

Documenting a crime “worse than death”

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During six months of documenting the sexual violence committed by Syrian army and militias, [Marie Forestier](#) discovered that the power of stigma and feelings of helplessness prevented many survivors from speaking. However, as crimes committed by ISIS continue to capture attention whereas those committed by pro-regime forces are under-reported, some women gathered the strength to talk about the abuse they had endured.

“Rape is worse than death. I’m more afraid of rape for my wife or my daughter than of death”, a man from Homs, central Syria, told me last May at a coffee shop in the Turkish border town of Gaziantep. He explained to me that in 2012, he decided to move to a rebel-controlled area of the city of Homs, where he and his family ran the risk of being killed by shelling but that was free from pro-regime forces. To him, this was more bearable than staying in a safer neighbourhood, where pro-regime forces randomly arrested or kidnapped women and in the worst cases raped them. This summarises in the most compelling way the attitude towards rape in Syrian society. From a conservative perspective, it is better for a woman to be dead than raped.

Traditionally, in conservative Syrian communities, the honour of the family is on its women’s shoulders. When a woman is dishonoured – and having a sexual relation, whether forced or not, outside of marriage is considered a deep dishonour by conservative Syrian families – the whole family is dishonoured.

I have been documenting sexual violence, especially [rapes](#), committed by pro-regime forces in the Syrian conflict these past six months, and it has proved extraordinarily challenging. Needless to say, in any country, documenting sexual violence is sensitive and difficult. There is indeed no culture in which women easily admit this kind of abuse. I have previously collected testimonies of survivors of sexual violence in regions with traditional cultures. Yet, some conservative aspects of Syrian culture and the context of a protracted conflict add additional layers of complexity.

First of all, in predominantly conservative Muslim communities, such as the ones to which most Syrian survivors belong, the stigma attached to sexual violence prevents women from coming forward. I spoke to a gynaecologist working in a public hospital in a contested town of central Syria. In 2012-2013, she treated several women who had obviously been raped, either in detention centres or during military operations. None of them came to seek treatment for health issues related to rape, but for other illnesses. And despite physical marks or wounds, not a single one admitted having been raped to the gynaecologist, during their one on one consultations behind the closed doors of the hospitals.

Speaking out might entail serious consequence for Syrian women, including losing their honour for the most conservative ones. I heard multiple stories of former detainees who were rejected by their families – either their parents or their husbands- after being released, on the mere suspicion that they had been abused in detention. This is what happened to Maryam,* who was arrested in Damascus because she was an activist. Her parents heard rumours that some detainees had been raped in the prison where her daughter was held. After her release, they refused to let Maryam come back home. She was obliged to live with a cousin. “It’s like the whole society rejected me,” Maryam said. Social pressure and the shame associated with detention have had more dire consequences for women. Facing rejection and humiliating judgments, several women eventually committed suicide.

Cultural taboo is not the only hurdle preventing women from testifying. Even though time has passed and Syrian people have spoken more critically about the regime over the past years, fear remains entrenched. Among Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, not only survivors but witnesses as well, are extremely scared to speak out. Most of them are afraid to be noticed by the powerful Lebanese or Syrian *mukhabarat*, the intelligence services, if they speak against the Syrian regime. In addition, many Syrian’s legal status is in limbo because the renewal of residency permits has been extremely difficult this past year. [Syrians fear being arrested](#) since the Lebanese army

has conducted raids in refugee camps, arresting refugees without proper permits. This context leads Syrians living in Lebanon to adopt a low profile and not take the chance of talking to outsiders.

In addition, the timing of the Syrian crisis and the recent massive exodus of Syrians to Europe have also seriously hampered my research. Among previously identified survivors, many have left Syria's neighbouring countries, and they often changed their phone numbers. In many cases, women who remained reachable have started a new life; some got married and don't want to look back at the ordeal they went through several years ago in Syria. Besides, it has been difficult to identify survivors in Europe, probably because communities are smaller, more spread out, and more isolated.

Finally, the current political stalemate and the immense feeling of hopelessness and abandonment don't give Syrians any incentive to come forward and to speak. "What is the benefit of talking?" is probably the sentence I've heard the most frequently over the past months. At the individual level, Syrian people living outside of camps don't receive much humanitarian help or assistance. And this is their primary preoccupation, not speaking out for their rights. Many Syrians have been interviewed by journalists, international organisations, or researchers and haven't felt any positive impact on their lives.

At the national and international level, many Syrians believe that the international community at best doesn't care about their fate, or at worst has betrayed them. According to them, if [the August 2013 chemical attack](#) in rural Damascus, or the release of the so-called '[Caesar report](#)' with the [pictures](#) of thousands of tortured-to-death prisoners didn't trigger any action, why bother? Why would another report catch attention? This is probably the most difficult objection to answer, as a researcher. Last but not least, victims have limited expectations in terms of justice, since they come from a country where justice doesn't mean much. In Assad's Syria, perpetrators have not been held accountable.

So, how to overcome these tremendous obstacles?

Most of the women who agreed to talk to me, thanks to an introduction from dedicated activists and doctors, were convinced by the necessity to shed light on the crimes committed by the pro-regime side. Many are angry about the disproportionate attention paid to the crimes committed by ISIS. Others found it easier to reveal their ordeal to a foreigner, from a different cultural background. "I know you won't judge me," a young broken woman told me. I was the first person she had told about her abuses. And in the end, fortunately, some believe in the need for testifying and the importance of bringing attention to the crimes of the regime. All felt comfort in the fact that someone was documenting the crimes they suffered from. The courageous women I talked to believe that, even if shame lingers, silence must end.

** Name has been changed for security reasons*

About the author



Marie Forestier [@MarieForestier](#) is a Visiting Fellow in the Centre for Women, Peace and Security and an independent journalist and researcher. She has extensive experience working in Muslim countries and in countries in conflict and post-conflict transition. Her current research focuses on sexual violence against Syrian women committed by pro-regime forces.