

ISIS's Persecution of Women

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Key Findings

- Women within ISIS-held territory in Iraq and Syria are **denied basic human rights**, including freedom of belief, freedom from slavery, freedom of equal protection of the law, freedom of movement, and freedom to consensual marriage.
- ISIS sanctions **rape and physical abuse** for girls **as young as nine years old**. Some survivors report that women are gang raped and subjected to gruesome punishments including beatings, and being forced to watch militants rape friends and family.
- Western women are typically isolated within ISIS-controlled territory due to language barriers, as well as ISIS's **restrictions on contact between foreign and local women**, and between **women and male non-relatives**.
- Isolation reportedly drives many women to participate in the online recruitment of others. In exchange, female recruiters are reportedly allowed basic **privileges such as "seemingly unfettered Internet access,"** more freedom of movement, and better access to health care as compared to their non-recruiter counterparts.
- CEP's [website](#) offers profiles on more than **20 girls and women** from diverse backgrounds across numerous Western countries—all of whom have served as recruiters, recruits, or fighters for ISIS.

Executive Summary

According to Iraqi reports, [ISIS](#) has executed hundreds of Muslim women and their relatives for refusing to marry ISIS fighters. ISIS has brutal disregard for women within its territorial control. Firsthand accounts indicate that ISIS repeatedly abuses and mistreats women in its territory, enslaving and molesting non-Muslim women and girls, and abusing and restricting the movements of Muslim women and girls. All females within ISIS-held territory—slaves and non-slaves alike—can be married to ISIS militants as young as nine years old, according to rulings issued by ISIS. (Sources: [International Business Times](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [Quilliam Foundation](#))

Women recruited by ISIS online have historically been unaware of the extent of ISIS's oppression. ISIS recruiters have at times been forthright about the societal expectations for ISIS women, citing marriage and motherhood as alluring reasons to join the group. They have not, however, typically been forthright about the accompanying abuse and restrictions. Contrary to their expectations, females recruited to ISIS's territory have often been left socially isolated—surrounded by men with whom they are forbidden to interact, locals who reportedly resent their presence, and other foreign women who don't often share common languages. (Sources: [International Business Times](#), [New York Times](#))

As a result, foreign women and girls have typically ended up in isolated communities, participating in the oppression of other women. In Raqqa, female recruits overwhelmingly comprise al-Khansaa Brigade, ISIS's repressive, all-female police unit. Foreign girls have also joined ISIS's recruitment team, where they paint a glorified portrait of life under ISIS's brutal

regime. In Nigeria, the ISIS-affiliated faction of [Boko Haram](#) has carried out abuses against women and girls, kidnapping 22 girls and women in March 2017 alone. ISIS's affiliate in Libya has also captured, enslaved, tortured, and abused Eritrean and Nigerian women and girls, including hundreds of refugees and migrants seeking to reach Europe through Libya. As one woman told Reuters, "There was no one there to help me. So I kept quiet and took the abuse... I stopped resisting. [My rapist] did as he pleased with me." (Sources: [Al Arabiya](#), [International Business Times](#), [New York Times](#), [Time](#), [Guardian](#), [Reuters](#), [Reuters](#))

ISIS's brutal practices reflect an ideology that devalues women and girls and calls for their oppression. This ideology is enshrined in the group's self-styled fatwas (legal rulings) and propaganda magazines, and confirmed by firsthand accounts from escapees and human rights observers. As ISIS continues to lose territory in its remaining strongholds in Iraq and Syria, the group is working to export its practices to satellites in North Africa, West Africa, and Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the group is working to recruit foreign men and women in North America and Europe to carry out terrorist attacks abroad.

Abuse in Theory: ISIS's Anti-Women Ideology

ISIS has produced large amounts of written materials demonstrating the breadth of its anti-women ideology. The group prescribes different rules for Muslim and non-Muslim women, though both types of women are severely mistreated under ISIS's rule of law. In casting Muslim women as inferior to men and relegating non-Muslims to the status of property, ISIS often employs and manipulates Quranic quotes and *hadiths* (religious rulings) to support its anti-women agenda. The group also issues its own self-styled *fatwas* (rulings on religious law) to sanction its abuse and elaborate on rulings.

Rape: ISIS sanctions the rape of Muslim wives and non-Muslim slaves. In the May 2015 issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS referenced a quote from Muhammad's cousin Ibn 'Abbas, that "approaching any married woman is fornication, except for a woman who has been enslaved." ISIS used this hadith to imply that men do not need to obtain sexual consent before engaging with wives and slaves. ISIS also used a Quranic quote [Al-Mu'minun: 5-6] to justify its policy of rape: "And [men] who guard their private parts, except from their wives or those their right hands possess, for indeed, they will not be blamed." As outlined in *Dabiq*, ISIS interpreted "those their right hands possess" as a modern reference to slaves. (Source: [Dabiq](#))

In justifying its policy of rape, ISIS relies not only on interpretations of Quranic verse, but on its own rulings. One ISIS pamphlet from December 2014 ruled that a man can rape a female slave even if she "hasn't reached puberty" so long as she is "fit for intercourse." In another article in *Dabiq*, a purportedly female ISIS author attempted to refute the argument that ISIS's practice of engaging in sexual relations with female slaves constituted "rape" in the first place. (Sources: [Dabiq](#), [Dabiq](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [Newsweek](#), [Independent](#))

Enslavement: ISIS authors cite hadiths to justify the group's practice of taking slaves and concubines, as in the May 2015 issue of *Dabiq*. One article—titled "Slave-Girls or

Prostitutes?”—cited Muhammad’s companion Sa’d Ibn Mu’adh who said, “I rule that [our opponents’] fighters be killed and their families be enslaved.” Muhammad then replied, “You have indeed judged in their affair by the ruling of Allah.” ISIS uses this hadith—and cites Muhammad’s own use of slaves—to justify its present-day practice of taking female slaves. ISIS has also ruled that “[i]t is permissible to buy, sell, or give as a gift female captives and slaves” since they are “merely property, which can be disposed of as long as that doesn’t cause [the Muslim ummah] any harm or damage.” (Source: [Dabiq](#))

Forced Marriages: ISIS issued a fatwa in February 2015 stating that a woman’s consent is required for legitimate marriage. ISIS’s gruesome practices toward women, however, regularly undermine this claim. By April 2016, ISIS had reportedly executed at least 250 Muslim women and families in Mosul for refusing marriages with ISIS militants. Escaped slave girls from various ISIS-controlled regions have also reported being forced into short-term, sham marriages with ISIS militants as a workaround to prohibitions on extramarital sex and rape. (Sources: [Jihadica](#), [CNN](#), [International Business Times](#), [Human Rights Watch](#))

ISIS also forces children and teenagers into marriages. Al-Khansaa Brigade, ISIS’s militant female enforcers in Raqqa, published a manifesto in February 2015 stating that “it is considered legitimate for a girl to be married at the age of nine.” While some girls have been married off at nine years old, the manifesto declares that most “pure girls” will be married by the age of 16 or 17. (Source: [Quilliam Foundation](#))

Social Isolation: ISIS’s all-women police force, al-Khansaa Brigade, often exploits Quranic verse to justify the group’s strict control over women. Al-Khansaa’s manifesto states that a Muslim woman is only allowed to leave her home under three conditions: “jihad (by appointment),” “studying the sciences of religion,” and serving as “female doctors or teachers.” ISIS has issued its own fatwas barring Muslim women from appearing in public without a male chaperone. The group has also reportedly issued rulings forbidding foreign women from interacting with locals. (Sources: [Atlantic](#), [Quilliam Foundation](#), [Dabiq](#), [Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security](#), [Jihadica](#), [New York Times](#))

Dress: In December 2014, ISIS issued a fatwa stating that women cannot show their eyes or parts of their faces in public, because doing so “causes temptation (fitna), especially when make-up is used.” According to reports by the Wilson Center, ISIS has issued more restrictions on female dress than either Iran or Saudi Arabia. All females under the age of 45, including some pre-pubescent children, are required to wear black *abayas* (loose robes for women), *niqabs* (double-layered veils over the face), veils over their eyes, and black gloves, according to a February 2015 *Guardian* interview of women inside ISIS territory. (Sources: [Jihadica](#), [Guardian](#), [Wilson Center](#), [Wilson Center](#))

Abuse in Practice: ISIS’s Persecution of Women and Girls

ISIS’s self-styled fatwas, recruiting materials, and pamphlets outline the group’s intention to subject women to persecution. Testimony from women in ISIS’s territory and beyond confirm that ISIS carries out these abuses in practice.

ISIS's Inhuman Treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim Women

According to ISIS escapees, the terror group has subjected women to what the United Nations characterizes as “inhuman treatment.” Human Rights Watch has been adamant that the crimes committed against women and girls in ISIS’s territory amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. These efforts violate basic human rights, including the rights to freedom of movement, consensual marriage, and religious practice, and the right to freedom from slavery. (Sources: [United Nations](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [United Nations](#))

Movement: According to reports from female escapees, ISIS begins to strip away foreign women’s rights immediately upon their arrival to ISIS-held territory in Iraq and Syria. Muslim recruits there are placed in a *maqar*, a group home for unmarried women, and cannot leave unless accompanied by an approved male chaperone or other women. (Sources: [Guardian](#), [Guardian](#))

Women within ISIS’s territory reportedly took jobs and husbands that they would not have otherwise accepted, in order to regain their mobility. Female escapees from ISIS territory told the *New York Times* in November 2015 that they became second-class citizens as soon as ISIS seized their hometown of Raqqa. The young women lost many of their freedoms, including their right to free movement. In an attempt to alleviate these restrictions, the three Syrian women married foreign militants whom they didn’t know and joined al-Khansaa Brigade. Although they objected to the job, the women said that it allowed them to regain some measure of their mobility as well as a small income and a sense of safety for their families. (Source: [New York Times](#))

Consensual Marriage: Muslim women who have resisted marrying ISIS militants have been subject to severe retribution. ISIS enforces its rule through physical and sexual violence, blackmail, and arrest. ISIS uses these same tactics to force Muslim and non-Muslim women into arranged marriages. Some are placed into exploitative “temporary marriages,” according to testimonials from ISIS defectors. Girls and women are forced to marry militants for an undetermined length of time—sometimes only for a few hours—during which time they typically endure sexual abuse. (Sources: [Al-Islam](#), [International Business Times](#), [Independent](#), [Independent](#), [Human Rights Watch](#))

One Muslim woman named Hanan told CNN that she was 26 years old when ISIS took control of her hometown in eastern Syria. ISIS militants soon arrested her father for possession of a firearm. When Hanan and her mother asked ISIS’s local police officers for his freedom, they told Hanan that she would have to marry the police chief or else her father would be killed. Hanan agreed to the marriage to save her father’s life. By her own account, she was then subjected to frequent bouts of rape and abuse. (Sources: [Huffington Post](#), [CNN](#), [Dabiq](#), [CNN](#))

Religious Practice: As part of the group’s stated goals to eradicate all other religions, ISIS exhibits blatant disregard for freedom of belief. Upon taking over a new territory—such as Kojo and Kocho in Iraq—non-Muslim men are reportedly killed, while non-Muslim women are

typically forced into slavery. ISIS emphasizes that slaves will receive heavenly rewards for converting to Islam, citing the hadith that says “Allah marvels at a people who enter Jannah in chains.” Some slaves have reportedly converted to Islam in a failed effort to improve their conditions. (Sources: [Dabiq](#), [BBC News](#), [BBC News](#), [Daily Mail](#))

Slavery: ISIS uses Quranic verses and hadith to justify its policy of enslaving women and girls. In the May 2015 issue of *Dabiq*, ISIS claimed that “saby” (taking slaves through war) is a “great prophetic Sunnah containing many divine wisdoms and religious benefits.” The article quoted numerous hadith and examples, concluding that “we almost cannot find a companion [of the Prophet] who didn’t practice saby.” Throughout ISIS territory, non-Muslim women, including Yazidis, are systematically persecuted and enslaved in ISIS territory. Three years after they were initially captured from Mt. Sinjar, Iraq, ISIS continues to hold thousands of Yazidi women and children. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [Wadi](#), [New York Times](#), [Dabiq](#))

After capture by ISIS militants, many slave girls and women reported suicide attempts. One captured Yazidi slave, Leila, told Human Rights Watch that when she was told to take a bath—a typical precursor to rape—she and her fellow slaves found poisonous chemicals in the bathroom and drank them in a failed suicide attempt. Another 12-year-old girl reported being “owned” communally by seven men, four of whom would rape her. “Sometimes I was sold,” she said. “Sometimes I was given as a gift. The last man was the most abusive; he used to tie my hands and legs.” (Source: [Human Rights Watch](#))

Cycle of Abuse: ISIS Enlists Women to Enforce Its Abusive Practices

Isolation

Western women have typically been isolated within ISIS-controlled territory due to language barriers as well as ISIS’s restrictions on contact between foreign and local women, and between women and male non-relatives. For foreign recruits, the isolation has typically begun when women arrive in ISIS territory and are forced to stay in the maqqar. From that point on, ISIS prohibited the intermingling of locals and foreign female recruits in cities like Raqqa, reportedly as part of an effort to minimize gossip and conspiracy amongst the women. (Source: [New York Times](#))

While migrants have been encouraged to learn Arabic before they arrive in ISIS’s territory, many foreign women have been dependent upon their neighbors to learn the language. This process is naturally more difficult in cities like Raqqa, where interaction between locals and foreigners has been prohibited by ISIS. The separation has also reportedly spurred resentments between local and foreign women, as foreigners have reportedly been given access to certain privileges (e.g. Internet access, ability to cut food lines, and various discounts) that local women do not have. Local women, meanwhile, have basic advantages (e.g. a command of Arabic) that foreigners do not. (Source: [New York Times](#))

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In addition to separating foreign from local women, both groups are prohibited from spending time with male non-relatives. The isolation that results from codified segregation has reportedly driven many women and girls to serve as ISIS recruiters or law enforcement officers in order to curry favor and protection for themselves and their families. Both foreign and local women in this way become active participants in ISIS's efforts to oppress, torture, and subjugate other women within its territory. (Sources: [New York Times](#), [Dabiq](#), [Daily Mail](#))

Al-Khansaa Brigade

ISIS's al-Khansaa Brigade is an armed morality force dedicated to policing the actions and appearances of women. Multiple sources confirm that ISIS created the brigade in early 2014 after anti-ISIS actors—reportedly from the Free Syrian Army—dressed as women to pass through ISIS checkpoints. In response, ISIS appointed female border guards in an effort to monitor gender-segregated checkpoints. Since its implementation, al-Khansaa evolved from a checkpoint guard force to an all-female police force, expanding from Raqqa, Syria, into Mosul, Iraq. Abu Ahmad, an ISIS official in Raqqa, told media in July 2014 that ISIS created the brigade to educate women about Islam and “punish women who do not abide by the law” while preserving gender segregation. According to Ahmad, “Jihad is not a man-only duty. Women must do their part as well.” (Sources: [News Deeply](#), [Vice News](#), [Atlantic](#), [Al-Sumaria News](#), [Syria Direct](#), [Independent](#), [New York Times](#))

By September 2014, a unit in al-Khansaa Brigade reportedly had as many as 60 young British women between the ages of 18 and 24. Activist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently reported in May 2015 that the Brigade had about 800 girls in it, at least 100 of whom were British. According to the activist group, al-Khansaa's foreign women came from a number of foreign countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Chechnya, and the Netherlands. Local women who were a part of al-Khansaa before defecting from ISIS told the *New York Times* that they trained with 50 other local women in a single, 15-day training course for new members. Among its ranks, al-Khansaa Brigade has reportedly included such notorious ISIS members as British ISIS recruiter [Aqsa Mahmood](#) as well as local women from Raqqa. (Sources: [Daily Mail](#), [International Business Times](#), [Syria Direct](#), [New York Times](#), [Daily Beast](#), [Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently](#))

Al-Khansaa is known for stories of excessive violence and torture. In one case, members of al-Khansaa reportedly beat a teenager to death for lifting her veil while going clothes-shopping in Mosul. In another case, al-Khansaa members used a bear-trap-like torture device—known as the “biter”—on the chest of a 24-year-old woman who was breastfeeding in public, an act which violated ISIS's modesty laws. Another woman, referred to as “Batol,” was arrested for appearing in public wearing a veil that al-Khansaa members deemed too transparent. She, too, was tortured by the “biter.” Raqqa citizens who have since fled the city say that this style of torture is commonplace. Al-Khansaa reportedly offers prisoners a choice between the biter and whipping as punishment for their so-called crimes. “I felt then that my femininity has been destroyed completely,” Batol told Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently after being subjected to the torture device. One ISIS victim, Um Omar told Al Arabiya: “Until this day, I wake up in the middle of

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the night trembling. Each time I feel footsteps next to my tent or a person bumping into it, I imagine it is one of the ‘biters’ of ISIS who has come to kill me.” (Sources: [Mirror](#), [Daily Mail](#), [Al Arabiya](#))

Recruits: Women Drawn to ISIS

Women and girls comprise an estimated 10 to 40 percent of ISIS recruits from Europe, North America, Australia, and Africa. Though these women may be drawn to ISIS for various reasons, many cite religious motivations or a desire for marriage. Indeed, ISIS has promoted the message that every Muslim—including Muslim women—is religiously obligated to move to live under ISIS’s self-styled caliphate. Once there, ISIS claimed that women have the additional obligations of marriage and motherhood. Infamous recruiters such as Aqsa Mahmood have framed marriage and motherhood as a priority on par with jihad, saying that women “gain more ajr [reward] by spending years of sleepless nights by being a mother... than by doing a martyrdom operation.” (Sources: [Time](#), [Guardian](#), [Morocco World News](#), [Morocco World News](#), [Soufan Group](#), [New York Times](#), [Asharq al-Awsat](#), [New York Times](#), [BuzzFeed](#), [SITE](#))

Many female recruits—like “Alex” from Washington State—have taken the pathway outlined by Counter Extremism Project CEO Mark Wallace: first they are enticed by ISIS recruiters who recruit publicly on platforms like Twitter or Telegram. Then, the recruits “go dark,” moving to private messaging channels like those on WhatsApp, Telegram, and Kik. Finally, the recruits are lured physically from their homes to ISIS’s territory abroad. (Sources: [Counter Extremism Project](#), [New York Times](#))

Alex, whose last name was censored for her own protection, said she was first attracted to ISIS through the group’s postings on Twitter. After discussing religious issues with ISIS members, Alex was urged to move from public-facing channels to private messaging accounts like Skype messaging. Once there, she was encouraged by members of her virtual community to migrate to ISIS-held territory in Syria. There, she was told, a husband was waiting for her. (Sources: [BuzzFeed](#), [Marie Claire](#), [Counter Extremism Project](#), [New York Times](#))

Recruitment: Women Who Recruit

Many foreign female recruits have been employed as recruiters upon reaching ISIS territory, receiving between \$2,000 and \$10,000 for each person they recruit, according to U.N. estimates. Joining the network of female recruiters has also reportedly offered migrants a reprieve from the reality of life under ISIS. The terrorist organization grants recruiters certain privileges—such as Internet access—that other women in ISIS’s territory are typically denied. (Sources: [Al-Arabiya](#), [New York Times](#))

Successful recruiters like Aqsa Mahmood and [Sally Jones](#) demonstrate the ease with which some women can transition from a recruiter to other dangerous positions of power, such as leaders within all-female militant or recruiting cells. Mahmood became a leader within al-Khansaa Brigade while Jones was given permission to start and lead the female wing of the Anwar al-

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Awlaki battalion, a unit dedicated to planning and executing attacks in the West. CEP has tracked Sally Jones on Twitter, where she has issued hit lists on U.S. soldiers and called for attacks in the U.K. metro system. (Sources: [Al-Arabiya](#), [New York Times](#), [Telegraph](#), [Counter Extremism Project](#))

Looking Ahead: ISIS's Long-Term Danger to Women

ISIS is capable of persecution in the territory under its control, though the territory is continuing to dwindle. In response, ISIS is believed to be shifting its command structure, propaganda apparatuses, and wealth to other countries. The group has also been encouraging ISIS supporters to stay in their home countries and to “wait to do something there” rather than migrate to Syria or Iraq. Indeed, as CEP has noticed in online platforms, the group has repeatedly encouraged its supporters to carry out low-sophistication terrorist attacks on crowded civilian areas using knives and vehicles. (Sources: [Washington Post](#), [Counter Extremism Project](#), [Washington Post](#))

As ISIS continues to lose territory in the Middle East, its capacity to persecute women there has been reduced drastically. Evidence nonetheless suggests that ISIS's attempts to recruit, exploit, and persecute women will continue through ISIS's efforts to relocate to other territories, and by encouraging women to carry out attacks abroad. ISIS recruiters like Sally Jones and [Rachid Kassim](#), for example, have reportedly worked to radicalize women to carry out attacks abroad. In September 2016, a group of female ISIS supporters were arrested before allegedly attempting to bomb France's Notre Dame Cathedral. Several of the girls had reportedly been coached and recruited by Kassim. (Source: [Telegraph](#), [BBC News](#), [Jihadology](#))

Even as ISIS continues to lose territory in Iraq and Syria, the group maintains a presence in *wilayat* (governances) around the world, including in Libya. A Human Rights Watch report revealed that ISIS imposes its clothing restrictions on girls in Libya “as young as 10 or 11.” Libyans have told Human Rights Watch that if a woman or a girl disobeys the dress code, one of their male relatives will be fined and flogged, “often on the spot.” This fear of violence has propelled mothers to cover their daughters even earlier—some as young as eight years old—in order to avoid potential repercussions. ISIS commanders in Libya have also ordered fathers under their control to “marry off their daughters” to ISIS's militants, blatantly disregarding the girls' right to a consensual marriage. ISIS in Sirte has also captured, enslaved, tortured, and abused refugee and migrant women and girls seeking to reach Europe through Libya. One escaped ISIS slave told Reuters that ISIS “wanted to destroy us.” She described hearing an ISIS fighter rape another woman: “She was screaming. Screaming. It tore my heart.” (Sources: [Human Rights Watch](#), [Reuters](#))

Conclusion

The dangers that ISIS poses to women are primarily drawn from the group's ability to repress, abuse, and control women within its territories. Nonetheless, ISIS also poses a broader and long-term danger to women that is not necessarily contingent on the group's access to territory in the Middle East. Indeed, ISIS's anti-women ideology is already serving as a template for the group's

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formal affiliates in places like Nigeria and Libya, where ISIS retains a presence despite territorial setbacks. (Sources: [Sun](#), [Human Rights Watch](#), [Human Rights Watch](#))

As governments look to reintegrate returnees—and particularly children—into their home countries, it will also be necessary to keep in mind ISIS’s long-lasting danger to the girls and women who have been subject to ISIS’s abuses. Anecdotes show that many girls and women in ISIS’s territory have suffered—and are expected to suffer—from PTSD, and are likely to require significant attention and psychological care. In these cases, the onus will likely fall on governments to provide psychological support for ISIS’s female victims. Without safe and effective intervention, ISIS’s hateful ideology and mistreatment will continue to negatively impact women and young girls for years to come. (Sources: [Quilliam Foundation](#), [Human Rights Watch](#))