

Brief Report: On International Women's Day... Syrian Women Continue to Suffer from the Worst Types of Violations

At Least 28,316 Females Have Been Killed and at Least 9,668 Females Are Still Detained or Forcibly Disappeared

SNHR

SYRIAN NETWORK FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

الشبكة السورية لحقوق الإنسان

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The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), founded in June 2011, is a non-governmental, independent group that is considered a primary source for the OHCHR on all death toll-related analyses in Syria.



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I. Introduction

The popular uprising and the demand for political change in a country like Syria, which is governed by a longstanding authoritarian regime that minutely controls even citizens' most mundane movements in an Orwellian fashion through its widespread security apparatuses, is rightly seen as a major challenge and a heroic action by the Syrian people against a murderous system, which will undoubtedly bring with it harsh retaliation and frightening challenges. There is no doubt that these conditions and challenges multiplied after the popular uprising turned into an internal armed conflict; these challenges are particularly severe for women within Syrian society, due to the economic and social norms that govern Syrian society. It would be no exaggeration to state that Syrian women who participated in the process of political change have been exposed to the same types of brutal violations as the Syrian regime inflicted against their male peers since the earliest days of the popular uprising. Even in the face of these terrible abuses, Syrian women have continued to play a central and vital role in the uprising for freedom and democracy, paying a horrendous price for their participation in the march towards democracy, dignity and human rights. In retaliation for their heroic involvement in working for freedom and justice, Syrian women have been subjected to killing, arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, torture, sexual violence, forced displacement, and other abuses among the long list of violations committed during the Syrian conflict. These abuses have not been practiced solely by the Syrian regime, although it is by far the largest perpetrator, but are also inflicted by the other parties, even if the level, type and magnitude of the crimes differs. Women in areas controlled by extremist Islamist groups have also suffered numerous dangers and challenges, including restrictions on freedom of clothing, movement, and expression, as well as being subjected to various challenges in the areas under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) forces, and those controlled by the Armed Opposition.



Fadel Abdul Ghany, Chairman of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, says:

“Despite the sensitivity of violations against women and the clear condemnation by the provisions of international law to these violations, we note a complete failure to implement protection for women in Syria, firstly by the Security Council, and, secondly, by the international community. Many of the violations against women, which amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes, have barely received any censure, let alone sufficient levels of condemnation and denunciation, or at the very least any effort to exert economic and political pressure to alleviate them even if they cannot be immediately ended.”

II. Nine Years of Continuous Violations Against Syrian Women

The terrible violations against Syrian women in the context of the Syrian uprising, which began nine years ago, have escalated gradually, amounting to crimes against humanity, particularly in the case of many violations mainly committed by the Syrian regime such as: killing, enforced disappearance and torture. Worst of all has been the relentless continuation of these violations over the months and years, constituting an unprecedented insult to women not only on International Women’s Day but on every other day of the year, with these horrific violations inflicted against Syrian women for nine years and up to the current day reaching the level of crimes against humanity and completely destabilizing Syrian society, with also the UN Security Council, the international community, and the civilized countries having been unable to take any firm action to stop these crimes. In addition, we have not seen anything like the level of solidarity, advocacy and assistance which Syrian women deserve from the vast majority of women’s organizations worldwide, many of which were founded in order to protect women, raise awareness about abuses of women, and advocate for women’s rights and dignity.

The basic rights of Syrian women have deteriorated at all levels, including in the areas of security, social, economic and health issues, including psychological issues, due to the violent practices by all parties to the internal armed conflict. Whilst it’s true that all sections of Syrian society have been adversely affected by the repercussions of the conflict, women have been worst affected, firstly because of their multiple roles and responsibilities as mothers and caregivers, and secondly due to their social and health status. Females in Syria – both children and adults - have also been subjected to various types of violations, including extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, torture and executions, enforced disappearances, sexual violence, forced displacement, siege, and denial of healthcare and basic services, with many of these violations, particularly the killing, torture and enforced disappearance, being the worst in the world.



Syrian women and girls have not been accidental victims of the conflict, but have rather been directly and deliberately targeted; females have been targeted either because of their active contribution to social, humanitarian, political, human rights, relief, medical, and media work, or simply because they are females, with the aim of marginalizing and breaking them, as part of the regime's efforts to suppress and intimidate society and deter any further opposition to the authorities, particularly since the status of women in Syrian society is still strongly linked to tradition, customs and beliefs. Women have also been subjected to other types of violations, including restrictions on work, education, clothing, expression, and access to adequate healthcare in areas controlled by ISIS and Hay'at Tahrir al Sham, as well as forced conscription in areas controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, along with persecution, threats, intimidation and extortion in areas under the control of factions of the Armed Opposition. They have also suffered in many cases from the loss of their family breadwinners and from enduring unimaginably stressful living conditions in the context of displacement and of early and coerced marriage.

The internal armed conflict has imposed onerous burdens and massive changes on Syrian women; the high death toll and the disappearance of large numbers of men from society has led to women bearing an additional burden, as the percentage of households headed by women increased. This has led to many women being forced to assume new roles in addition to their customary ones, subjecting them to stressful and complex living conditions that are difficult to cope with, often outweighing their physical and emotional capabilities, with the constant stress, lack of security and social care due to the loss of husbands or brothers, and the paralysis of the educational process, amongst other challenges, having a catastrophic effect on their mental and emotional wellbeing. The lack of sufficiently competent organizations specializing in caring for and supporting Syrian women inside Syria or in countries of asylum has further aggravated this already intense suffering.

III. Record of the Most Notable Violations Against Syrian Women According to SNHR's Database

In this brief report, issued to mark the occasion of International Women's Day, which falls on March 8th each year, we update our records of the most notable violations against Syrian women, as documented in the SNHR's database from March 2011 until March 2020. This record notes that the violations against women are continuing up to this moment, and that the suffering of Syrian women remains the cruelest and most severe in the world in many respects. In addition, it should be emphasized that this data represents the bare minimum of the violations perpetrated in light of the difficulties encountered in the documentation processes.



A. Extrajudicial killing

Between March 2011 and March 2020, SNHR documented the deaths of at least 28,316 females at the hands of the main perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria, distributed according to the main perpetrator parties as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces (army, security, local militias, and Shiite foreign militias):** 21,933 females, including 10,021 female children and 11,912 adult females.
- **Russian forces:** 1,578 females, including 610 adult females and 968 adult females.
- **ISIS (the self-proclaimed 'Islamic State'):** 980 females, including 394 female children and 586 adult females.
- **Extremist Islamist groups**
 - o Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (an alliance composed of Fateh al Sham Front and a number of factions of the Armed Opposition): 81 females, including five female children and 76 adult females.
- **Factions of the Armed Opposition:** 1,307 females, including 433 female children and 874 adult females.
- **Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the Democratic Union Party):** 250 females, including 92 female children and 158 adult females.
- **US-led coalition:** 959 females, including 303 female children and 656 adult females.
- **Other parties:** 1,228 females, including 437 female children and 791 adult females.

B. Arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance

Between March 2011 and March 2020, SNHR documented that at least 9,668 females are still detained or forcibly disappeared at the hands of the main perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria, distributed according to the main perpetrator parties as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** 8,156 females, including 234 female children and 7,913 adult females.
- **ISIS:** 249 females, including 24 female children and 225 adult females.
- **Extremist Islamist groups**
 - o Hay'at Tahrir al Sham: 29 adult females.
- **Factions of the Armed Opposition:** 851 females, including 68 female children and 783 adult females.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** 383 females, including 214 female children and 783 adult females.



C. Female deaths due to torture

According to SNHR's database, between March 2011 and March 2020, at least 90 females died due to torture at the hands of the main perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria, distributed according to the main perpetrator parties as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** 72 females, including 27 female children and 45 adult females.
- **ISIS:** 14 adult females.
- **Factions of the Armed Opposition:** One adult female.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** Two adult females.
- **Other parties:** One adult female.

D. Sexual violence

The SNHR estimates that at least 11,523 incidents of sexual violence have been committed by the perpetrator parties to the conflict in Syria, distributed according to the perpetrator parties as follows:

- **Syrian Regime forces:** 8,013 incidents of sexual violence, including 871 incidents in detention centers and at least 443 cases of sexual violence against girls under the age of 18.
- **ISIS:** 3,487.
- **Factions of the Armed Opposition:** 11.
- **Syrian Democratic Forces:** 12.

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Additional Protocols thereto of 1977 clearly provide for the protection of women from attacks on their honor, personal dignity and from degrading and humiliating treatment. The practices of the Syrian regime and other parties to the conflict constitute a flagrant violation of the Geneva Conventions and the provisions of international law.
- At the 2005 Summit, states unanimously agreed that each country had a responsibility to protect its population from crimes against humanity and war crimes. This responsibility entails the prevention of such crimes, the prevention of incitement to commit them by all possible means, and when the state clearly fails to protect its population from egregious crimes, or is itself committing such crimes as in the case of the Syrian regime, asserts that it is the responsibility of the international community to intervene to take protective measures in a collective, decisive and timely manner.
- The failure of the protective mechanisms established by international law mechanisms and consequently the loss of any protection for Syrian women from atrocious violations is one of the worst betrayals that Syrian women have suffered.



- Most international instruments and covenants, such as the Geneva Convention, its two Additional Protocols, international humanitarian law, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights have given special protection to women in their articles, in all circumstances, due to their special needs, but in the Syrian conflict hardly any of the parties have applied any of these articles, making Syria a location where international law has apparently been effectively suspended, with violations greeted with absolute indifference. These are exactly the conditions which totalitarian states like Russia and Iran wish to normalize, with a comprehensive collapse of the norms of international law in the eyes of the world's peoples enabling tyrants and dictatorial regimes to invoke the law of the jungle with impunity.

Recommendations:

- The UN Security Council must adopt a binding resolution on the fundamental rights of women, providing absolute protection for women from indiscriminate killings and any attacks on their honor, in particular against rape, forced prostitution and any defilement of women, and must demand urgent assistance for forcibly displaced females, in addition to demanding the immediate release of female detainees and taking real action to end the horrendous violations perpetrated against them which threaten to severely undermine the security and stability of Syria and the region for decades.
- Donor parties and relief organizations must provide medical, psychological, rehabilitation and other multisector services to adult and juvenile female victims, giving priority especially to pregnant women and to nursing and lactating mothers.
- The parties to the conflict must spare women from the scourge of war by taking all necessary steps to ensure that all forms of violations against women are stopped, and to ensure that women deprived of their liberty are placed in separate detention facilities from men.
- The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences should intensify his efforts in Syria, given the horrendous level of violence committed against Syrian women, in particular by the Syrian government itself, which exceeds that shown by any other government in the world, most especially women in the detention centers of the Syrian regime and its security services.
- Feminist organizations worldwide should advocate for Syrian women and speak out against the horrific violations they are exposed to, whose level and magnitude has no comparable contemporary peer at the global level, and should organize more events and projects to help rehabilitate the survivors of detention, torture and forced displacement.





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