

Iraq/Syria: More Powerful Than ISIS - On women facing down ISIS every day.

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The most uplifting stories I hear are often about things that never happened. This is what I keep reminding myself as I join others seeking to end rape as a weapon of war. This is what drives the work of the courageous women facing down ISIS every day.

This paradox is familiar to many women's rights activists out there. In this vital work to combat violations of women's human rights, the best news can be no news. A community that reported no women dying in childbirth in the past year. A girl who grows up into womanhood facing no barriers to her education and no violence.

But it's very hard to find good news in the timeline of ISIS' advance across Iraq and Syria. The ideology of these armed extremists depends on the subjugation of women. They have imposed iron-fisted restrictions on women's freedoms. They have raped and sold women into sexual slavery. They have publicly beaten women who dare to take a stand.

These are the atrocities that grab headlines. But behind these headlines are the stories of things that did not happen, of women who escaped the threat of rape and found refuge beyond ISIS' grasp. Despite the odds, grassroots women's rights activists in Iraq and Syria are risking their safety and their lives to do what others have dismissed as impossible: to prevent rape as a weapon of war. These are the glimmers of hope that must light our way.

Local women's rights activists are mobilizing to prevent sexual violence and protect survivors. They even operate in places governments and aid agencies cannot reach, thanks to their longtime local connections. They know the lay of the land. For instance, in Iraq, brave women are setting up safe houses and shelters, creating clandestine oases of safety even in the heart of ISIS territory. They spread the word so that women in danger know where to turn, through postings on social media or by word of mouth.

Iraqi women's rights activists have had more than a decade of hard-won experience in preventing wartime rape and protecting survivors. They describe how the US invasion and occupation of their country brought religious fundamentalists to power and fueled the rise of brutal anti-government groups, including, eventually, ISIS. Both government-allied and rival militias have meted out terror, violence and rape against women. In the early years of the occupation, groups like the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (OWFI) responded by creating shelter networks to prevent rape and protect women. When the threat of ISIS exploded, they knew exactly what women in danger would need, and they leapt into action to expand their shelters and set up emergency escape routes.

In Syria, the women's movement was dealt a serious blow by the devastation of their civil war and by the upsurge of extremist militias. But these women have remained active, organizing to provide humanitarian aid for displaced women and families, including reproductive and maternal health care for women. They've also been more successful than world governments in brokering local ceasefires and prisoner exchanges and getting aid into besieged areas. They are the people who know exactly what needs to be done to prevent more atrocities by ISIS: re-start peace negotiations (seriously, this

time) and make sure that women's rights and civil society activists are represented.

Women's rights activists in both countries know that even beyond ISIS-controlled territory, the landscape is treacherous for women. Government policies that trample women's rights continue to put women at risk of rape, even once they've escaped ISIS. Consider Iraq's pending Ja'afari draft law. This pernicious piece of legislation would lower the marrying age for girls to nine and legalize marital rape. Before the war broke out in Syria, women's rights activists there were hard at work demanding a voice in their country's constitutional redrafting, a process that had eroded protections against rape.

What gives them the strength to take on these monumental challenges?

One young Iraqi woman's story is a stark reminder of what a person can be forced to endure. At 16, she was raped and had to flee her home, fearful that her family would kill her in order to erase the shame of her rape and restore their "honor." She had turned to sex work to survive. For this, she was arrested and imprisoned. OWFI activists found out about her story, secured her release and offered her shelter.

And she began to attend activist meetings. She became an OWFI organizer, reaching out to women in danger and helping them seek shelter. As a survivor, she connected with other survivors. Her story is one of transformation and strength, and she is not alone.

The essential work of many grassroots activists in Iraq and Syria is galvanized by survivors' activism. This helps make their leadership indispensable. Better than any outsider, they can identify and meet urgent needs for women threatened by ISIS and all sexist violence. And their voices offer crucial perspectives to ensure that any potential political resolution responds to women's needs.

Brutal violence may make an easy headline. But women's activism makes for powerful solutions.

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P.S.

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http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yifat-susskind/more-powerful-than-isis_b_6264786.html?1417695685

* This post is part of a series produced by The Huffington Post and the International Campaign to Stop Rape & Gender Violence in Conflict in conjunction with 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence. To learn more about global activism to end sexual violence in conflict, visit here. To read all posts in the series, visit here.