

**Statement by Edward Watts
Documentary Film-maker**

**U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
Special Hearing
July 29, 2015**

“Women Under ISIS Rule: From Brutality to Recruitment”

Mr Chairman and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

For the last six months I have been working on a film entitled *Escaping ISIS* that explores what life is like for the estimated four million women living under the rule of the Islamic State group. I believe it is the most important subject I have covered in my career. I am glad the Committee has made it the focus of this special hearing.

The treatment of women by ISIS is sometimes overshadowed by the terror group’s more spectacular atrocities. Yet I would argue no other section of society suffers more on a day-to-day basis at their hands.

In the course of my work, I documented ISIS’s abduction of thousands of non-Muslim women and girls, their sexual enslavement and the rape of girls as young as nine. I gathered testimony that described markets where ISIS trade young women like cattle, or even rent them to each other for a few hundred dollars. These crimes are condoned – even celebrated – by ISIS’s official publications.

And Muslim women too endure terrible oppression.

They are subject to severe limitations on their freedom of movement and right to education and work; they must abide by a strict dress code enforced through harsh physical punishments; some are coerced into marriage to ISIS fighters; others have been stoned to death on trumped up charges of adultery.

This should be the stuff of history books, not contemporary news reports.

It’s worth noting that ISIS’s extreme interpretation of Islam is not shared by the majority of Muslims in the territory under their control. Yet, disturbingly, I also met women who had been so thoroughly brainwashed they now shared ISIS’s vision for society, even to the point of punishing others who defy it. And we know that young women from our own nations have been targeted for similar indoctrination and lured to the territory under the extremists’ control.

Such stories show that this is a struggle not only with a terrorist organisation but also a system of ideas, one that threatens the principles on which modern society is based.

It is understandable that, from afar, we may feel powerless to stop the atrocities. But there is action we could take. During the course of filming, I met a number of local activists who, with little outside

support, were risking their lives to undermine ISIS's rule and save the women and girls they can reach.

Those activists could use our help. And we could do more to support the rehabilitation of women who come back, often with severe psychological and physical trauma.

The example of the survivors and activists should inspire us to re-evaluate our policies and ask what more we can do.

Renewed action is not only necessary, but urgent. Every day that ISIS exists, more women will suffer horrendous violence or sexual assault and more people will be subject to indoctrination in their ideas.

The fight against ISIS is all of our fight. It will require time, effort and sacrifice on our part too. But in ending their regime, we all stand to gain.

Thank you.

Edward Watts