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SeyedehBehnaz Hosseini

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Ezidi Women's Forced Migration to Germany¹

By SeyedehBehnaz Hosseini²

Abstract

Sinjar³ became the center of the world's attention when one of the most horrifying cases of genocide took place, and also due to women who suffered from acts of violence, psychological trauma, and torture. A year after the Ezidi genocide in Iraq, many women fled from ISIS. Each of the women who managed to escape has a different history of persecution. This research was conducted to examine the problems which these women faced on a daily basis—problems occurring after experiencing sexual violence, persecution, and forced migration to Europe. The costs of forced migration, which is the consequence of the armed conflict, are enormous. Women in the diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a “home” culture, fundamental values of propriety, and religion. Women who were victims of violence or abuse developed trauma, which consequentially led to the psychological disorder of post-traumatic stress. They are terrified because of their experiences during the war. How can these women integrate into a new society? How can integration help them to recover from their traumatic stress? Experiences of displacement reshape constructions of “home” or the nation. This article constitutes a critical assessments of gender-based violence, as a source of displacement.

Keywords: Forced migration, Gender, Displacement, Resettlement, Exile, Psychological disorder, Sinjar, Iraq.

Introduction

¹ This research is part of my fieldwork on Ezidi women's integration in Germany 2016. In-depth, structured interviews were conducted with participants of the Ezidi women survivors, observers of their own situation, after arriving in Germany. The research begins by offering collected truth narratives, explaining why sharing truth narratives is important for women who have been harmed.

² SeyedehBehnaz Hosseini completed her doctoral research with a focus on minorities in Iran especially Yārsāani and migration in the Department of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies in University of Vienna. Her research interests include religious minorities in Iran and Iraq. Currently she is working on research about Iraqi minorities and women's forced migration. The author is currently affiliated with the Department of Sociology, University of Alberta. Research fellow, Edmonton, Canada and can be reached via email: seyedehbehnazhosseini@gmail.com

³ Ezidis is an ancient religion dating back to the Sumerian period of Mesopotamia. The great majority of Ezidis, numbering close to 600,000, live in Iraq, predominantly in Sinjar in the western part of Nineveh province. Their ethnicity is Kurdish, and they believe in a closed religion and do not seek to convert other people.

Islamic State (IS) or The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is the Islamic extremist terrorist group controlling territories in Iraq and Syria (Bunzel, 2015, p. 3). In August 2014, ISIS took 3,929 women and girls from the Tal Afar citadel in the region of Nineveh, Iran to Syria. The girls and women, predominantly from the Ezidis and Christian communities, were either given to ISIS fighters as rewards or sold as sex slaves (interview with Sub branch of Endowment organization in Erbil, opened December 2014, focus on Ezidis in KRG).

<http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/protocolslavery.pdf>, Retrieved Sep. 3, 2016

The Islamic movement (IS) in Iraq employs the strategic use of religious discourse and institutions to promote views and actions that are absolutist and intolerant, anti-human and anti-women's rights, and, at their root, fundamentally patriarchal (Ahram, 2015, p. 57, Yaghi, 2014, Weaver, 205). My examination of the discourses and various political and social factors that surrounded or underlay the actions of IS shows that Ezidi women in Iraq were pulled in different directions as a result of multiple forces operating in the context of structures of violence and ethnic cleansing by fundamentalist social movements. Ezidi women experienced violence from both Islamist groups and religious individuals, who used their own interpretations of Islam to condone their crimes against women. (Yin, 2014, p. 10, Bitar, 2015)

This research aims to establish grounds for interventions to assist women's needs in the future. The voices of women who were affected by violent war and who are trying with courage, to construct a community from the demolition, must be recorded. The documentation and these stories must be spread all over the world. The power of women's stories should encourage them and give them strength to change their situation. The truth about their conditions should be told to those who would not otherwise be aware of the circumstances. Ezidi women have been forced to leave their home countries because of personal or national trauma, war, genocide, and sexual violence (Bitar, 2015). Ezidi women have been treated with special brutality due to the current perception of Islamic fighters and integration into their host society.

What is the impact and consequences of Forced Migration and displacement on women and children? What is the current situation of these women in Europe and their special needs? The findings of this study will indicate whether their needs are being met fully and also will generate recommendations. The aim of the study is to look at Ezidi women's problems as they seek livelihoods in the aftermath of their forced migration, examining the impacts and consequences of their forced migration and displacement. The paper will offer insight into their expectations and perceptions of the conditions they are living in. This study will also provide recommendations for integration initiatives including educational and skills training, which is often promoted as the best way to rehabilitate and reintegrate women and children back into a society.

Research Methodology

This paper presents preliminary results of a current pilot study, based on narrative interviews of refugees' life experiences in their home country, their reasons for leaving, and the obstacles witnessed during their flight, including short term refuge in Kurdistan and their first experiences in Germany. In addition, "The most legitimate feminist position of collecting and presenting refugee women's voices is that which put forward personal narratives displaying various survival strategies and, more important, the possibilities of construing alternatives, underground women's self-help social networks which could turn them into subjects of their lives" (Kirin, 2002, p. 182).

Current thinking supporting narrative research is the idea that, "telling a story about oneself involves telling a story about choice and action, which have integrally moral and ethical dimensions" (Rice and Ezzy 1999:126). The procedure of revealing narratives, in addition to the narratives themselves, is the crucial element of participant involvement. Narratives also allow individuals to examine the cultural dimensions of their narratives and their effects on the individual (Byrne-Armstrong 2001, p. 110). Chase has identified five interrelated, analytic magnifiers used in a narrative research (Chase 2005: 657-8). The first focuses on the narrative as a channel for the uniqueness of human actions; the second examines the narrator's voice, verbal expressions and

choices made by the narrator. The third focuses on the ways in which narratives are restricted by social circumstances, while the fourth locates narratives as a social act, exploring the interactive performances between the researcher and the participant. The final, central point highlights researchers as storytellers. The current research focuses on Chase's second and third features, i.e. how participants told their narratives, qualifying their ideas, perceptions, and behavior in connection to transforming their traumatic experience, and on the ways in which those narratives were restricted and influenced by the social mores of the age. Goldstein (2001, p. 363) shows that when women tell their traumatic stories the process itself is transformative, helping them to move past memories considered socially inexpressible and taboo. Furthermore, this study seeks to humanize the effects of violence and forced migration of women by giving a voice to Ezidis women through their narratives of their own experiences. The narratives highlight two psychologically stressful themes: fear of IS, and their displacement in Germany.

Theoretical Insights into the displacement of women and gender dynamics

Gender analysis and feminist theories help to simplify and comprehend these women's difficult situation. Compassionate support is a basic theme around which all gender theory rests. With respect to displacement, gender analysis reveals connections between gender dynamics, and the development of the problem of forced migration. In order to understand the causes of forced migration, we need to know the causes of armed conflicts since conflicts are identified as the causes leading to human displacement. Women's vulnerability is heightened by armed conflicts and typically made worse by political resolutions which marginalize women, excluding them from resolution-making and political processes that impact their lives (Sanderson 2001, p. 118-122). According to Benjamin (1998, p. 100), forced migration has both short and long term impacts on women and development. However, the most serious short-term manifestations include: family separation, gender violence, trauma from the deaths of family members and relatives, poor health, and loss of belongings and homes. Increased militarization has further limited women rights within their home countries, and gender equality also has been co-opted at the international level to justify military intervention into sovereign nations. In most cases, armed conflicts perpetuate gender inequalities and discrimination against minority ethnic groups. Disgruntled and marginalized groups thereby resort to forming rebel movements to fight injustice of those in power. While armed interventions are under no circumstances the answer to resolve inequalities based on gender, race, class and religion as well as unequal geopolitics, they nonetheless have become increasingly prevalent, and women's involvement in war has become common. Moser and Clark (2001) argue that women's direct or indirect support of armed conflicts generally presents women as aggressors. In addition, displacement into refugee camps as a result of armed conflict resettle women in criminalized spaces where political power structures increase, fortifying the patriarchal orientation of the exiled community (Callamard, 1999, p. 198).

However, in certain contexts displacement can potentially providing spaces for positive change and gender empowerment, gender equality, dignity and improved quality of refugee life. Women can become increasingly independent, with long-lasting implications. At the same time, in warfare, whenever the men are off fighting and dying, disappearing, and/or taking refuge in other countries, women are left with the responsibility of ensuring their families' livelihoods (Sørensen, 1998, p. 2).

Gender-based violence is the main cause of insecurity among displaced women. During a conflict, women usually lack protection from their spouses and armed soldiers, who see them as

rewards of warfare (Crush 2000, p. 103-105). Victim/survivors eventually can go through three phases of recovery: they establish safety, reconstruct trauma stories, and revive connection between survivors and their community. The effort of integrating into a new society, learning to adapt to their environment by learning the language and habits of the host community requires subordination to the norms and values of the host society (Scot 1995, p. 23).

It may be difficult to discern between the impact of displacement and the effects of violence more generally. Furthermore, in contexts such as Iraq, displacement may be both a consequence of the limited rights of women as well as an outcome (Al- Khalidi and Tanner, 2007, p. 8). For this reason, it may both be difficult, and indeed unsuitable attempt to distinguish between the impact of violence and the impact of displacement. In certain contexts displacement can become a space for affirmative change and gender empowerment. Displacement can lead to the goals of gender equality, women's rights and improvement in the standards of a refugee's life leading to increased self-confidence of refugee women.

Schmeidl takes a constructive approach to the description of forced migration, contending that refugees and internally displaced peoples escape from similar root causes, rather than responding to a set of totally different incidences. Schmeidl (1997, p. 303) discriminates three types of effects that impact forced migration: root causes, the near situation, and interceding agents. Davenport and E.T. (2003, p. 28) observe that people renounce their homes when they fight for their liberty or lives. Today there are over 13 million refugees, and 25-30 million displaced people all over the world, as the result of internal and external conflicts (Martin, 2004). The Women's board for Refugee Women and Children estimates that 80% of these refugees and internally-displaced populations are women and children (Schmiechen, 2004). During times of war and displacement, women and children, especially girls, are often easy targets for sexual and gender-based violence as such situations make the defenseless even more helpless (Kohl, 2008, p. 3). During a conflict, targeted violence against civilian women, including sexual violence, is seen as a "tactic of war" (Peterman, Palermo, Bredenkamp, 2011, p. 1060) and it is increasingly recognized as public health and human rights concern. Such conflict victimization has been associated with a range of negative outcomes, including poor mental health (Johnson, and et al., 2010, p. 558).

Impact of Forced Migration on Women in a New Society

For Ezidi women in Iraq, forced migration is caused both by armed conflict and religious fundamentalism. Factors increasing the vulnerability of the displaced women include human rights abuses, food insecurity, health and psychological trauma. Women who become part of conflicts frequently lack the financial support necessary for counseling. Many who live in temporary residences do not have a stable overview of the future, and the thousands of survivors who fled from attacks to the Duhok displacement camps and refugee camps in Iraq, are the living ghosts of the Sinjar genocide. The 2014 Genocide Convention incorporates extermination by mass killing, and elimination through forced migration, as two distinct elements of genocide. Estimates indicate that 360,000 Ezidi civilian are displaced (Religious Endowment center in Duhok, June 2016).

The long term consequences of forced migration on women in Germany include permanent loss of social and cultural relationships. Refugees who leave their communities and countries also experience, cultural deprivation, a state in which a person misses a home, a language and traditions.

Refugees who find themselves in rich countries with very different cultures also suffer from social seclusion and high levels of depression. In one interview, N.S⁴ mentioned:

I am 27 years old. I feel alone with my 7 children without my husband, my husband is with IS. I do not know how to treat my children...the situation in the camp is not good, we do not have a stable life. I do not want to come back to Iraq. I would like to have a house at the moment. I cannot learn a new language now.

Forced migration changes the construction of families and household composition as well as gender roles for Ezidi women. Their responsibilities are different now; they have to learn how to take care of their children alone, and how to exercise power, independence and strength, while joining a new society. Many women used to stay home. Their notions of “home” also change. Formerly “home” was associated with homeland, connected to their sense of belonging, citizenship, and an individual’s identity formation within the framework of the national order (Malkki, 1992, p. 26).

“I can never relax because I lost everything. Here in Germany is good. My mother, my father and three brothers, my husband and father of my husband are in captivity IS. I like Germany, but we are not relaxed here, but it is much better than in Iraq. We lost everything. We are in a bad situation, and how we come back to home.”

For women living in diasporic situations, their losses of family to captivity are undoubtedly painful. They struggle with physical and mental self-doubt, incurred through exile, compounded by the necessities of family and work, and through the assertion of old and new patriarchies. Significantly, in spite of these difficulties, when given the opportunity to return to their homeland, they reject it, mainly when the situation is arranged by men. They say:

“We were in a bad situation in a tent, and Germany is helping us and supporting and paying for us to live, our hearts are broken but we feel we have good future. We changed our country, it is not easy. Here is good. My children spend life here in peace, because they help us with a doctor, psychology, anything. I am living in heartbreak, and I cannot change, my head is in Kurdistan, my body is here. My son was a doctor and IS killed my son.”

The question of home is strongly connected with the way in which

...processes of inclusion or exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about our political and personal struggles over the social regulation of “belonging” (Brah, 1996, p. 192).

Codou Bop (2001, p. 25) explains that women experiment with new identities, because as a result of war, they lose all points of cultural reference. Such events exclude people, women in particular, of all their familial, tribal, and national identities, and leave them bereft of their traditional sociocultural connections. Furthermore, isolation during war leaves women in a

⁴ Pseudonyms and initials are used to protect women’s privacy.

defenseless position as they are often displaced and left without any protection. Under such circumstances women face menaces of violence, including gang rapes, sexual abuse, forced marriages, forced sexual relationships and pregnancies. All are undeniable consequences of wars (Bop, 2001, p. 26).

H.N told me how she was sad about the loss of her children: seven members of her family were killed by IS and 12 members are in captivity:

“If my children were with me we would be happy. They (camp people), help us a lot. But my three daughters are still in Iraq. You're talking about how the German language is difficult. I have no idea why you keep on talking about the language and Germans. Home is more comfortable than this camp, a person is happy with mom and dad.”

M.N mentioned how she is waiting for her family as she is living alone here, she said:

We don't love to go back to Sinjar...what we will do...I wish from God that our children who are with IS will be freed, and I wish that every one of the Ezidi people would come to Germany. Germany is good for living, they are teaching us the language. There is no problem in Germany, but IS is bad. I am thinking about my family, they all were with IS. I would like to see my family. I am sick now, I have problems, every time I'm thinking too much. I am thinking about my sister, I know what they did to her...

Brah asserts that there is a difference between wish for a home and a desire for a homeland because there is no guarantee that there will be the opportunity to return to a homeland (1996, p. 190-92).

M.A said the following:

“Now we are here, but our thoughts are with our kidnapped people; we have become three parts, one part is here, one part in Iraq and other part is kidnapped by ISIS. We are doing nothing, but some people go to school. Women and children of the displaced by armed conflicts. The women bear the burden of maintaining their families in situations of insecurity.”

According to Mbiganyi, Mozambican women who lived with their extended families overcame their problems more quickly than those who lived in camps. Social contact and good relations with a family can help in the process of recovery (1997, p. 21-22). In other words, social support decreases stress and depression among refugee women. Having family friends and relatives around also works as a source of support and helps to regulate and improve the lives of forced migrants (Brydon 1989, p. 127).

Everlasting Fear and Psychological Disorders

Traumatic events are dangerous, overwhelming, and sudden. They are indicated by their excessive or abrupt force, followed by fear, anxiety, withdrawal, and avoidance (Ursano, 1994, p. 7). Ezidi women in camps still carry fear of IS and this fear continues in a new society. They prefer

to stay in a camp because they are afraid that when they go out they may be killed by IS. These fears haunt their dreams and their everyday lives. They cannot forget, and, as M.N told me, one of her daughters does not go school because IS prevented her from going to school in Iraq, so now in Germany she does not go school:

We are afraid of what is happening in Germany because of IS. First we were happy in Germany, but IS is here. We are not happy. IS came here and they live in the same country and the same city. I live with people from the same Muslim region from Ragma in Syria. I saw how they hurt us, Muslims in Ragma had connected with IS, people who raped us are in the same building. We were in Syria, and they sold us for little money. We cannot trust Arab people in Germany I am really afraid of IS in Germany. Germany is good, but the place is also full of Arab people.

The expectations of the host community and those of the new arrivals play a major role in their adaptation to their new environment. Unattainable and unrealistic expectations result in frustration. It is important to be aware and have practical expectations of what a person might envisage in the new community. The host community may also have unrealistic anticipation of the arrival, which impacts on their survival (Brydon 1989, p.125-127). Psychological treatment is necessary for sexually abused children. Many are not immediately benefitting from therapy (Putnam, 2003; Ramchandani and Jones, 2003). Another women identified the grief she feels without her family:

We want all of our people to come back from IS to us...my head is full of bad things, and I am not interested in going to school because my mind is with my son who is in captivity. I like Germany. When I see Arab Muslim people I am afraid. Because I remember IS. I do not go to any courses. I am too tired to attend the courses.

These examples are indicative of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which Goldstein describes as follows:

Following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal experience of actual threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity, the common denominator of traumatic experiences is a feeling of intense fear, helplessness, and loss of control and threat of total destruction. Experiences in which a survivor actively participated in killing or committing atrocities are especially traumatic when such participation has no value or meaning. (Goldstein 2001, p. 260).

Statements such as the following underscore that Ezidi women are experiencing PTSD:

We are afraid and we remember IS. When attacked by IS in Germany, it scared us. We cannot trust Arab people in Germany. We lived together in Sinjar for many years, and they killed us. They were cruel and they hurt us very much. We do not trust Muslim people anymore.

Roe's work (1992, p. 1-8) also confirms that women who have experienced the kinds of traumas discussed above are suffering from PTSD. Thus, trauma, grief, and depression dominate the lives of women in the diaspora. They feel lost; they cannot feel relaxed because they are always thinking about the past. M.A told me that her daughter and two of her sons were still in captivity. She had a heart attack when she was in captivity, and she has very bad headaches ever since. She told me:

I have been in Germany for a year. Every week a psychologist comes. We also have a handicraft course. Two weeks ago, I saw my son who was slaughtered by IS, and I cried and screamed for help. I opened my eyes and saw I was in a mental hospital. Now we are here, but our thoughts are with our kidnapped people. We have become three parts, one part is here, one part in Iraq, and the other part is kidnapped by ISIS.

According to a psychologist who granted me an interview, M.A's mental health has become worse, in part because she has had more free time to think about the past, and she keeps repeating what has happened to her (Interview with psychologist, August 2016).

Some women have nightmares regularly. They scream, "Do not kill me". They forget in their sleep that they are in Germany. When they awake, they are still always in the past. Women have to learn to be self-confident and independent, because they will not go outside alone; they need help with all tasks, including while the shopping, in part because of their illiteracy. They always repeat stories from the time of their captivity, and they are unable to learn German because of the impact of their trauma. They remember details such as the numbers of days they did not see the sun, ate dry bread, lost their property and families. Some refugee camps, prior to their arrival in Germany, provided them with courses in swimming or handicrafts as therapy to help them focus on something else, to move beyond their past, at least for a while. Some have also engaged in talk therapy but very few are taking anti-depressants and other medical interventions.

According to Benjamin (1998, p.100), forced migration has both short term and long term consequences on women and their development. However, the most serious short-term consequences concern: family divorce, gender violence, trauma related with loss of family members and relatives, poor health; and loss of belonging and homes. Long-term consequences include poverty, depression and physical collapse. Other longer-term impacts include constant loss of social and cultural ties and unemployment. Some marriages suffer the stress of displacement resulting in divorce, which may affect family members especially women with children. War-affected populations in general, suffer from high rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Those who have been abused require intensive, long-term therapy in order to carry on with their lives. N.M told me how:

I could not sleep at night when I was with IS. I was with IS for one month. The tragedy is still in my head, I don't pay attention to what I eat and drink. I have been for one year in Germany. I will always remember how IS pressed my small son's neck. I do not feel safe here, I suffer from anxiety.

The survivors saw the worst situations and violence they had never before witnessed. They saw their families being killed by ISIS with their own eyes. They also saw their dead relatives. They

saw blood and they were scared. Many of their families are still in ISIS' hands. One woman told me:

I faint every day for forty minutes. I have a headache and pain in my eye because IS shocked me with electricity. I use drops to sleep. A doctor visited us, but even a doctor cannot help me. I do not feel better, and the doctor's therapy was not helpful. I am without my family; my husband is in Iraq. My family is in captivity with IS. And I cannot learn German.

Another woman that was mother of girl told me:

My daughter tried to commit suicide when she was with IS. IS beat her too much because they wanted to force her to clean their houses and they beat her in the head, now she gets crazy when she recalls the past. She suffers from pain and she loses consciousness.

Sexual violence was also systematically performed by fighting forces to undermine populations, causing disintegration within communities and families. Rape is often a public act aimed to increase embarrassment and shame. Survivors are also at risk for risk-taking behaviors as well as re-victimization (Courtois, 2004). There are many other examples of women and girls who were kidnapped and forced to provide sexual services. Many are then subjected to discrimination by their families and a communities, increasing the emotional effects of their violation, feelings that are as grueling as any physical pain.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research can assist in planning interventions to assist these women in the future. The voices of women who were affected by violence and warfare, must be recorded, but also the documentation of their stories must be shown all over the world. Those who are granted asylum in rich countries with very different cultures from their own experience social isolation and high levels of depression because they feel alienated from the new culture, loss of community and isolation. Derks (1998) suggests that healing must include some form of reintegration into society; telling their stories is a beginning. The power of women's stories encourage them to become part of their own change and can build empathy through awareness. Women can use the power of their narratives as incentive to convert their identities as victims into active contributions to peace-building. Women are not only victims of war but deeply engaged in preserving and gathering family in post-captivity situations. Although they carry their grief, they nonetheless can view their lives as meaningful in the reconstruction of family and community in new spaces.

Additionally, forced migration is gendered, having different impact on women than on men. Women must contend with changes in gender roles, accelerated by the conflict, as they became the majority of the displaced population after men were killed. In this regard, forced migration has had short and long term consequences. Moreover, the impact of forced migration depends on the period of displacement: the findings reveal that short term impacts on the displaced women are manifested in insecurity, and loss of home and a family disruption due to violence. Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful-struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new

patriarchies. There are also difference in the coping capabilities between women of different ages; younger women and children are able to learn the language which is very helpful, but they struggle emotionally. Older women cope with emotional issues better, but are unable to learn German. Despite these hardships, they may refuse the option of return when it presents itself, especially when the homeland is not safe. Displacement tends to alter the structure of families and households and to change gender roles—sometimes for the better. Perhaps most significant in developing approaches to post-conflict situations is the necessity of women’s involvement in reducing conflict. Women plainly play a fundamental both in conflict prevention and in post-conflict rehabilitation.

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