

Supporting the Reintegration and Recovery of Female Survivors of ISIS in Kurdistan, Iraq



Over 6,000 Yezidi women and children were taken by ISIS in 2014. Thousands survived ISIS captivity and horrific violence, and reunited with their families in Kurdistan. But they returned to a changed world and face critical challenges.

Executive Summary

In early 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), often referred to as Daesh, launched an offensive covering large parts of Syria and Iraq using extreme violence, including rape and slavery as weapons of domination, genocide, and ethnic cleansing. During their reign, ISIS terrorized minority communities throughout the region including Shi'ites, Turkmen, Kaka'i¹, Shabaks, Alawites, and Christians.² Among those most impacted was the Yezidi community, a small, conservative ethnoreligious group with less than 1.5 million members living mainly in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Armenia.

As ISIS ravaged northern Iraq, men and boys were killed, and some boys were captured, taken either with their mothers or separated to be trained as child soldiers. Over 6,000 Yezidi women and children were taken by ISIS in 2014.³ Women and girls were subjected to extreme physical and sexual violence; as a result, they gave birth to unknown numbers of children born of war while in captivity and upon return. An estimated 2,889 Yezidis remain missing.⁴

From 2014 to the present, survivors escaped captivity, their families paid a ransom, or they were freed by military forces, allowing them to return to their living family members largely in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). However, they returned to a very different life. With their homes and villages destroyed or otherwise unsafe, they returned to camps or informal settlements with family members missing or dead, forcing them to reintegrate into a new reality while processing the traumatic experiences and physical consequences from their time in captivity. Returning women and girls have survived human trafficking including sexual enslavement, torture, starvation, and assault on their cultural identity.

The level of devastation committed by ISIS was extreme and created lasting impacts - one survivor shared:

“We all wish we had died and not lost our dignity and honor.”

The question remains how to best support these survivors as they return and reintegrate to an environment already struggling to support its own citizens in the wake of an economic crisis, war with ISIS, and exceptionally large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

This report aims to identify and highlight ways to strengthen the reintegration and recovery of survivors by examining: 1) survivors' priority needs upon return; 2) key challenges in reintegration; 3) promising practices in supporting survivors in successful reintegration; and 4) opportunities for government actors, community and religious leaders, NGOs, and the donor community to better support the reintegration of survivors returning from ISIS captivity. Throughout this report, the term “survivor” refers to women and girls who experienced sexual and other forms of violence during their captivity with ISIS. This assessment utilized focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KIIs), and an extended literature review to gather information from survivors, community members from areas of return, professional service providers, and government officials.

Upon return, survivors face a variety of challenges including significant physical and mental health needs,

lack of access to safe and private housing, missing identification and legal documents, poverty, stigma, unwanted pregnancies, and denial of the right to parent children born of war. While findings showed that many survivors are interested in working, they lack access to work. As a result, the majority of survivors are dependent on male family members or have insufficient income to meet their basic needs. One survivor reported: "My husband earns 250,000 IQD [approximately \$210 USD] monthly and supports all ten family members in the home." Despite significant efforts from various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), United Nations (UN) agencies, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), survivors' needs remain extensive, complex, and multi-layered, and available services are often inadequate to provide sustainable solutions and/or insufficient to meet existing needs.

At this stage in the response, the KRG and Government of Iraq (GOI), community leaders, and organizations can greatly benefit from listening to survivors, service providers, communities of return, and frontline government officials and learning about promising practices in programming that have tangibly helped survivors and their families meet their needs and achieve positive outcomes long-term. Additionally, there are specific actions that government actors, community and religious leaders, NGOs, and the donor community can take to meet survivors' needs.

As many as 3,530 individuals have survived ISIS captivity and reunited with their family in the KRI following ISIS captivity; of these, 1,197 are women and 1,038 are girls.



Read the full report

www.seedkurdistan.org/reintegration-of-survivors-of-isis

1 BBC News. (2019). <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-48301954/the-secretive-kaka-i-of-iraq-are-finally-speaking-out>

2 Ahran, A. I. (2015) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396338.2015.1047251?journalCode=tsur20>.

3 Cetorelli, V., Sasson, I., Shabila N., & Burnham, G. (2017). <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1002297>.

4 KRG's Office of Missing Persons and Kidnap Affairs. Personal communication conducted by SEED on April 2, 2020.

Key Recommendations

Government actors

- Develop and implement a national action plan, embedded in a comprehensive strategy, to respond to the needs of survivors.
- Consider legal reforms, such as issuing regulations around the issuance of ID cards for CBOW that allow mothers to select the religion indicated on the ID.
- Pass the Yezidi Female Survivors Bill.
- Ensure that prosecutions are in line with the law of crimes committed by ISIS, and implement mechanisms to update survivors on the outcomes of court proceedings. Establish an ad hoc national court with UN observers to try ISIS perpetrators.

Community and religious leaders

- Empower survivors to fully participate in social activities and community events by ensuring that these spaces are safe and welcoming to survivors and their families.
- Participate in the recovery and reintegration of survivors by listening to and incorporating survivors' views and needs into leadership, advocacy efforts, and policies.
- Work to destigmatize CBOW and actively support their acceptance within the community.

NGOs and International Community

- Invest in integrated, comprehensive, and long-term services that will allow survivors to access a variety of services in one location or through effective referral pathways.
- Increase the number of effective livelihood programs that recognize the realities of survivors' lives and result in a sustainable income.
- Empower vulnerable survivors to utilize resettlement programs, when necessary.

Donors

- Ensure NGOs deliver high quality services in accordance with international standards by requiring robust M&E mechanisms and reporting.
- Fund comprehensive service delivery that includes medical, livelihood, and cash assistance programs.