursue it because the social consequences of doing so would further harm her and her children. This is especially difficult in situations of *mukhala’a*, which is when divorce is requested by the wife

Home ownership brings stability after displacement

Azhaar now feels secure because she owns a house in her own name following her divorce. She lives peacefully with her daughter and son, after all she has been through.

To Azhaar, home ownership means documents she can hold in her hands which are registered in her name. These documents prove her ownership of the house and prevent anyone from interfering in her rights. Azhaar told us that to have a house registered under her name meant that she doesn’t fear being evicted by landlords or going through the disruption of more displacement. Ownership brings stability, confidence and a decent life for her and her children. When she bought the house, she searched for it by herself, asked for it in real estate offices, compared prices, consulted many experts and studied every step carefully before taking the final decision. Now she knows it is fully hers.

Azhaar says she was able to stand up for herself, against the prejudice towards divorced women, by protecting her rights and her children’s rights. Azhaar believes she convinced many people that women are strong by claiming her rights and defending them against her husband and community.





A place to call home

This anthology contains five true stories told by Syrian women throughout 2019 and 2020 as part of NRC and UNDP's work on women's Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights in Syria. These stories aim to bring women's experiences to light through their own voices, as they talk about their struggle to claim their property rights.



NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL

