

**Syrian conflict exacts heavy toll on women**  
**By Tracey Shelton, GlobalPost**  
**4 April 2013**

IDLIB PROVINCE, Northwest Syria — A group of young women sits huddled around a diesel heater sipping tea in a stone cottage in the village of Seyjar. Outside, their children use stick guns to play their favorite game of rebel fighters.

Just like mothers anywhere, they chat about their families and cooking — until a series of distant thuds stops the conversation: the sound of explosions. The mood suddenly tense, some whisper under their breath. “God is greatest” and “God protect us.” Others resume their discussion without a flinch.

An older woman sits in the corner, tears slowly rolling down her cheeks. Although everyone here has reasons to cry, only she succumbs today.

Another woman explains that women are suffering most from Syria’s war.

“Our husbands are always gone. We must deal with everything alone,” says Muna Basham, a 30-year-old primary school teacher and mother of four. “With no electricity, our work at home has become so hard. We must wash by hand and cook by fire. We must take care of children who have become obsessed by war. We’re not used to these things.”

Across the country, tens of thousands of women have lost their children, husbands, homes and lives. Thousands more live in tents amid the mud and misery of border camps.

But as the death toll approaches 90,000 by some counts and the refugee crisis soars past a million, the battle for Syria is rippling far beyond the visible tragedies. Already entering its third year, the conflict is affecting every Syrian.

As the elderly woman stares expressionless at an empty wall, a round of coffee restores others to their happy chatter.

Half the women have fled their homes because of fighting or heavy shelling in their own villages. They’ve lived crowded in the small homes of relatives or friends for many months.

One has lost her house and all her possessions in an airstrike. The others dread they will return to find the same of their own homes.

One of the women miscarried her second child six weeks ago, a victim of the constant fear and harsh conditions. She’s still struggling to overcome her loss. Physically, too, she remains weak and suffers from untreated complications.

In the corner, two toddlers stare at a television screen showing the death and destruction playing out across their homeland.

“My children’s favorite activity is to follow the free fighters around collecting bullet casings,” Basham says at another meeting at her home in the village of Zaharaa.



An internally displaced woman and child reflected in a puddle of water along the Turkish border in Idlib Province. Many women say they've lost their husbands' support.

“They were always fighting to watch cartoons before,” she adds. “Now none of them watch cartoons anymore, all they want to see is the news channels with videos of the fighting.”

Many women in the villages of Idlib Province say life before the conflict, which revolved around children and meal preparation, was a happy time. They reminisce about mornings getting the children ready for school, afternoons of tea with neighbors and evenings spent with their husbands.

These days, most schools are closed and the men often eat and sleep at rebel bases.

Basham repeats that the women have lost their husbands’ support. “Mine is always involved in civil matters. Others are off fighting. Some husbands are based in different areas or have been killed.”

Several days later, the women of Seyjar gather again, this time in the home shared by Rehib, her two sisters and their seven children. The women are married to three brothers and lived in different villages before the revolution. Now they’re all crammed into one small house.

“My house is right near the government checkpoint facing the snipers,” Rehib says in a crowded room of 10 women and dozens of children. “I slept in the kitchen with my three daughters for two months before we had to come here because that was the only safe room.”

This time, the gathering isn’t as cheerful. The men are about to stage an attack on a government position just a few miles away. When the sounds of battle begin, it’s Ahad, a 28-year-old mother of four, who bursts into tears.

“I was so afraid for my husband,” she explained later. “That’s why we all come here when there’s fighting. The explosions aren’t so loud from here.”

The women spend several nervous hours praying and fretting. Soon after fighting stops, one of the fighters arrives with news of victory. Two men have been killed and an older man in the village died of a heart attack, but the women’s husbands all survived unscathed.

There’s a cry of “Allahu Akbar!” — “God is great!” — but happiness soon turns to unease as they discuss the inevitability of a retaliation by government forces.

“Tomorrow will be very dangerous for us all,” Rehib says.

Sure enough, the bombardment starts just after midnight, as the women prepare to huddle together for the night. Ground-to-ground missiles begin exploding around the village.

The women rush their babies into a small, dark back room, the only one built into the mountainside that offers the best protection from the missiles. Some of the older children, sleeping peacefully through the sound, have to be woken to be moved.

After an hour, the missiles stop and the women finally settle in for the night in the uneasy knowledge that although this battle has ended, the war for Syria is far from over.