

Syria: Sexual Assault in Detention
By Human Right Watch
15 June 2012

Syrian government forces have used sexual violence to torture men, women, and boys detained during the current conflict. Witnesses and victims also told Human Rights Watch that soldiers and pro-government armed militias have sexually abused women and girls as young as 12 during home raids and military sweeps of residential areas.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 10 former detainees, including two women, who described being sexually abused or witnessing sexual abuse in detention, including rape, penetration with objects, sexual groping, prolonged forced nudity, and electroshock and beatings to genitalia. Many of the former detainees told Human Rights Watch that they were imprisoned because of their political activism, including for attending protests. In other cases, the reason for the detention was unclear but detainees suffered the same abusive tactics.

“Sexual violence in detention is one of many horrific weapons in the Syrian government’s torture arsenal and Syrian security forces regularly use it to humiliate and degrade detainees with complete impunity,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. “The assaults are not limited to detention facilities – government forces and pro-government shabiha militia members have also sexually assaulted women and girls during home raids and residential sweeps.”

Human Rights Watch documented over 20 specific incidents of sexual assault, five of which involved more than one victim, that took place between March 2011 and March 2012 across Syria, including in Daraa, Homs, Idlib, Damascus, and Latakia governorates. The majority of cases were from Homs governorate. Interviewees described a range of sexual abuse by Syrian security forces, the army, and pro-government armed militias referred to locally as shabiha.

Human Rights Watch interviewed eight Syrian victims of sexual violence, including four women, and more than twenty-five other people with a knowledge of sexual abuse – former detainees, defectors from the Syrian security forces and the army, first responders and assistance providers, women’s rights activists, and family members.

The full extent of sexual violence in and outside of detention facilities remains unknown, Human Rights Watch said. The stigma in Syria surrounding sexual violence makes victims reluctant to report abuse. Survivors also may face dangers when they make crimes public, and researchers have had limited access to the country to document abuses. In many cases interviewees told Human Rights Watch that victims did not want their families or others in the community to know about the assault because of fear or shame. In one case, a female rape victim who was willing to be interviewed was not permitted by her husband to speak to Human Rights Watch.

Even when they may wish to seek help, Syrian survivors of sexual assault have limited access to medical or psychological treatment and other services in Syria. Survivors who have fled to neighboring countries also face obstacles in seeking treatment, including limited service options and inability to access services that are available because of social taboos surrounding sexual abuse, families restricting their movement, and the fear of being subjected to so-called “honor” crimes.

It is critical that survivors of sexual assault have access to emergency medical services, legal assistance, and social support to address injuries caused by the assault; prevent pregnancy, HIV, and other sexually transmitted infections; and to collect evidence to support prosecution of perpetrators, Human Rights Watch said. Human Rights Watch called on the Syrian government, countries hosting Syrian refugees, and donors to ensure that survivors have information about relevant health and psychosocial services, including that they should be accessed on an urgent basis, as well as facilitate victims' access to them through safe and confidential mechanisms.

Human Rights Watch does not have evidence that high-ranking officers commanded their troops to commit sexual violence during home searches, ground operations, or in detention. However, information received by Human Rights Watch, including from army and security force defectors, indicates that no action has been taken to investigate or punish government forces and shabiha who commit acts of sexual violence or to prevent them from committing such acts in the future.

Many of the reported assaults were in circumstances in which commanding officers knew or should have known the crimes were taking place – for example, assaults committed on an apparently regular basis in detention centers under the full control of particular commanders.

Sexual Abuse in Detention

Detention facilities where male and female detainees have reported sexual torture include Military Intelligence Branch 248 and Branch 235 (known as “Palestine Branch”) in Damascus; the Military Intelligence facilities in Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib, and Homs; the Political Security branch in Latakia; the Air Force Intelligence branches in Mezze, Latakia, and Homs; and the Idlib Central Prison.

Salim (all names have been changed to protect the identities of the interviewees), a soldier who was detained in June 2011 while on leave at the Air Force Intelligence branch in Latakia, was questioned about his brother's and father's roles in demonstrations. He told Human Rights Watch:

They started torturing me here (gesturing toward his genitalia) [with the electricity]. They were also beating me and there was a guard behind me turning the electricity on. I passed out. They were beating me and shocking me. The interrogator was beating me with a cable over my whole body. I still didn't have any clothes on ... they asked me every thirty minutes if I would confess.

While a number of female detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch said that they were not sexually abused in detention, others reported that they were subjected to sexual abuse and other torture. One was Sabah, who was detained in the Military Intelligence facility in Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib in November 2011.

“They took my abaya off,” she said. “I was wearing jeans and a tee-shirt underneath, and a guard tied my hands behind my back ... He grabbed my breasts ... I said, ‘Beat me, shoot me, but don't put your hand on me.’ ... He came to grab my breasts again and I pushed him ... Then he grabbed me by the chest and threw me against the wall. I fell and he started beating me with a stick. On the knee and on the ankle. My ankle was also broken [along with my hand]...”

At least two male former detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch also reported hearing women's screams – in the Air Force Intelligence and Military Intelligence branches in Homs, and an ad hoc shabiha facility in Latakia. Human Rights Watch does not have further confirmation that women were actually held and sexually tortured in these facilities.

All former detainees who described sexual abuse said they had received no medical or psychological treatment in prison for the sexual abuse. Only one of the 10 former detainees interviewed about sexual

abuse in detention said she received medical treatment after her release. All of the former detainees interviewed have left Syria.

Sexual Abuse During Home Raids and Ground Operations

Human Rights Watch spoke to two women sexually assaulted in their homes and six other witnesses, including two male family members, with knowledge of sexual assaults against women and girls.

In five of these cases all of the interviewees described the attackers as shabiha. Descriptions and characterizations of shabiha forces varied, but in four out of five cases witnesses described them as armed men in civilian clothing operating alongside Syrian government forces, though official forces were not always present during the sexual assaults.

Maha, from Daraa, told Human Rights Watch that in February 2012 Syrian government forces and shabiha raided her house looking for her husband. She said that a member of the shabiha assaulted her and that a member of the army threatened her with rape if he did not turn himself in. She said:

They broke the door – it is just a regular wood door – and came in... They said to me, “Where is your husband?” I said, “I don’t know. He left a long time ago.” Then the one standing next to me came at me. He tore my shirt and started grabbing my breasts ... The one who grabbed me looked like shabiha. He was wearing civilian clothes ... The person in charge was outside. Someone came in and said, “The officer said to tell her that if he doesn’t turn himself in that she will see worse than this”... [This person] was wearing plain green military clothes. He was clearly from the army.

Four army and security force defectors also told Human Rights Watch about incidents – five in all – that they were aware of or received information about in which government forces sexually assaulted women during home raids or detained women to sexually assault them. Three of these defectors described incidents in which women were taken to another location and sexually assaulted.

Walid, an army defector from Hafiz al-Nizam (riot police), told Human Rights Watch that officers bragged about raping women during home raids in Daraa: “[One officer] joked that during that house raid, ‘When I fucked the woman, she made a lot of noise because I must have pleased her so much.’”

Another defector, Toufiq, who belonged to a security force mudahama (raid) unit told Human Rights Watch that a friend in his unit admitted to having participated in a gang rape of two women detained during a home raid in November 2011 in Homs. He saw video on his friend’s cellphone that confirmed the gang rape.

Human Rights Watch also spoke to a first responder who worked in Homs and seven assistance providers outside of Syria who described their work with sexual assault survivors and who discussed the availability of assistance.

Human Rights Watch called on the Syrian government to end all use of or tolerance of sexual violence by its forces or by shabiha under its command or control, and to investigate and punish those responsible. Human Rights Watch also urged the United Nations Security Council to demand that the Syrian government grant the UN Human Rights Council-mandated Commission of Inquiry unrestricted access to all parts of Syria, especially detention centers, so that the commission can investigate all allegations of human rights violations.

The Syrian government should also give the United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria (UNSMIS), tasked with monitoring the implementation of the Annan plan, unrestricted access to all places of

detention to monitor abuses. The mission should include among its personnel people trained to identify gender-based violence and other gender-specific human rights violations.

Human Rights Watch also reiterated its call to the UN Security Council to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC) and urged other countries to join the calls for accountability by supporting a referral to the ICC as the forum most capable of effectively investigating and prosecuting those bearing the greatest responsibility for abuses in Syria.

Human Rights Watch called on international nongovernmental organizations, humanitarian assistance providers, the United Nations, and local organizations to develop, expand, and improve access to medical, psychological, social, and legal assistance to Syrian male and female victims of sexual abuse inside and outside of the country. Assistance providers should, in accordance with the UN Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings, ensure that survivors have information about and access to this package of services. In accordance with the Annan plan the Syrian government should also grant humanitarian assistance providers access to “all areas affected by the fighting” so that they can provide assistance to those affected by sexual violence.

“The international community urgently needs to address the human rights violations going on in Syria,” Whitson said. “The Security Council should send a strong signal to the Assad government that they will be held accountable for sexual violence and other human rights violations – by referring the situation to the ICC.”

Evidence on Sexual Abuse in Detention

Salim, the soldier who was arrested in June 2011 while on leave and questioned about his brother and father, told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview:

[T]hey took me downstairs, two sets of stairs with a turn. Each 15 steps ... I couldn't see and my hands were tied [I was naked]. We were in the interrogation room. They were beating me for the first hour with their hands. Then they used a wood baton. I didn't confess. The interrogator said, “Bring me the electricity.”...The guard brought two electric prongs. He put one in my mouth, on my tooth. Then he started turning it on and off quickly. He did this seven or eight times. I felt, that's it. I am not going to leave this branch. Then they started asking, “Will you confess now?” I said I had nothing to confess to.

They removed the electricity from my tooth and put it on my knees. Here they used the electricity the longest. It is still marked. They would put it on for a long time and then take it off ... They started torturing me here (gesturing toward his genitalia) [with the electricity]. They were also beating me and there was a guard behind me turning the electricity on. I passed out. They were beating me and shocking me. The interrogator was beating me with a cable over my whole body. I still didn't have any clothes on ... They asked me every thirty minutes if I would confess. I said no. At a point they said, “We will kill you,” and I said, “Ok, ok, kill me. Death is better than the torture you are putting me through.” ... When he shocks you the electricity hits your whole body. I was there for hours. They had to carry me on a mattress to the cell. I couldn't walk after that.

Khalil, who was detained in Idlib governorate in late June 2011 and spent about two months in several detention places, including about one month in the Idlib Central Prison, told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview that when he was detained there:

They forced me to undress. Then they started squeezing my fingers with pliers. They used a stapler to put nails in my fingers, chest, and ears. I was only allowed to take them out if I spoke. The nails in the ears were the most painful. They used two wires hooked up to a car battery to give me electric shocks.

They used electric stun-guns on my genitals twice. I thought I would never see my family again. They tortured me like this three times over three days.

Amer, a man from a town in Idlib governorate, described to Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview how he was tortured during his 42-day detention in the Political Security Branch in Latakia:

They undressed me, tied my hands behind my back, and hit me on my private parts. They clipped my hands to a metal pipe and lifted me so that my feet hardly touched the floor. They kept me like that for two days. When they released me I couldn't stand, my feet were completely swollen. I then spent five days in a single cell with six other people. After that 15 officers took me to a separate room. They were cursing my mother and sister and threatened to rape me. They put me on a flying carpet – I was lying on my back, tied to a board, and they lifted my head and legs. All this time I was undressed. They wrapped wires around my penis and turned on the electricity. I could just hear it buzzing. They did this maybe five times for about 10 seconds. I passed out. When I regained consciousness they were pushing my legs and hands into a tire. My entire body was blue from beatings.

Hussein, who was detained in Daraa at the end of April 2011 after he was shot in both legs and then held in Military Intelligence Branch 248 in Damascus told Human Rights Watch:

When I arrived at Branch 248 I was screaming from pain because my legs were broken [from gunshot injuries]. They laid me down in an underground corridor. After five minutes five guys came and started to beat me. I was still blindfolded, but I was able to see a bit under the blindfold. They punched me in the face so I started bleeding from the nose. They left me alone when I pretended to be unconscious. Afterwards another guy came and smacked my head into the ground. Finally an officer came. They wanted to transfer me to a cell, but there was no room for anybody with broken legs so they transferred me to Hospital 601 instead. After six days in the hospital they took me back to 248. In the cell, two guards held my legs apart and beat me in the groin.

Nour, who was detained in February 2012 at a checkpoint in Homs and held for approximately two-and-a-half months in the "Palestine Branch" told Human Rights Watch that while in detention she and three other women who were held with her were repeatedly raped. Nour said that she suffered from amnesia as a result of her detention, however Human Rights Watch could not independently verify her condition. Nour, who has left the country, told Human Rights Watch that she could not remember her life before she was detained. She could not recall information such as her name, her age, or whether she was married and had children. She said:

The earliest thing I remember is being stopped at a checkpoint in Homs. I thought I was going to be detained but the soldiers there took me to an apartment where there were other girls ... I was there for two or three days and then they took me to Damascus to the Palestine Branch. They held me there for two-and-a-half to three months. There were three other women there ... They had a schedule. They would take turns with us. More than one man would rape you. It wasn't every day, but it was regular....

Sabah, who was detained in the Military Intelligence facility in Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib in November 2011, told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview that she had participated in demonstrations and prepared food and drink for demonstrators. She said that when she was detained she was beaten and groped:

The director asked me why I was going to demonstrations ... I didn't lie. He asked what I said in demonstrations and I told him ... Then he slapped me. I will not forget it. He told the boys to come take me ... they took me to a closed room. There were boxes in it. It was like a storage room. There were also broken chairs and other things. They took my abaya off. I was wearing jeans and a tee-shirt underneath,

and a guard tied my hands behind my back. I said, "A dog like you doesn't have a right to do anything [to touch me] ..." He grabbed my breasts. [Eventually] he let my arms untie. I said, "Beat me, shoot me, but don't put your hand on me." ... He came to grab my breasts again and I pushed him ... When I pushed him he fell on the boxes. Then he grabbed me by the chest and threw me against the wall. I fell and he started beating me with a stick. On the knee and on the ankle. My ankle was also broken [along with my hand]...

Former detainees also told Human Rights Watch that they had witnessed sexual abuse when they were in detention. Salim, the soldier arrested in June 2011, told Human Rights Watch that while he was detained in the Political Security branch in Latakia, a Brigadier General told him that he had to confess. Salim said:

He [the Brigadier General] told the guard to take my blindfold off. He wanted me to see with my own eyes how the other detainees were being tortured. He showed me the detainees. Two were being tortured. The interrogator and the guards were with me. He told me we will do this to you if you don't confess. They were putting them [the two detainees] on coke bottles. He told me their crime was going to demonstrations. They looked 24 or 25 years old. For five minutes they showed me this, their making them sit on the coke bottles. I put death in my mind. They took me to the end of the corridor to an empty room. Here they blindfolded me again. There were two guards and an interrogator with me in the room. They put me on my knees and started beating me on my back with a steel cable.

At least three adult male former detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch confirmed the presence and sexual abuse of adult women and male children in detention facilities across Syria. Samih, who had been held in the Political Security branch in Latakia, told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview that children were subjected to worse treatment than adults, including rape, specifically because they were children:

We were 70 to 75 people in a group cell that was three by three meters.... There were 15 and 16-year-old kids in the cell with us, six or seven of them with their fingernails pulled, their faces beaten. They treat the kids even worse than the adults. There is torture, but there is also rape for the boys. We would see them when the guards brought them back to the cell. It's indescribable. You can't talk about it. One boy came into the cell bleeding from behind. He couldn't walk. It was something they just did to the boys. We would cry for them.

Malik, a 28-year-old from Latakia who told Human Rights Watch that he took part in demonstrations, said in a face-to-face interview that he was detained in late March 2011 in Latakia in an ad hoc facility run by shabiha where female detainees were sexually assaulted:

There were 35 of us in my cell. We were all there because of participation in demonstrations. There were no children ... and no women, but you could hear the sound of women screaming. They were on the floor above us. They were being sexually assaulted, screaming, and yelling. We could hear the guards talking to them. We would cry listening to them...

Wissam, who was detained for several months in a number of facilities and released in November 2011, also told Human Rights Watch that he heard women being sexually assaulted while in detention:

They [the female detainees] were in a cell next to us ... This was in both the Air Force Intelligence branch and Military Intelligence branch in Homs ... From the noise it seemed to be a lot of women. We would hear that all day ... Some of them were detained because their husbands or brothers were wanted ... When the guards were screaming at them we would hear them say, "Let your son [who they wanted]

come and get you,” or, “Let your brother come and set you free.” They would respond with crying, saying, “I have nothing to do with it. I didn’t do anything.”

Evidence on Sexual Abuse During Home Raids and Ground Operations in Residential Areas

Maha, from Daraa, who described how government forces and shabiha raided her house looking for her husband, said that they assaulted her and threatened her with rape if he did not turn himself in:

We were sleeping, me and my girls all in one bed. I have five girls. They are aged from 12 years to nine months. They broke the door, it is just a regular wood door, and came in. The first room you enter in our house is where we were sleeping. I got out of bed and they said to me, “Where is your husband.” I said, “I don’t know. He left a long time ago.” Then the one standing next to me came at me. He tore my shirt and started grabbing my breasts. My chest was completely exposed and I started to scream. Each one of them had a gun with him. The one who grabbed me looked like shabiha. He was wearing civilian clothes. When he did this the others were searching the house ... The person in charge was outside. Someone came in and said, “the officer said to tell her that if he doesn’t turn himself in that she will see worse than this.” When he said this I feared rape ... [This person] was wearing plain green military clothes. He was clearly from the army.

Wafa, who lived with her family in Hayy Ashera, Homs told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview that a soldier tried to rape her while her husband hid during a home raid on March 8, 2012:

Two [soldiers] came into my house and ... asked me where my husband was. They were wearing camouflage. They had vests that were full of weapons, knives, bullets, etc ... I told them there were no armed people in the house and that my husband was traveling. I started to show them around the house – we had nothing to hide. One of them ... grabbed me when I went to open the pantry door. He grabbed my arm, and grabbed me by the side. I was afraid that if I screamed, my husband would hear from his hiding place [just outside the house] and would come up, but I did make some noise, and the other soldier heard me. He yelled, “Hey, leave her alone! Go out to the sitting area!” I thought if I made a noise we were all done for. He was trying to push me into the bedroom, and I was trying to pull myself back into the corridor ... We fled three days later.

Suha from al Qusayr, Homs, also told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview that the Syrian army raided her house a number of times during arrest operations. During one of these raids, she said shabiha raped her 28-year-old neighbor whose house was also raided:

I heard her screaming [when my house was being searched] and went to her house [after the army left]. She was hysterical, and we talked. She told me one attacked her. The other two were at the door. She resisted him. When he was done he let the other two in. They took her hijab off. Her face was cut and bleeding when I saw her. She was hysterical. Blood was coming down her face. When the army left she went to her family’s house. There are no communications so I don’t know what happened after that. Her two kids were sitting in the corner [during the attack].

Selma, from Karm al-Zeitoun, Homs told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview that she heard her neighbors being raped while hiding in her apartment in March 2012. She told Human Rights Watch that her family members had already fled the area and that she had returned home to pack clothing for her children when she realized she could no longer flee because the army and shabiha had entered her neighborhood:

I saw the security forces and the shabiha and I went into the house [and hid] ... My neighbor has girls. I heard her say to them, “Don’t let out a noise.” Our apartments are wall-to-wall ... They [the shabiha] came

to our building ... The door to my house was open still [as I left it when I was packing]. From my hiding place I could hear that someone came in and said "This one is empty, there is no one here"... They knocked on my neighbor's door ... One of them said, "Open or we will shoot." She did not open the door and they shot at it ... When they went in one said, "Why are you not opening the door?" She was saying, "Oh God, God forbid, don't come close to me." She said, "I will kiss your feet but don't come near us"... The girls were protesting. I could hear them saying not to grab the mother and she was just saying, "Don't touch my daughters." I could hear one girl fighting with one of them. He was saying, "Oh, you are going to scratch me too?" She pushed him and he shot her in the head. She was the oldest. 20 years old ... They grabbed the youngest. She was 12. You could hear her say, "Don't take my clothes off." The mother said, "This girl is 12." The youngest, I saw her [later], her sweater was torn, all the way down the front. They raped her and they raped the two others ... The other girls were 16 and 18 ... I waited, hiding after they left. I didn't move for one hour or so until the thwar (revolutionaries) came ... The girls had closed the door to their house and were crying ... I knocked on their door and said, "I am your neighbor let me in." The scene on the inside was unreal. The 12 year old was lying on the ground, blood to her knees. I told them to get up, that this happened against their will. More than one person had raped the 12 year old. I heard them from my hiding place, saying, "Come on, enough, my turn." She was torn the length of a forefinger. I will never go back there. It comes to me. I see it in my dreams and I just cry.

In a face-to-face interview Mansour, from Baba Amr, Homs told Human Rights Watch that when the army invaded in March 2012 that he knew from listening to her screams that his neighbor was sexually assaulted in her home by shabiha. In tears, he said:

Ten of them went into the house ... Her screaming filled the air. Afterward they killed her in the street. They took her out into the street with her kids. She has three boys and two girls. They were all killed ... we could see and hear the screaming from where we were ... You hear a woman screaming and there is nothing you can do to help.

Talal, a taxi driver from Homs told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview that shabiha apparently raped and killed a woman in her apartment in the Karm el Zeitoun neighborhood in Homs in April 2012. A close relative had called Talal, asking him to pick him up because his building had been attacked during the night. When he entered his relative's apartment building, Talal noticed that the door to the apartment below his relative's was open. When he and his relative entered the apartment they found a woman and a small child in the bedroom, both dead, apparently killed by knife wounds to the neck. Talal said the woman was naked from the waist down and had bruises on her thighs. His relative, who had hid in the attic during the night, said that he had seen the shabiha enter the building and that he had heard screams from the woman's apartment.

Khalid also described to Human Rights Watch the sexual violence that accompanied the mass displacement following the Syrian army's entry into the Baba Amr district of Homs in early March 2012:

One of my relatives – she is married with two kids – told me about how she was raped ... After her house was shelled she left with her husband and two kids to live with neighbors. When they were there, the army came in and arrested the men, and only women and children were left ... She said that 15 minutes later some army soldiers dressed as civilians came into the neighbor's house where she was and put her and the other women there in the living room of the house. One of the soldiers took her, and put her in a room with a guard ... She resisted him and he beat her. She showed me her hands. I saw her seven to eight days later. Her hands were still bruised. She tried to stop him, to beat him with her hands and legs but he said he would kill her two kids if she didn't give in ... [She said] he was dressed in military gear ... After that she fled from Baba Amr to al Qusayr. I saw her here. Her husband is still detained.

Yousef told Human Rights Watch that he watched soldiers from the security forces rape his wife during a military operation in Daraa on June 25, 2011. He said about 25 security agents and shabiha entered his house in the afternoon during house-to-house searches in the city. When the security forces had finished searching the house some left, leaving seven inside.

“They had handcuffed me and three of them were surrounding me,” he said. “Three others grabbed my wife and tore off her clothes and then the last guy raped her. They were all cursing and insulting us. There was nothing I could do to stop them. Then they took off the handcuffs and left.”

Security force and army defectors interviewed by Human Rights Watch face-to-face confirmed that women were sexually assaulted during home raids or detained during home raids so they could be assaulted.

Ghassan, a sergeant who defected from Brigade 18, Battalion 627, told Human Rights Watch that on the night of February 18, 2012, he was stationed at a small military camp outside of Zabadani, a town near Damascus, when a young woman, who may have been a minor, was brought to the camp and, he believes, raped by a captain when he forced her into an armored vehicle and held her there for two hours:

Some men wearing civilian clothes – I think they were intelligence or shabiha – came to the camp in a grey van with a girl around 16 to 19 wearing an abaya but her face was showing and her hands were handcuffed. They handed her to a captain at about 2:30 in the morning, who took her inside an armored vehicle. She was crying and screaming. I suspect she was arrested during one of the home raids in the area. I saw and heard this from about 150 meters away. The captain and the woman stayed in the tank until about 4:30 a.m. [when] a black van came and seven men dressed in black took the girl away.

Ahmed, an army defector from Division 10, Brigade 85, Battalion 37, also told Human Rights Watch that that in the second half of February 2012 a woman in Zabadani had been raped by a commander:

During the second part of February, at our camp, I heard members of the Hafiz al-Nizam (riot police) ... say that they raided a house with no men [in Zabadani]. They said they took out a young woman after blindfolding her and covering her mouth so that she couldn't speak or scream and put her in a vehicle. She was sent to a commander to be raped offsite.

Other defectors told Human Rights Watch that fellow officers bragged about raping women during home raids. Walid, the defector from Hafiz al-Nizam (riot police), told Human Rights Watch that other officers told him they had raped women during home raids in Daraa when they found women alone:

Last July I heard ... [a Major from the Brigade] boasting about raping a woman. He was describing an incident that happened in the days or weeks before. He joked that during that house raid, “When I fucked the woman, she made a lot of noise because I must have pleased her so much.” A colleague responded, “You are not as clever as me, when I have sex with one of these women, I bind their mouths so that they don't make any sounds. I don't want people listening in.”

Toufiq, the defector who belonged to a security force mudahama (raid) unit, told Human Rights Watch that a friend in his unit admitted to having participated in a gang rape of two women during a home raid in November 2011 in Homs. He saw video on his friend's cellphone that confirmed the gang rape.

He told me that the young women were taken to a military base and raped for two consecutive nights before they were released ... the men demanded that the two sisters have sex with them at the base but they protested that they were virgins and begged to keep their virginity. He told me that they threatened

the women by brandishing a weapon, after which they complied ... On the first clip of the video, I saw the two women being pulled by their hair from their homes and taken into vehicles. In another video, I heard one of the men speaking to the women while they were at the base. He said, "If you don't have sex with us, I am going to kill you." I saw both women crying, pleading with the men to let them go home. Some of the five men held one of the women down, one pulled her hair while another ripped off her clothes and then they proceeded to rape her. The second woman was raped as well and I saw the rape on the video. The women were held in the same room. In total I saw five men and recognized all of them but I can't give their names especially since one of them is a good friend.

Limited Services for Sexual Violence Victims

Syrian survivors of sexual assault are reluctant to report sexual violence and seek treatment because of rampant stigma and the fear of reprisals by the attackers. Even if they seek help, survivors in Syria have limited access to medical or psychological treatment and other services due to a dearth of resources and inadequate mechanisms to facilitate and ensure access to appropriate health and other services. One Syrian women's rights activist, Leila, told Human Rights Watch that she and her friends have tried to fill the service gap for women and girls by providing underground medical services, including abortion services, and safe shelter in Syria.

In May 2012, Leila said that her group had supported a family of three women, including two teenage girls, ages 14 and 21, after 10shabiha gang raped them in Homs during a home raid. The husband was killed trying to protect them. Leila told Human Rights Watch that they assisted the family after they relocated to a different city in Syria by finding them shelter, providing them with money, and assisting the 14-year-old girl in getting treatment for a sexually transmitted infection contracted during the attack. The mother and girls have not been able to get any psychological support.

Farah, a woman from Homs with medical training, also told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview about the limited services she and others working in field hospitals in Homs were able to provide to female rape victims. She told Human Rights Watch that she cared for the injured during Syrian government ground operations in Hayy Ashera, Karm al-Zeitoun, and Nazheen, Homs in March 2012 and that through this work she had encountered a number of female rape victims, including children, some of whom had been killed. She said the services they were able to provide were limited to giving victims stitches if their genital skin was torn from the attack, providing them with aspirin, and helping them stop their bleeding. Describing the military operation in Hayy Ashera she said.

There were around seven girls [who were brought to] ... the field hospital that had been killed. Some of them had been stabbed. You could see the knife marks. If they resisted they were beaten, you could see the marks. They were not wearing clothes on the bottom half, and above they were torn ... There were five girls that came that were alive, that had been raped ... They were blue and bruised ... You could tell from their wounds that they were raped, most of them were girls (virgins) not women so it was obvious, they had blood running down their legs. We would give them a shot ... to stop the bleeding and I would sew them up below [if their skin was torn]. I gave one three stiches, another four stiches. One girl was cut from front to back ... I used six stiches to sew her together.

Farah also said that she saw six or seven young women and girls in a field hospital in Nazheen, Homs, after the military operation there in March and that she treated three teenage sisters, whose ages she approximated at 14, 16, and 18, who had been raped in their house in Karm al-Zeitoun in March 2012 after the army invaded.

Syrian women who have fled to neighboring countries also face obstacles in seeking treatment, even if services are available. In Jordan, a humanitarian assistance provider working with Syrian refugees told Human Rights Watch that her group is prepared to provide services to survivors of sexual abuse but that no victims have come forward. She said that barriers to assistance included social taboos surrounding sexual abuse and the fear of being subjected to honor crimes. She noted that there was also a need to build capacity to meet the needs of male sexual abuse survivors, who require different services and expertise.

A representative from a local women's rights nongovernmental organization working with Syrian female rape victims in Jordan told Human Rights Watch in a face-to-face interview that some women seeking their services had to do so secretly, without telling their families. The representative said that the local group could not provide statistics on the numbers of rape survivors they were seeing but that in her field office in Ramtha, near the border with Syria, she had seen cases since February or March 2012 and that they were able to provide assistance to the victims. She noted that the numbers of those seeking assistance varied, saying, "One week you may get several cases and then a month may go by and you won't see any."

The Lebanese Council to Resist Violence against Woman told Human Rights Watch that their ability to provide assistance to sexual abuse survivors in Tripoli, Lebanon depended on funding. The Council's president said, "We will provide [Syrian sexual assault] victims with social, medical and legal services ...[but] unfortunately, if we don't have enough funding we will not be able to continue with the program."

Four community leaders in Lebanon who provide assistance to Syrian refugees separately told Human Rights Watch that no services were available to victims of sexual abuse in the Bekaa region, where there is a concentration of Syrian refugees. Human Rights Watch interviewed Sheikh Ayman from the Al Azhar Institute in Majdal Anjar, Lebanon, who is working to register and distribute aid to Syrian refugees in the Bekaa. He said: "We heard about two women who were raped in Syria but of course nobody will talk about it. There are no organizations working on the issue in the Bekaa." Others who said there were no organizations working on the issue in the area included the mayor of Majdel Anjar, Anwar Hamzeh.