

Male rape and sexual torture in the Syrian war: 'It is everywhere'

When Sarah Chynoweth was asked to report on sexual violence against men and boys in the Syria crisis, she had no idea of the scale of the problem

By Sarah Chynoweth

The Guardian (21.11.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2jbNXze> – Last year I agreed to undertake a fact-finding mission for the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, on sexual violence against men and boys in the Syrian crisis. We knew that many women and girls were being targeted for rape and other sexualised violence, but we didn't know much about what was happening to men and boys. Drawing on a few existing reports, I assumed some boys were being victimised, as well as some men in detention centres, but that sexual violence against males was not common. I worried that few refugees would have heard of any accounts and that they wouldn't talk to me about such a taboo topic anyway. I couldn't have been more wrong.

In October 2016, I landed in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, where more than 200,000 Syrian refugees had fled. The UNHCR arranged for a translator and discussions with refugees at a nearby camp. I met with the first group, eight Syrian men who had fled the war. I asked them about their lives in the camp, how they were getting by, and what their main concerns were. Once we had established some rapport, I tentatively probed whether they had heard of any reports of

sexual violence against men or boys in Syria. They looked at me incredulously, as if they couldn't believe that I was asking such a basic question, saying: "Yes, of course. It is everywhere. It is happening [from] all sides."

I was surprised at their response and their candour. I was also sceptical: rumours are rampant in war zones. Had they heard any accounts from someone they knew personally? Again, resounding replies of "yes" from the men. As I met with more and more refugees – almost 200 across Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan and Lebanon – I received similar responses, and was inundated with heartbreaking stories.

In Lebanon, a Palestinian man who had lived his entire life in Syria asked to speak with me after the group discussion. He told me how armed men had entered his village and raped him. The experience had left him devastated, and he was too emotionally distraught to work, even though he had to care for his younger sister.

In Jordan, one young Syrian man told me about his uncle, who had been randomly detained. While in detention, his captors sexually tortured him. After his release, he stopped eating and became an alcoholic, dying from liver failure soon after.

A number of women described how men changed after these experiences – isolating themselves, no longer interested in sex, and at times becoming violent. Some were not able to work because of the physical and mental impact of the violence, putting their families at risk of poverty.

I met one man who suffered from painful and debilitating injuries as a result of sexual torture, and a few aid workers said anal injuries were not uncommon for men who had been detained.

The accounts were heart-rending and horrific. They were also abundant. At a large refugee camp in Jordan, I met a group of women who were eager to talk about the issue. According to them, men and boys are routinely sexually abused during detention in Syria, a comment echoed by other refugees, and scores of men had been detained by different armed groups. I asked them to guesstimate how many men in the camp had undergone sexual violence while in detention. They said, "Between 30% and 40%. We cannot think of any family who doesn't have someone [who was detained and sexually abused]."

Other refugees told me how armed groups would conduct raids on homes, during which "they raped everyone" – both women and men. I heard that phrase a number of times from refugees across the three countries.

People said that after having fled to neighbouring countries, some younger boys were being sexually victimised by older boys and men, who lured them with promises of food or money. A few women said that their sons were too scared to go to school, afraid of being sexually assaulted on the way or at the school by their peers.

What surprised me most were accounts of sexual exploitation at work. An 18-year-old Syrian man who was working two jobs was the first person to tell me about it. He described how his

boss demanded sexual favours before paying his wages. He felt he couldn't refuse because he had to care for his mother and two sisters; his despair and shame were palpable. It was a story I would hear from other refugee men and boys, many of whom were working without a legal permit. Faced with grinding poverty, diminishing aid and intense pressures to provide for their families, they felt they had no choice but to submit.

I also met with a group of gay and transgender refugees who faced the double stigma of being both refugees and sexual and gender minorities. One gay man told me how, in Syria, he had been detained for four months, during which he and other male detainees were raped anally with sticks and bottles. He still experiences pain when sitting. He had fled to a neighbouring country, but didn't find safety there. He was again sexually assaulted by a local gang as well as by a security guard. He knew he was still at risk.

Other members of the group shared disturbing accounts of sexual assault by taxi drivers, neighbours, landlords and military personnel. They were too afraid to report these to the police, who could assault them again, or even arrest them under laws addressing "public morality" or "unnatural practices".

In Jordan I met a group of psychotherapists who specialised in treating torture survivors, and asked them why sexual torture was being used in this conflict. They said torture was designed to inflict deep psychological pain that disrupts one's sense of self. In places such as Syria, where same-sex sexual activity is strictly forbidden and traditional gender roles are entrenched, the use of sexualised torture against men and boys is unsurprising.

Studies from other wars where sexual violence was documented – such as in Liberia, northern Uganda and the former Yugoslavia – also show that men and boys are targeted for a range of sexualised violence. Wartime sexual violence is a complex issue, but it can also be a very effective way to humiliate, terrorise and subjugate women and men.

And though women and girls are the main victims during conflict and displacement – with an estimated one out of five forcibly displaced women having suffered sexual violence, and this is likely to be an underestimate – it doesn't mean the number of male survivors is small. For example, a 2010 study in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo found that almost one-quarter of men in selected conflict-affected territories had experienced sexual violence: an estimated 760,000 men. LGBTI people are particularly at risk of sexual violence in detention and as refugees.

The good news is that some humanitarian organisations are beginning to recognise the issue and are providing basic services for male survivors. But much more is needed to prevent this violence and to provide support and care to the men and boys who have been sexually victimised. This work should complement and, where possible, reinforce, programmes for women and girls, who bear the brunt of sexual violence and who face myriad forms of violence, discrimination, and subjugation.

In our report we ask for improved advocacy and staffing, and more data. But we also ask donors to fund desperately needed programmes in this area. Key to preventing and responding to sexual violence against men and boys is raising awareness, sensitising aid personnel, and working with communities to

establish targeted programmes. This cannot be achieved without funding. Money for programmes addressing violence against women and girls is already scarce, and additional targeted funding for men, boys, and sexual and gender minorities is needed. The US is one of the few donor governments that has provided funding to address sexual violence against men and boys in humanitarian settings.

The Trump administration has proposed steep cuts to the 2018 international affairs budget, which would impact overseas development aid and support for UN agencies. This would be devastating not just for Syrians, but for the 65 million people worldwide grappling with the horrors of war, disaster and displacement – and, in some cases, sexual violence.

The cuts would be catastrophic for smaller and often local organisations, which provide life-saving services in dangerous settings where few if any international humanitarian agencies operate. Most of the organisations providing care to male sexual violence survivors in the areas I visited were local women's, LGBTI and human rights groups, many of which relied on funding from the UN and other international agencies supported by the US government.

Stories of the refugees I met remind us that the proposed cuts would affect the life chances of some of the world's most vulnerable people. These men and boys – like all those surviving war and disaster – deserve and have a right to protection, support and good quality care.

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