

## *The Gendering of Victimhood: Western media and the Sinjar genocide*<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

This article adopts a gender perspective on war, problematising media attention on Yezidi women since the attacks by ISIS. Sinjari Yezidis' narratives/subjectivities since 2014 are silenced in Western media reports in favour of a "hyper-visibility" of women's "injured bodies", which mobilises a specific narrative of victimhood. Reports from UK and US broadsheet newspapers, plus the BBC, CNN and online publications are analysed, plus new data gathered through fieldwork among Yezidis in Northern Iraq. Western media draw on and reproduce cultural and gender representations, reinstating relations of power infused with orientalist and patriarchal tropes. The focus on women's bodies moves attention away from the workings of *namûs* "honour" and the suffering of Yezidi men. Some Yezidi women who became activists, speaking as victims, are heard internationally; the compromises this entails are discussed in light of Fassin and Rechtman's work on the politics of victimhood

### **Introduction**

This article contributes to the literature on western representations of non-western women in conflict by considering western media reporting of the Sinjar genocide of 2014. We use this word advisedly, having considered both ISIS' publications on the subject and multiple eyewitness accounts that demonstrate Lemkin's classic definition of 1946, though detailed legal descriptions are beyond the scope of this article. We adopt a gender perspective on war (Enloe, 2000, 2007; Giles and Hyndman, 2004; Cockburn, 2007, Shalhoub-Kevorikian, 2009) problematising media attention on Yezidi women in the context of the war against ISIS. We argue that Sinjari Yezidis' narratives and subjectivities since 2014 are silenced across media representations in the West in favour of a "hyper-visibility" (Baudrillard, 2005, 1990, 1982) of women's "injured bodies", which mobilises a specific narrative of victimhood. We will ask what kind of subjectivities lie behind these representations of the

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“injured body” and consider how the paradigm of hyper-visibility of Yezidi women and its association with a narrative of victimhood are constructed and disseminated, highlighting the modalities through which they represent women’s experience of war. We will show how the Western media draw on and reproduce cultural and gender representations, reinstating relations of power infused with orientalist and patriarchal tropes. We will argue that the Western media focus on women’s bodies moves attention away from the very real suffering of Yezidi men, the workings of *namûs* “honour” and the collective nature of the catastrophe, which includes the experience of men, women and children. However, we will also note that some Yezidi women who became activists are claiming more agency starting from the victimhood narrative and are increasingly using their encounters with the Western media and their own social media accounts to make their voices heard; we will use Fassin and Rechtman’s (2009) work on the politics of victimhood to consider the wider implications of this.

We wish to state at the outset that we do not intend to deny either the magnitude of the tragedy lived by the Yezidi community, or the utility of the media interest in preserving a general sense of attention and alert towards the destiny of this minority. We are aware that many journalists are working compassionately, with the intention of helping a disadvantaged group secure international attention and awareness, and that they regard bearing witness as a morally positive act. Reporters often have little role in the editing of their copy or in the headlines invented by editors. In a discussion which uses humanitarian organisations in Palestine as an example, Fassin and Rechtmann show that proxy testimonies of suffering offer “histories without history” – fragments of experience “shuffled to suit the needs of humanitarians, to fit the message they wish to communicate.” (2009: 214). They call for a focus on how “the victims have reappropriated this representation of themselves, how they are taking it over or diverting it, depending on their situation, how they claim or reject it.” (2009: 216). Our interest lies in examining this dynamic further – in identifying how the gendered media narratives differ from the views expressed by Yezidis themselves, how they fit into the Orientalist wider use of stereotypes of the women and gender relations in the

Middle East,<sup>3</sup> and how, given the dynamics of power operating, these discourses impose constraints on the Yezidis, who are still finding an international voice as a community.

In concentrating on women's bodies, the media discourse reproduces the fascination with women's bodies shown in Orientalist writing and art since the nineteenth century,<sup>4</sup> and sets up a narrative of Oriental women who need to be saved (preferably by Westerners), emasculating the Yezidi men. Paradoxically, although Yezidis were a focus of disproportionate volumes of Western Orientalist narrative in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Austen Henry Layard and George Percy Badger being the best known examples in English, these writings focused on the Yezidis' exotic customs and minority status; they contain few comments on the beauty, strength or visibility of Yezidi women, such as are found in the writings of E.B. Soane (1912) and Mark Sykes (1915), for example, on the Kurds. Moreover, the trope of 'white men saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak, 1994:93) is a feature currently associated predominantly with representations of Muslim women, as Abu Lughod has noted in her discussion of the representations of Afghan women in English-language sources (2002; 2013). 'Saving brown women' produced not only a specific representation of women but most importantly became the justification for military intervention (Cooke, 2002: 468).

As material for analysis, we have used specific items from influential English-language broadsheets and mainstream online sources. Internet searches, using terms such as "Yazidi/Yezidi" "Sinjar" "Islamic State," "Da'esh" and "women" brought up many articles, of which the most detailed and nuanced came predominantly from the websites of prestigious daily broadsheet publications. Here we cite 1 article from the *New York Times* (US), 3 from the *Daily Telegraph* (UK), 4 from the *Guardian* (UK), 1 from the *Financial Times* (UK) - also 1 from the weekly *New Statesman* (UK). We also used the websites of large news agencies such as the BBC (3 audio/AV broadcast resources), CNN (1 article) and a few other well-

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<sup>3</sup> In this article we use the term "Orientalism" to highlight the production of knowledge and the power embedded in the creation of truth about "the other", the Yezidis. Secondly, we reflect on how this process reproduces and proves a specific image of Yezidi women and "the women question," with the media as the Western authoritative subject that speaks about the Yezidis.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the association made by Flaubert between the Orient and sex is noted by Said (2003: 188-190); harem paintings constitute an identifiable genre within nineteenth-century art.

known publications such as *GlobalPost* and *The Week*, which often contain embedded videos. We have used the versions archived on the websites as our sources, retrospectively surveying articles published since August 2014, although we read many of the articles when they were first published. Prestigious broadsheets not only help to form opinions in the countries they serve, but also put reporters on the ground while the events were happening and their feature articles tend to give relatively long and nuanced accounts of the events concerned. In the UK, the *Guardian* gives a left-of-centre perspective (as does the *New Statesman*) and of the right-of-centre publications, the *Telegraph* is known in the UK for its strong foreign coverage. Both help to form opinions among their political constituencies, and both presented results for our searches; by comparison, the News International-owned *The Times* presented us with relatively little data. Although we did not intend to survey US publications as such, a representative of the activist group Yazda.org<sup>5</sup> drew attention to the importance of Rukmini Callimachi's work in increasing the Yezidi profile internationally, and especially in Washington, hence our inclusion of the *New York Times*. There is a wider spread of news reporting across many different websites in the immediate aftermath of the genocide, that is, through August and September 2014, plus flurries of news coverage of subsequent events (the liberation of groups of victims over Winter 2014-15, the recapture of the town of Sinjar in late 2015, the press releases issued by activist groups etc). However, after October 2014, most of the articles are features, prompted by the work or travel of activists such as Nadia Murad, or aid enterprises such as Baden-Wurttemberg's Special Quota project (see below). The descriptions of events by Yezidis constitute new data, taken predominantly from interviews made by Christine in Northern Iraq during her February 2016 fieldwork, supplemented with recorded interviews online.

### **Description of events and the international media response**

In the early hours of 3 August 2014, forces of the so-called Islamic State moved into the Yezidi collective town of Sinjar City, located below the southern flank of Mount Sinjar. Abandoned by the Kurdish peshmerga garrison charged with protecting them, and knowing that the road leading east via Tell 'Afar was closed to them, the panic-stricken townsfolk headed due north up the mountain, a hard and barren road where many died of exposure or

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Barber, personal communication, February 2016.

were picked off by their enemies. Elsewhere in the Yezidi settlements around the mountain, people fled for their lives on the long road to Duhok, in the Kurdistan region. Some were cut off and only escaped when YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel/People's Protection Units*) forces from Syria's Kurdish-held areas (aligned with the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê/Kurdistan Workers' Party*)) opened up an escape route via Syria. A few remained marooned on the mountain, in desperate need of supplies. Of those who did not leave their homes in time, ISIS forced many to choose between conversion to Islam or death. Others were not given the choice. Thousands of men were killed (hundreds in the village of Kocho alone) and approximately 7,000 women and children taken prisoner and sold into slavery. At the time of writing, almost 2 years on, more than 300,000 Sinjari Yezidi displaced persons remain in refugee camps in the Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria and Turkey, whilst some 2,500 prisoners remain in the hands of ISIS and a constantly increasing number are leaving Iraq, mostly hoping to find asylum in Germany or the United States.

The media response to these events passed through various stages. In the immediate aftermath, the first week or so, there was a great deal of confusion, not only about what was happening, but about who it was happening to. Many of the “who are the Yezidis?” articles reached for comfortable Orientalist staples – ancient origins, timelessness, exoticism, which had characterised nineteenth and century writings on the community. Sean Thomas' piece of 7 August 2014 on the *Daily Telegraph* website opened:

“They are afraid of lettuce. They abhor pumpkins. They practise maybe the oldest religion in the world. And now, after at least 6,000 years, they are finally being exterminated, even as I write this.”

On 5 August the sole Yezidi member of the Iraqi parliament, Vian Dakhil, had broken down as she described the plight of her people in the chamber; her appeal, which covered the general humanitarian emergency, was widely reported and viewed online:

“30,000 families have been besieged on Mount Sinjar, without food or water. Our women are being taken captive and sold on the slave-market. In the name of humanity save us.”

At about the same time, Iraq's Human Rights Ministry issued a statement that "hundreds" of Yazidi women had been reported kidnapped by their families. The spokesman, Kamil Amin, used the word "slaves" and said they would be used in "demeaning ways." This was the element of the story which would become dominant. Priya Joshi's article of 8 August is an example of those which included Dakhil's speech (citing the words above) but led with Amin's announcement concerning the women.

The humanitarian emergency on the mountain continued to dominate reporting over August 2014, as the story of the abducted women grew. On 12 August, the Secretary General of the UN, Ban Ki-Moon, expressed his "dismay" at the plight of the refugees amid a more general call to the government of Iraq to avoid sectarian strife (United Nations News Service, 2014). By this time, the first Western journalists had witnessed and reported on the situation; also on 12 August 2014, the *Daily Telegraph* website carried an interview with Jonathan Krohn, who described the refugees' journey from Sinjar into Syria, under PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat/ The Kurdish Democratic Union Party*) protection and thence into Iraqi Kurdistan. Although Krohn describes the poverty of the Sinjaris and their utter lack of resources with compassion, the website's headline, which is "Mount Sinjar Dispatch: Yazidi refugees "living like animals," probably reflects an editorial choice rather than that of the journalist. Tracy Shelton's account of one man's wait in Erbil for news of his family, published in *GlobalPost* on 12 August 2014, was unusual (and remains so) in its voicing of the feelings and viewpoint of a Yazidi man.

Meanwhile, the Yazidis themselves were organising and forming pressure groups. The easiest to chronicle online is Yazda.org, formed by Yazidis in the USA in the immediate aftermath of August 4 and now a small but active NGO delivering advocacy and humanitarian aid in Northern Iraq and lobbying elsewhere. Their immediate goal was to make the Yazidis' plight known globally and to facilitate the liberation of women by collecting information, tracing prisoners wherever possible and mobilising the international community with a view to pressuring their governments into using special forces against ISIS to free the captives; as early as August 25 they issued a statement saying that airstrikes would not be enough. This was complicated by emerging information about the contribution of KDP (*Partiya Demokrata Kurdistanê/ Kurdistan Democratic Party*) Peshmerga forces- part of the KRG and thus an important ally of the West - to the humanitarian disaster by their failure to remain at

their posts and protect civilians. This story was first broken on 17 August by Christine van den Toorn - tellingly, not in the mainstream press but in the online *Daily Beast*.

Although Yazda.org's press release of August 25 stated that the humanitarian situation on Mt. Sinjar remained critical, the abducted women were steadily becoming the tagline by which Yezidis were identified in the international media. This was consolidated by the online publication of issue 4 of the purported IS Magazine *Dabiq* in October 2014, which gave a justification for sexual slavery on religious grounds (pp. 14-17), provoking many responses in the media. It also ensured that the story was decisively taken up by anti-slavery activists, such as CNN's Freedom Project (Watson 2014). Also during this month, Iraqi Yezidis sent a delegation to Washington to share information with policy makers on the whereabouts of the detainees in the hope of sparking targeted US attacks to liberate the women before they were dispersed; although many important contacts were made, this aim was not successful. However it was an unprecedented attempt to transcend divisions of clan, political affiliation and locality to speak with a united Yezidi voice. By December 2014, Amnesty International's report on the abductions was bringing attention to the pressures put by host families (sometimes their own relations) and even by Yezidi activists, on women who had escaped from IS to speak to the media (Rovera, 2014: 14). However, many journalists worked more sensitively; Rukmini Callimachi's work in the New York Times on ISIS' "theology of rape" was welcomed by Yazda.org for its responsible approach and for putting the story into a wider international space (Matthew Barber, personal communication, February, 2016).

Another strand in the discourse on Yezidi women deals with their association with female fighting forces. By October 2014, the media were reporting on the Syrian Kurdish forces who had opened up an escape corridor for the Sinjaris; attention fell mostly on the female fighters (*The Week*, 7 October 2014).

### **The media discourse: Women's bodies**

Drawing on Baudrillard's analyses of media representation, we conceive hyper-visibility as an insistence or "excess" of visibility, which overloads with signification the object that has been represented. The object becomes therefore transparent, disappearing behind its broadcast image. "This is the murder of the image. It lies in this enforced visibility as the

source of power and control, beyond even the “panoptical”: it is no longer a question of making things visible to an external eye but to making them transparent to themselves” (Baudrillard, 2005: 94).

The key point about hyper-visibility for Baudrillard is that this insistence of visibility erases what lies behind the image, fostering a sense of “obscenity” which privileges the “over exposed”, the “all-too-visible”. The concept of visibility here does not refer only to the realm of “images” (photographs and videos), but also includes “speeches” and, more generally, discourses produced and disseminated by the media. According to Baudrillard, this hyper-visibility produces a sort of pornographic effect through which the “hypervision in close-up” of the object erases the broader context in which action and subjectivity occur (1990: 59-60). A plastic image of the corporeal detail is only visualised and endlessly disseminated in the circuit of communication, producing a magnetic fascination, which however removes the holistic dimension of the body and human relationship. When thought of in terms of the Yezidi experience, it is the gendered, “injured” body that is assumed as the object that the image encapsulates, produces and disseminates, effacing the subjects and the complexity of the context, while at the same time allowing for the capture of Western audience through an allusion to Orientalist tropes. With orientalist tropes we mean here quite conventionally the production of essentialising representation of the others which is functional both to political domination (Said, 1979), and to the normative constitution of a Western self (Isin, 2015). Most of the tropes are organised around a binary and dialectical principle whereby the colonial or post colonial world is depicted as a space of irrationality, triviality, cruelty, innocence etc which is far more immune to historical change (Sadowski, 1993) allowing for the retrospective constitution of the western self as its radical opposite.

As discussed earlier, while media coverage initially focused on the “(re-) discovery” of the Yezidis in the Middle East, for example R. Jalabi’s article “Who are the Yezidis and why is ISIS hunting them?” (*The Guardian*, 11 August 2014), the account of their participation in conflict in the region later became centred around the theme of sexual violence through a victim-perpetrator relationship, with IS fulfilling the role of the hyper-masculine, “unenlightened”, sexually abusing perpetrator. Titles such as Rukmini Callimachi’s “ISIS enshrines a Theology of Rape” (*The New York Times*, 13 August 2015), Nussaiba Younis’



“How Isis has established a bureaucracy of rape” (*The Guardian*, 16 August 2015), Martin Chulov’s “Yazidis tormented by fears for women and girls kidnapped by Isis jihadis” (*The Guardian*, 11 August 2014), Emma Graham-Harrison’s “You will stay here until you die”: one woman's rescue from Isis” (*The Guardian*, 26 Dec 2015) – show how “Yezidi women” have become not only a key object of inquiry by the media, but also a genre per se based on a narrative of salvation and rescue.

The type of commentary we scrutinise in this article enacts a “hyper-visibility” of Yezidi women and violence, celebrating a generalised form of “global feminism” which dismisses the function of local practices and complexities in the context of Iraq, the specificity of war experience in this location, and the macro-systemic variables which have defined such an experience over time; that is, the way in which war, conflict and the very sense of being a minority has been shaped by colonial heritage, neo-colonial practices, various ethnic and religious tensions, and global capitalism. Only the dualist relationship between ISIS and Yezidi women (in the form of their “injured body”) remains, dismissing the broader context in which this relationship is embodied.

An interesting example is offered in the BBC program *Newshour* dedicated to the “Yezidi women sex slave ordeal” (22 December 2014). The journalist in this programme asks Donatella Rovera, Amnesty senior advisor in Iraq, whether this kind of violence could be described as a strategy adopted by ISIS. Interestingly, Rovera highlights how ISIS’ strategy is to annihilate ethnic and religious minorities that “have lived in Iraq for centuries,” forcing them out of their territory. While little is said here about the histories of violence that Yezidi have suffered in Iraq over time, therefore isolating the dualistic relationship of Yezidi and ISIS out of their broader historical context, attention is mostly put on the “corporeal” abuse of Yezidi women and their international relevance as now recognisable victims of ISIS. Their invisibility in the past (and invisibility of past experiences of violence suffered) is now turned into a new visibility as ‘witnesses’ to the violence of ISIS, which finally endowed them with a voice to be broadcast. This is, however, only made possible by highlighting a material and corporeal aspect of violence and sexual pleasure in relation to which a logic of salvation can be opposed. Hence, the journalist asks whether ISIS’ strategy includes “impregnating Yezidi women [...] in order to dilute blood line?”; or whether this strategy aims at achieving “simple sexual gratification or encouraging other men to come and join IS”, and whether “those

[women] who have managed to escape get the help they now need?” It is interesting how the journalist uses terms related to the materiality of the body (“blood,” “impregnating”) to confirm the brutal practices operated by ISIS, fixing the image of Yezidi women as “victims” of individual violence by ISIS members and object of “sexual gratification.”

In this scenario, how is the hyper-visibility of Yezidi women in war contexts produced, knotted, and disseminated? That is, what forms of subjectivities are concealed behind the image of the injured body? The injured body conceals the diversity of female roles and positions within the Yezidi community, producing a homogenised and undifferentiated image of the “abducted woman”. The experiences of older women, children, widows and the diversity of socio-economic conditions in the specific context of the Yezidi community are thus excluded from the representation that the injured body mobilises. This is also reflected in the elaboration of the priorities and the criteria informing “humanitarian intervention programmes” whereby humanitarian and medical considerations inevitably end up fragmenting and concealing the experience of the community as a whole, while isolating a predefined model of woman to be rescued. In Philippe Sands’ article presenting the Baden-Wurttemberg’s Special Quota Project (2016), which aims at temporarily relocating 1000 Yezidi women from refugee camps in Iraq to Germany, Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, the medical head of the project, says:

“It was hell to make such decisions, to decide for that one, yes, you meet the criteria, but for another one, no, you do not [...] The elderly, or girls who were alone, would not be selected, the former because it was felt they would not benefit from a programme of treatment, the latter because they should not travel without close family members [...] There was one child, she was nine or ten, we decided she could not come alone but then, after two months, an aunt was freed from Da’esh and we agreed to bring them both” (Sands, 2016).

Kizilhan is clearly aware of the rhetoric of rescuing and saving women (Abu Lughod, 2002, 2013; Das, 2007) and also of the difficulties experienced in the refugee camps. However, despite the understandable difficulty of deciding which women can be identified as good candidates for the programme, the scrutinisation of Yezidi women’s body and personhood, the action of dividing them by age group and the problems related to the separation of women

from their community, demonstrate the mobilisation of a predominant image of Yezidi woman to be rescued and healed against those women that do not “meet the criteria” and therefore disappear behind that image, an effect which is further enhanced by the media gaze.

But how is this image of the injured body upheld? This is partly done through the narrative of victimhood that the hyper-visibility of the abducted woman instantiates. This narrative, however, is sustained by its counter-part in the iconographic representation of Yezidi women: the female fighter. After the initial portrayal of the Sinjar massacre as the event where the victimhood of Yezidi women was originally produced and made self-evident, a sequel in the media representation puts emphasis on the “revenge” that some abducted women have embraced by assuming the role of fighters resisting and challenging the misogynist cruelty of ISIS. Interestingly enough, in the narrative of victimhood, abducted women are constantly interviewed and asked to recall and give testimony to the individual violence they have suffered. By distancing themselves from this logic, interviewed female fighters actively reshape a mode of representation of war experience, which downplays individual trauma in favour of a collective sense of belonging and agency. The insistence on a narrative of victimhood by the media, however, intervenes here to bring back the image of the injured body. As the BBC commentator Jiyar Gol put it on 19 August 2015, when discussing the experience of a Yezidi female fighter in the PKK:

“Avin is shy and quiet, the commander advised me not to ask about what happened to her in captivity but the scars on her face and hands are a silent testimony. She says she is now focused on learning everything she can in order to go back and face her abductors” (Gol, 2016).

In the passage the paternalist narrative of victimhood reproduces the hyper-visibility of women’s “injured” body by assuming the materiality of the body as the ultimate parameter against which the truth of Yezidi women can be stated and tested. The impossibility of asking Avin about her individual trauma is overcome by the immediate truth that the signs in her body reveal, allowing her body to figure as an empty surface where signification and truth can be played despite the real subject embodying the image. Avin is thus forced to coincide with hyper-visibility of the body injured, to “transform herself into the image” as Baudrillard would put it, adapting to the “jurisdictions of signs” of hyper-visibility (Baudrillard, 1990: 31). On the one hand, therefore, the female fighters complement the passive figure of the

victim celebrating the active alter ego of the same figure. On the other hand, their disruptive dimension as active subjects and embodiments of collective agency is re-domesticated through their re-confinement to the image of the victim. Hence, Avin's contradictory "nature" as a female fighter with a "shy and quiet" character, who has to "learn" how to "go back and face her abductors".

This example once again shows the modalities of production of gendered and sexualised media practices. Victimhood stands here as *dispositif* or apparatus in a Foucauldian sense; that is, a mechanism through which heterogeneous discursive and institutional practices concur to structure and implement forms of power relations (Foucault, 1980). An essential feature in the apparatus of victimhood is that of protection. The more Yezidi women are produced as victims of IS, the more the patriarchal value system of the Yezidi community is called into question, with emphasis on the "failing" role of Yezidi men in protecting the "honour" of their women. This will be discussed further below.

### **The Yezidi discourse: Men's voices and collective suffering**

Let us now consider some Yezidi accounts of the Sinjar genocide and its effect on the community. With the exception of a few privileged interlocutors such as Nadia Murad and the KDP MP Vian Dakhil, Sinjari Yezidi voices are rarely heard in the international media and the data given here, unless stated otherwise, was collected during Christine's visit to the Badinan province and Sinjar in February 2016.

When one speaks with Sinjari refugees in camps, or with activists, the narratives of the genocide begin by embedding the events themselves within their historical and political context, which, as mentioned above, is rarely visible in the media stories. The media do not tell us that Sinjar has long been a poor region by Iraq's standards, disadvantaged by insufficient healthcare and schooling, with little water; that "Sinjar city" is one of a number of collective settlements made during the 1970s when Saddam's government forcibly evacuated ancestral villages; that the inhabitants, under the protection of the KRG but not within the Kurdistan region itself and not benefiting directly from the economic boom post-2003, have felt marginalised even in post-Saddam Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Dulz, Savelsberg and Hajo 2008.

As the media coverage freezes their experience of suffering to the present conflict with ISIS, what is obscured is the specific way in which Yezidis frame their experience of violence, attaching it to a genealogy of *ferman* (persecutions) and a feeling of being outnumbered and surrounded.<sup>7</sup> In 1992, they counted 72 *ferman* against their community, which, after the 2007 bombings of the Yezidi communities of Kahtaniya and Siba Sheikh Khidir and then the 2014 genocide, has now risen to 74 (Sinuni, personal communication, February 2016). A full discussion of this worldview is beyond the scope of this article, but anxiety about the abduction of women has long been one of its strong features.<sup>8</sup> In 1992, Iraqi Yezidis discussed the politics of folkloric songs about the past with Christine. They saw the performance of songs by Muslim singers about love between Yezidi women and Muslim men as an act of epistemic violence, and a reflection of a dystopian past where the Muslim majority preyed on the women of minorities.<sup>9</sup>

In the present circumstances, the abduction of women en masse reduces the Sinjari male to an “injured man” unable to fulfil the social expectation to protect his womenfolk that the “rules of honour” require (cf. Abu-Lughod, 2000:89-90). As early as 12 August 2014, Tracey Shelton’s Sinjari interviewee in Erbil made these rules clear:

“Give me a weapon and I will go to fight. Give the weapons to all the Yazidi men. Just give us a chance to fight for our families or die trying. That’s all I ask.”

A young (i.e. aged under 30) Sinjari *stranbêj* (singer of folkloric songs) living in Rwanga community camp near Zakho explained this further to Christine (February 2016). After explaining his great feeling and passion for the old songs of Sinjar, he stated that he would not sing them again until “someone comes to protect us or brings our mothers and sisters back ... or what has happened to us happens to them [i.e. the enemy].”<sup>10</sup> He added, “Let the

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<sup>7</sup> Although the core meaning of *ferman* is no more negative than “official decree,” it has come to mean “persecution” in the Yezidi context. Cf. Allison 2001: 44, 284.

<sup>8</sup> Yezidis are not alone in this; see Das 2007: 32-33 for Hindu imagery of “the lustful Muslim.”

<sup>9</sup> In both 1992 and 2016 Christine heard complaints (first from non-Sinjari Yezidis, and secondly from a Sinjari) of the way non-Yezidi singers performed a song called Keça or Kurê Simoqî (Simoqi girl/boy) which for them represented abduction of a Yezidi girl.

<sup>10</sup> ezê ser karê xwe mînim bes, heta em nabînin yekî me rabe an jî yek da ku dayk u xwiskê me bîne ... yan jî ya bi sere me hatî, bila bi serê wan jî be. All translations in this article are by Christine Allison and Kawa Morad.

men go...but let the girls and ladies return<sup>11</sup>...a woman is powerless, she has no support.”<sup>12</sup>  
People don’t know how it feels, he added, to have a sister or daughter calling on the phone saying “come and save me...”

As it is incumbent on men to protect women and children, the young singer makes it clear that there is shame surrounding these events for Sinjari men:

“We don’t know what to say [i.e. we are at a loss/embarrassed]...we won’t go back to Sinjar, we have no faith left... it’s finished...”

Describing the flight over the mountain in the context of the singers’ practice of immortalising persecutions or *ferman* in songs, which often praise the heroism (literally “manliness”) of heroes, he said,

“A *ferman* happened to us, we don’t know who to praise, we don’t know whose heroism to praise... there was nobody [lit. we saw nobody] to help us...”<sup>13</sup>

Little children were “thrown aside” (*avêtî*). At a moment when such things could happen, when children could be cast aside, there is no hero with manly virtue (*mêranî*) to praise. Pursuing the subject of children, he said, it didn’t matter if he went hungry or thirsty himself, but he worried about protecting his own children. “I wish they had never been born,” he added. The despair resulting from their inability to provide help and protection highlight the sense of powerlessness men experience as an effect of the assault, which produce a de facto feminisation of the whole community in this war context, as they are subsumed into the narrative of victimhood.

The singer quoted above had no female members of his immediate family in captivity, but his words tally with accounts of those who do. During the first public conference to be held on the Yezidi genocide, at the American University of Suleymani, Iraqi Kurdistan, on 11 February 2016 (which Christine attended), several survivors spoke publicly about their experiences. One, a man named Kiçê, who came from Kocho, described the massacre of the

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<sup>11</sup> Kec and khanom bên, mêr bila biçin...

<sup>12</sup> Jin bê dest e ... desthilatiya wê nîne.

<sup>13</sup> Ji ber ku em nizanin çi bêjin, em neçine Singal...baweriya me nema...xelas bû.....  
Ferman me rabû em nizanin emê medhê kê bikin, em nizanin mêraniya kê pesin bidin  
...Me kesekî xwe nedît.

men (which he survived by chance) and the abduction of the women, including women from his own close family; he stated that, although he suffered various symptoms, he had had no psychological help. Another account of the Kocho massacre, given shortly after the event by Nayef Jassem (17 August 2014) in a video from Associated Press embedded in the *Daily Telegraph* website, speaks in similar terms: the delivery is factual and deadpan, with the telling comments at the end: “I just want for my family to be in a safe place; I wish I had been killed there instead of them, that’s what I want.” An aid worker told Christine at the same conference that a number of Yezidi men have lost their own womenfolk and live alone in camps, or with groups of other similarly afflicted men. A Yezidi woman from the Sinuni area north of Mount Sinjar who lived in Bajit Kandala camp near Zakho, affirmed this, saying that she and other women nearby took turns to cook for one such man who lived nearby. Camp life presents many challenges for men in general; the current economic crisis in Iraqi Kurdistan makes it extremely difficult to find work to provide for the family. We conjecture that this affects their wellbeing further, though we know of no studies so far on this. But it is perhaps worth noting that in an article by Lara Whyte in the *New Statesman* profiling the Baden-Wurttemberg project of giving women psychological treatment in Germany (26 January 2016), the women’s only criticism of the project is that it does not include men over 18.

In Western media discourse, the hyper-visibility of the Yezidi woman is accompanied by an invisibility and silencing of the Yezidi male. He is sidelined, leaving little room for a discussion of his experience whether as resistance fighter or as wounded survivor. There is no focus on men’s bodies as a counterpoint to those of women; nor are the sufferings of boys problematised, though boys do suffer; for example, it is known in the region that pre-adolescent Yezidi boys who have been taken captive are being trained by ISIS as suicide bombers (personal conversations, Yazda staff, February 2016). The absence of the Yezidi male voice also masks one of the central aspects of this genocide for the Yezidis, namely its collective nature. It is the whole group which has been violated.

### **Yezidi voices in the media**

The events in Sinjar gave Yezidis an unprecedented opportunity to speak to the world. Although the senior members of the Yezidi religious council (*the Majlis-i Ruhanî*), who are

mostly from the Sheikhan area, have spoken publicly through their links with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Sinjari voices have now also made themselves heard in the West. Yazda took a strong role in this with their support of the delegation which visited Washington in October 2014, but the advocacy and dialogue process also continues through Yezidi groups in Germany, most of whom, like Jan Ilhan Kizilhan, have roots in Turkey. Some, though not all, of these are aligned with the Kurdish movement from Turkey.

Fassin and Rechtman (2009: 275) see the current prominence of victim testimonies and the valorisation of bearing witness as the culmination of a long process, whereby victimhood develops from a source of shame into a strong position from which to speak. This, they note, recalls Reinhardt Koselleck's prediction that in the future, history would become a "historiography of the vanquished" (2002: 76-83). Within the international discourse of human rights, a victim's story can be heard, understood and valued by the world, indeed there are few other forms of communication open to the subaltern. This is the framework within which the Yezidis can make their voice heard and put forward their agenda as a minority in the international arena.

Another important contextual element here is the political climate of Kurdistan and the emphasis placed on narratives of Kurdish suffering and victimhood. Before the rise of ISIS, the demand for the "Anfal" campaigns (of deportation and massacre undertaken by the Ba'ath regime against Kurdish civilians during the 1980s) to be accepted as a genocide, was a keynote of Kurdish international relations. Crimes against humanity committed by the Saddam Hussein regime were (and are) memorialised, through statues, museums, investigations and oral history projects with victim narratives and testimonies figuring strongly (Fischer-Tahir, 2012). However, it is noticeable that there are still some kinds of victimhood which are difficult to enunciate and these are often associated with *namûs*. In Turkey, for example, memories of extremely humiliating violence suffered in prisons may be evoked in public discourse (e.g. in published prison diaries). However, women still find it difficult to express their experiences of rape or sexual violence (e.g. Aras, 2014: 95-96); accounts of this violence are not part of the public domain in the same way. In Iraq, the iconic "Anfal woman" is represented as mother and/or widow, but is rarely if ever described as a rape victim. Thus, although the politics of victimhood and suffering within Kurdistan interface well with the Yezidis' own consciousness of persecution over many years, the



placing of the international gaze squarely on female bodies and the *namûs* issue is extremely painful for the whole community.

Some of the protest politics in Kurdistan have centred on the “ownership” of victimhood. The destruction of the Halabja genocide monument in 2006 by the people of Halabja themselves had its origins in public discontent at the slow pace of regeneration and a strong feeling that the KRG was using the suffering of victims to raise international money without channelling that money back to the victims themselves (cf. Watts, 2012). Some Anfal women have had a complex relationship with the way they have been publicly represented by the political establishment (Mlodoch, 2012). It is not surprising, then that while some of the most active Yezidi campaigners who speak to the media, such as Vian Dakhil and the activist Khidir Dommle in Duhok, are members of the KDP, other groups favour media spokespersons without such connections. Yazda.org, for instance, has sponsored the visits made by Nadia Murad to Europe and the USA (see below).

In formulating responses to the fall of Sinjar, Yezidis are negotiating with the politics of victimhood at a number of levels, within the community, in Kurdistan and Iraq, and internationally. Many young men (and some women) have joined the fight for Sinjar, enlisting in a number of defence units aligned with various political forces; the politics of these is beyond the scope of this article. But for the first time, spokespersons have stepped forward whose permission to speak comes not from their hereditary authority (like the religious leaders), nor their local political role (like the village leaders or the Yezidi MPs Vian Dakhil and Amira Hassan), but from their own experience of suffering. In the international discourse, the women’s narratives of victimhood are privileged over men’s and the female voice is audible on the media, as we discussed earlier, because it is in line with the brutality of ISIS.

The most prominent of these survivors is the UN good will ambassador Nadia Murad, who, backed by Yazda.org, has visited many senior politicians worldwide and addressed the UN Security Council. A former IS prisoner who managed to escape, Ms. Murad has secured support from prominent figures (most recently the human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, who has agreed to represent her) and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. She keeps the story of the women still in captivity in the media but in her frequent tweets places a greater emphasis on the entire and collective nature of the crime, placing her cause within the

framework of international human rights. She leads on her website, [nadia-murad.com](http://nadia-murad.com), with her aim to have the crime against the Yazidis internationally accepted as genocide. She describes herself there as “survivor of enslavement and human trafficking” and “human rights activist.” She visited the UK in February 2016, when as mentioned above, the *Daily Telegraph* website’s headline described her as “former sex slave.”

During the same visit, Nadia Murad was interviewed for the BBC discussion programme HARDtalk (2016), by journalist Sarah Montague. Nadia recalled her personal experience before and during the captivity and how she managed to escape. Sarah Montague framed all her questions in the perpetrator-victim continuum; she reminded us that Nadia exists and has a voice as an “abducted woman” who survived. This is visible by looking at the questions posed:

“When you think about the man who raped you in the time you were held what do you want to happen to them?” “There are young people all over the world who are attracted by what the Islamic State is doing, what do you say to them?” “There are many women who have been held who killed themselves out of desperation - was it something that at the time you thought about?” “I wonder you did not question your faith?” “You said they told you to convert to Islam, did you think about that?”

Despite the framing of these questions in terms of Nadia as a victim, Ms. Murad manages to escape her role as simple vulnerable actor and manifest a sense of agency and self assertiveness. As well as affirming her faith in God she says:

“I have never thought of killing myself, either before or after I was captured by Da’esh, it has never occurred to me. I believe that everyone should accept what God has given them (...) we must all endure.”

Despite her instrumental and political functioning in the public discourse of the West, Nadia succeeded to become politically vocal for her own community through her vivid descriptions of the reality lived by Yazidis. By accepting the media morbidity related to the details of her captivity she embraces the “tactical dimension of trauma” (based on the social significance of the trauma) which recognises the “social intelligence of the actors involved” (Fassin and Rechtman, 2009: 10-11).

When Nadia answered the question posed by Sarah Montague “Do you also want to see soldiers going in from Western countries to take on IS” with “I don’t really understand military matters” she purposely moved the discussion away from the violence suffered. She precisely named her expectations in regard to the “ethical” Western military forces in context of war (respectful towards women and children in opposition to the brutality of ISIS). Furthermore, Nadia reminded the audience that in the occupied areas in Syria and Iraq regular people who do not support ISIS, Muslim families who were active in helping her and other women, were also suffering therefore “International forces must stop Da’esh and bring them to justice.” By recognising the dignity of the victims and their request, Sarah Montague reproduced the west as the generous benefactor which can act now through military intervention (Cook, 2002: 468).

In campaigning for international recognition of the genocide, Nadia is in line with Yezidi lawyers in Iraq and Yezidi activists more generally. As well as the wish for justice to be done, Yezidis are aware that special security arrangements for Sinjar, which would permit a more concerted return home, will be more likely if Western allies recognise that genocide has taken place. Moreover, within the current discursive environment of international acknowledgment of the inviolability of human rights, in the aftermath of Bosnia and Rwanda, genocide is the ultimate crime. The controversy over recognition of the Armenian genocide is well known in the region and a major part of discussions in Turkey about the Kurds’ past. Before June 2014, the KRG’s key international demand was its campaign for Anfal to be internationally recognised as genocide (Fischer-Tahir, 2012). Apart from any more concrete benefits, success would inscribe the stateless Kurds into international frames of reference. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Yezidis too, having lost faith in their own country’s ability to protect them, are seeking justice by this route, using international terms of reference rather than local structures.

## **Conclusion**

We have analysed English-language media representations of the Sinjar genocide, and found that they focus predominantly on the bodies of suffering Yezidi women and on their sexual slavery. In doing so, the genocide becomes gendered and not only the suffering of Yezidi men, but their very voices are effaced. By contrast the discourse of the Yezidis themselves

foregrounds the collective nature of the genocide and sets it within a historical framework of persecution and marginalisation.

The Yezidi community has publicly suffered pain which remains unspeakable even within the current acceptability of narratives of victimhood in Kurdistan. A community which venerates blood succession as a guarantee of purity has lost control of its reproductivity.<sup>14</sup> Families have lost livelihoods, women have lost the reputation they valued and men have been emasculated. Many despair; however, great resources within the community have been revealed in their responses to these events. Not only have Yezidis made an unprecedented decision to welcome violated women home without loss to the honour (*namûs*) of their families; they have united as never before to speak out on these matters and to advocate an approach which moves on from established practices of localised revenge towards a campaign for justice and security at international levels. Through the media presence of figures such as Nadia, who are not affiliated with political parties within Iraq, Yezidis are taking their claim of genocide directly into the international arena. This provides a fillip for the efforts of Yezidi lawyers in Iraq, who struggle with formidable legal difficulties both within Iraq, as Sinjar is a disputed territory, and outside. US Secretary of State John Kerry's announcement of 17 March 2016, in which he described the attack on the Sinjari Yezidi community as "genocide," constitutes a milestone in the Yezidis' fight for international recognition, though the route to eventual prosecutions remains long and complex.

Fassin and Rechtman (2009: 274) note that in the context of asylum claims, the professional discourse from lawyers and clinicians on psychic trauma "speaks only the truth about the victim that society is prepared to hear."<sup>15</sup> It seems that the same is true of media discourse. The media gendering of the genocide does not match the collective nature of the trauma as lived and narrated by the Yezidis. Yet in order to be heard, the Yezidis are forced to abide by the agendas of Western discourse, which they have not set themselves. The unequal power dynamic drives a hard bargain. The voices of Yezidis such as Nadia are securing international

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<sup>14</sup> This story, that in addition to rape, the women were given the contraceptive pill, often without their knowledge, broke in March 2016 and was covered, among others, by Rukmini Callimachi in the New York Times.

<sup>15</sup> Their point is that society finds it much more acceptable to focus on the general principles of a link between violence and trauma rather than proof of that damage in individual cases.

support for the Yezidi case, but the cost of this, thus far, has been an unblinking spotlight placed on the community's deepest hurt.

The Yezidis, always subaltern in the countries where they have lived, practise a unique religion and culture which for hundreds of years has frequently found itself in conflict with local manifestations of Islam. It is ironic that, in terms of gender, the way in which they are represented in international contexts, a mode of representation in which they acquiesce, for pragmatic reasons, -bears many similarities to the issues faced by Muslims. The perspectives given by gender studies scholarship enable these wider dynamics of subalternity and intersectionality, which may not be obvious within an oppositional framework of Yezidi identities versus Muslim identities, to be discerned. Today, the challenge faced by Yezidis, who are seeking social justice and international recognition, is also related to their exclusive existence, presence or status in the world as possible victims of genocide.

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