



The Tahrir Institute  
for Middle East Policy

in partnership with News Deeply

# SYRIA'S WOMEN: POLICIES & PERSPECTIVES

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN September 5, 2017

### Summary

- The use of rape in Syria has become a widespread tactic used by multiple actors as a tool to punish women and discourage dissent. The United Nations treated **38,000** victims in 2013.
- In refugee camps, women face an **increasing** risk of sexual and domestic violence, as well as sexual exploitation in exchange for essential goods and services.
- Rape and other forms of violence against women not only bring devastating physical and psychological harm to individuals, but can destroy important family and social units, with repercussions for years to come.

### Overall Situation

The Syrian government was reportedly responsible for **62 percent** of rapes between 2011 and 2015, while the Islamic State “owns” **thousands** of Yazidi women and gifts Syrian girls as brides to its militants. The **U.N.** first declared that rape was being used as a weapon of war in Syria in 2012, and has since **condemned** sexual violence multiple times, blaming both the Syrian government and Islamic State forces.

**Fear of rape** is often cited by female refugees as a primary reason for their flight from Syria, yet sexual violence and **sex trafficking** remain issues within refugee camps and host countries. In one camp, **69 percent** of women were reported to live in dwellings without adequate locks and 46 percent felt unsafe living within the camp. Both sexual assault and domestic violence are reportedly on the rise, but **social stigmas** related to sexual assault prevent many women from reporting it.

## Background

A significant amount of legislation in Syria either directly facilitates sexual violence against women or downplays its criminal nature: Marital rape is not recognized in Syrian law, and victims of rape are often pressured into [marrying their rapist](#) to shield themselves from dishonor. [Honor killings](#) were only made illegal in 2009, with a minimum prison sentence of just two years and a maximum of seven.

The Syrian government is a major [perpetrator](#) of sexual violence against both men and women, reportedly responsible for 62 percent of rapes between 2011 and 2015; the pro-Baathist armed militias, or *shabiha*, were said to be responsible for another 23 percent. In interviews, multiple victims recounted that their attackers used links to opposition parties or protests as justification for the assaults.

Other women report being abducted, detained, and raped in front of male relatives as [blackmail](#). As of 2015, 34 percent of reported rapes occurred while victims were in [detention](#), while 23 percent took place during home raids and 15 percent during abductions. [Government forces have reportedly](#) abducted women from checkpoints, raped them, and returned them to their families, seeking to identify them as victims of rape and expose them to the social stigma associated with it. Additionally, women report being arbitrarily arrested and detained for use in negotiations and [prisoner exchanges](#).

While exact figures are unavailable, [honor killings](#) are [reportedly](#) increasing in frequency in Syria, and have been reported in [refugee communities](#) as well. In 2009, prior to the outbreak of the current conflict, the Syrian Women Observatory estimated that about 200 such killings took place in the country each year. To protect their daughters, many families are arranging for them to marry earlier; [child marriage](#) among refugees increased by 20 percent between 2011 and 2014, and though there is limited data on the issue within Syria, girls there are likely facing similar situations.

The Islamic State uses an organized system of sexual slavery and forced marriage to [attract fighters](#) and to reward their militants. Minority women are bought and sold to fighters in “[slave bazaars](#),” and rape is so frequent that most are put on consistent [birth control](#) regimens. Syrian girls are also gifted as brides to Islamic State members, and as our partners at [News Deeply](#) report, these marriages are often driven by fear and accompanied by sexual, physical, and psychological abuse. [Interviews](#) with women who have escaped indicate that rape and torture are also used against Sunni Arab women deemed apostates because of their actions or those of their family members.

The threat of rape and other forms of sexual violence are cited by refugee women and girls as a [primary factor](#) in their decision to flee Syria, but the same issues remain pervasive within the camps. In many camps, sleeping areas are not gender-segregated, and women report [fears](#) of being groped or assaulted in their sleep. Aid workers say that refugee women are loath to admit that they have been assaulted, but humanitarian organization [Caritas Lebanon](#) reports that more than half of the women who seek its services have been raped. Domestic violence is also on the [rise](#), which aid workers attribute in part to the frustration associated with the cramped quarters and high levels of unemployment within the camps.

Women who are widowed, divorced, or otherwise separated from their husbands also reported [sexual harassment](#) from employers, landlords, and others. Nearly [35 percent](#) of Syrian refugees live in female-headed households, and on average these families have incomes that are 15-32 percent lower than male-headed households, leaving women vulnerable to sexual exploitation in exchange for necessities. Women are sometimes [lured](#) into forced prostitution under the guise of employment.

## Policy Implications and Challenges

Syria ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2003, and the U.N. Security Council has condemned the gender-based violence that accompanies war through numerous resolutions and calls to action, yet sexual violence continues to plague Syria. Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security was heralded as a landmark resolution, but has failed to address the structural inequalities that put women at greater risk during conflict, and fundamentally lacks necessary enforcement mechanisms. Additionally, as discussed by our partners at News Deeply, agreements such as the 2015 refugee deal between the European Union and Turkey have negatively impacted refugee communities in general, but women and girls in particular, as refugees have been stranded in ill-equipped camps that lack adequate privacy and protection.

Rape and other forms of violence against women can be devastating for individuals and pervasively undermine peace and development, tearing apart essential familial and societal structures and reinforcing harmful perceptions of women as commodities. While the international community has recognized the extent of Syria's sexual violence crisis—the 2016 U.S. Trafficking in Persons report placed Syria into Tier 3, which indicates that a government “does not fully meet the minimum standards and are not making significant efforts to do so”—it has failed to establish meaningful institutions to protect women and girls or provide aid to victims. Prevention of gender-based violence and provision of aid to victims must be actively pursued and protected through enforceable measures as an integral aspect of Syrian recovery and reconstruction.



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