

# VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN SYRIA: BREAKING THE SILENCE

Briefing Paper

Based on an FIDH assessment mission  
in Jordan in December 2012

Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood. Article 2: Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty. Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. Article 4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms. Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel,



*The UN Security Council:*

*“9. Calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect fully international law applicable to the rights and protection of women and girls, especially as civilians, in particular the obligations applicable to them under the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Additional Protocols thereto of 1977, the Refugee Convention of 1951 and the Protocol thereto of 1967, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women of 1979 and the Optional Protocol thereto of 1999 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 and the two Optional Protocols thereto of 25 May 2000, and to bear in mind the relevant provisions of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court;*

*10. Calls on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict;*

*11. Emphasizes the responsibility of all States to put an end to impunity and to prosecute those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes including those relating to sexual and other violence against women and girls, and in this regard stresses the need to exclude these crimes, where feasible from amnesty provisions;*

*12. Calls upon all parties to armed conflict to respect the civilian and humanitarian character of refugee camps and settlements, and to take into account the particular needs of women and girls, including in their design, and recalls its resolutions 1208 (1998) of 19 November 1998 and 1296 (2000) of 19 April 2000.”*

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 of  
31 October 2000 on Women, Peace and Security (Extract)

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# List of acronyms

<b>AWO</b>	Arab Women Organisation
<b>CBO</b>	Community-based organisation
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>FIDH</b>	International Federation for Human Rights
<b>FSA</b>	Free Syrian Army
<b>GBV</b>	Gender-based violence
<b>HRW</b>	Human Rights Watch
<b>ICC</b>	International Criminal Court
<b>IRC</b>	International Rescue Committee
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation
<b>SWA</b>	Syrian Women Association
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNHCR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNFPA</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organisation



# Executive summary

In December 2012, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), in collaboration with the Arab Women Organisation (AWO), sent an international fact-finding mission to meet with Syrian women who had fled the crisis to seek refuge in Jordan. The mission focussed on the impact of the ongoing conflict on women and sought to document specific forms of violence targeting women. The FIDH delegation visited three refugee camps, Al Zaatari, King Abdullah Park and Cyber City and held meetings with 80 refugees living outside “official” camps in Amman, Rusaifa, Dhleil and Sama Sarhan (Zarqa Governorate).

It remains extremely difficult to measure the extent of crimes of sexual violence or to draw conclusions on patterns, in particular due to the stigma surrounding such crimes. However, all those interviewed reported having witnessed or heard about cases of sexual violence and said that the fear of being raped had motivated their decision to flee the country. Several of the women interviewed gave indirect accounts of rape and other forms of sexual violence committed by pro-government forces during house searches, following arrest at checkpoints and in detention. There were also accounts of such crimes having been committed by anti-government armed groups.

Many of those interviewed also spoke of the risk of women being abducted, by all parties to the conflict, in order to obtain information or as bargaining tools for the release of prisoners.

According to several women and organisations providing support services, survivors of rape are sometimes forced into marriage, in order to “save family honour”.

Risks of stigmatisation and rejection of survivors impose a culture of silence, preventing women reporting crimes of sexual violence. As a result, the vast majority of those in need of medical and psycho-social support do not have access to such services.

FIDH presents at the end of this briefing paper a set of recommendations towards different stakeholders.

# PART I

## Introduction

### A - Methodology and scope of the report

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), in collaboration with the Arab Women Organisation (AWO)<sup>1</sup>, sent an international fact-finding mission<sup>2</sup> to meet with Syrian women refugees<sup>3</sup> in Jordan from 13 to 22 December 2012, in order to document sexual violence and other forms of violence against women and girls perpetrated during the ongoing conflict in Syria. The mission aimed to strengthen documentation and awareness of crimes targeting women in the ongoing conflict in Syria, in order to contribute to efforts to fight impunity for such crimes.

The mission also sought to contribute to identifying the needs of survivors and to improving access to support services. To this end, AWO is developing a gender based violence specific psychosocial counselling project for Syrian women refugees in Jordan. The project will be implemented in partnership with the Arab Women Forum (AISHA) and Women against Violence (SALMA) – two active regional networks calling for gender equality and improved social and legal positions for women in the Arab world.<sup>4</sup>

In collaboration with AWO, the FIDH delegation visited the three “official” refugee camps in Jordan, namely: Al Zaatari (Mafrq Governorate), King Abdullah Park and Cyber City (Irbid Governorate). Focus group meetings were conducted with 75 Syrian women refugees living outside “official” camps in Amman and the nearby villages of Rusaifa, Dhleil and Sama Sarhan (Zarqa Governorate). In addition, five individual interviews were carried out with refugees in urban and rural communities in Jordan. The delegation also met with service providers, including community-based organisations (CBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies working with Syrian refugees in Jordan (see appendix for the list of organisations met by the mission).

The FIDH delegation followed a strict ethical protocol when collecting testimonies. The methods used aimed, in particular, to ensure the non-disclosure of personal data and to minimize risk of re-victimization. This protocol included identifying appropriate medical and psychosocial support services prior to seeking disclosure from interviewees. The women who decided to

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1. See AWO’s website: [www.awo.org.jo/](http://www.awo.org.jo/).

2. The mission delegation was composed of women with expertise in GBV and human rights in the region: Ms. Rula Asad, journalist and member of Suryyat (a Syrian women’s rights NGO); Ms. Katherine Perks, Programme Director at the African Center for Justice and Peace Studies (ACJPS); Ms. Jeanne Sulzer, Lawyer and member of the FIDH Litigation Action Group; Ms. Aida Tuma, Head of Women against Violence (SALMA); Ms. Layla Naffa Hamarneh, Director of Projects at the Arab Women Organisation (AWO); and Ms. Dana Abu Sham, Project Coordinator at AWO. Ms. Samia Shatara acted as Arabic-English interpreter.

3. The term ‘refugees’ will be used in this report to refer to those Syrians who have fled their country because of conflict and the humanitarian crisis. However, most of these persons have not, for various reasons, been formally registered as such. For further information on the situation of Syrian women refugees in Jordan, see the forthcoming FIDH report to be published in May 2013.

4. In 2012, the two networks established a joint project in Jordan and Lebanon with the objectives of revealing violations perpetrated against Syrian women refugees, in particular crimes of sexual violence, as well as raising awareness and advocating for the protection of women (based in particular on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 of 31 October 2000).

disclose their experiences to the FIDH delegation were informed that the information would be used to raise awareness of the international community on sexual violence perpetrated in the context of the Syrian crisis, to mobilise diplomatic, political and judicial mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels.

The accounts presented in this report were given by refugees who had fled Syria between June and December 2012 and representatives of organisations supporting them. These recent testimonies provide an indication of the nature of crimes targeting women in the ongoing conflict in Syria. The report also draws on other interviews conducted by FIDH with Syrian human rights defenders and other activists, as well as reports of national and international organisations.

## **B – Difficulties related to the documentation of sexual violence**

It is particularly difficult to document crimes of sexual violence in the Syrian context. Survivors are generally extremely reluctant to talk about their experiences, due in particular to stigmatisation and cultural, social and religious pressures.<sup>5</sup> Many of the acts of violence against women reported to the FIDH delegation were related as incidents that had happened to someone else – a relative, neighbour or friend. Few gave direct testimonies. Other organisations, individuals and bodies report the same difficulties. The Women’s Media Center’s project, Women Under Siege, which has been collecting evidence of crimes of sexual violence in Syria, underlines the fact that, “*data on this type of violence is notoriously difficult to collect because... survivors often flee the area or simply go silent – out of fear and shame*”<sup>6</sup>. According to an update on the situation provided by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (hereafter the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria) in March 2013, “*Direct accounts of sexual violence continue to be sought from victims and eyewitnesses. It remains immensely difficult to collect first-hand accounts due to a culture of silence which prevents reporting*”<sup>7</sup>.

Throughout FIDH’s mission in Jordan, representatives of humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies reported having had few cases referred to them concerning allegations of sexual violence, including rape, perpetrated against Syrian women during the conflict. Whilst most humanitarian assistance providers working with Syrian refugees said that they were equipped to provide support services to survivors of sexual violence, victims had not come forward. Those interviewed stressed that the lack of reports could not be taken to reflect the extent to which such crimes have been committed.

FIDH observed that in “official” refugee camps, established by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), specific gender based violence referral systems

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5. According to a recent report published by the World Health Organisation (WHO), “*sexual violence has numerous social and psychological consequences. Social consequences can include: stigma, discrimination, and abandonment. Psychological/mental health consequences range from distress, self-blame and feelings of isolation to a range of mental disorders, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other anxiety disorders, suicidal ideation and other forms of self-harm.*” See “*Mental health and psychosocial support for conflict-related sexual violence: 10 myths*”, WHO, 2012: [www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/rhr12\\_17/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/rhr12_17/en/index.html).

6. See the website of the project *Women under siege*: <http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/blog/entry/the-cartography-of-suffering-women-under-siege-maps-sexualized-violence-in>, as well as: [www.mailman.columbia.edu/news/sexual-violence-syrian-conflict](http://www.mailman.columbia.edu/news/sexual-violence-syrian-conflict)

7. See Oral Update of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 March 2013 (A/HRC/22/CRP.1), p.6: [www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/PeriodicUpdate11March2013\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/PeriodicUpdate11March2013_en.pdf)

were in place to handle such cases, should they be reported. By contrast, in urban areas, where the vast majority of Syrian refugees in Jordan have settled, such referral systems are yet to be operational.

All the women interviewed by FIDH expressed concerns about lack of information about and difficulties in accessing primary health care. To FIDH's knowledge, at the time of the mission, only Syria's Bright Future, an association of doctors and psychologists working to provide medical and psychosocial support to Syrian refugees in Jordan, was pro-actively providing such assistance to individuals and families. FIDH understands that, at the time of writing, this issue was being given consideration by UN agencies in the field, particularly the UNHCR.

The Syrian women refugees who agreed to talk to the FIDH delegation were in a state of survival. They had witnessed or been direct victims of extremely violent crimes in Syria. Most had endured a traumatic and exhausting journey before arriving in Jordan as refugees. Most were also mourning the loss of loved ones, had lost their homes and were forced to live in a new and extremely challenging environment, both within and outside refugee camps. The primary concern expressed to the FIDH delegation concerned immediate humanitarian needs.

# PART II

## Sexual and other forms of violence against women in the context of the Syrian crisis

### A - The Syrian crisis: perpetration of crimes against humanity and war crimes

#### **Ongoing grave violations against the civilian population**

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in March 2011, the human rights situation has relentlessly deteriorated. Since September 2011, the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria – mandated by the UN Human Rights Council – has been echoing the warnings of human rights organisations and reporting on grave violations committed by Syrian government forces and other parties to the conflict.

Violent fighting has progressively intensified between Bashar al-Assad’s forces and armed rebel groups and in July 2012, the situation was qualified as an internal armed conflict, under international humanitarian law, by the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In a report published in February 2013, the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria stated: *“The situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic has continued to deteriorate. Since 15 July 2012, there has been an escalation in the armed conflict between Government forces and anti-Government armed groups. The conflict has become increasingly sectarian, with the conduct of the parties becoming significantly more radicalized and militarized.”*<sup>8</sup> At the time of writing, serious violations targeting the Syrian civilian population continued unabated.

Arbitrary arrests and detention, extra-judicial executions, rape, other forms of sexual violence, abduction, enforced disappearances and the use of torture by Syrian authorities and pro-governmental militias (referred to as *shabbiha*<sup>9</sup>) have been widely documented. Committed in the context of widespread and indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas and the apparent targeting of civilians, these violations can be qualified as crimes against humanity. With the intensification of fighting and the development of the crisis into an internal armed conflict, violations perpetrated by all parties to the conflict have also been qualified as war crimes.

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8. See the 4<sup>th</sup> Report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 February 2013, (A/HRC/22/59), [www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A.HRC.22.59\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A.HRC.22.59_en.pdf).

9. Literally the term *shabbiha* means an “immoral person”. This term commonly designates armed groups or militia identified as pro-government fighters.

The governorates of Dara'a and Homs are among the main protest hotspots and have therefore been the targets of the harshest repression by government forces. Military operations, including those in Homs, increasingly considered a “capital” of resistance, in February and March 2012, have been intense and accompanied by large-scale grave human rights violations. On numerous occasions government troops have shelled Homs and perpetual fighting has left the city in ruins.

The ongoing conflict has resulted in a critical humanitarian situation, with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons and more than one million refugees in neighbouring countries (in particular Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Egypt). Most of the Syrian refugees who have arrived in Jordan since the beginning of the uprising come from the cities and regions of Dara'a and Homs.<sup>10</sup>

### **Crimes of sexual violence**

Various UN bodies and representatives, as well as international and national NGOs, have documented crimes of sexual violence committed during the Syrian crisis. In its January 2013 report, the International Rescue Committee described “*rape as a significant and disturbing feature of the Syrian civil war*”.<sup>11</sup>

In August 2012, the UN’s International Commission of Inquiry on Syria indicated that there are “*reasonable grounds to believe rape and sexual assault [have been] perpetrated against men, women and children by Government forces and shabbiha members. Rape and sexual assault [have also been] part of torture in official and unofficial detention centers*”.<sup>12</sup> On 18 January 2013, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Valerie Amos reported particular concerns about the “*vicious indiscriminate nature of the violence that is taking place and the increasing levels of sexual violence, which is affecting many women*” in Syria.<sup>13</sup>

There have also been reports of crimes of sexual violence committed by anti-government armed groups. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria stated that, on the basis of the limited information it received, it was not possible to make a finding on rape or sexual violence cases committed by opposition armed groups<sup>14</sup>. However, on 15 February 2013, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Zainab Hawa Bangura, stated that “*Civilians already caught in a vicious cycle of violence are also the target of sexual violence by all parties to the conflict*”.<sup>15</sup>

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10. See for example, CARE International, “Syrian Refugees in Jordan: ‘People were killed in the streets outside our home’”, 27 November 2012, <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-refugees-jordan-%E2%80%9Cpeople-were-killed-streets-outside-our-home%E2%80%9D>

11. See International Rescue Committee (IRC), Syria: *A Regional Crisis*, January 2013: [www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRCReportMidEast20130114.pdf](http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRCReportMidEast20130114.pdf)

12. See the 3<sup>rd</sup> Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 16 August 2012 (A/HRC/21/50), [www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session21/A-HRC-21-50_en.pdf)

13. “UN officials alarmed by effect of systematic violence on civilians in Syria”, UN News Centre, 18 January 2013, available at: [www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43961&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.UPpkdL-9Kc0](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43961&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.UPpkdL-9Kc0).

14. See the 4<sup>th</sup> Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 18 February 2013 (A/HRC/22/59), pp. 17 and 78, [www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A.HRC.22.59\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A.HRC.22.59_en.pdf)

15. See Zainab Hawa Bangura’s statement in “UN envoy calls on all parties in Syria conflict to cease acts of sexual violence”, UN News Centre, 15 February 2013, available at: [www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=44160#.UUH8N33RITg](http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=44160#.UUH8N33RITg).

Under international law, such crimes can be qualified as crimes against humanity, where they form part of a widespread and systematic attack against a civilian population. In August 2012, the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria stated, “*Having previously determined that military operations such as those [led by government forces] in Homs in February and March [2012] and in Al Haffe in June [2012] were part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population, the commission finds that the rapes committed during these attacks, made with knowledge of the attacks, could be prosecuted as crimes against humanity*”.<sup>16</sup>

When committed in connection to an armed conflict, such crimes can also constitute war crimes.

## **B - Rape and other forms of sexual violence**

### **Crimes perpetrated during house searches, at checkpoints and in detention**

Most allegations of rape and other forms of sexual violence reported to the delegation were said to have been perpetrated by Government forces and *shabbiha*, during house searches, when they were stopped at checkpoints and while they had been detained. In some cases, women were assaulted in public or in front of family members.

A Syrian woman told FIDH about her experience in detention after being stopped by *shabbiha* at a checkpoint:

*“In August 2012, while I was on my way to work in the morning, I was stopped at a security checkpoint in Harasta [city in the North-eastern suburb of Damascus]. They asked for my identification and pulled me out of my seat when I refused to get out of the bus. A soldier took my mobile phone and took me to a vehicle parked some distance from the checkpoint. There were two girls already in the car. I was very afraid that they were going to rape me. One of the girls was crying.*

*I was blindfolded and handcuffed. After an hour in the car, I knew that we had left Damascus. When we stopped, we were taken into a studio, which I later discovered was a shabbiha headquarters. I became more afraid of being raped. They told us they wouldn’t take us to the [security/intelligence] branch because they didn’t want us to go to prison. One of the men who abducted me told me that he liked me, and I became even more afraid. They began to question us in a separate room. One of the girls who was abducted was pro-regime - after searching her phone, they found photos of Bashar al-Assad and pro-regime songs- and they released her.*

*The man who said he liked me asked to question me. When he took me into the room, I found it was very small. I was afraid. I asked not to go into the room with him and to be questioned in front of the others, but he hit me and forced me to enter. He then began to touch me, putting his hands on my lips and playing with them. He told me that I had been detained because one of my friends had confessed that I was active in the revolution. I denied it.*

*We were in the studio from 10 am to 3 pm. They then took us to a very small house. After a while, **two men entered and told us that we weren’t detained, but that we had been abducted.** The residents of Harasta had abducted NAME REDACTED and NAME REDACTED, and we had been kidnapped to be exchanged for them.*

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16. See the previously cited 3<sup>rd</sup> Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, 15 August 2012, § 102.

*At night, three young men came with an elderly man. One of them bound my hands and feet, gagged me, and sat me on the floor. A short time later, two of them began to approach me, touching me all over my body and on my sensitive parts. They started drinking and again came over to me every so often, but they did not rape me.”<sup>17</sup>*

A Syrian man, who had been detained three times<sup>18</sup> by the pro-regime forces, told FIDH that on one occasion, during his detention at the al Khatib (security) branch in Damascus, he witnessed torture and sexual violence perpetrated against three female university students:

*“They were forced to strip completely in front of 42 prisoners. One of the girls refused to take off her underwear because she had her period, but she was forced to strip. They were cursed the whole time and subjected to sexual talk. They were made to bend down and stand up, then the men approached them and began to grope them and make gestures toward them. Their bodies showed they had been beaten.*

*I learned that they had been brought over from the counter-terrorism branch. This scene of harassment of the girls in front of me lasted for about 15 minutes...*

*In the barracks I was in, most of the prisoners were kept in isolation, known for their problems with security personnel. I think they made us especially watch what happened with the girls as a kind of threat, to let us know that the same thing would happen to ‘our women’ if we continued our anti-regime activity.”<sup>19</sup>*

Doctors and psychologists from the association Syria’s Bright Future, working with Syrian women refugees, also reported that they were treating women who had experienced rape and other forms of sexual violence. One doctor reported that he was treating a Syrian girl whose brother had been forced by security forces to rape her.<sup>20</sup> Another service provider had provided support to a woman who said that she had been detained by Syrian Government forces with 20 other women for several days in a private apartment. She reported that the detainees had been injected with a substance, which made the women feel very weak and unable to resist sexual assault. She reported that she was raped by soldiers and then taken to the building of the “Palestine branch” of the Syrian Military Intelligence detention facilities in Damascus.<sup>21</sup>

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17. FIDH interview with a Syrian refugee woman, Cairo, Egypt, 1 November 2012.

18. FIDH Interview with a Syrian refugee man, Amman, 19 December 2012:

*“I was arrested again in Harasta Street in Rural Damascus by men in army uniform. They put me in a car with other people they had rounded up. They put us in the courtyard of the police hospital in the Harasta area and would bring in more detainees every so often, putting us all in the courtyard. We were men and women, children and the elderly. From 10 am to 4 pm I, like others, was severely beaten. Some of the doctors and nurses at the hospital even took part in the beatings, hitting and kicking us, and beating us with electrical cables. The nurses would repeat angrily, “The Alawites annihilated you, right?”*

*In the evening, they put me on the bus with a group of men. While on the bus, we were beaten and forced to chant praises to Bashar al-Assad. When we reached the intelligence branch, we were completely stripped, ostensibly for a search. They then told us to put on our underwear and started beating us. Then they took each group to a prison. I was put in solitary. Among the forms of torture I experienced is that a club would be wrapped in a piece of wet cloth and would be put on my body with electricity. They also beat me on my head a lot. Sometimes they burned me with a candle or a lighter on sensitive parts of my body. I was also subjected to torture that degraded me as a man. At night they took me out of the prison yard that overlooked civilian homes. I would be stripped down to my underwear and then was forced to walk on the asphalt on my elbows and knees. Sometimes the guards stood on my back. My hands and legs were also broken. During the interrogation they wanted me to give them names of people working on the coordination committees and the names of army officers cooperating with the revolution”.*

19. FIDH Interview with a Syrian refugee man, Amman, 19 December 2012.

20. FIDH Interview with members of the Syria Bright Future Association, Amman, 14 December 2012.

21. FIDH Interview, Amman, 21 December 2012.

While most of the allegations documented by FIDH related to abuses committed by pro-government forces, there were also reports of such crimes being committed by armed rebel groups. A Syrian man interviewed by FIDH described having witnessed violence by members of the FSA:

*“ I saw elements with the FSA kidnap a pretty girl known for her relations with a young man. Her kidnapers from the FSA raped her, then they killed her so she couldn’t expose them. They threw her body in front of her home and spread the news that the Syrian army had done it [...]”*

Interviewees consistently reported that the **fear of rape** was one of the main reasons they had fled the country. According to the International Rescue Committee (IRC), based on assessments conducted in Lebanon and Jordan in 2012<sup>22</sup>, *“one of the reasons that families from Homs, Damascus, Dara’a, and Idlib governorates fled was because of a perceived risk of kidnapping and rape.”*

There is widespread suspicion that women regularly suffer sexual abuse in detention. One Syrian activist met by FIDH declared that, *“traditionally it is considered to be shameful for a woman to even enter a police station, it’s even worse if she is arrested or spends time in detention. People suspect that women are sexually abused in these places”*.<sup>23</sup>

According to the International Commission of Inquiry on Syria in March 2013, *“Indirect accounts suggest that women who have been held for any period of time at checkpoints or in intelligence agencies may have suffered rape or other sexual assault.”*<sup>24</sup>

### **Shame and honour**

The **social stigma** attached to having been subject to sexual and other forms of gender-based violence is very strong in Syria. Conservative cultural and religious norms, particularly in rural and southern areas of Syria, forbid women and girls from talking freely about intimate and private issues such as sexual violence and other forms of violence against women. It was clear to the delegation from interviews conducted, that these norms persist amongst Syrian refugee populations in Jordan. Doctors from the association Syria’s Bright Future explained that *“we do not find rape cases because of the prevailing culture and the refusal to talk publicly about these topics.”*<sup>25</sup>

The International Commission of Inquiry on Syria has emphasised<sup>26</sup> that the religious beliefs of the Syrian population, as well as cultural and social factors, have left victims of crimes of sexual violence feeling ashamed, traumatized and/or afraid of being stigmatised and thus unwilling to report such crimes, rendering it extremely difficult to document the extent of such crimes.

22. See report by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), *Syria: A Regional Crisis*, January 2013: [www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRCReportMidEast20130114.pdf](http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRCReportMidEast20130114.pdf)

23. FIDH Interview with a Syrian activist, January 2012, in *Women and the Arab Spring: Taking Their Place?*, FIDH, March 2012: <http://arabwomenspring.fidh.net>.

24. See Oral Update of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, 11 March 2013 (A/HRC/22/CRP.1), § 28, [www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/PeriodicUpdate11March2013\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/PeriodicUpdate11March2013_en.pdf)

25. FIDH Interview with members of the Syria Bright Future Association, Amman, 14 December 2012.

26. See 1st Report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 23 November 2011 (A/HRC/S-17/2/Add.1), [www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/A.HRC.S-17.2.Add.1\\_en.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SY/A.HRC.S-17.2.Add.1_en.pdf).

According to members of the Syrian Women Association who met with FIDH, no Syrian woman would dare to disclose or describe an experience of sexual violence: “*Women do not generally talk about the abuses they faced or are facing.*”<sup>27</sup>

A Syrian activist confirmed that “*hardly anyone makes complaints about such crimes or even talks about it. If it is known that a woman has been raped, nobody will want to marry her*”.<sup>28</sup>

Social stigma and family pressure can contribute to the shame experienced by women victims of rape and sexual violence, which in some cases can lead to **suicide**. One woman reported the situation of two women she knew, including one who was 17 years old, who had been raped by the regime’s forces. She indicated that both committed suicide shortly thereafter, one of them by setting herself on fire.<sup>29</sup>

A Syrian refugee based in Cyber City refugee camp told FIDH that a female friend in Damascus was raped by regime forces who stormed her home, supposedly looking for a young man. When they found her by herself, they raped her and left. She committed suicide.<sup>30</sup>

Cases in which raped women were later **rejected by their husbands and/or families** were also reported. Once she was released from detention, one woman went home to find that her husband and his family had collected her personal belongings. They kicked her out with her son. Her husband later divorced her.<sup>31</sup> This account was supported by other hearsay testimony of a rape victim whose husband left her following her rape.<sup>32</sup>

### **Lack of access to or knowledge of appropriate support services**

The stigma surrounding such crimes often means that victims do not have access to appropriate services.

A doctor told the FIDH delegation that a relative of his in Homs had been raped and was pregnant. When she went to Damascus, hotels refused to accept her because they knew she had been raped. She was unable to find a clinic that would perform an abortion.<sup>33</sup>

Doctors from the association Syria’s Bright Future told FIDH that there are two safe houses allegedly holding 21 Syrian women rape survivors aged between 14-25 years old in Amman:

*“Two families who supply food and basic needs supervise them, but the supervisors intend to marry off the women. When we were able to reach the raped women through an intermediary, we asked them what they wanted. They said that they just wanted to be under the ground. Four of them have since been married.”*<sup>34</sup>

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27. FIDH Interview with Rights Committee Officer for Syrian Women Association, Amman, 19 December 2012.

28. FIDH Interview with a Syrian activist, January 2012, in *Women and the Arab Spring: Taking Their Place?*, FIDH, March 2012: <http://arabwomenspring.fidh.net>.

29. FIDH interview with a Syrian refugee woman, al-Rusaifah/al-Zarqa, 15 December 2012.

30. FIDH Interview with Palestinian refugee woman who left Syria, Cyber City, 18 December 2012.

31. FIDH Interview, Amman, 21 December 2012.

32. FIDH minutes of Focus Group meeting, Amman, 19 December 2012.

33. FIDH Interview with members of the Syria’s Bright Future, Amman, 14 December 2012.

34. FIDH Interview with members of the Syria’s Bright Future, Amman, 14 December 2012.

## Forced marriage

Syrian women refugees told FIDH that sometimes families forcibly marry women who have been raped, including to relatives, in order to ‘end the matter’. According to members of the Syrian Women Association, “*When we, as a women’s association, attempted to help the girl, who was demonstrably traumatized by what she had suffered, we were kicked out by her parents, and she was married the next day.*”<sup>35</sup>

## C – Abduction of women in Syria: an “instrument of terror”

The threat of abduction was a consistent theme that arose during interviews with Syrian women refugees. It was described by one woman interviewed by FIDH as “an instrument of terror” used by both pro-regime and opposition armed forces in the ongoing conflict in Syria.<sup>36</sup>

Many interviewees said they knew of women in their neighbourhoods who had been abducted by Government forces and *shabbiha*, usually when passing through check-points. Several women also reported having heard about cases of women being abducted news reports.

Fear of abduction is exacerbated by reports of violations, including crimes of sexual violence, committed during abduction and detention. The testimonies of several Syrian women refugees described the perpetration of sexual violence and crimes following abduction.

Interviewees reported cases of Syrian army officers **paying or otherwise coercing women to identify women to be abducted**. One woman told FIDH that the Syrian army would pay 5,000 Syrian lira to a woman for every woman she would bring to them. She said that some women would put on a face veil (niqab) and knock on doors, ostensibly seeking medicine for her child, to choose potential women for abduction.<sup>37</sup>

Among the purposes cited for the abduction of women is the **collection of information about the other party** and sometimes the negotiation for the **release of a prisoner**. FIDH was told that women were being abducted to coerce them into providing the names of pro-regime or FSA elements in exchange for their own release, or the release of male family members.<sup>38</sup>

A male Syrian refugee and former FSA fighter alleged that he knew of cases of Syrian government forces coercing or paying women to seduce FSA elements in order to establish their locations.<sup>39</sup>

Similar conduct was also alleged of the FSA. One interviewee alleged that “*the FSA would kidnap a member of the woman’s family to pressure her to do what was asked in exchange for her family member’s release*”.

FIDH was informed that it was common for women whose sons or husbands were affiliated to the FSA to be detained or abducted by government forces to obtain information on their family members.<sup>40</sup> One woman described that her “*neighbour was detained for two days because*

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35. Syrian Women’s Association, Amman, 19 December 2012.

36. Interview with a Syrian activist, January 2012, in FIDH, *Women and the Arab Spring: Taking Their Place?*, March 2012.

37. FIDH Interview, Amman, 21 December 2012.

38. *Ibid.*

39. FIDH Interview with a Syrian refugee man, Amman, 19 December 2012.

40. FIDH Interview with Syrian Women Association members, Amman, 19 December 2012, and a Syrian refugee woman, widow’s house, SWA, 20 December 2012.

*her two sons were fighters with the FSA. In retaliation, the regime forces were contacted and threatened that if anything happened to her, the [government] security checkpoint would be blown up with the soldiers. She was released after this threat.”<sup>41</sup>*

Similarly, FIDH was told that women were sometimes abducted to negotiate with the other party the release of a detained member of its own group. FIDH collected testimony about a woman who was abducted from the street by regime forces, to negotiate for the release of an officer who had been abducted by the FSA.<sup>42</sup> One woman recounted that “*in the building where I lived there are two Alawite Shia families. Once, the FSA kidnapped my Shia neighbor and her daughter. They were kept by the FSA for two days and then traded for a Sunni female hostage with the regime forces. They didn’t say they had been subjected to any harm during their abduction.*”<sup>43</sup>

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41. FIDH Interview with Syrian refugee women, widow’s house, SWA, 20 December 2012.

42. *Ibid.*

43. FIDH minutes of Focus Group meeting, Amman, 19 December 2012.

# Recommendations

FIDH calls on:

## **All parties to the conflict in Syria**

- to immediately cease all forms of violence, including sexual violence;
- to release all those arbitrarily detained, including women and children, without delay;
- to issue clear orders against the perpetration of sexual violence through their respective chains of command;
- to allow access to necessary medical and psychological treatment for survivors inside Syria;
- to fully respect international law applicable to the rights and protection of women and girls, especially as civilians, in conformity with UN Security Council resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions; and
- to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence (GBV), particularly rape and other forms of sexual violence.

## **The State of Jordan**

- to ensure that Syrian women and girls, both within and outside refugee camps, have free access to and information about specialised medical, psycho-social and legal services that ensure the safety, confidentiality, respect of and non-discrimination against GBV survivors;
- to take into account the particular needs of women and girls in accessing medical and psycho-social services and counselling, both within and outside refugee camps; and
- to take into account the particularly acute barriers to the disclosure of sexual and other forms of violence against women faced by Syrian women and girls and the need to tailor outreach and protection services accordingly.

## **UN agencies and service providers in Jordan**

- to take proactive measures to reach survivors of sexual violence and ensure access to appropriate health and other services; and
- to use the GBV Management Information system in Jordan with Syrian refugees, ensuring safe and ethical data collection, monitoring and reporting.

## **The relevant UN mandate holders**

- to continue all efforts to document sexual violence and other forms of violence against women in Syria;
- to contribute to the implementation of the various UN Security Council resolutions on sexual violence in conflict, particularly S/RES 1325 (2000), S/RES/1820 (2008), S/RES/1888 (2009), S/RES/1889 (2009), and S/RES/1960 (2010), in the context of the situation in Syria; and
- to ensure that the issue of sexual violence and other forms of violence against women in Syria is systematically included in documentation and briefings to the UN Security Council and other UN bodies.

## **The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria**

- to continue documenting and reporting on crimes of sexual violence and other forms of violence against women in Syria, including with a view to contributing to future criminal investigations and prosecutions.

### **The UN Security Council**

- to refer the Syrian situation to the ICC and encourage efforts to fight against the impunity of those responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes, including those relating to sexual and other types of violence against women and girls in Syria.

### **States that support the Syrian regime, and in particular Russia and China, to urge the Syrian regime**

- to immediately end its policy of repression, indiscriminate and widespread attacks and serious human rights violations against civilians, which could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity;
- to cooperate with and provide unimpeded access to the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria to investigate all alleged crimes under international law and violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including crimes of sexual violence and other forms of violence against women; and
- to allow international human rights monitors and humanitarian agencies prompt and unfettered access into Syria.

### **All States (in particular those supporting the parties to the conflict)**

- to call upon all parties to the conflict to respect international human rights and humanitarian law and immediately cease violations, including GBV and all forms of violence against women;
- to investigate and prosecute, where possible, including under the principle of extra-territorial jurisdiction, those responsible for crimes against humanity and war crimes, including sexual violence and other types of violence against women and girls perpetrated in Syria; and
- to support initiatives to fight impunity for such crimes, including the United Kingdom's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative, which provides for, inter alia, deployment of experts to the region to provide training in how to respond to reports of sexual violence, to improve the prospect of future investigation and prosecutions.

# APPENDIX

## List of organisations met by the mission in Jordan in December 2012

### **In refugee camps in Jordan**

#### ***Zaatari camp***

- Jordanian Hachemite Association (JHAS)
- Gynécologie sans frontières
- United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
- Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- Al Hussein Foundation
- Save the Children

#### ***King Abdullah camp***

- JAHS
- UNHCR

#### ***Cyber City***

- Jordanian police
- Noor Al Hussein Foundation

### **UN Agencies**

- UNFPA
- UNHCR
- UN Women
- Inter-agency Gender Based Violence United Nations Working Group

### **International NGOs**

- Médecins sans frontières (MSF)
- Médecins du monde (MDM)
- International Rescue Committee (IRC)
- Center for Victims of Torture (CVT)
- International Relief Development (IRD)

### **Jordanian and Syrian non governmental and community-based organisations**

- Arab Women Organisation (AWO)
- Syrian Women Association
- Syria's Bright Future
- Sisterhood Is Global Institute (SIGI)
- JHAS
- Noor Al Hussein Foundation



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## **Establishing the facts**

### **investigative and trial observation missions**

Through activities ranging from sending trial observers to organising international investigative missions, FIDH has developed, rigorous and impartial procedures to establish facts and responsibility. Experts sent to the field give their time to FIDH on a voluntary basis.

FIDH has conducted more than 1 500 missions in over 100 countries in the past 25 years. These activities reinforce FIDH's alert and advocacy campaigns.

## **Supporting civil society**

### **training and exchange**

FIDH organises numerous activities in partnership with its member organisations, in the countries in which they are based. The core aim is to strengthen the influence and capacity of human rights activists to boost changes at the local level

## **Mobilising the international community**

### **permanent lobbying before intergovernmental bodies**

FIDH supports its member organisations and local partners in their efforts before intergovernmental organisations. FIDH alerts international bodies to violations of human rights and refers individual cases to them. FIDH also takes part in the development of international legal instruments.

## **Informing and reporting**

### **mobilising public opinion**

FIDH informs and mobilises public opinion. Press releases, press conferences, open letters to authorities, mission reports, urgent appeals, petitions, campaigns, website... FIDH makes full use of all means of communication to raise awareness of human rights violations.

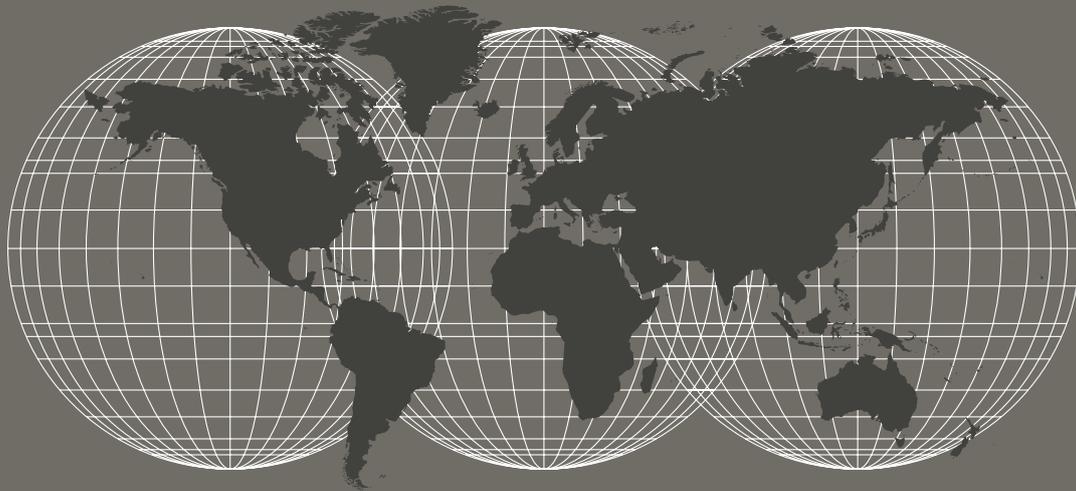
**FIDH**  
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**on 5 continents**

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**FIDH - International Federation for Human Rights**  
17, passage de la Main-d'Or - 75011 Paris - France  
CCP Paris: 76 76 Z  
Tel: (33-1) 43 55 25 18 / Fax: (33-1) 43 55 18 80  
[www.fidh.org](http://www.fidh.org)

Director of the publication: Souhayr Belhassen  
Editor: Antoine Bernard  
Author: Jeanne Sulzer  
Coordination: Delphine Carlens, Katherine Booth, Marie Camberlin  
Design: Bruce Pleiser  
Photography: © AFP PHOTO/SAM TARLING

# FIDH represents **164** human rights organisations on **5** continents



inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Article 6: Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law. Article 7: All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination. Article 8: Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law. Article 9: No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile. Article 10: Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him. Article 11: (1) Everyone charged with a penal offence has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty

## ABOUT FIDH

FIDH takes action for the protection of victims of human rights violations, for the prevention of violations and to bring perpetrators to justice.

### **A broad mandate**

FIDH works for the respect of all the rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: civil and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights.

### **A universal movement**

FIDH was established in 1922, and today unites 164 member organisations in more than 100 countries around the world. FIDH coordinates and supports their activities and provides them with a voice at the international level.

### **An independent organisation**

Like its member organisations, FIDH is not linked to any party or religion and is independent of all governments.

# fidh

Find information concerning FIDH's 164 member organisations on [www.fidh.org](http://www.fidh.org)