

# **Gender and Human Security: An Exploratory Analysis of Al Hol Camp**

**Human Security Solutions**



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Human Security Solutions (HSS) is a global advisory and research firm dedicated to advancing security sector governance and sustainable peace through "field truth." By bridging the gap between high-level policy and local realities, HSS provides the expertise needed to navigate complex institutional recovery in conflict and post-conflict environments.

### **Why This Topic Matters**

The reintegration of displaced populations is not merely a logistical challenge; it is a fundamental pillar of human security. In contexts like Al Hol Camp, structural gender norms deeply influence the vulnerabilities and opportunities of women and girls. Understanding these dynamics is essential for creating reintegration frameworks that are not only sustainable but also just. At HSS, we believe that people-centered security is the only path toward lasting stability.

### **The HSS Al Hol Working Group**

In line with our commitment to this issue, HSS has established a dedicated **Al Hol Working Group**. This internal body of experts focuses on developing evidence-based strategies for gender-sensitive reintegration and media accountability. By hosting this publication, we aim to further the international dialogue on creating safe, dignified, and effective pathways home for those affected by the conflict.

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### **Abstract**

Gender bias is embedded, consciously and invisibly, in societal structures. Of particular concern are gender biases that normalize violence against women and girls, a critical issue in personal security. Crises can provoke intimate partner violence and sexual violence remains a weapon of war despite international policy commitments, such as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and its subsequent resolutions. However, operational intervention in gendered security remains complex and inconsistent. This paper examined gendered security risks among women and girls displaced by conflict, particularly to refugee camps. Female refugees experienced heightened vulnerabilities, including gender-based violence, trafficking, and socio-economic marginalization. Al Hol refugee camp in Syria, initially established to house Iraqi refugees exemplifies these challenges as it now largely shelters women and children; many are relatives of former Islamic State (IS) fighters or conflict-zone civilians. This paper explores how structural gender norms shape the experiences of women detained in Al Hol and investigates the societal factors influencing their repatriation and resettlement. Drawing on reports from international organizations and academic literature, this paper explores the challenges and emphasizes the importance of integrating gender considerations into human security policies and humanitarian interventions to better address the personal security of female refugees while in detention and reintegration or resettlement to home or new communities.

## Introduction

Gender bias permeates every aspect of society, according to the 2023 Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI). Nearly 9 in 10 people hold a bias against women on at least one gender social norm, and biases are evident among men and women even in neoliberal countries (Conceição et al., 2023). Gender biases are pervasive and persistent, Conceição et al. found, reflecting social norms ranging from a conceptual view that men are better suited as political leaders, should obtain higher education and have a greater right to employment. Biases are potentially damaging, and those that normalize violence against women and girls are of gravest concern to personal security (Stivachtis, 2023). For example, India has long overlooked honour killings, and rape has been weaponized as a tool of war (Hanlon & Christie, 2016). Violence targeting women was not eliminated by the adoption of Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security a quarter century ago (United Nations Security Council, 2000). Neither have subsequent Resolutions 1612 (2005), 1674 (2006) and 1820 (2008) which affirmed the importance of women in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding while also acknowledging they are a target for sexual violence in war (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (n.d.). International policy commitment to women's personal security is evident in these resolutions; however, human rights fieldwork and peacebuilding is situationally complex.

Freedom from fear (Alkire, 2003; Hanlon & Christie, 2016; James, 2012; Tarai, 2022) in the context of personal security is out of reach for many women and girls, particularly those detained in refugee camps. According to the UN Refugee Agency, there are 36.4 million refugees worldwide (United Nations, n.d.), more than half of whom are women (Women for Women International, 2024). Significant refugee encampments exist in Kenya, Jordan, Algeria and Bangladesh, and Cooper's Camp in West Bengal, established in 1947, now operates more as a village though residents remain stateless (Finch, 2015). The longevity of these camps highlights the pressing need for better solutions for millions of displaced people, and they cast a spotlight on gender-specific security issues that shape the lives of women and girls pre-conflict, in refugee detainment, and during repatriation and resettlement. Among the most distinctive examples of gendered insecurity is within the Al Hol Camp for refugees (Al Hol) in northeastern Syria, which housed 70,000 residents at its peak.

The Camp, designed initially for Iraqi refugees in the 1990s, now primarily accommodates women and children, many of whom are relatives of former Islamic State (IS) fighters or civilians who fled conflict zones. Gendered vulnerabilities manifest in the form of heightened exposure to gender-based violence (GBV), lack of access to essential healthcare, and socio-economic marginalization. Women and girls in Al Hol and, indeed, all long-term refugee camps face distinct security risks, including sexual exploitation, trafficking, forced marriages, and radicalization threats. Forcibly displaced women and children experience compounded vulnerabilities due to intersecting factors such as legal limbo, economic dependency, and patriarchal norms that persist within displaced communities (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020).

This paper seeks to explore two research questions. First, how might gendered security risks associated with structural social norms shape the experiences of women detained in Al Hol? Second, what societal factors impact the repatriation and resettlement of these refugee women and girls? Discussion will draw on published reports from international organizations such as UNHCR, the International Rescue Committee, the World Bank, and academic studies to illustrate factors contributing to women's insecurity in refugee encampments. Further, through a review of United Nations policy frameworks, humanitarian practices, and the Iraqi reintegration program, this paper will attempt to highlight the gender dimensions of displacement and return that must be considered to fulfill the elements of responsibility to protect as applied to female refugees.

### **Theoretical Framework: A Feminist View of Human Security**

Traditional approaches to human security have historically focused on the state-centric framework, highlighting military threats (or intervention) and have been criticized by feminist theory as failing to account for the gender-specific insecurities of women (Khalid, 2018; Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). From this notion, the feminist theory argues that male-dominated perspectives serve to marginalize the specific threats women face (extending to gender-based or domestic violence). For instance, the realist theory, emphasizing military strength as the primary security guarantor, fails to address the pervasive forms of gendered insecurity.

Feminists argue that absolute security includes protection from gender-based violence, reproductive rights and economic empowerment (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). From this, we see the patriarchal society as a form of structural violence that further impedes gender security yet shapes national and global security policies (Khalid, 2018). This patriarchal overhang perpetuates

the inequalities of women's security. An example of this is rape as a weapon of war, which is not simply a side effect of conflict, but a deliberate act of violence used as a suppressive tool to reinforce power and control, representing a grave threat to women's security (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007). The current UN approach to the reintegration of female refugees may risk perpetuating these gendered inequalities by failing to apply a feminist lens and gender-specific intervention strategy. Within this model, if the collective community approach is solely considered, reintegration inadvertently overlooks women's distinct needs and vulnerabilities (Khalid, 2018; United Nations, 2025), which can be quite different for returning women compared with women within the host community.

A feminist-informed approach necessitates a deliberate and sustained shift toward personal empowerment agents for individual reintegration, ensuring each woman has a voice. However, this Western secular idea of gendered emancipation cannot ignore Islamic feminism principles, which operate within religious and cultural frameworks rather than challenging them from the outside. Women's rights, as enshrined in international conventions, originate in the West, and to embrace them would require a complete overhaul of Muslim societies (Barlow & Akbarzadeh, 2006). However, as Jawad (2003) noted, "This secularist approach has...created a backlash, since it alienates sections of Muslim women who want change, but not at the expense of their Islamic identity" (p. 109). The issue of gender relations is highly sensitive, and "even knowledgeable and respectable male interpreters can easily be criticized and marginalized, especially if they speak in favour of women" (p. 112). Further, Islamic feminists often frame women's empowerment in terms of religious and social responsibility rather than individual rights alone. Barlow and Akbarzadeh (2006) point to the shift within Islamic feminist theory away from the outright adoption of the UN framework on women's human rights toward a culturally conscious approach grounded in Islam's egalitarian doctrine. "Over the extended course of her community and intellectual work on women in Muslim societies, Mernissi has come to personalize the evolution of feminism from a movement premised on the rejection of the status quo to one of accommodation and reform" (p. 1482).

A nuanced understanding of this gendered paradox is paramount within the complex context of repatriation and reintegration from Al Hol. Here, gender extends beyond a binary categorization to encompass the diverse lived experiences of women and girls, including mothers, sisters, daughters, and children identifying as female. It acknowledges the distinct vulnerabilities and needs shaped by their roles, relationships, and experiences within the Camp and the broader

conflict zone (Hanlon & Christie, 2016). Subsequently, the terms 'women' and 'female', as defined above, will be used interchangeably to describe gender inclusively. As indicated by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), gender includes socially constructed norms and roles which are determined by the environment” (Brown & Mohammed, 2021, p. 8).

### **A Praxis Lens: The Al Hol Refugee Experience**

For this paper, our analysis examines gender at the individual level, recognizing the broader classification in which the United Nations plans intervention is undifferentiated between ‘women and children’ (United Nations, 2025). Based on the failure to acknowledge differences, this paper seeks to highlight the specific realities and individual challenges faced by women returning from Al Hol into society (United Nations, 2025). The limited understanding overlooks the varying levels of trauma, perceived affiliations with the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS or ISIL) and the ability to effectively rehabilitate and reintegrate into a sustained way of life (Khalid, 2018; United Nations, 2025).

For context, Al Hol was established in 1990 to house Iraqi refugees during the Second Gulf War. The population of the Camp skyrocketed after the territorial defeat of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Baghouz 2019, the final territorial stronghold in Syria. At its peak, Al Hol housed approximately 70,000 individuals, predominantly women and children with perceived ISIL affiliations. The primary population of the Camp are Iraqi and Syrian nationals, with 10,000 citizens of third-country nationals from 57 nations. Due to security concerns, Al Hol has transitioned from a refugee camp to a detention center, where freedom of movement in and out of the Camp is restricted. Security measures are in place under the supervision of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the main armed force of the Autonomous Administration of North and East of Syria (AANES). Today, thousands of female-headed households are in legal and security limbo with no clear solution, underscoring the urgent need for humanitarian intervention. (Parry, Koshnaw, & O’Neil, 2022; Rosen, 2021).

Without an individualized gender lens to reveal the diverse lived experiences of the women in Al Hol, the root causes leading to detention and shaping camp experience are only superficially understood. The resulting homogenized program to rehabilitate and prepare these refugees to reintegrate into community life is, therefore, less likely to be successful. The UN’s blanket approach neglects to discern the differences between a woman who may be coerced into a

predefined role compared to a woman who may have assumed her role or status within the refugee Camp or the distinct needs of a widow versus a survivor of familial or domestic violence (Khalid, 2018).

Providing an individualized, gender-specific approach allows for exploring vulnerabilities specific to women and girls. These include the increased risk of GBV, including sexual exploitation, and in some instances, forced marriages within and external to the Camp (Khalid, 2018). An identified gap is the UN plan to explicitly address preventative measures or provide accessible support services for individual survivors of such violence. Similarly, specific challenges faced by households, such as extended stay in the identified transitional centres or difficulty returning to the original community due to lack of economic and social support, are not accounted for (United Nations, 2025; Khalid, 2018). Female-headed households may face safety concerns, and familial circumstances surrounding the female may exacerbate conflict, which is not addressed. Of course, individuals are unique. Thus, the plan for reintegration must be tailored to include specific support services, psychosocial support, economic empowerment programs, and/or legal support (Khalid, 2018; UN Women, 2021). As noted by Brown and Mohammed (2021) in an ICCT report, a gender-specific approach extends to an awareness of “experiences of parental intimate partner violence and domestic violence, and the normali[z]ation of violence in everyday lives; in adult populations, that women are at greater risk of PTSD following assaultive violence” (p. 7). From this, exposure to violence becomes the norm, accompanied by a lack of trust in social support. Whether through family or systemic stigma, returnees often feel apprehensive about access to services due to unclear communication and/or procedural delays (International Organization for Migration -IOM, 2024).

In addition to the above-noted gender-specific considerations, women who may be associated with ISIS, whether through coercion or by choice, are at an increased likelihood of facing marginalization, alienation, and/or skepticism in the community (Hanlon & Christie, 2016; Khalid, 2018). A missing element in UN planning is a strategy to overcome stigmatization or at least mitigate barriers to reintegration, recognizing that this may be beyond the mandate of the UN's scope. Engaging host communities is crucial to devising culturally suitable strategies that encourage equity and empowerment through an individual lens.

The UN's 2021 Outcome Report titled "Global Digital Consultation: Civil Society Voices on the Gendered Dimensions of Violent Extremism and Counter-Terrorism Responses" (UN Women, 2021) indicates:

We need to reinvest in sustaining peace, sustainable development and human rights agendas to effectively tackle terrorism and violent extremism. This can be successful only if efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism are both inclusive and participatory, with the meaningful participation of women, including young women and marginalized groups (p. 1).

Although the report identifies the essential inclusivity of women's voices in strategic reintegration planning, this becomes difficult to actualize when the meaningful involvement of women who should be the most active participants exists within the environment to which they are often suppressed, further limiting agency. This statement highlights the intractable problem, as the conditions do not exist for these women to be allowed to participate.

To further illustrate the value of empowerment within a conflict region, Attuquayefio (2023) articulates that any meaningful strategy must have "at its core the protection and empowerment of individuals and communities...this fact's veracity is not improbable" (p. 11). However, a critique of this assertion reveals the vital need and reliance on additional structural forces to enable this empowerment. For instance, Attuquayefio (2023) suggests policies that include economic security have pointed to a positive relationship between job creation and reduced vulnerability to renewed conflict and cited other types of security, but this is shortsighted. It infers a causal relationship and fails to account for the many interrelated factors, including gender roles and biases that contribute to participation, or a lack thereof, as discussed above.

A salient point described as the 'Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus' could be the recognition of the "silosiation" of efforts for humanitarian development. Ineffective compartmentalization becomes particularly true in stressed communities, such as Al Hol, where the emphasis is placed on a holistic response "thwart[ing] efforts to address individual needs before, during and after the crisis by placing people at the centre" (Attuquayefio, 2023, p. 12). A tailored response grounded in personal security factors could better address individual needs by placing their well-being at the forefront of interventionist planning.

Similarly, pertinent to the reintegration of Al Hol detainees into community life is the precept of Mexico's I-GAMMA project which proposes that Policy Coherence for Development

(PCD) as an integral element of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda must shift from a eurocentric application to a participatory bottom-up model that is tailored and legitimized in dialogue with local communities (Koff et al., 2020). This type of approach can pinpoint and bridge process gaps in support of state macro-objectives in the repatriation of Al Hol refugees, as well as the local community's socio-economic capacity to safely integrate female citizens within local communities.

## **Challenges for Women as Refugees: The Extreme Case of Al Hol Camp**

### *Security and Violence in Al-Hol Camp*

The security situation in Al Hol poses severe risks to both women and children, with violent extremist groups operating inside the Camp as well as dangers to personal security posed by camp guards and other camp residents. Reports indicate that extremist elements within Al Hol enforce rigid ideological norms through coercion and violence to maintain control, and women who do not conform to the violent extremist groups' expectations are targeted and punished, resulting in physical assault and, in some cases, death (Sandi, 2022). Security conditions are further exacerbated by inadequate law enforcement, leading to a pervasive sense of fear and lawlessness (Parry, Koshnaw, O'Neil, Munguía, Genat, 2022).

The impact of daily insecurity is profoundly damaging to people inside Al Hol. Women and children who are frequently subjected to intimidation and physical harm experience an acute and lasting loss of psychological safety and individual security. Many are reluctant to leave their tents or access basic services due to fear of reprisal from extremist factions (Parry et al., 2022a). Efforts to improve security remain inadequate as humanitarian organizations struggle to implement effective measures against extremist influence. Deaths within the Camp, particularly those of women and girls, highlight broader gender-based violence, reflecting systemic failures to protect the vulnerable populations inside Al Hol. Additionally, Al Hol residents have little to no access to formal justice mechanisms, making it difficult to report crimes, which enables perpetrators to operate with impunity (Sandi, 2022).

The governance structure inside the Camp remains fragmented, further exacerbating the security crisis. The absence of a unified administration results in inconsistent law enforcement and a lack of accountability. Reports indicate that extremist networks within the Camp leverage this

vacuum to consolidate power, enforcing IS-style governance structures in certain sections (Parry et al., 2022a). The lack of oversight contributes to persistent human rights violations experienced by the Camp's inhabitants. Women do not have a voice or agency in the governance system and are particularly vulnerable, as they are often viewed as both victims and enforcers of extremist ideologies, leading to a complex cycle of violent extremism and individual insecurity (Sandi, 2022).

### *Health and Sanitation in Al Hol Camp*

Health security in Al Hol is dire for women, girls, and children. Overcrowding, malnutrition, and limited access to healthcare contribute to a high prevalence of disease. The lack of maternal healthcare is particularly concerning, with pregnant women receiving insufficient medical attention, leading to high rates of birthing complications and maternal mortality. Infectious diseases spread rapidly due to poor sanitation, leading to outbreaks that disproportionately affect children and pregnant women (Sandi, 2022; Parry et al., 2022a). The overcrowding exacerbates disease outbreaks, especially among girls and children, leading to increased mortality rates inside the Camp. Mental health issues among camp residents remain largely unaddressed; the women, girls, and children, in particular, experience high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. The prolonged uncertainty surrounding their legal status, combined with the harsh living conditions, has led to severe psychological distress among many residents. Humanitarian organizations providing psychosocial support face numerous operational challenges, including limited funding and restricted access to specific sections of the Camp (Parry et al., 2022a). Reports also suggest that ISIL networks within the Camp have weaponized mental health struggles by manipulating psychologically vulnerable women and children into furthering extremist narratives (Sandi, 2022).

### *Radicalization and Indoctrination in Al Hol Camp*

The influence of ISIL inside Al Hol remains a critical concern. Women, girls, and children are particularly susceptible to radicalization due to prolonged exposure to violent extremist ideology and harsh camp conditions. Violent extremist networks within the Camp actively recruit and indoctrinate individuals to join ISIL, perpetuating cycles of radicalization (Sandi, 2022). Children in the Camp are also targets for ideological indoctrination, posing longer-term and

possibly multi-generational insecurities (Sandi, 2022). The lack of alternative educational opportunities to counterbalance the extremist narrative and the isolation of camp residents, which channels and concentrates violent extremism, contributes to radicalization.

Women, many of whom were coerced into joining ISIL or had limited agency in their involvement, find themselves trapped in an environment where disengagement from the violent extremist ideology is impossible. Even those seeking to disengage from ISIL ideology struggle to do so due to the presence of extremist networks, lack of support structures, and chronic insecurity, which magnify the risks of violent extremism (Parry et al., 2022a). Reports indicate that children as young as five are being trained in extremist doctrine, entrenching radicalization within the camp and further victimizing mothers unable to protect their children. Sandi (2022) found that the role of women in indoctrination is evolving from passive victims to increasingly active promotion of ISIL ideology within the camp. Female residents have organized secret religious classes, relayed messages from ISIL leaders, and forced other women, girls, and children to embrace the radical beliefs, pointing to a trend of radicalization that is perpetuated internally, making external interventions increasingly challenging.

#### *Repatriation and Legal Status of Al Hol Detainees*

Due to traditional security concerns and political considerations, most governments are still reluctant to repatriate their citizens from Al Hol. The fear that returnees may pose a threat to national security has slowed the process of repatriating, rehabilitating or reintegrating. Furthermore, legal barriers complicate repatriation efforts as most camp residents lack the proper documentation or face prosecution in their home countries. The lack of a clear legal framework for repatriation further complicates efforts to resolve this severe human insecurity situation. Prolonged detention in Al Hol has extreme consequences on the residents' mental and physical well-being, which exacerbates their suffering, contributing to growing levels of distress and vulnerability. Women, girls and children endure psychological trauma due to the uncertainty surrounding their futures, even if they have no direct association with ISIL, raising human rights concerns due to their indefinite detention (Parry et al., 2022a; Sandi, 2022).

## **Confronting Gender in Repatriation and Resettlement**

In response to Al Hol's insecurities and risks, with the support of international organizations, including the United Nations represented by its multiple agencies (IOM, UNDP, UNODC, UNICEF), the Iraqi Government has prioritized the repatriation of camp residents of Iraqi nationality through Al-Jadaa Center for Psychological and Social Rehabilitation (unofficially known as Al-Jadaa Camp1 or J-1) in Nineveh Province, northern Iraq. The Government has adopted a strategy framed by the Prosecution, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (PRR), a partnership with international organizations, according to roundtable reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) (2022).

The PRR takes a comprehensive approach to those returning from conflict zones who have or are perceived to have affiliations with ISIL that consists of three main components: prosecution ensures those responsible for crimes are held accountable through legal channels; rehabilitation provides psychological, educational, and vocational support to disengage individuals from violent ideologies and behaviours; and, reintegration secures returnees' transition into society by addressing community acceptance, stigma, and socio-economic and other needs.

The PRR acknowledges the diversity of individuals affected by violent extremist groups and emphasizes the development of human-centric and security-conscious processes such as risk assessment and needs evaluation before implementing programmatic intervention (IOM & ICCT, 2022). The screening processes categorize individuals based on their level of vulnerability to violent extremism and psychological state, enabling tailored rehabilitation programs that may include mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), religious counselling, vocational training, and education. Given that many returnees are women, girls and children, the PRR framework also incorporates gender-sensitive and child-specific interventions based on field learnings to address the unique needs of each returning individual, such as trauma, stigma, and legal identity issues (IOM & ICCT, 2022). In parallel, reintegration efforts prepare local communities to accept Al Hol returnees, mitigating potential resentment and fostering reconciliation through community engagement programs, strategic communication initiatives, and long-term economic and social support mechanisms. Despite this structured plan, the implementation of PRR faces multiple challenges, including community rejection of returnees in some areas of origin, limited resources, and limited funding for sustained interventions to bridge communication gaps among key stakeholders, including information sharing between Iraqi

authorities and the SDF according to IOM and ICCT (2022) roundtable reports. Since May 2021, Iraq has repatriated approximately 12,500 nationals from Al Hol (Reuters, 2025), yet many continue to face multiple barriers upon return. A significant issue is the lack of civil documentation, particularly for women, girls, and children, which limits their ability to access education, healthcare, employment, and housing. Parry, Khoshnaw, O’Neil, Munguía and Genat (2022) also found that female-headed households face higher rates of insecurity due to social stigma, homelessness, financial burdens, and bureaucratic delays that make their reintegration challenging.

Additionally, security clearance and assessment processes remain inconsistent and depend on traditional security measures that fail to address the individual complexities women face. This failure is especially problematic for returnees to areas of origin, where communities reject displaced persons due to concerns about their perceived affiliation with ISIL and the perceived threats they pose to local communities on their return to the area (IOM & ICCT, 2022). For example, returnees from Anbar Province appear to have experienced more successful reintegration. At the same time, those from Nineveh and Salahadin Governorates face more significant opposition, given the perceived traditional security concerns associated with Al Hol returnees (Semnani & O’Neil, 2024).

One of the most pressing barriers to reintegration with the local community is the lack of civil documentation, particularly for children. Many children were born under ISIL occupation, leaving them without official birth certificates or Iraqi national IDs; without these documents, children cannot access schools, healthcare, or public services, increasing their risk of exploitation and radicalization. The legal process for acquiring documentation is highly restrictive, requiring security clearances, proof of paternity, and, in some cases, DNA tests to prove lineage. These hurdles disproportionately impact female-headed households that often lack legal proof of marriage or access to male relatives who can vouch for their children's identity (Parry et al., 2022a).

Moreover, the housing and employment opportunities remain limited for Al Hol returnees. Many displaced Iraqis return to find their homes destroyed, occupied, or legally inaccessible due to tribal disputes or community resistance. In some provinces, landlords refuse to rent properties to Al Hol returnees, fearing security risks or the social backlash. While the Iraqi Government and international aid programs have attempted to address housing shortages, the process remains inadequate and slow. Despite these challenges, Parry, Khoshnaw, O’Neil, Munguía and Genat (2022) found signs of gradual progress in shifting public perceptions regarding the returnees. In

the past, Al Hol returnees were viewed with suspicion. They considered potential ISIL sympathizers or members who could pose a future threat in the host communities and areas of return or origin. However, growing awareness that many women, girls and children of Al Hol were victims of forced displacement and coercion has led to greater acceptance in some communities, though the reintegration process is still a challenge in other areas. This shift has particularly benefited female-headed households, who now receive increased social support, albeit with ongoing disparities in employment and legal recognition (Parry et al., 2022a).

Looking ahead, the future of Al Hol refugees is uncertain. While the Government of Iraq is continuing the repatriation efforts with international support, thousands of women, girls, and children are still trapped in Al Hol as gender barriers to return disproportionately affect these individuals due to their legal, social, and economic vulnerabilities. Gendered obstacles, such as societal stigma, lack of reintegration programs tailored to women's and girls' needs, and the absence of protections, further complicate the return process (IOM & ICCT, 2022). In addition, women often face heightened risks of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), coercion into further radicalization, and trafficking, making their reintegration even more challenging (ICCT Report, 2024). Western countries remain hesitant to repatriate their female citizens from Al Hol, fearing traditional security risks and political backlash, despite evidence that women in these camps do not fit a singular narrative of either perpetrators or victims. Research highlights that while some women were active supporters of ISIS, others were coerced or joined due to socio-economic vulnerabilities, demonstrating the need for gender-sensitive risk assessments rather than blanket policies that treat all women as security threats (Ingram, 2024).

Inaction poses a different risk to human security. Researchers warn that the prolonged detention of thousands of people could fuel future cycles of violent extremism if sustainable, gender-sensitive solutions are not implemented. Without such interventions, these camps risk becoming long-term incubators for radicalization, particularly among children who grow up in environments of prolonged displacement, statelessness, and exposure to extremist narratives (Ingram, 2024; IOM & ICCT, 2022; Semnani et al., 2024).

### **Community Reintegration Hurdles for Women Refugees**

Al Hol represents one of the most complex humanitarian, legal, and human security challenges in the world. While Iraq made notable progress in the repatriation of its citizens, the systemic barriers and insecurities are significant. They encompass access to documentation,

education, healthcare, food, employment, and related human security (Parry et al., 2022a). Addressing the challenges, concentrated around women and children, requires multifaceted, individual-centred approaches, beginning with rehabilitation through to repatriation and reintegration into communities (IOM & ICCT, 2022). Repatriating or resettling Al Hol detainees in their home communities or elsewhere is difficult due to the profile of the Camp as a detention centre for ISIL affiliates. The unique circumstance of the Camp elevates the need for tailored community support networks and ongoing monitoring to ensure returnees, predominantly women, girls and children, can sustainably and securely reintegrate into society (Procter & Barry, 2024).

For example, a study of 83 women who returned from Al Hol to their home communities in Syria found that in Hajin, few women reported difficulties accessing the appropriate documentation for necessary services. In contrast, many women in Kasra struggled to obtain the same documents, including identification papers. Lack of documentation prevented women in Kasra from travelling, making purchases, or accessing support services (Procter & Barry, 2024). Further, returnees from Al Hol faced employment challenges due to their lack of education or skills development while in the Camp. Gaining employment is a critical component of sustainable reintegration; without employment, women and their families often remain below the poverty line and rely on aid and support services far longer than they should (Procter & Barry, 2024).

Ultimately, the reintegration of women refugees returning from Al Hol must overcome structural inequities and gender relationship dynamics as outlined in the Gender in Development (GAD) approach (Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007) and local societal stigma. Many women encounter discrimination due to perceived affiliations with ISIS, creating barriers to their reintegration. Procter and Barry (2024) found that in Hajin, for example, returnees often face accusations of wrongdoing, leading to strained community relationships. Mothers struggle to navigate the suspicion surrounding their return while protecting their children from derogatory labels like “ISIL children.” This stigma fosters a climate of fear, prompting some mothers to restrict their children’s movements to avoid harassment. Addressing the mental health of women, girls, and children who have experienced trauma is, thus, essential for successful integration with community support and local leaders playing a crucial role. Additionally, prioritizing children's welfare and education can help build confidence for mothers and their children, facilitating a sense of belonging. The distinct challenges faced by women refugees must be recognized with a collective effort to combat stigma, ensuring their reintegration is safe and sustainable and a sense of inclusivity is fostered. This issue

transcends local borders and requires coordinated efforts from global actors to uphold human rights. One effort underway to tackle these challenges is a €3 million initiative co-sponsored by the UNDP and the Government of Italy focused on the sustainable reintegration of returnees, emphasizing social cohesion and inclusive strategies that recognize women's vital core.

## **Discussion**

There is a societal cycle of structural gendered biases that invisibly and overtly hamper the post-conflict humanitarian work associated with forcibly displaced women, from detention in refugee encampments to their reintegration and resettlement. While Al Hol Camp represents an exceptionally acute situation as female detainees are disproportionately linked with terrorist organizations, the obstacles to their personal security and the challenges to their reintegration are instructive to human security policy and operational models. A gender-mainstreamed approach to repatriation and reintegration, as outlined by UN Women (2023), is critical to addressing systemic inequalities that exacerbate these challenges.

## *Outcomes of Repatriation and Reintegration Efforts*

- 1- Legal and bureaucratic barriers:** The inability to obtain civil documentation prevents returnees, especially children, from accessing essential services, confining them to prolonged legal limbo. The lack of gender-sensitive legal pathways complicates women's ability to secure identity documents for themselves and their children (Parry et al., 2022).
- 2- Community resistance and social stigma:** Perceived ISIL affiliation creates enduring stigma for returnees, affecting their acceptance within host communities, especially in Nineveh and Salahadin Governorates. Women and girls face additional discrimination due to gendered narratives framing them as either active perpetrators or passive victims, limiting their access to meaningful reintegration programs (Parry et al., 2022).
- 3- Economic and security vulnerabilities:** Women-headed households struggle with financial burdens, lack of employment opportunities, and heightened exposure to gender-based violence (GBV). Gendered economic inequalities and the lack of tailored vocational training exacerbate their vulnerability to re-exploitation (Parry et al., 2022).
- 4- Fragmented rehabilitation approaches:** While the Prosecution, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (PRR) framework attempts to tailor support, inconsistencies in security clearance and reintegration strategies reduce its effectiveness. A lack of gender-responsive screening processes can lead to increased security restrictions on women, further isolating them from resources (UN Women, 2023). Research shows that progress in CVE programs is non-linear, requiring sustained engagement without immediate results (King et al., 2025). Many returnees face setbacks prior to signs of reintegration, reinforcing the need for long-term interventions and individualized support plans.
- 5- Risk of further radicalization:** The prolonged detention of individuals in insecure Camp conditions increases susceptibility to extremist narratives, particularly for children growing up without access to education or stable environments. The absence of gender-sensitive approaches in countering violent extremism (CVE) limits the effectiveness of de-radicalization programs, as highlighted by UN Women's gender-mainstreaming framework (2023). CVE studies indicate that addressing psychosocial needs—such as mental health support and social inclusion, can significantly reduce the likelihood of recidivism (King et al., 2025).

## *Implications of These Repatriation and Reintegration Outcomes*

- 1- **Failure to address gender-specific barriers weakens reintegration efforts:** A lack of tailored reintegration programs for women results in incomplete rehabilitation and increases the risk of systemic failure by further isolating female returnees and perpetuating cycles of radicalization (UN Women, 2023).
- 2- **Potential for cyclical displacement and conflict:** If stigma and socio-economic exclusion persist returnees may experience secondary displacement that exacerbates regional instability. This is particularly concerning given the security risks associated with marginalized populations being targeted by extremist groups (Parry et al., 2022).
- 3- **International hesitancy in repatriation aggravates human security crises:** Western countries' reluctance to repatriate female citizens, despite evidence of non-complicit pathways into ISIL affiliation, contributes to indefinite detention of women and children, violating human rights commitments and prolonging statelessness (Ingram, 2024).
- 4- **Need for sustainable solutions:** The current framework lacks a long-term vision that includes economic empowerment, psychosocial support, and legal pathways to citizenship, essential for preventing further displacement or radicalization. A comprehensive gender-responsive reintegration strategy, as advocated by UN Women (2023), is necessary to ensure sustained support for returnees.

## **Need for Future Studies**

Given these outcomes and implications, further research is needed in several key areas:

- 1- **Measuring the effectiveness of PRR programs:** A longitudinal study of returnees' rehabilitation and reintegration experiences is necessary to evaluate the PRR's success and identify areas for improvement. Gender-disaggregated data collection should be prioritized (UN Women, 2023) as CVE research recognizes that individuals may initially experience setbacks before achieving sustainable reintegration (King et al., 2025).
- 2- **Assessing the impact of stigma on reintegration:** Community-level research that examines how stigma shapes economic and social reintegration outcomes for women and children can inform strategies to mitigate social exclusion (Parry et al., 2022).

- 3- **Evaluating the gendered impact of security screening:** A comparative analysis of security clearance processes could reveal biases in existing frameworks and propose more inclusive alternatives that address gender-specific vulnerabilities (UN Women, 2023).
- 4- **Exploring alternative legal avenues for stateless children:** Research into policy solutions for undocumented returnees, particularly children born under ISIL rule, is essential to break cycles of marginalization and exclusion (Parry et al., 2022).
- 5- **Understanding how economic empowerment reduces recidivism:** Investigating how access to employment, vocational training, and financial support affects long-term reintegration success can guide policy adjustments to better support female-headed households (UN Women, 2023) as CVE interventions suggests economic empowerment significantly improves long-term reintegration outcomes (King et al., 2025).

## Conclusion

This paper set out to examine two questions: How do gendered security risks embedded in structural social norms shape the experiences of women detained in Al Hol, and what societal factors impact the repatriation and resettlement of these female refugees? Our analysis explored the Western feminist theory of human security and the Islamic feminism framework in which the gendered concept of emancipation exists. Discussion of the Al Hol refugee experience revealed a human security crisis with deeply gendered dimensions, making it vital to understand the global consequences of such crises. While feminist perspectives on human security emphasized the need for gender-sensitive responses to structural inequalities, gender-based violence, and the agency of women in conflict contexts and situations, the praxis represented by Al Hol presented a more complex reality. The Camp embodies contradictions where women are simultaneously victims of displacement, systemic neglect, and violence while they can also be agents of radicalization or supporters of extremist ideologies.

The prolonged detention, insecurity, and humanitarian deprivation experienced by vulnerable women and children is a failure in both individual security and economic empowerment, which are core principles of human security. Without sustainable solutions prioritizing individual-centred rehabilitation and reintegration interventions, Al Hol risks perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and radicalization, ultimately undermining long-term global

stability (Semnani et al., 2024; IOM & ICCT, 2022). The case of Al Hol illustrates the profound gendered insecurities that persist in post-conflict settings, revealing the urgent need for gender-sensitive and individually driven strategic responses. As discussed, many women and children of Al Hol were coerced into situations beyond their control and now face compounded vulnerabilities, including gender-based violence, social exclusion, legal invisibility, and economic hardship. International and national plans, such as the PRR model, attempt to address the diverse challenges, but as explored, gaps remain in both gender-sensitive and individualized approaches. As explored from the feminist perspective, acknowledging the diverse lived experiences of women is crucial, and without recognition of gender differences, successful reintegration is difficult and slow.

The analysis made it clear that response must transcend beyond traditional security concerns to encompass a gendered approach to psychosocial, legal, and economic reintegration and support mechanisms. The human security processes used in the field emphasized the need for customized operations. While the one-size-fits-all approach enables efficiency and consistency, it does not recognize the individual needs of displaced persons and the diverse factors that affect each differently. The intricacy of personal and social situations are intertwined elements that can lead to empowerment or vulnerability. This reality requires individualized programs tailored to the unique needs of female refugees to ensure sustainable rehabilitation, reintegration, or resettlement. While this applies to all refugees, the circumstances of women are particularly acute given the structural distinction of gendered roles embedded overtly and invisibly across society, including in United Nations programs and related non-governmental agencies involved in Al Hol. Without comprehensive, tailored strategies that prioritize sustainability, empowerment and community acceptance of Al Hol detainees, the risks of continued marginalization, radicalization, and myriad human insecurities remain high. At the same time, new models, such as PRR, are relevant to applications beyond Al Hol.

As Ambassador Bob Rae, Canada's permanent representative to the United Nations, acknowledged, longstanding policy frameworks are inadequate for today's crises with conflict and family violence, leaving millions of women and children vulnerable. "There is a difference between choosing to move and being forced to flee" (Rae, 2025, January 31). Addressing the personal security crises manifest in Al Hol is not just a regional imperative but representative of the global responsibility to protect. Sustainable solutions require a human-security-driven approach that fosters individual rehabilitation, prioritizing the returnee's agency and dignity while

addressing community cohesion and protecting safety for all. The failure to implement such measures heightens risk factors, as examined above, and at a broader level, increases cycles of violent extremism, displacement, and related human insecurities. This vicious cycle of violence ultimately undermines national and international efforts that seek stability in support of human development aims. By coalescing efforts around gender-sensitive, individually driven intervention strategies, policymakers and humanitarian actors can begin to forge a path toward lasting state and subnational security and more equitable socio-economic footing for women detained in Al Hol, as well as female refugees generally.

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