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“Women Under ISIS Rule: From Brutality to Recruitment”

Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee

U.S. House of Representatives

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Good morning and thank you to the House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel, and other Members of the Committee, for this opportunity to testify before you today on this important and timely subject: “Women under ISIS Rule: From Brutality to Recruitment.”

My name is Dr. Kathleen Kuehnast. I am a socio-cultural anthropologist and direct Gender and Peacebuilding at the United States Institute of Peace. The U.S. Congress created the Institute 30 years ago with a mandate to prevent, mitigate and resolve violent conflicts around the world. The Institute does so by engaging directly in conflict zones and by providing analysis, education and resources to those working for peace. USIP experts work on the ground in some of the world’s most volatile regions, collaborating with U.S. government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to foster peace and stability.

My statement reflects my own views, and does not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Institute of Peace. The Institute does not take positions on policy and is prohibited in its statute from taking positions on legislation.

The Situation Today

Sexual violence must be seen by Congress and in U.S. foreign policy as a security issue. It is not simply a women’s issue although many of its victims are women. Through UN Security Council Resolutions like 1325 and 1820, sexual violence is framed as a peace and security issue. For the sake of this testimony, sexual violence may include individual rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, sexual torture, genital mutilation and sexual humiliation.

How best should the US Government respond to the horrifying accounts coming out of ISIS-controlled areas?

Mr. Watts in his intense film brings the viewer face to face with the brutal treatment of women by ISIS. The recounting of the selling, raping, and stoning of women and girls acts not only as a witness to this human atrocity but is also a compelling counter argument for young people contemplating joining what can be described as a medieval-style gang.

Dr. Ahram describes how sexual violence is a systematic crime that targets children, boys and girls under 15 years of age. At an age when children are seeking affiliation and sorting out their identities, ISIS is attacking the society in order to destroy the ties of kinship and rearrange the lines of loyalty.

Ms. Havlicek takes us into the minds of international girls who are enticed into a web of evil. ISIS uses imagery of empowered women and manipulates them for their extremist cause and a sense of belonging to their movement.

Each of these experts’ contributions is critical to understanding the current situation.

Sexual Violence is a Security Issue

When sexual violence is used in war or by extremists' groups to achieve their ends, it can be even more devastating than a gun. Major General Patrick Cammaert, a retired UN force commander in Eastern Congo, said that "sexual violence is cheaper than a bullet, and far more effective" in its efforts to destroy an individual, a group, or a society.

As ISIS captures land, resources, and people, it has borrowed a page out of the history of other wars where deploying sexual violence destroyed families, communities and the moral fiber of a society.

Impact on Society

For women and girls, the results of sexual violence, perpetrated individually or on a mass scale by ISIS, can include social exclusion, isolation, or even suicide. Or in the case of some Muslim societies like Iraq, murder by a family member in order to, quote, preserve the family's honor, unquote. There is no easy path to healing from rape and sexual violence. It is a long-term process and must be a part of the healing and reconciliation in post-conflict situations.

Although women and girls are more often the target of sexual violence, in some armed conflicts men and boys are also victims. Male rape is much more a taboo in many societies, and thus is rarely addressed in reintegration and reconciliation efforts after the conflict.

Sexual violence in conflict is a peace and security issue. It cannot be resolved by women alone. Nor can healing happen in isolation. It must be an inclusive effort of the society in which victims and survivors live.

Therefore, our work at the U.S. Institute of Peace defines gender as the dynamic relationship between men and women, and masculine and feminine identities. This dynamic is especially relevant in states experiencing violent conflict.

It is essential to define security concerns through a full gender lens. As Texas A & M political scientist Valerie Hudson notes, there is a direct correlation between countries where gender equality exists and more peaceful states and stable economies.

Last year when I testified before this Committee on "Engaging and Educating Women and Girls in the Prevention of Violent Conflict and Violent Extremism," I emphasized that it is not enough to support girls going to school. We must also engage fathers, brothers and sons in learning about gender equality, to further enable a more capable and more inclusive state. But also to help end violence as a means of resolving conflict.

In the same way, the policymaking community needs analysis and programming on how to help societies that have fused "manhood" and "violence" together. If the only way to become an adult male in your society is through a rite of passage involving violence and war, then the chances for peace and security are significantly reduced. The impact for women of this hyper masculine notion of manhood can be devastating.

A Focus on Children

It is alarming the way extremists' groups are reaching into the hearts and minds of very young men, under 14 years of age, to entice them with promises of belonging, and a violent sense of power over women and girls.

That's why I believe the next security and peacebuilding arena deserving of our full attention is Children, Peace and Security.

This identifies both the humanitarian services and protections needed for boys and girls in every kind of war and every type of refugee camp, and also the need to fight those who would make children the weapons of a new war.

Over the past year, reports have emerged that ISIS is less interested in youth over 14 years of old. Instead, they are setting their sights on young children. This includes using the tactic of sexual violence in the form of kidnapping girls, enslaving them, and reselling them. Boys are used as armed fodder-- as human bombs and executioners.

In March of this year, the London-based monitoring group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, reported that ISIS has recruited at least 400 children this year — far more than the number of new adult recruits. ISIS refers to them as “tiny terrorists.” Children are used to execute prisoners, in combat missions and as spies in families and neighborhoods, markets and schools.

Children are more malleable than young adults. They offer less resistance when threatened with violent acts of terrorism on their communities, on their family members and, on their bodies and minds. We must also recognize that children are able to find a way out of horrific human conditions. Yet, they can also take the opposite path and directly engage in violent acts.

Because we are not collecting complete data on girls and boys, we are not fully tracking this ISIS recruitment effort. The Observatory reports that “boys as young as six are recruited into “Ashbal al- Khilafah," which translates to “the Cubs of Lions of the Caliphate.” The UK's Quilliam Foundation, an anti-extremist think tank, compares it to Hitler's Youth program—a core ideological and military training for hate.

The boys — often lured in with bribes of money and weapons — are shipped off to camps where they learn how to shoot rifles. They learn to behead dolls first, and then to execute human hostages.

The reality of ISIS trolling for children is something that should cause us all great anxiety. We have inadequate data to fully understand what is happening in front of our eyes. And we are only beginning to understand the online and social platform recruiting methods targeted to children. If we are to fight this trend, we need better data on how many children are being recruited or snatched, what is happening to them in these camps, and how they can be rescued and returned to society.

In 1980, I spent time at Corrymeela, a reconciliation camp in Northern Ireland during the troubles. Every night five and six year old Protestants and Catholics alike would tell me their stories of terror. I learned how early hatred is taught. I learned that vengeance helps even young children rationalize violence.

Such narratives of hate are now so easily conveyed through social media. A week ago, the U.S. Institute of Peace along with USAID and the Department of State hosted a conference on Women and Countering Violent Extremism. One of the keynote speakers, UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, Zainab Bangura, stated that ISIS is using modern communications in service of a “medieval agenda.” She stressed, “Information is ISIS’s oxygen, and we must suffocate them.” By employing the best of the free world’s technology, ironically ISIS has infiltrated social platforms like Facebook and Twitter and is recruiting young people every day.

Indeed, one of the White House Countering Violent Extremism work streams focuses on youth, and this is critical. These civil society reports, however, suggest that more is needed – both data as well as interventions – and greater focus should be on children under 14 years of age. This is especially pertinent when in terms of the growing refugee crisis.

It is worth remembering that there are more displaced people in the world today than any time since World War II. The UN refugee agency reported in 2014 that the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people worldwide has exceeded 50 million people. And this includes many, many children.

Idleness among boys and girls in refugee camps is dangerous. We must more fully engage kids in active, creative learning. If ISIS is paying families for their boys to pick up a gun, and their girls to be captured for sexual slavery or as child brides, what kinds of alternatives can be offered to the families so that children can pick up a pencil and learn while they are in these camps? We need to be looking at ways to engage children with critical analysis and a skill set that leads them away from ISIS, not toward it.

Unless the international community, led by the U.S., tackles the massive and growing refugee crisis head on, these children will grow up without the capacity to ever become engaged citizens.

We are at that pivotal point in history. We are at an urgent reckoning of the human condition as we see the rapid decrease of safe spaces for civil society to operate within. At the same time, ISIS is all about building a new world -- a world that looks to us more like the Dark Ages with its use of ancient torture and violent acts ISIS has made it its mission to enslave women and girls as a key strategy toward building this new world order. And sexual violence is at the heart of their tactics.

Recommendations

The U.S. needs to demonstrate action moving forward.

- Recognize that children need food for their minds as well as food for their bodies. Encourage greater attention to education in refugee camps as a step in that direction.
- Develop age-sensitive “exit” ramps for children and youth who have been entangled in the web of ISIS’s control and brainwashing.
- Develop ideally the very best trauma counseling and healing assistance possible for all the victims of sexual violence. All the family members who have had to stand witness to these horrific crimes deserve a chance to heal.
- U.S. policymakers should consider how U.S. security will be enhanced by even modest efforts to combat the ability of extremists to recruit children and to perpetrate sexual violence.
- The U.S. should lead a global effort to create the tools, resources and experts to address the deep physical and mental trauma inflicted on a generation of young people. Otherwise, we will stitch the violent experiences and memories into the DNA of this young generation.

As the largest age cohort of children living on this planet approach their adolescent rites of passage to adulthood, we need to find ways to inspire and expand the free world; as ISIS tries to offer shortcuts to a violent adulthood.

We know all too well that violence is the shortest path to losing a childhood, a vision, and the way forward.

The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author and not the U.S. Institute of Peace, which does not take policy positions.