



# VIOLENCE PERPETRATED BY STATE ACTORS

16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER VIOLENCE  
16 DÍAS DE ACTIVISMO CONTRA LA VIOLENCIA DE GÉNERO  
16 JOURS D'ACTIVISME CONTRE LA VIOLENCE DE GENRE  
25 NOV - 10 DEC <http://16dayscwgl.rutgers.edu>



**Sexual and Gender-Based Violence by State Actors** - Even in places where there is no recognized conflict, militarized violence against civilians by uniformed personnel, such as the police, military, and prison guards, takes place. Militarism tends to privilege a particular form of aggressive masculinity, wherein sexual violence is a tool that is used to assert power over others. Women and men who do not conform to particular traditional gender roles may experience specific forms of sexualized harassment and violence. For example, during the protests in Egypt, the military rounded up a number of female protestors and subjected them to degrading “virginity tests” and threatened them with prostitution charges. Additional examples of sexual and gender-based violence by state agents include: high rates of sexual violence within the military, threats by police to women reporting cases of violence or assault, violations committed by peacekeeping forces, and violence against women living and working around military bases.

While many argue that the people who perpetrate gender-based violence are simply ‘bad individuals’ acting on their own, the examples above point to the ways in which such violence is implicated in specific social, political and security systems. In addition to the culture of violence in which uniformed personnel may be trained, pervasive impunity and lack of accountability are major barriers to the true safety and security of civilians, and women and girls in particular. Militaries have their own, separate justice codes and courts, often making it difficult for civilian victims/survivors to seek and obtain justice. Lack of political will to investigate and address violations can also result in impunity for perpetrators. Other individuals in positions of authority may believe they can commit crimes because they are ‘above the law.’ Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish between violence by state agents and state-encouraged violence by perceived non-state actors. Governments may also use private security companies, proxy militias, and hired paramilitaries to act out violence and avoid responsibility for attacks on civilians.

The police and military have a prominent, although complicated, role in our understanding of safety and security. We often turn to them as a way of responding to crimes and disasters, stabilizing conflict situations, or accessing justice systems. Sometimes these state agents may act against civilians, either upon government orders or because they are able to commit crimes with impunity. The state, using the police or military, has the ability to inflict violence and intimidation on a far greater scale than individual actors. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that the state must be responsible to its people, that state agents must be held accountable for any violations, and that the ‘security sector’ should be guided by human rights principles.

## Selma’s Account, Syria

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: “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 *thuwar* (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.”

*Excerpted from:*

Amnesty International. 2004. “Democratic Republic of Congo: Mass rape – time for remedies.” <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR62/018/2004>

## Suggested Actions

- **Raise Your Voice – CWGL’s Security Project:** In your life, what does it take to feel secure? What does security mean to you? Submit your thoughts: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/cwglsecurityproject> and learn more: <http://www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/program-areas/gender-based-violence/security-project>. You can also check out “The Security Project” in the 2012 Take Action Kit.

### **Share this initiative:**

- Share this project with networks and friends
  - Post the survey on social media sites
  - Tweet: #mysecurity
  - Add the link to your email signature
  - Email us at [16days@cwgl.rutgers.edu](mailto:16days@cwgl.rutgers.edu) if you would like us to speak at your event about this project
- **Investigate:** Research the rules that govern your country’s military and the type of justice system in place to deal with any violations of those rules. What happens if a military service member commits a crime against a civilian - male and female? What are the rates of domestic violence in military families, and how do they compare to national statistics? Is there a system for reporting sexual violence within the military? Share your findings with women’s rights, human rights and peace organizations near you.
  - **Network:** If state agents are known as perpetrators of violence against civilians where you are, reach out to other women’s rights, peace and human rights organizations in your community or country to discuss possible avenues to increase transparency and government accountability. Countries that have signed on to human rights treaties and covenants are legally bound to protect the rights of their peoples. Consider reaching out to international networks that can help you name and shame perpetrators.
  - **Find positive role models:** Ask former members of the military who are sympathetic to your work to serve as positive role models for current service members. Prior to deploying troops or peacekeepers, create empathy for women and girls by sharing women’s experiences of violence at the hands of state agents.
  - **Dialogue:** Are there any female police officers or soldiers in your community? If so, what was/is their training like? What kinds of jobs do they do? Invite them for a conversation about women’s participation and how to engage in security sector reform and gender-aware trainings.

## Resources

- Enloe, Cynthia. (2007) *Globalization & Militarism: Feminists Make the Link*. <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780742541115>.
- Hans, Asha and Betty A. Reardon. (2010) *The Gender Imperative: Human Security vs. State Security*. <http://www.taylorandfrancis.com/books/details/9780415585774/>.
- United Nations Development Programme. (1994) *New Dimensions of Human Security*. Available online: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr1994/>.
- Democratic Control of the Armed Forces: <http://www.dcaf.ch/>
- Human Rights First: <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/>
- Human Rights Watch: <http://www.hrw.org/>
- Nobel Women’s Initiative: <http://nobelwomensinitiative.org/>
- Women Human Rights Defenders: <http://www.defendingwomen-defendingrights.org/>
- Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom: <http://www.wilpfinternational.org/>