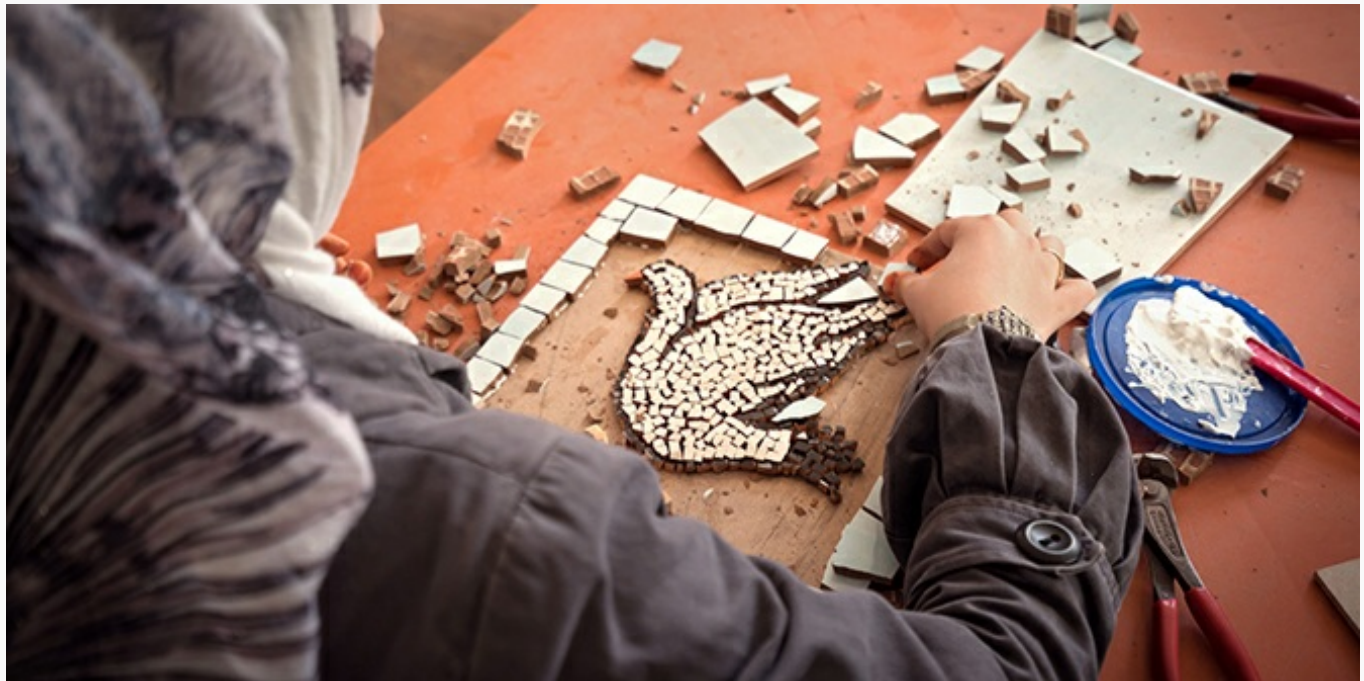


'You want freedom? This is your freedom': Rape as a Tactic of the Assad Regime

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2017/02/14/you-want-freedom-this-is-your-freedom-rape-as-a-tactic-of-the-assad-regime/

2/14/2017

Interview with Marie Forestier



© UN Women Humanitarian work, Za'atari Refugee Camp, Jordan

In its attempt to crush the revolution and remain in power, the Assad regime has resorted to every possible tactic, from torture to enforced disappearance, and from indiscriminate bombings to the use of chemical weapons. Sexual violence against women, and especially rape, has been no exception. In a [working paper](#) for the [LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security](#), Marie Forestier presents her research findings based on more than 70 interviews with 20 survivors of rape, dozens of former detainees, dozens of doctors, lawyers, activists and humanitarian workers, as well as three defectors from the regime security apparatus.

We always hear about acts of violence against women committed by ISIS and other groups in Syria and Iraq. Why is rape by pro-regime forces under documented?

It is more difficult to convince the victims of pro-regime forces to speak out, and their abuses are probably more difficult to document. The main reasons are the shame and stigma associated with sexual violence. In any culture, rape is a taboo; but this goes even deeper in most Syrian communities. Some women were rejected by their families and lost custody of their children because they had been raped in prison. Some reportedly committed suicide due to family and social pressure. This is why, when a woman is released from jail, it is highly unlikely that she will speak out about her assault; so she hides it. On the other hand, ISIS victims were kidnapped in order to become sex slaves most of the time. Thus, when a woman has been released and returns to her community, everyone knows that she was raped, which makes these women more likely to speak to investigators. In addition, one of the main challenges I faced was to convince survivors of the utility of documenting their ordeal. 'What is the benefit of talking?' is probably the question I've heard the most these past months. Syrian women feel abandoned by the international community and think that there has been no reaction to many atrocities that were made public.

The second issue affecting documentation is access. Some survivors are still in Syria and, for most of them, it is too dangerous to speak. Others have fled to neighbouring countries or to Europe. Intermediaries often lost track of them. When women start a new life in Europe, they don't want to look back and remember the ordeal they went through. In addition, depending on where survivors live, some are still too afraid to speak out against the regime. This is the case in Lebanon for instance.

Finally, politics is an important reason as well. From the perspective of the international community, the main threat comes from ISIS and other extremist groups, not from the regime. Some countries encourage the UN to investigate crimes perpetrated by ISIS and prefer to overlook crimes committed by the regime. In the same way, some countries focus on exploring accountability mechanisms regarding ISIS crimes. Most of the women I talked to feel very bitter and don't understand why sexual crimes committed by the regime receive so little attention compared to the ones committed by ISIS.

How aware is the government in Damascus of these acts?

Even though it is difficult to assess the degree of knowledge that government officials had about sexual violence, they must have been aware of these acts. The Syrian security apparatus is characterised by a very strong hierarchy and an effective chain of command. According to several testimonies, directors of detention centres were directly involved in sexual assaults. It is unlikely that mid-level commanders were not aware of what was happening in detention centres. And it is even more unlikely that mid-level commanders would have taken the initiative to tolerate something that high officials would have disapproved of. Moreover, the fact that rapes were committed in many different cities and provinces indicate that they were part of a policy that was at least tolerated. For example, a survivor said that when she told the head of an intelligence branch that she had been raped, the officer didn't take her claim seriously. Finally, the UN Commission of Inquiry mentioned sexual violence in several reports. While the Syrian government never addressed the allegations, it cannot argue it never heard about them.

Were rapes ethnic rapes, specifically targeting Sunni women?

I observed that survivors mainly belong to the conservative Sunni community. However, in the majority of cases, I don't think sectarianism was a driver *per se*. Rapes have targeted activists and women perceived to be associated with the opposition – whether the relatives of opposition fighters, or women living in opposition strongholds who were not politically active. Since the majority of the opposition is Sunni, most of the women who were assaulted were thus Sunni as well. The rhetoric of security agents and of militiamen has clearly been sectarian. It has been a way to mobilise people and to reinforce the dynamic of 'us' against 'them'. Security forces, whose majority belong to the Alawite community, have felt threatened by the Sunni-majority opposition uprising. It also fuelled violence. But I collected testimonies of a Christian woman and of an atheist woman who were raped. And a witness heard Alawite women saying they had been assaulted as well.

You highlight in your report that rapes seem to be more frequent when the regime felt under threat. Why is that the case?

This is what I noticed when looking at the date rapes occurred. This would need to be confirmed by studying more cases. From early on, the regime understood that it was fighting for its survival, and resorted to any weapons and any possible tactic, including siege and chemical gas. It scaled up its attacks when it felt it was the most threatened, especially in 2012 and the first half of 2013 when the opposition gained ground and before it received heavy support from foreign countries. Following the logic of doing 'whatever it takes' – to use a line commonly attributed to Syrian security officials – to retain power, security agents probably used rapes. Unfortunately, this has been an effective weapon to contribute to subdue the opposition. Defectors from the regime said that even though security agents did not receive specific orders about which tactic to use, they were given a free range in the context of impunity. I think this was also conducive to sexual violence.

Could the regime be held responsible for war crimes?

Solid evidence that the Syrian regime has perpetrated war crimes exist. Since the beginning of the war, it has committed the most egregious attacks against its own population. Indeed, serious violations of international humanitarian law such as unlawful killings, torture, inhumane treatment, the use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, and rape of civilians have been documented by human rights organisations and by United Nation investigators. Therefore, in the context of the non-international armed conflict currently occurring in Syria, these violations constitute war crimes according to the Rome Statute of the ICC. In addition, if these crimes are part of a widespread or systematic attack targeting the civilian population, they can amount to crimes against humanity. This is why these crimes need to be formally investigated so that the regime could be held accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity. But at the moment, no international court has jurisdiction on Syria.

Looking into the future, how can these women get justice, if at all possible?

It is absolutely crucial that these women get justice. Not only do they need to obtain reparation, but perpetrators must also be held accountable in order to send a strong signal that war-time sexual violence is not a fatality and that it is unacceptable. Some of the women I talked to long for justice, whereas others don't believe it can happen. Actually, as of now, accountability prospects at the high level look bleak. Since Syria is not a signatory to the Rome Statute and the Security Council is paralysed by the Russian veto, the International Criminal Court has no jurisdiction on the country. Still, after the war is over, an ad-hoc tribunal might be set up. In addition, all states have the obligation to investigate and prosecute the most serious crimes based on the universal jurisdiction principle. It means that national courts can proceed even if the crimes have committed abroad and even if the suspect and the victim are foreign citizens. Meanwhile, European national courts can also investigate cases involving dual nationals or nationals. For instance, criminal complaints for alleged war crime and crime against humanity have been filed against Syrian regime officials in France and Spain. So there is a range of options. And remember, last year, the ICC convicted the former vice-president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Jean-Pierre Bemba, for crimes against humanity and war crimes, for rapes its troops committed in Central African Republic in 2002. So even if it takes time, provided there is political will, victims can ultimately get justice.

[> Download the Working Paper \(PDF\)](#)

Marie Forestier ([@MarieForestier](#)) is an independent journalist and researcher with extensive experience working in Muslim countries and in conflict and post-conflict transition. In June–December 2016, she was also Visiting Fellow at the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security. Her current research focuses on sexual violence against Syrian women committed by pro-regime forces.



- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science