



How Islamic State uses systematic sexual violence against women

October 7, 2014 at 6:45 PM EST

The Islamic State has gained notoriety for their beheadings and mass executions, but the group has also abducted thousands of women to make into sex slaves. A former female captive shares her story with the NewsHour, plus Gwen Ifill talks to Manal Omar of the United States Institute of Peace and David Jacobson of the University of South Florida about the exploitation of women by the Islamic State.

TRANSCRIPT

GWEN IFILL: We return now to the Islamic State group and its brutal tactics.

Much is known now about the group, also known as ISIL, and its high-profile beheadings of Westerners, mass executions of civilians and forced conversions. Less well-known is the extremist group's horrific treatment of women and girls.

Last week, the United Nations reported thousands of women had been abducted by the group, some handed over to fighters as a reward or sold as sex slaves.

The NewsHour sent a crew to meet a 15-year-old girl, a member of the Yazidi sect, who was captured and held by the Islamic State before managing to escape. She now lives at a camp with others who've been displaced.

We withheld her identity for her and her family's safety.

GIRL (through interpreter): They kept us in a house, the girls and the women. And then they killed all the men, including my brother.

GWEN IFILL: She and the abducted women were taken by truck east to a house in Mosul.

There, they were ordered to convert to Islam. More kidnapped girls joined them.

GIRL (through interpreter): They separated the women and the girls. Some of the girls were taken by ISIL. They gave some of us to the guards and they sold some of us, too. And some were given as a gift.

If we didn't do what they asked, they would have hit us. We did everything because we were threatened. We had to. They were very bad to the girls. They were doing bad things to the women, illegal things.

GWEN IFILL: That's only one story.

To help us understand the depth and scale of the Islamic State's treatment of women and girls, we turn to Manal Omar, acting vice president for the Middle East and Africa Center at the United States Institute of Peace, and David Jacobson, professor of sociology and founding director of the Citizenship Initiative on Civil Society and Conflict at the University of South Florida.

David Jacobson, you wrote that women are now at the heart of the world's most dangerous quarrel. What do you mean when you say dangerous quarrel?

DAVID JACOBSON, University of South Florida: Well, I think that women's status and women's sexuality has become the hinge of very different perspectives of society and very different perspectives of morality.

The Islamist groups in general and the jihadi groups in particular, the more violent jihadi groups, see the West under the force of globalization as being a very corrupting force, and they wish to — there's a backlash in essence against that corrupting force, sometimes violent, extremely violent in the case of ISIS, and other times less so.

GWEN IFILL: Manal Omar, has ISIS proven to be more dangerous on this front than other similar groups?

MANAL OMAR, United States Institute of Peace: I think that you have seen an increased level of brutality, but what's actually frightening is that they're very strategic in targeting women.

It's a wonderful way of really forcing communities into submission, and I think the strategy behind the targeting of women is what's particularly scary from the ISIS. I think that we have seen in the past, you know, that sexual violence is often used as a tool of war, and it's a very effective tool of war, and it's something that they're adopting to be able to force communities into control.

GWEN IFILL: But I guess this is unusual. Is this something — as horrible as it is, is it something we have seen in past wars and past conflicts?

MANAL OMAR: I think the reality is that you have always seen women targeted, and you have seen various U.N. resolutions.

U.N. Resolution 1820 specifically identifies sexual violence as a tool of war. But dating back to U.N. Resolution 1325, which was in 2000, which admitted that women bear the brunt of war, I think that there's a trend that we have seen in terms of really exploiting, but particularly the use of sexual violence, as a way of not only targeting the individual women, targeting the families, but also targeting the community.

So, it's not something that's new, but ISIS has taken it to a very brutal level. And what we have seen is that they're not only using it as a way of targeting communities, but they're also using it as a way of creating a reward system with soldiers, as well as then income-generating in terms of selling and human trafficking.

GWEN IFILL: And yet, David Jacobson, we hear a lot or a fair bit about the beheadings and the executions and even mass bombings, but we don't hear as much about this kind of violence. Why is that?

DAVID JACOBSON: It is puzzling. And I think that's beginning the change slowly.

And it's puzzling on two levels. One is the sheer scale of this violence against women, and secondly the centrality of explaining what is going on. So when ISIS and other jihadi groups across the world ideologically or one could say obsess around the issue of women, and so the targeting of women has got a strategic objective in terms of frightening populations.

But it's also very symbolic. And it's important to point out the categories of women in terms of

who they target. So, much of the rape, for example, is targeted either what they would term people — they're both minorities, Christians, and other minorities like the Yazidis, whereas, among Sunnis, women who they feel have gone — are apostates of some kind have generally been executed.

GWEN IFILL: Manal Omar, because of this, because of the cultural shame that is visited on these women who are the victims, are these likely to go underreported or unreported?

MANAL OMAR: Of course.

Reporting sexual violence even in this country, in America, 60 percent of sexual violence goes unreported. And you can only imagine how much that's enhanced with the cultural ramifications, but also the fact that the communities have no tools of really being able to reintegrate if they are able to bring their girls back.

And I think that that's one of the primary challenges. We have heard on the ground reports of women who have escaped who commit suicide in order not to have to face that reintegration or face their families and community.

GWEN IFILL: David Jacobson, how do we confirm the numbers? How do we confirm the scale and the scope of this kind of violence? Is there any way?

DAVID JACOBSON: Well, if one looks at the United Nations report which you referred to earlier, what they indicate is they can just get at a certain minimum baseline in the cases they report.

We have to assume that the number of cases is much worse than what we're reading. And, no, I think to get a precise count would be near impossible, but we know it's very, very bad.

GWEN IFILL: Is that in part because of the taboo associated with this kind of crime?

DAVID JACOBSON: Certainly.

And that's one of the tragedies of what is happening, is that the women who are raped, sexually assaulted, forced into marriages in these honor cultures, they're now dishonored. And this is not something that they necessarily are going to advertise or report on. And it's

compounded by issues, for example, if they become pregnant. It's a very severe situation for these individuals.

GWEN IFILL: Manal Omar, if we consider the possibility, the horrible possibility that rape and sexual assault have gone mainstream as a tool of war, I wonder at what point does human trafficking also have become part of this or whether it is a separate issue.

MANAL OMAR: I think that it is an integrated issue.

What you're seeing, again, is based on a reward system, based on selling, it's all tied and integrated together. I think one of the primary challenges is really being able to identify it as terrorist attacks. These are attacks that are used to cause terror, to cause, again, submission of communities.

And until we're able to really recognize it as that, and not just a humanitarian issue or something that affects women, I think it will be very difficult for us to combat the issue that's being raised in terms of sexual violence as a tool of war.

Again, ISIS is very strategic in that use, and it's something that we have to think strategically about as well to counter their narrative.

GWEN IFILL: And what is the international community's responsibility in that?

MANAL OMAR: I think that one of the primary issues is better documentation.

As you mentioned, there's a taboo in underreporting. But there is also a failure for us to acknowledge the hard side of the use of sexual violence in terms of security. We continue to see it as a softer side, as a humanitarian side, and so we're not documenting it. We're not able to really be responsive to it, and I think particularly to really highlighting the awareness of it.

I mean, the Islamic State is using religious justification. And I think that the more population — that the population is aware that this is not tied to religion, it strips away any claim that they have in terms of the false name of Islamic State.

GWEN IFILL: Manal Omar of the U.S. Institute of Peace and David Jacobson of the University of South Florida, thank you both very much.

MANAL OMAR: Thank you.

GWEN IFILL: Online, you can hear more from the 15-year-old girl who escaped from Islamic State group militants. You can watch that on our World page at PBSNewsHour.org.

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