

## **Yazidi Women's Psycho-Social Crises and Cultural Rejection**

This panel will discuss the psycho-social challenges facing Yazidi survivors from the ethnic cleansing transpired in August 3, 2014 during the ISIS attacks in Iraq and the effective methods for their rehabilitation and reintegration pathways as individuals. The number of affected individuals is not accurate because still there are hundreds of missing women. The local officials report that many kinds of sexual violence, rape, sexual slavery trade and mass murder were practised against both genders from different ages including children. One of the worst consequences of this genocide is suicide; yet, it is hard to obtain accurate data due to certain cultural considerations and faith-related reasons. The second observable consequence is the survivors' children and their acceptance among their community.

Unquestionably, the survivors who became mothers may pay more attention to their children and their motherhood instinct prevents them from committing suicide. Therefore, our main goals are to seek rehabilitation for the survivors and assist them to reintegrate with the society. On the other hand, we need to address the patriarchy and male dominance culture within the academic institutions in Kurdistan region to promote the concern among individuals about the psychological and cultural consequences for committing sexual violence.

### **Introduction**

On Aug. 3, 2014, the IS terrorist group attacked the city of Sinjar and its villages where a religious minority resides called "Yazidis". The Yazidis represent less than 2 percent<sup>1</sup> of Iraq's estimated population of 38 million. (Sevdeen, 2019, p. 231) states that the Yazidis practice a faith with pre-Zoroastrian roots, while their speaking language is Kurdish with slightly specific northern dialect (Foltz, 2013, p. 291). As, the IS terrorists consider the Yazidis infidels, they subjected them to a systematic genocide and ethnic cleansing through massacres and plunder followed by capturing thousands of women and girls (Clarke, 2018, p. 93). The ISIS enslaved these women and explained in details the theological justifications for enslaving them because they are identified as infidels, many stories are told in this respect (Murad & Krajewski, 2018). Moreover, they cited Quranic verses and interpretations of Islamic scholars to refer to the principle that these women could be enslaved. The senior members of

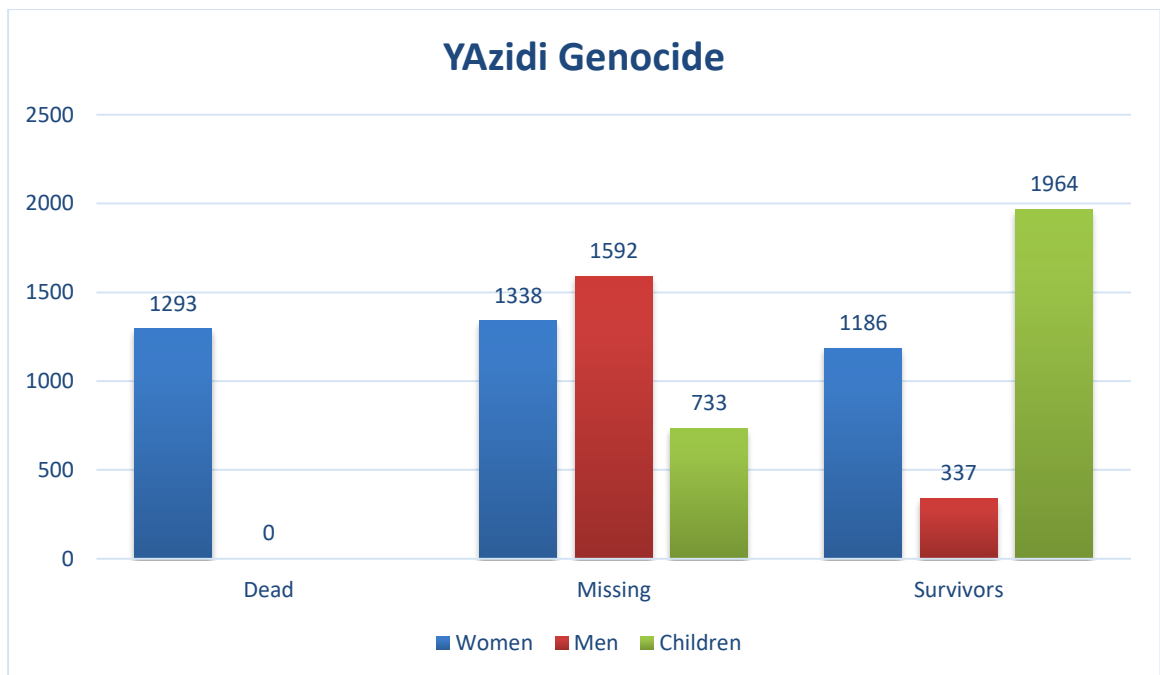
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<sup>1</sup> The estimated number of Yazidi population approved by the UN is around 550,000 people.

the group authorized themselves to practise sexual violence and trade slavery as a weapon against civilians, particularly women .

The official data available with the United Nations, Kurdistan Regional Government and Barzani Charity Foundation<sup>2</sup> show that:

- The estimated number of Yazidis of internally displaced are 360,000 and the refugees 100,000.
- The estimated number of male casualties of the raid are 1293 over 80 mass graves identified in the area.
- The total number of the abductees registered are 6,417 individuals including 3548 young women.
- The total number of the survivors are 3487 individuals including 2210 females and 1227 males.
- The estimated of the missing individuals are 2930 including 1338 females.



### Debatable Interrogations

<sup>2</sup> The data was obtained via personal communication with Barzani Charity Foundation- the department of public relations.

Research shows that sexual violence and all types of domestic violence that are associated with the ethnic conflicts, have numerous short-term and long-term consequences such as; social, cultural, economic and health-related issues (Schaal & Elbert, 2006). Indeed, (McHugo, 2018, p. 127) offers a concise detail of the existing conflicts between both Muslim groups in post 2003 Iraq and the writer asserts that “the cycle of conflicts spiralled out of control”. Therefore, it is not only the Yazidi women are affected by the sexual violence; nonetheless, there are many other unspoken groups as well but due to the complexity of the political situation in Iraq, they miscarry to disclose their identities.

Unfortunately, government officials try to conceal the loss of life and suicidal attempts; perhaps, due to social security reasons and cultural considerations that makes the case untouchable. This understanding makes our task more problematic, complicated and challenging. As the survivors, suffer psychological trauma and mental health issues including isolation, fear, feelings of unworthiness, rejection and suicidal thoughts without professional support. Therefore, immediate rehabilitation programs and recovery centres are needed to provide support and recognition to these vulnerable groups including the children.

Beyond, the ISIS terrorists deeply enmeshed the efficient rape of Yazidi women and girls through their radical theology and announced it as reviving slavery as an institution (Khalaf & Hoffmann, 2017, p. 175). In many of the interviews and the published memoirs, the survivors refer to their unsuccessful suicidal attempts because they believe that the failure to commit suicide meant they had to keep on being raped (Schmermund, 2017, p. 40). This demonstrates the fact they started suicide attempts during their slavery and these attempts lasts to the present time. Further in this regard, (Tagay, Ayhan, Catani, Schnyder, & Teufel, 2017) conducted a systematic investigation on the effect of genocide on the Yazidi community in Germany in which they deliberate the posttraumatic stress disorder and symptoms among the Yazidi women refugees.

On the other hand, (Hoffman et al., 2018, p. 112) state that the genocide of the Yazidi religious minority was committed by the ISIS, as a large number of men were executed and the women were “subjected to sexual slavery, experiencing repeated abuse and rape.” According to Hoffman, The survivors’ experience is well documented and studied, and the concluding facts show that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex post-traumatic

stress disorder (CPTSD) are observed among the survivors of rape who currently live in camps but there thousands survivors who are still in Iraq.

As mentioned by the participants and the written diaries of Yazidi women, the perpetrators are from diverse backgrounds but generally motivated by religious ideologies. While the frequent and extreme brutality committed with impunity during the wave of armed occupation which resulted in the disintegration of the moral and social values among the Yazidi community. Moreover, the social stigma has left large numbers of rape victims and children born of rape rejected by their families and communities because the action is associated with violence against civilians like women, men, girls, and boys.

Consequently, culture and community traditions largely influences the ways that the survivor perceives wider social reintegration. The Middle-Eastern societies including non-Muslim ethnicities recognize rape as an evil action; therefore, the offspring and their mothers face dreadful challenges, including stigma and banishment from the wider community (Calder et al., 2009, p. 201). Accordingly, not only the women are stigmatized, but their children also become their symbol of disgrace.

Ultimately, the community reactions towards the survivors are often ruthless; hence, the survivors need special care, advocacy and support (Clarke, 2018). Unlikely, the children are not eligible for national IDs without a father's name and birth certificate, which prevents them from going to school and receiving government assistance in the near future. Growing up, the community will identify them as the sons and daughters of the loathed terrorists and often face discrimination. Again, local officials prefer to keep these facts undiscussed (El-Masri, 2018).

At this point, we need well-studied informative campaigns of cultural awareness among the Iraqi society in general and more specifically the northern parts including Kurdistan region where direct interactions occur with the survivors. Indeed, the traditional cultural and religious values limit the choices of the survivors, including male family-members, by determining the ways in which the community expects them to manage the situation (Desbois & Costel, 2018, p. 176). This repeatedly causes families collapse due to the shame and humiliation associated with their experience of sexual violence. Through these

campaigns, the public will be familiar with the different types of sexual violence and show empathy rather than disgrace.

There is no doubt that the survivors experience physical and psychological devastations. They may discuss their physical symptoms and sufferings with medical practitioners but it is hard to disclose the traumatic experience of sexual violence (Otten, 2017). Moreover, (El-Masri, 2018, p. 57) reports that in the context of Yazidi's adversity, enslavement and sexual violence acts contribute to high levels of PTSD and depression. Perceived social rejection plays a significant role in the relationship between trauma exposure and mental health among the abducted survivors and the fate of their children (Inal & Smith, 2018, p. 43). Therefore, Providing psychosocial support and treatment for Yazidi people is urgent. There is no doubt; further deferrals will lead to more deaths and social catastrophe.

For the survivors of sexual violence, it can leave deep physical, psychological and psychosocial marks because they did experience physical harm, unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Moreover, psychological trauma can include, but is not limited to, distress, fear, guilt, depression and isolation (Ramsbotham & Woodhouse, 2013, p. 195). Additionally, some victims hesitate to report their experiences because of feelings of shame, disgrace and fear of vengeance. (Ibrahim, Ertl, Catani, Ismail, & Neuner, 2018, p. 9) conclude that the survivors of the Yazidi genocide often experience stigmatisation and social rejection by their own families and communities.

As (Loader, 2007, p. 192) mentions that the common cultural perception exists that a victim of rape can cause divine curse and may bring bad luck to their entire community due to her impure body. In case, the social rejection of this vulnerable group remains, which is expected in near future, the combination of physical and emotional consequences lead to the loss of socio-economic stability and any active opportunities for individuals. On a community level, it creates a climate of fear and destroys social fabric. Families of victims vicariously experience the trauma, particularly if they witnessed an attack.

On the other hand, many of the survivors suffer in silence, without accessing necessary medical and psychological support and care because this phenomenon is new to the Iraqi culture and probably to the Middle Eastern culture. Even when they have a will to speak out and seek support, considerable material obstacles may hinder the path to accessing medical care due to the lack of professional institutions and service providers in the country.

The health sector in Iraq in general and the Kurdish region does not cover rehabilitation programs of sexual violence and rape; therefore, this panel aims at establishing a rehabilitation centre for the survivors in the area. For this purpose, the [Kurdistan Regional Government](#) KRG, the local administration in Duhok governorate and [Barzani Charity Foundation](#) BCF offer their inclusive support to any third party who can offer rehabilitation programs to the survivors.

Although, the recovery for rape related trauma is a slow and complicated process and it is impossible to delete the rape experience due to its association with terrorism, but the negative effects can be reduced to minimum through providing cultural awareness, education, training and employment opportunities (Inal & Smith, 2018, p. 144). Moreover, assisting the survivors to achieve financial independence will have constructive results. Holistic programs, social work professionals and well-trained caseworkers are needed to control their stress reactions, and re-establish a sense of hope. The rehabilitation programs can provide the skills needed to take back control of their life and return to the mainstream social life.

The next outstanding dilemma of some of the survivors is the children born as a product of their sexual slavery. This vulnerable group is forced to live on the borders of the community that leads to their isolation and eventually they will be deprived from the basic human rights; such as health, education, and economic security. In spite of the traumatic experience, they have to take the responsibility of the children because these children are not recognized as ordinary members of the community by the Iraqi officials neither their own community. This group of children need to be legally registered and socially recognised to be able to integrate naturally with the mainstream society. From our perspective, the small-scale schemes that offer food and shelter to these mothers and their children are unable to sustain the cultural identity of these children.

In fact, in September 2016, the United Nations and the representative of the Iraqi government signed an agreement on the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence. As (Mahmood, 2017, p. 27) points out, the issue of children born as a result of rape appears in point number three stating: “Ensuring the provision of services, livelihood support, and reparations for survivors and children born of rape.” In addition, the same researcher believes that the “international organizations should exert the fullest legal and institutional capacity to exert pressure and create awareness of this issue.” Moderately, as local academics in this field, we must admit that the collective response to sexual violence in general has been inadequate, and that failure is magnified over time. Therefore, promoting women empowerment, more specifically the

survivors of rape, is a fundamental requirement of social justice, reparation, ethnic reconciliation and peace-building process. The rehabilitation programs will directly affect the conflict recovery efforts and contribute to restoring peace and stability to the Iraqi society and the survivors of war zone rape.

The many accounts reported by the Yazidi survivors illustrate the brutal experiences and they are already documented through previous and existing research. More needs to be done to prevent this atrocity and barbarism. We believe that advanced rehabilitation programs and wide-ranging projects need to be established in order to assist the survivors. The official health institutions do not include rehabilitation programs and support services from Sexual violence because sex and gender-based violence are culturally not recognised. In relation to this, certain mechanisms are required to be part of such programs and they can be implemented to support the survivors to show resilience and continue with their lives because there is always room for improvement and better life.

## **Conclusion**

Female empowerment and gender mainstreaming are indispensable parts of this panel that aims to support the survivors. The ethnic conflict and Aug. 3, 2014 ISIS attack relocates sexual violence from the unmentionable personal closed secret to the open-to-public issue and becomes part of the public agenda argued by the community leaders every day. Currently, the public are sensitized and convinced that sexual violence is associated with war zone. The survivors are not responsible for the abuse they subjected to, which is considered as a remarkable progress in cultural trends, but the family members need to be informed that in one way or another, they are responsible to accept the survivors and their children.

Conclusively, we must respond to their needs as survivors from the conflict-related and gender-based crimes in north of Iraq. Particularly, in the Kurdish ruled area where stability and security is solid and the regional government can offer logistic support. Additionally, Barzani Charity Foundation acts as one of the top rated NGOs in the area and the United Nation's foremost implementing partners in Iraq. By and large, we must find a way to rebuild their lives in spite of the community stigma associated with sexual violence and the trauma of the crimes they have experienced. Since the social crises, cultural rejections and the traumatic experiences facing these mothers and their children need to be considered by all.

Furthermore, the survivors of this genocide and any sorts of sexual violence must have access to dignified, culturally sensitive and confidential support. This panel aims at establishing a collaborative network to provide psychosocial care and medical services, which support the survivors throughout the process of recovery. Our aim is to set up self-sufficient support centres by training local professionals from the community. These professionals can show respect and apply all ethical principles in their efforts to reduce the long-term impacts of the Yazidi genocide on this minority group.

Awareness campaigns and activities are also important in identifying the consequences of this genocide, reducing stigmatisation and informing communities about the psychosocial consequences are our priorities. The rehabilitation programs to assist the individuals affected by sexual violence requires a multidisciplinary effort, bringing together expertise from different disciplines. Professionals and academics. We are all committed to addressing the causes and effects of wartime sexual violence, providing support to the survivors and ensuring that it never becomes the norm.

In the near future, these survivors and their children will experience aggression and behavioural problems, toxic stress, developmental regression, extreme ideological worldviews, social exclusion, vulnerability, low self-esteem, identity loss and confusion. The development of a network hub to share proposals and effective programs to establish rehabilitation centres are my aims in this panel. This paper recommends a range of possible tools and methods to ensure effective practice. First, an adequate starting point for interventions can be sexual violence and trauma awareness to understand the multiple psychological effects on working with the survivors. Secondly, making efforts to establish an inclusive rehabilitation centre in the safe areas close by Sinjar. This can be the second significant step to start our journey with one of the most vulnerable groups in the history of Middle East.

### **The recommended Programs**

1. Acceptance, Empowerment, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Yazidi Women Affected by the ISIS Genocide 2014
2. Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) Prevention and Response among Youth in Iraq



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