

# “Freedom Belongs to Everyone”: The Experiences of Yazidi Women in Bashiqa and Bahzani

In August 2014, the Yazidi minority in Iraq was subjected to a genocide by the Islamic State (ISIS). The crimes perpetrated against the Yazidis included mass executions, forced conversion to Islam, the recruitment of child soldiers, and the operation of slave markets for Yazidi women and girls. When ISIS entered Bashiqa and Bahzani, they blew up Yazidi shrines and graves to try to erase the cultural and religious identity of the Yazidis. They also destroyed homes, factories and olive groves, which were considered to be part of the identity of Bashiqa and Bahzani.

Yazidi women in Bashiqa and Bahzani today are still living through the trauma and consequences of these events. In addition, they face a range of further challenges as marginalised women from a minority religion. While more Yazidi girls and young women are progressing in education, harmful social norms, customs and practices – originating from both wider Iraqi society and the Yazidi community itself – create barriers for Yazidi women who want or need to work outside of the home, access healthcare or engage in public life. Widows and divorced women face specific challenges as they are seen as without male protection. Yazidi women also face the stigma that comes from being a former captive of ISIS, and the discrimination that comes from being judged an “infidel” due to their religion. However, these women are growing in strength. They are speaking out about their feelings and experiences, connecting with others, and working together for positive change.

## Key messages

- Yazidi communities in Bashiqa and Bahzani have faced persecution, violence and discrimination on account of their religious, ethnic and gender identities. As members of a minority religion, they also experience institutional discrimination and barriers to accessing education, employment and healthcare services.
- Yazidi women and men taking part in this study identified a range of issues affecting their lives and opportunities. However, there were differences between women and men in the issues chosen as high priority. For women, education and freedom were ranked among those of key importance, whereas men prioritised religious discrimination. Other issues prioritised by both women and men included safety, security, and health.
- Participants’ experiences demonstrate the intersectional discrimination and disadvantage experienced by Yazidi



women in Bashiqa and Bahzani. For these women, institutional discrimination, combined with ideas, norms and practices around gender, religion and ethnic identity, restrict their opportunities to access education, employment and healthcare, move freely outside of the home, and take part in public life.

## Context

Bashiqa and Bahzani are two urban areas on the Nineveh plain, between Mosul and Sheikhan in Iraq. They are famous for their olive groves and the 3,000-year-old dam of Sheikh Hassan. In the past, local industries included the manufacture of tahini, soap, olive oil, local carpets, traditional clothes and arak (an alcoholic drink). The language spoken by the people of this region is Arabic, spoken using the Bashiqi or Bahzan dialects. In addition, Kurdish, Shabak and Syriac are also spoken.

Many religions are practised in Bashiqa and Bahzani, including Islam and Christianity, and there are ethnically distinct groups, such as the Shabak and Turkmen, both of which follow the Muslim faith. The Yazidi are an ethnically and religiously distinct group, now a monotheistic religious minority in their own right. The Yazidi religion is one of the ancient Shamsaniya religions in the Middle East. Prior to the ISIS' genocide in 2014, the **Yazidi population was estimated to be approximately 500,000**. Today it is **estimated that 80 per cent of that population are living in displaced camps, and 100,000 have emigrated**.

## Methodology

### Focus Group Discussions using participatory ranking

The research was carried out through focus group discussions (FGDs) with 26 Yazidi women and 24 Yazidi men living in Bashiqa and Bahzani. Women and men were invited to take part so that their experiences and priorities could be understood and comparisons drawn in day-to-day life struggles and sources of strength. Two groups were held for women and two for men. Each group contained participants of mixed ages, between 18 and 60 years old. Participants included single, married and widowed women and men.

All participants were asked a series of open-ended questions to elicit views about the challenges facing Yazidi communities in Bashiqa and Bahzani. Participatory ranking was then used, so that participants themselves could rank the issues they had identified in order of their priority. The discussions around the problems and challenges identified generated rich qualitative data. This was complemented by quantitative data collected through the participatory ranking to inform analysis.

### Researchers from the same community as participants

The research was conducted by a Yazidi civil activist from Bashiqa. She has significant experience working with civil society organisations focusing on peace, security and stability. She was one of the founders of the Olive Grove campaign, which was established after the liberation

of Bashiqa from ISIS. This expertise, combined with her own lived experience, means that the researcher has a unique understanding of the problems and challenges faced by Yazidi communities in Bashiqa and Bahzani, and particular insight into the unique experiences of Yazidi women.

### Key findings

Fifteen key issues were identified by participants overall and ranked in order of severity, starting from the most severe and widespread. The issue ranked as highest priority across all four FGDs was education (prioritised by 15 of 50 participants). This was followed by religious discrimination (eleven participants), safety and security (seven participants), health (six participants), and freedom (four participants).

However, when the rankings were disaggregated by gender there were clear differences between women and men's priority issues. Ten of the 26 women participants ranked education most highly, compared to five of the 24 men. All of the eleven participants who chose religious discrimination as their top priority were men, while all four participants who chose freedom as the principal issue they face were women. The reasons for these differences are discussed below.

### Education and employment

Both women and men participants in the FGDs – especially those aged between 20 and 35 – raised education as a priority issue. They discussed the barriers caused by discrimination against Yazidis as a minority, in terms of the curriculum, the language spoken in educational institutions, and attitudes of other students. University education often means travelling to Mosul to study, which can be risky and dangerous for Yazidi men and women. Participants gave examples where students' bus drivers had been injured or killed by groups targeting Yazidis.

Participants also discussed a lack of employment opportunities. Graduates shared their impressions that some professions, such as the judiciary, are barred to Yazidis. In addition, some government departments' employment application forms have a field for religion, which does not include the Yazidi religion among the options to select. A lack of local employment was also an issue of concern. Women with skills in handicrafts could not find enough trade nearby, but were prevented from seeking employment further afield because of difficulties brought about by their religion and ethnic identity. Others had been forced to leave jobs in cafes or restaurants because customers would not eat food prepared by a Yazidi. Divorced and widowed women were facing particular challenges around employment, often being forced to depend on donations from their communities.

### Safety and security

FGD participants discussed the importance of safety as a basic prerequisite for living in peace and stability, and the reality of living without it. They felt that Yazidi women in Bashiqa and Bahzani lack security and safety in all respects, feeling insecure and unsafe even in their homes. Yazidi experiences of post-2003 Iraq have been of

increasing terrorism, kidnapping, robbery and killing, as well as ISIS persecution and genocide. FGD participants gave many examples of family members or friends they had lost to terrorism and violence, as well as describing how the trauma of persecution and displacement had impacted them. Women reported that when they do venture into public spaces, they face harassment because they do not wear a headscarf like women of the majority religion. All of this has heightened family members' fears for the safety of women and girls and destroyed women's own confidence and psychological security. As a result, the possibilities for women to travel to access education, employment and healthcare are severely restricted.

### Health

While there are doctors in Bashiqa and Bahzani, there are no hospitals, so people living in this area must travel to Mosul for hospital treatment. Healthcare was raised as a key issue, most particularly for FGD participants aged between 35 and 50. As well as the barriers and insecurities caused by the requirement to travel to Mosul, women described the discrimination they had faced as members of a religious and ethnic minority when trying to access healthcare. One woman had been refused access to a maternity hospital while in labour because she did not understand the language spoken there. Another described how a doctor referred her for an unnecessary operation in another hospital as they did not want to treat her themselves. Another woman recounted how staff at a health clinic refused to treat her daughter after she had taken an overdose. Participants felt that harmful stereotypes about Yazidis, such as incorrect beliefs that Yazidis do not wash for 40 days, meant that doctors were reluctant to treat them.

### Freedom

Freedom was mentioned as a key issue only by women in the FGDs. They expressed freedom as one of the most beautiful things in life, which belongs to everyone. They saw a lack of freedom as underpinning all of the other challenges they faced. Women described a range of situations in which they felt their freedoms were curtailed as a result of their ethnic and religious identity, combined with their gender. These included: working outside of the area; owning their own business; wearing the clothes of their choice; visiting libraries, cafeterias and restaurants; expressing their opinions, making decisions and participating in politics; and taking part in creative and entertainment activities. Participants also recognised the ways that their own communities' beliefs and fears, as well as their own loss of self-confidence due to recent events, contributed to this curtailment, meaning that their own, and their daughters' freedoms, had been increasingly restricted.

### Religious discrimination

This issue was particularly high on men's list of grievances in the FGDs. They felt that religious discrimination arose from the misconceptions other communities in Iraq have about Yazidi religious practices, as well as institutionalised biases in government towards other religious groups. Participants shared many examples of discrimination they had faced on the grounds of their religion. The fact that religious

discrimination was not explicitly prioritised by women in the FGDs does not mean that they are unaffected by discriminatory norms and ideas around religion.

Other barriers and challenges discussed in the FGDs included:

- **Legal rights:** Including the lack of a transitional justice system for Yazidi people who have been subjected to genocide, as well as challenges presented by Article 26 of the Personal Status Identity Law.
- **Language:** Yazidi women in Bashiqa reported discrimination in accessing healthcare and education, and in buying essential goods, because they do not speak Kurdish.
- **Harassment:** Women gave examples of verbal and sexual harassment in public spaces and in universities. They felt they were more vulnerable to harassment as they do not wear Islamic dress.
- **Racism:** Participants defined racism as unequal treatment of people because of their colour, religion or culture. They felt this was behind much of the persecution and marginalisation they had experienced.

## Policy recommendations

The following recommendations aim to address the marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion faced by Yazidi women in Bashiqa and Bahzani. They are designed to address the priority issues identified by FGD participants, and are guided by the researcher's own knowledge and expertise.

- The government must work to create the conditions needed for Yazidi women to feel comfortable, safe and secure, so that they can take the next step forward. This should include challenging institutional discrimination and undertaking legislative reform to protect and guarantee the full rights of minorities.
- The government and donor agencies should support and fund civil society organisations to provide workshops for Yazidi women and their communities to strengthen self-confidence and awareness of women's rights. These workshops should empower women in decision making and promote participation in study, work or travel. Workshops should also be aimed at Yazidi men to challenge the customs, traditions and norms they uphold that restrict the freedoms, movement and opportunities of women in their community.
- Due to the barriers faced by Yazidi women around travel outside of their region, the government and local businesses must create more employment opportunities within Bashiqa and Bahzani. There should be a particular focus on opportunities for widowed and divorced women, and those caring for orphans.
- The government must provide appropriate healthcare facilities in Bashiqa and Bahzani, particularly a hospital with maternity facilities that provides care for all patients, irrespective of religion, ethnic identity or gender.

## Further reading

- Al-Juboori, S. and Shahab, S. (2021) *Red Wednesday: Why Preserving Yazidi Heritage is Essential to their Survival*, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, 14 April (accessed 7 December 2022)
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## Credits

This policy brief draws on the CREID paper 'Discrimination and Conflict: Experiences of Yazidi Women and Men Within Their Community and Iraqi Society' by Zeri Khairy Gedi. It was compiled by Jenny Birchall and edited by Amy Quinn-Graham.

It was produced as part of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID), a consortium funded by UK Aid from the UK government which provides research evidence and delivers practical programmes which aim to redress the impact of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, tackle poverty and exclusion, and promote people's wellbeing and empowerment.

The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IDS or the UK government.

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DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.009](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.009)

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