

# **CREID** INTERSECTIONS SERIES Religious Inequalities and Gender

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## **Challenges Faced by Yazidi Women as a Result of Displacement**

Turkiya Shammo, Diana Amin Saleh  
and Nassima Khalaf

**December 2022**

*Part of the CREID Intersection Series Collection on  
Violence and Discrimination Against Women of  
Religious Minority Backgrounds in Iraq*

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### Suggested citation:

Shammo, T.; Saleh, D. A. and Khalaf, N. (2022) *Challenges faced by Yazidi women as a result of displacement*, CREID Intersections, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.017](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.017)

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ISBN: 978-1-80470-062-4

DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.017](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.017)



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### Available from:

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IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England.

Charity Registration Number 306371

Charitable Company Number 877338

# Challenges Faced by Yazidi Women as a Result of Displacement

Turkiya Shammo, Diana Amin Saleh and Nassima Khalaf

## Summary

The Yazidi minority in Iraq has become the focus of international concern due to prolonged persecution from ISIS, after this group invaded the Yazidi stronghold of Sinjar in 2014, and forced its citizens to migrate to the mountains, murdering many Yazidi and kidnapping Yazidi women and forcing them into marriages, slavery and sexual abuse. This research uses mixed methods to uncover the lived experiences of Yazidi women and girls living in displacement camps in Iraq. Through participatory ranking and focus group discussions, this research centres the voices of survivors – those Yazidi women and girls who were kidnapped, raped and forced into marriage, slavery and conversion to Islam at the hands of ISIS – by providing an opportunity for Yazidi women, men and survivors to identify the challenges facing them as women from a religious and ethnic minority. This paper closes with recommendations for the Iraqi government, civil society organisations and the international community on how to ensure Yazidi women and girls can live in freedom and dignity with access to the full spectrum of their rights.

**Keywords:** Yazidi, women, religious minority, marginality, gender discrimination, Iraq, participatory research.

**Turkiya Shammo** lives in Sinjar District, Nineveh Governorate, and was born in 1995. As a result of the actions of ISIS Turkiya currently lives in a displacement camp. She holds a bachelor's degree in electronic journalism, and has worked with several civil society organisations within displacement camps, as well as participating in workshops, conferences and seminars related to rights. Turkiya has always believed in one abiding principle: the abolition of all laws that discriminate between the sexes and the adoption of appropriate laws that prevent discrimination against women.

**Diana Amin Saleh** is 27 years old and a sixth-grade student. Diana is a Yazidi survivor who was kidnapped by the terrorist group ISIS and liberated from their hands after three years of torture. Diana has worked with several civil society organisations, including the French organisation Yahd, the International Organization for Migration, and the Farida International Organization. Diana is a member of the Yazidi Survivors Network, and has also participated in several conferences and seminars related to justice and human rights.

**Nassima Khalaf** is from Sinjar, al-Qahtaniyah district. After the terrorist attack by ISIS on the Sinjar district, Nassima was displaced to the Kurdistan region and currently lives in a displacement camp under pieces of fabric and a cloth. As victims of a genocidal campaign Nassima believes Yazidis should be ensured human rights, and granted equality under the law. Nassima has worked with several civil society organisations, as well as participating in training and workshops. Nassima believes women should have equality with men in employment, wages, and an equal right to participate in social security, public and political decision-making; that women must enjoy rights that guarantee them freedom and dignity, free from fear and exploitation.

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# Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the women of the world, and a special thanks to the Yazidi women who suffered every form of violence and persecution and are still standing, with dignity and strength.

## 1 Background

Prior to 2014, there were an estimated 500,000 Yazidis living in Iraq, however population numbers are now unclear. It's estimated that by mid-2016, 210,000 Yazidis had emigrated to Europe, particularly Germany (Minority Rights Group International 2022).

Of those remaining in Kurdistan, most live near Mosul and the Sinjar Mountain region in Iraq, with a few groups still living in Turkey, Syria, Georgia and Armenia. The Lalish Al-Nurani temple in Iraq functions as the main Yazidi religious centre and holy place.

Yazidism is a monotheistic religion, believing in one God who is represented by seven angels. The foremost of these angels is Malak Tawous, the peacock angel or king, revered as the leader of the archangels and most loyal to God.

Yazidi rituals are thousands of years old and include prayers facing the sun in the morning and evening, a three day fast taking place in December each year, pilgrimages to the temple of Lalish in Ain Sifni, as well as feasting ceremonies around the Yazidi New Year, known as Red Wednesday.

When ISIS took the city of Sinjar in 2014, they persecuted the Yazidis, burning their homes, schools and places of worship. Some girls as young as nine were kidnapped, sold, sexually enslaved, beaten and forced to work (Cetorelli and Ashraph 2019). So far, more than 2,000 Yazidi women and children are missing and in captivity (Arraf and Khaleel 2021), over 200,000 Yazidis are currently displaced in IDP camps (Yazda 2021) (18,000 in Shariya camp alone) (Travers 2021), and seven years have passed since ISIS committed genocide against the Yazidi people, killing an estimated 12,000 Yazidis (Nobody's Listening 2022). Displaced people have been living in encampments of tents made from pieces of polyester and cloth.

Generally, Yazidi girls and women are marginalised and excluded from accessing health care and education, as well as being deprived of job opportunities. Those who have returned to Sinjar continue to suffer from a lack of services and infrastructure.

Those Yazidis who survived kidnapping and enslavement by ISIS continue to suffer seven years after their ordeal began. Living in camps, they are deprived of many basic rights and have no access to mental and material support or access to employment.

Yazidi women are disproportionately marginalised due to their experiences with violence, kidnapping, enslavement, killing and displacement. Even if they survived the atrocities, they may still be in the hands of ISIS, or have lost mothers, sisters, or children to the violence. Upon their escape from ISIS, many Yazidi women still live with the daily threat of violence within the refugee camps where they are forced to live. Many have no rights or laws to shield them, leaving them marginalised, and unprotected from abuse and oppression.

Upon their kidnapping and enslavement, most Yazidi women were forced into converting to Islam. Their imprisonment was characterised by indoctrination, persecution, enslavement, severe violence, sexual abuse, beatings, and living through the trauma of war and bombing. Upon their release, carrying these traumatic burdens, Yazidi women have struggled to integrate back into their societies, despite their resilience.

This research deals particularly with the lack of support and services provided to displaced Yazidi women now living in refugee camps. While research has been conducted on the experience of the Yazidi, most does not address the experiences of displaced people as they are written in English, a language not spoken by most who are currently living in camps. This removes the ability of the Yazidi women to tell their own stories and describe their own experiences.

Designed as temporary shelter solutions, some women have lived in the camps for as long as seven years, where their basic needs are not being addressed. Services and support for women inside the camps is woefully insufficient. These camps lack basic resources to provide healthcare and education, there are very few economic opportunities, and jobs are scarce. Having lost their homes due to war, they are now forced to live in tent cities that are subject to the ravages of the elements – fire, wind, floods – leaving them vulnerable and in a state of uncertainty and flux.



This research has found much evidence of the great suffering and persecution experienced by Yazidi women. They are victims of violence, displacement and trauma, facing extreme challenges and a loss of rights, resulting in their extreme marginalisation.

The needs of Yazidi women are multifarious. They need access to education from both local and international organisations. This education should include information on their own rights, and how to access these rights within the framework of the law. Education will also have the added benefit of supporting the women to tell their own stories, which can be shared with the wider world.

The women are in dire need of health services, for both their physical and mental wellbeing. There is a lack of ongoing care and rehabilitation, as they have been abandoned in makeshift camps where care is superficial and cursory. They require job opportunities to ensure economic security, and they require a safe living environment, where they can access the services they need.

## 2 Introduction

Yazidis form a significant proportion of the population in the area that spans across Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Yazidis form part of the larger Indo-Aryan group, alongside the Persians and the Kurds. While most speak Kurdish, the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Syria speak Arabic. The Iraqi Yazidis live across many cities, including: Sheikhan, Bashiqa, Bahzani, Sinjar region, and Baadhra, Sumail and Zummar. The Yazidi have one main shrine, a holy place for Yazidis around the world, located in Lalish close to Ain Sifni, the centre of Sheikhan district.

The Yazidis sanctify the sun as one of the manifestations of the creator, a source of life, and a sacred source in the cosmic system that provides beings with spiritual, intellectual and physical energy. The Yazidi teach the importance of seeking good for all mankind and then for yourself, and prohibit premeditated murder, usury, fornication, usurping the money of an orphan, and assaulting others. They advocate for goodness, peace, tolerance and love, and promote peaceful coexistence with all human beings.

Throughout the history of their presence in Iraq, since the Islamic conquest, particularly under the Arab and Ottoman emperors, the Yazidi have been subjected to harassment,

persecution, displacement and killing. Yazidi people have been massacred many times (some sources have counted 74 separate massacres (Nicholls 2020)) throughout history, for no other reason than the hostility expressed towards those of a different religion generally, and the Yazidi specifically.

The worst of these campaigns of persecution was during the era of the Ottoman Caliphate. Over a period of more than 300 years the Yazidi were subjected to genocide and military campaigns against them. Despite this onslaught many Yazidi remained steadfast in their beliefs, resisting their total destruction. However, this extended period of terror left them exhausted and displaced, having lost much of their homeland.

History is filled with evidence of the heinous crimes committed by Muslim rulers against the Yazidis – in Sinjar, Bashiqa, Bahzani, Sheikhan and other areas – their armies attacking villages and bringing ruin to Yazidi cities. Islamic fatwas justified the enslavement of Yazidi women, the killing of Yazidi elders and children, and the looting of Yazidi property.

## **2.1 The marginalisation of the Yazidis today**

The Yazidis have been marginalised and persecuted by successive modern Iraqi governments, and in August 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) attempted to exterminate the Yazidi people. Thousands of women, girls and children were taken captive, men were killed, property was looted, homes, temples and shrines were destroyed, and thousands of Yazidi people fled to different regions and countries.

Beginning on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2014, ISIS began a campaign of genocide to destroy the Yazidis. Their actions are defined as genocide according to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The 2016 report, *UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: ISIS is committing genocide against the Yazidis*, states that:

ISIS sought to wipe out the Yazidis through murder, sexual slavery, servitude, torture and degrading treatment. In addition to this, the imposition of poor living conditions that brought a slow death, the use of means that impeded the birth of Yazidi children, including forcing Yazidi adults to change their religion, psychological trauma, separating Yazidi women and men, and removing Yazidi

children from their families and placing them with ISIS fighters, thereby separating them from their community's religious beliefs and practices.

(Human Rights Council 2016)

The report continues by describing the specific persecution carried out against Yazidi men and boys, such as murder and forcing boys to become child soldiers, while Yazidi women and girls, some as young as nine years old, were sold in slave markets and kept by ISIS fighters in conditions of servitude and sexual slavery, often being subjected to brutal rape on a daily basis.

The impacts of the genocide are far reaching – 2,745 orphans have been identified, 68 religious shrines destroyed, and more than 100,000 people were forced to flee. Over 6,400 Yazidi were kidnapped, with approximately 3548 of them female and 2869 male (Shafaq News 2021). The Office of the United Nations for Human Rights added that the number of survivors who managed to escape ISIS was 3537, including 1201 women, 339 men, 1043 female children and 954 male children, noting that these statistics are approved by the United Nations and do not include material losses in property, land, livestock, agricultural, cars, factories, and others (OHCHR 2016).

The Iraqi writer Amin Farhan Jeju, in his book *The Yazidi Nationalism: Its Roots, Constituents and Sufferings*, refers to the reasons many have taken such an aggressive stance against followers of the Yazidi religion:

- Acquisition of Yazidi spoils and property;
- The eradication of the Sumerian-Babylonian historical and civilisational extension of the Yazidi people;
- Erasure of the Yazidi language;
- Eradication of the Yazidi religion, which is an extension of the Babylonian religion;
- Elimination of the cultural, historical and heritage monuments of the Yazidi people;
- Acquisition of the entire Yazidi regions and geography;
- Exploiting the human potential of the Yazidis, who are at the mercy of the invaders for the slave profession and their recruitment into the ranks of the invading armies;
- Stealing children and abducting women;

- Elimination of the Yazidi people in order not to develop their human, geographical, intellectual and administrative capabilities.

This intellectual, political and social barbarity led to the commission of a heinous crime against the Yazidis throughout the history of the Abbasid and Ottoman Empire.

ISIS invaded the entire Sinjar district, in addition to the cities of Bahzani and Bashiqa in the Nineveh Plain. The destruction rate in the Sheikhan district centre exceeded 95 per cent of the total number of houses, homes, facilities, and government departments within it. Many Yazidis were executed. For those who survived, many were held captive, forced into slavery, vilified as infidels, and had the Islamic religion imposed upon them. In Bahzani and Bashiqa, infrastructure and economic projects were destroyed, factories and institutions were looted, and orchards were burned. These desperate conditions have caused a monumental increase in migration and displacement. Camps for Yazidi survivors exist in Zakho, Dohuk, Sharaya, Baadhra, Eisian, Amadiyah, Sarsink, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

Many others were forced out of Iraq, seeking refuge in Syria and Turkey, before attempting to migrate to Europe. The immigration spanned different social strata and included the wealthy, the merchant and middle classes, as well as the well-educated - engineers, doctors, teachers and holders of high degrees in various scientific and intellectual disciplines (Habib 2018). The number of Yazidi immigrants moving to Germany and other European countries offering asylum is estimated at more than 120,000, since the invasion of Sinjar on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014 (Minority Rights Group International 2022). More than 1,500 enslaved and raped girls and women were brought to Germany for psychological and medical treatment.

## **2.2 The situation of Yazidi women and girls**

The experiences of Yazidi women and girls at the hands of ISIS, especially young Yazidi women and girls, was different to those of Yazidi men and boys. As mentioned above, Yazidi women and girls, some as young as nine years of age, were kidnapped by ISIS and sold into sexual slavery. They were forcibly converted to Islam and transferred to and between various holding sites in Iraq and Syria. Those who weren't forced into sexual slavery were forcibly married to ISIS fighters under the official endorsement and support of ISIS leadership (Khoudeida 2016).

Many of these women ('survivors') were freed from ISIS captivity in 2017, but unable to return to their homes, as they were destroyed by ISIS, and they were brought to camps for internally displaced people (IDP). Other Yazidi women who avoided capture by ISIS were still driven from their homes and are also still living in IDP camps today.

In addition to the trauma caused by ISIS, these women and girls are living in displacement conditions where they have no privacy, where their tents are at risk of combustion, and they are unable to complete their education. If they have received an education, they are unable to obtain jobs. The customs and traditions within the Yazidi community that prioritise education and employment for boys are still operating even in the camps. Consequently, Yazidi women and girls are battling a unique combination of vulnerabilities. They are struggling to cope with the physical, psychological and emotional impacts of their experiences with ISIS, alongside the harsh realities of living in displacement while also still experiencing marginalisation within their own community on account of their gender.

### 3 Research methodology

Initially researchers attended a training in Erbil, learning how to undertake the research and approach the methodology. It was agreed the team would use participatory ranking within the context of focus group discussions to better understand which challenges and threats affect Yazidi women and girls living in the IDP camps and to what extent their lives are impacted by each issue. We decided to run the focus group discussions (FGDs) with women of different ages, to obtain an understanding of how challenges and threats have affected Yazidi women across the life cycle, as well as to involve men, to better understand how they perceive the issues facing Yazidi women and girls. Significantly, we also planned to run a FGD with survivors; those Yazidi women and girls that on August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014, were captured by ISIS in Sinjar, as we suspected they may be dealing with very specific issues that wouldn't necessarily affect those who weren't captured. We also set out to select women from different locations and of different social backgrounds, including those who were married and unmarried, in order to work with a more representative sample.

Therefore, the focus group discussions were as follows:

- FGD 1 with women in Essien camp 25 and under,

- FGD 2 with women in Essien camp 26 and over,
- FGD 3 with young men in Essien camp 18-35, and
- FGD 4 with survivors in Shariya camp.

We identified those in the camp who had experienced specific marginalisation, for example economic hardship or health issues, and contacted them via their phones to ask if they would be interested in participation. We decided not to involve the authorities in the camp as we have found that they can be biased and choose those known to them for participation. This would potentially skew the data.

We began by introducing the research to ensure the participants were comfortable and knew the purpose of the FGD and how the information would be used. We additionally took care to inform them that all information would be kept confidential. We began the discussion by asking the women about the challenges and obstacles they face in their daily lives. In the third FGD we asked the men about the challenges the women face, and how they as men support the women with these challenges.

In order to carry out the participatory ranking exercise, each participant had a paper and pen to write their own challenges. They went through one by one to explain their challenges and these were noted on a flip chart. If the challenge was mentioned more than once it was given a mark for each time. We wrote all the challenges participants came up with, calculated all the marks that each challenge got, and then reordered them according to the number of mentions. More on these rankings is provided in Figure 1.

We began by asking questions about the identified challenges and the women and men were each given an opportunity to speak. We encouraged participants to share their experiences, especially the women.

The main purposes of the research were to collect evidence to prove or disprove theories we had about Yazidi women's marginalisation, as well as to record facts and the nature of the suffering experienced by women who are subjected to violence and persecution. These records serve the purpose of describing to a much wider global audience the nature of the suffering experienced by displaced Yazidi women. Specifically, this research draws attention to the fact that Yazidi women and girls face intersectional marginalisation - they are persecuted both on account of their gender and their religious and ethnic identity.

The ultimate aim of this research is to shed light on the reality that displaced women and girls are living, so as to secure their rights. Specifically, their right to equality, their right to gain freedom and personal security, their right to have equal enjoyment and be protected by the law, and their right not to be subjected to any form of abuse.

## 4 Findings

**Figure 1: Overall results of participatory ranking exercise**

Displacement	13
Economy	8
Education	6
Health	4
Employment	5
Law	2
Early marriage and so-called honour killings	2
Social habits and social environment	2
Privacy and personal decisions	2
Transportation	1
Unemployment	1
Environment	1
Discrimination and inequality	1
Genocide	1
Cases of tent combustion	1

**Figure 2: Participatory ranking results, aggregated by focus group discussions (FGDs)**

The most important challenges and problems faced by Yazidi women in displacement camps according to the number of participants who ranked each challenge in first place.

*Challenge/problem identified, and number of votes it received as top priority*

FGD 1: <b>Young women, Essien</b>		FGD 2: <b>Older women, Essien</b>		FGD 3: <b>Young men, Essien</b>		FGD 4: <b>Survivors, Shariya</b>	
1. Displacement	3	1. Displacement	3	1. Displacement	3	1. Displacement	4
2. Unemployment	3	2. Economy	3	2. Education	2	2. Economy	3
3. Education	2	3. Health	1	3. Economy and job opportunity	1	3. Education	1
4. Health	1	4. Education	1	4. Health	1	4. Environment	1
5. Economy	1	5. Job opportunity	1	5. Early marriage and honour killing	1	5. Cultural habits	1
6. Privacy	1	6. Law	1	6. Law	1	6. Health	1
7. Early marriage	1	7. Transportation	1	7. Privacy and decision making	1		
8. Discrimination based on religion	1			8. Insurance and health insurance	1		
9. Genocide	1			9. Social environment	1		
10. Personal decision making	1			10. Discrimination and inequality	1		

All the participants were internally displaced people (IDP) and had similar common problems and challenges. For example, all the participants ranked displacement as their biggest challenge, however age determined how they ranked other problems. For



example, where girls were suffering particularly due to a lack of employment, adult women were more concerned with a lack of economy.

The women live under particularly challenging conditions in the camps, and for this reason many have health problems. They spoke about the lack of health services in the camp and that the health clinic is not able to provide adequate treatment. Men discussed the educational problems in the camp, and that due to their own responsibilities they were not able to attend school, while the educational concerns of girls were down to a lack of specialised teaching staff.

#### **4.1 Displacement**

For most, the biggest challenge they faced daily was that of their displacement. Many of those in the camps in Iraq have lived under canvas with no access to services or facilities for seven years, through extreme weather conditions. This displacement effects every aspect of life – from health to education to employment and economy.

The living environment in the camps is very poor – streets are not paved so people are forced to live in mud and dirt, while the lack of space and privacy means there is nowhere for people to securely store their belongings or find a quiet place to study.

Women are particularly impacted due to their increased time spent in camp – preparing the meals, looking after the children, and doing household chores. Many of these responsibilities can also be dangerous – in 2021 a woman in a camp was badly burned when a gas cylinder exploded while she was cooking.

Living conditions also appear to be having a more significant psychological impact on the women. With no support or relief, suicide among young Yazidi women has become an increasing problem. Anecdotal evidence from participants suggested that in 2021, seven young women took their lives in Essien camp, with a total of 16 suicides of young women across all camps. While these numbers aren't confirmed by external sources, there are a range of sources that highlight the high numbers of Yazidi girls dying by suicide (Murad 2021, Cultural Center of Caucasian Yazidis 2022, Mohammed 2020). Causes include both physical violence and emotional abuse within the family unit. Stress, caused by unemployment, financial strain and cramped living conditions, which exacerbate difficult situations and can be the source of fighting and abuse. Within the

camps the needs of women have been largely neglected – there is a lack of mental and emotional wellbeing services, and no centres exist to support women dealing with domestic violence, emotional abuse or online harassment (which is on the increase).

## **4.2 Education**

Education was identified as a key challenge by older women. They are concerned by the low quality of the education children receive within the camp, exacerbated by the fact that families do not have the resources to support their education with equipment, additional tutelage or fees. For many mothers in the camps, they themselves are uneducated, and therefore are unable to help their children with their studies. In some cases parents are in fact dependent on their children to assist them – due to their illiteracy, or financially as they are able to secure better jobs.

## **4.3 Early marriage**

Early marriage was a concern for older women living in the camps. Many had been forced into early marriage themselves, and they were afraid that due to the current cultural and social situation in the camps their children might also be expected to marry young. Traditionally, women in Yazidi communities from Sinjar are expected to marry early, and therefore not continue in education. Sinjar was formerly a predominantly agricultural society, and farmers wanted to marry for economic reasons, in order to have a wife and children to assist them in their work. Additionally, the area lacked schools and universities, making it difficult for girls to access education.

Early marriage not only impacts how women are perceived in the broader society, but it also limits their opportunities, for example in education. As early marriage increases rates of divorce also increase, and the older women have experienced the social and economic challenges arising from divorce.

For the Yazidi survivors they also mentioned this challenge. Having survived ISIS they are now concerned that in order for their families to manage the shame and dishonour of having a daughter who has been 'violated', they may choose to marry her early.

Instances of early marriage in the camps are higher because of unemployment and a lack of awareness and trainings for young women about their rights and legal status

according to the government and what the risks – physical and mental – of being married at an early age may be.

Although there have not been any reported instances of so-called 'honour killings' in the camps, these have occurred in Yazidi society in the past and due to the current stresses of the living environment, there is a concern this may happen again.

#### **4.4 Making personal decisions**

Within the camps young women have very little autonomy over their lives, with their parents making the majority of decisions for them, from who they are allowed to be friends with to who they should marry. Parents see this as a means of keeping their daughters safe in an insecure environment, but do not recognise the strain this lack of autonomy can cause for young women. This is not a particular cultural or familial constraint, but a result of the treatment many Yazidi girls experienced under ISIS. For this reason, the same constraints may not be placed on girls outside of Iraq, for example in Germany. The lack of employment opportunities for women in the camps also decreases their autonomy, as economic freedom would contribute to their independence.

#### **4.5 Transport**

Transportation is a particular challenge for young women in the camps. This is both due to the cost of transport and lack of freedom to travel for women. The camps are situated outside of city centres, meaning there are no taxis or mini-buses. Instead, transportation tends to be provided by private cars, which charge a higher fare to transport people from the camps to the cities. Men find it easier to travel freely, while women, traumatised by their experiences under ISIS, fear travelling alone due to safety concerns.

## **5 Analysis**

This section explores the challenges identified in the FGDs in more detail, including in the participants' own words.

### **5.1 Women and displacement**

The women in the focus groups were clear that girls and women were among the most badly affected by the 2003 war, and the subsequent genocide of the Yazidi people. One

woman, a 48-year-old housewife from the Essien camp, described how this has followed them into the displacement camps, with women being the ones who continue to suffer the most.

*Yazidi woman tried to gather her strength after years of wars...the rape of girls and their sexual slavery and when they were sold to slave markets. There is no programme that supports women in the security sector, the legal framework, and economic marginalisation. These factors and the increase in violence has led to the growth of extremism, which makes women a target today in the camps for the displaced.*

One of the young women, a student aged 20 from the Essien camp, agreed, stating how:

*We, Yazidi girls, are most affected at the moment and suffer from many problems because we do not have the simplest necessities to continue life inside the camps. From the camp at the same time there are no mechanisms to support us until we can get out.*

She emphasised that despite everything Yazidi girls have already experienced, there has always been more to come.

*What happened to her [the Yazidi girl] in the past, of poverty, persecution, fear, wound, crying, and the voice of her orphaned children who were waiting for their martyr father, who sacrificed his soul for the sake of the country, and also taking responsibility within a society and despite the economic conditions, with all these problems they settled with the situation and then were attacked. This Yazidi woman and her children were displaced to the Kurdistan region and lived in camps for the displaced again. She began to gather her strength inside a torn tent to provide safety to her children until they complete their education. It is not easy to fight the conditions to be a successful mother.*

Another woman, a 28-year-old housewife from the Essien camp, expressed a similar feeling, asking how Yazidi women are expected to continue living when their rights are continually violated.

*How can this continue against an ethnic religious minority, and against a woman who has lived through injustice, persecution, rape, torture, killing, displacement and many other sufferings? Today, we are victims of the government and civil society organisations and we are constantly exploited. The future of our children is lost before our eyes.*

It was clear that these women's concerns were not just for themselves, but also for their children and their children's futures. One woman, a 32-year-old housewife from the Essien camp, shared how:

*The present and future of the Yazidi woman and the future of her children are unknown, we live at the mercy of aid. Will the situation continue to wait for someone to extend the hand of cooperation? Will we remain under the summer and winter camps, and will our children remain under the dust and mud of harsh days? What is this ordeal?*

The women explained how living in the camps means they have no way of supporting themselves and their families, stripping them of autonomy and leaving their fate in the hands of others. One woman, a 20-year-old survivor from the Shariya camp, described how women and girls are already traumatised and extremely fearful from their experiences of kidnapping and sexual slavery at the hands of ISIS, and now they are facing even more difficulties being responsible for their children without support.

*Because of the war, many women lost their husbands and fought the suffering of life on their own. Today, these displaced women are facing the most difficult stages of life, being single women and they have children and responsibility. The government does not help these women and their economic conditions are difficult.*

Another woman, a 33-year-old housewife from the Essien camp, agreed.

*I am with my children and we do not have a monthly income. We live on humanitarian aid from benefactors and we are waiting for a helping hand from all who belong to humanity.*

### **5.1.1 Conditions of displacement**

As well as living at the mercy of others, the women identified how they struggled to survive in their current living conditions. The 28-year-old woman described how the conditions in the camps are not fit for human habitation.

*In some countries it is not accepted for animals to live under a piece of fabric. They do not accept animals being persecuted, and today we are human beings of blood and flesh, but we have been living for seven years under the camps of the displaced. The educational level in the camps is at a very weak level, as well as the level of health. If you need treatment you must go to a doctor outside the camp from a second city, with the car fare, and the doctor, with the costs of treatment and huge sums. This means that the financially damaged woman cannot get treatment if she is sick.*

The women discussed how the living conditions in the camps are particularly difficult during winter. They must constantly weigh up the risks of using an electric heater with the need to keep their children warm. A 32-year-old woman from Essien camp says she is worried about her children during the winter, particularly at night.

*During winter nights at bedtime when I put my head on the pillow I feel apprehensive because I think about what will happen if the tent burns while I and my children are sleeping. These accidents have happened before, where the tents have burned due to the electricity supply, so we cannot light the electric heater as we are afraid of burning too. At the same time, we do not have oil as an alternative to the electric heater. In the harsh winter, we need white oil to ignite the heaters, but not enough oil was distributed to the displaced.*

This is not the only threat to the life and health of women and girls within the camps. One young woman, a student aged 21 from the Essien camp, explained how:

*There are environmental, health, and climatic problems that greatly affect the lives of the displaced, especially women. There are many types of pollutants that increase the danger of contamination in the environment, especially for people who suffer from psychological and skin diseases. It has a negative impact on this affected group, including skin diseases such as lice and scabies. In the past years, there was a huge number of displaced people who had scabies and lice because of the environment. There are girls who work as workers and clean places near*

*toxic waste, and some of them suffer from terrifying and dangerous conditions because they are close to waste and inhale harmful smoke and are exposed to toxic substances. Sometimes the displaced resort to burning the waste and this exacerbates the dangers that threaten the health of the displaced girls.*

Despite the awful conditions, some of the women described finding some hope and solace within the camps. However, this was short lived. For example, one of the survivors, a 20-year-old from the Shariya camp, described finding comfort in an initiative started by a women's organisation before it was hampered by a lack of funding.

*In fact, I did not imagine that I would find comfort...There was an interesting initiative by women's organisations to open a number of shelters for survivors of domestic and community violence in the governorates of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk, which provided important services in saving the lives of many of them and encouraged them to interact with their families as they used to do, and help in encouraging public opinion to stand against women's crimes. Because of the lack of funding and the difficulty of sustaining the centres by women's organisations, most of them were handed over to governmental authorities to manage. This led to reduced assistance to those survivors who were marginalised of the weakness of the government and organisations after their return, and most of the survivors live in the camp. And this is despite the conditions of the war that they were liberated from, including torture, rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage and forced conversion to Islam. The survivors, after all this suffering, today live under a tent, and they are not taken care of by parties... it is just a talk not action, giving them courses, seminars and conferences on human rights and travels, and all of this is just sayings, not a realistic action and protective work on the ground. A large number of them are waiting for God's mercy in order to go to Europe to get their rights.*

It appeared to the women that the only way to escape this continued life of displacement in the camps was to migrate and start a life elsewhere. They were clear that there was no way they could return to their homes, even if they had the option, because of the trauma they and their families had experienced there. For example, one of the survivors, a 20-year-old from Shariya camp, shared her response when people ask why she hasn't gone back to her original home:

*I will respond to him with a word. If your family is buried in a mass grave in front of a house, will you return to your home being a displaced person? The most difficult thing is that they leave the cemeteries in front of the families of the victims... In front of my house there is a mass grave. A while ago I went to see my memories when I saw the cemetery. I cannot go back. How will I go back when I know that there is a cemetery of Yazidi victims?*

This situation makes returning home impossible for many, leading to prolonged displacement.

The alternative solution to this continued displacement is to migrate. One of the young women, a student, aged 22 from the Essien camp, explained why Yazidi girls are choosing to migrate:

*Now the girls are choosing to immigrate to European countries in order to get security and safety. They are able to reach the most basic necessities of life, and they share freedom and equality in a region that respects its sovereignty, and they are integrated into a country that respects women's rights and their existence. Therefore, women here in the camps feel lonely, insecure, and deprived of all their rights as women and girls. They are marginalised, persecuted and exploited on a daily basis, especially as part of a minority that does not have a law to protect and preserves them and their dignity. As a Yazidi girl, if I were to choose between migrating and my country, I will choose to emigrate, without any hesitation. Some people will ask me, 'why are you thinking of emigrating and not staying in the mother country?' The answer is that I will get away from the terrible violence that results from armed conflicts or from persecution of Yazidi girls for political or ethnic reasons.*

### **5.1.2 Psychological strain of displacement**

During the focus group discussions, it became clear that the impacts of displacement and the conditions within the camps were not only physical and environmental. The conditions also had a significant psychological impact on women and girls. One of the young women from Essien camp, a 19-year-old student, described how:

*Displacement is a very sensitive and difficult stage, so it is expected that you will feel sadness, anger and other feelings when you have a major setback in life. I,*



*and thousands of displaced Yazidi girls live in an environment in which all suffering multiplies, on top of all the tragedies that we've experienced for seven years. We have been fighting hardships enough to bear the cold winter and the heat of summer. A large proportion of this suffering is borne by the Yazidi girl, even though she was the biggest victim, and now she is the victim of economic, social, and health conditions, and she does not feel the importance of her presence in life and these results. It has led to psychological and moral pressure and lack of community support from family and friends, and also a tendency towards feeling lonely and negative thinking, and she cannot bear all these pressures and feels weak and has no strength to the utmost.*

Another young woman, a 24-year-old employee from Essien camp, agreed, explaining how this psychological strain threatens the lives of Yazidi girls.

*Poor psychological states lead to suicide. Our stay in the displaced camps is involuntary, and it affects our future and the future of those girls who are young and have dreams.*

It was the young women in the focus groups that highlighted the psychological strain of displacement, suggesting that it is something that Yazidi girls feel more strongly than the older women. The same 24-year-old explained how girls in the camps don't have anyone to turn to when they experience violence and abuse, and this contributes to their declining psychological state:

*There are many girls who are subjected to verbal and physical violence. These girls are afraid and avoid society and family. They are afraid and choose silence rather than talking about what happened to them because they do not have a safe and secret party to go to and complain about what happened to them. Because of these problems, the girl chooses to lie inside her and suffocate because of her problems and what she is exposed to, and also this girl gradually avoids society and chooses loneliness and in some cases resorts to suicide.*

A 19-year-old student believed that the fact that the girls are often orphaned and therefore have no-one to care of them also contributes to this psychological strain being felt more acutely by younger women.

*There are girls who are orphaned from parents in Essien camp because they do not have anyone to take care of them, to help and advise them about life matters or to ensure they are raised in a correct and successful manner. All of this creates problems for them and they are sent away. They have to leave their studies and hard work, possibly experience early marriage, the danger of having children, and divorce cases. All these negatives lead to a case of suicide.*

Many of the young women highlighted the increased incidence of psychological illness among young Yazidi women in the camps. A 26-year-old student from Essien camp explained there is a lack of support for the young women experiencing psychological distress.

*At the present time there is no support body for psychological cases in the camp and there is an increase in psychological cases day after day. There are girls who are deprived of school and their ages do not help them to enter schools [by the time they are able to attend school again, they are too old for the school camps]. This is how they remain people deprived of everything and dominated by a feeling of despair, frustration, internal collapse, anxiety, negative thinking, and their inability to solve their problems. They cannot adapt to all the circumstances that surround them due to special circumstances, as a result of all these obstacles. All of these struggles lead to negative psychological states. Some of the girls are exposed to psychological pressure because of the lack of job opportunities and comfortable places, and these pressures can cause suicide.*

One of the survivors, aged 24, from the Shariya camp, highlighted how much more significant this psychological strain is for the young women who have survived kidnap, slavery, forced marriage and rape by ISIS. She felt that while:

*It is true that there were organisations that helped the girls from the psychological point of view, but the assistance was not continuous. Most of us, as survivors, our psychological problems continue to deteriorate. We need psychologists, and we do not have the costs of treatment, transportation and sessions. There was a health centre for psychological solutions that was opened for survivors in Dohuk. At first, they received the survivors, but with very bad methods and bad treatment. They accused the survivors of not being mentally ill, and there was an insult by the staff in the centre. Nagham centre is still there, but*

*there are only a few cases. They only receive transportation expenses of 1,500 thousand dinars. They pay. If the patient needs medication, they write, and the patient buys outside the centre on her personal account.*

Most survivors do not have the material means to pay for these vital health care services, and so they are left to suffer in silence as their physical and mental health continues to deteriorate.

## **5.2 Women and the economy**

One of the most difficult challenges facing women in the camps is having to be the sole financial support for their families in the absence of a husband, either as a result of being widowed or divorced. A 36-year-old woman from Essien camp described how this is especially difficult when there are limited opportunities to generate income.

*Seven years is never an easy thing for mothers who are the breadwinners for their families. We try with all our capabilities to obtain support and provide for our children's needs, but unfortunately, we are marginalised in all respects. Economically there are no job opportunities, no health insurance, monthly stipend, and also education. The educational level is very weak in the camps because of the incompetent teaching staff. The health sector is at a low level due - mothers are forced to go outside the camp and buy treatment for huge amounts.*

The consequences of this lack of financial support are far-reaching and can include preventing children from gaining an education. One of the young men, a 27-year-old employee from Essien camp, shared the experience of a widow he knows, who was forced to take her children out of school because of the financial burden it placed on the family.

*I know there is a widow who lives in Essien camp, she has children and they do not have a monthly salary, no government support, and she does not have health insurance. This mother is the breadwinner for her family and sends her children to school. The school is covering all their tuition fees, but unfortunately the mother has taken her children out of the school because of the economic situation [the cost of other school related fees and needing children to stay away from school*

in order to earn money for the family]. *This matter needs financial support, but the woman is alone, widowed, economically marginalised and lives at the mercy of suffering. She and her children have no support from any side. And this widow is not alone. There are thousands of widows, divorcees and marginalised women living under tragic conditions in the camps.*

Participants were also critical of the lack of financial support allocated to Yazidis in general, in the wake of the 2003 war and subsequent genocide by ISIS. One young man, a 21-year-old graduate from Essien camp, described how he believed this lack of broader financial support was what was keeping women stuck in the displacement camps unable to claim their rights.

*Not long ago, nearly \$8 billion was allocated to Palestinian women. We, the Yazidis, there are 15-17 camps, the amount that has been allocated is only \$500 million, meaning the Yazidi women kidnapped, raped and abused and returned from ISIS are stuck living in the camps and their psychological conditions are deteriorating.*

A 25-year-old man also from Essien camp, agreed,

*In other countries, we always hear about women's rights and about organisations and institutions that support women, but in fact, so far we have not seen many organisations and institutions that support Yazidi women, especially the Iraqi government.*

### **5.3 Women and education**

After the displacement, a large number of Yazidi girls were deprived of school education due to financial pressures and a lack of schools in the camps. In Kurdistan, those who have been displaced cannot access copies of their educational records as many documents were lost during the occupation and sacking of Mosul and Sinjar by ISIS. Schools require this documentation as an entrance requirement, and so many Yazidis, girls included, are not able to return to education.

For those wishing to take external examinations, they are expected to sit these in the city of Mosul. Participants explained how this is particularly traumatic for survivors, many of

whom were held captive and subjected to terrible abuse by ISIS in Mosul. This is already a significant barrier, paired with the financial implications of travel to Mosul for girls and young women who have no financial support.

A 24-year-old survivor from Shariya camp described meeting with the Director of Education for the Nineveh region to ask him if she, and other survivors, could return to their studies.

*When we go to Nineveh Education and meet the Director of Education, we ask him to go back to our studies but the Director of Education said, 'You can, when you take external exams, go to Mosul and take your exams there.' Despite the distance and poor financial means, despite all the tragic circumstances we went through, they ask us to go to the province of Mosul to take the external exams.*

Another survivor, also aged 24 from Shariya camp, shared how they tried to explain to the Director how difficult it would be for them to go to the city where their lives were destroyed:

*The Director said, 'I cannot solve your problem, and this [the external examinations] is an obligatory matter for everyone to go.' I told him that when you were busy with your studies I was raped, and when you were busy with your dreams, we were tormented between the borders of Syria and Iraq, and from Baghouz to Raqqa, and from Raqqa to places that were under bombing by planes... How could I go for an exam in the same city in which I was captive by the most horrific terrorist organisation, ISIS. How? I can go and see all the places where I was raped, and then sold to ISIS. How can I go and carry all the painful memories in my chest and take this test? Why were the feelings of that survivor who was raped, enslaved, killed, forced to convert to Islam, imprisoned, tortured, and sexually enslaved for days and years, not important? That innocent girl whose dream was to graduate and get a specialty.*

This survivor also shared how her friend, a fellow survivor, overcame these odds and made it to Mosul to take the exams, only to find herself sitting an examination alongside an ISIS member.

*She said, 'I saw one of the ISIS members in the same hall in which I was examining, and my hand trembled and I entered an unstable psychological state. At that moment I came out of the hall and withdrew from the exam because of fear and because it is not an easy thing to watch the criminal and the terrorist in front of your eyes and remember everything that happened from rape, slavery, murder and displacement.' These horrors that Yazidi women experienced led to severe physical and psychological problems, such as shock and severe depression, to the point of attempting suicide because of what happened to them.*

It was clear to the survivors that Yazidi women and girls, and particularly survivors, do not have any rights and their trauma is not taken seriously. They didn't understand why the examinations couldn't just be moved to another location, closer to them, where they would feel safe. This is a clear example of the needs and experiences of women and girls being disregarded and minimised.

Another obstacle the young women in the FGDs identified was a lack of access to the education they required. The survivors discussed the years of schooling they'd lost while living in ISIS captivity and how this affected the school year they needed to return to. One survivor, aged 30 from the Shariya camp, explained how survivors would now be much older than their classmates at the same level.

*We did not choose that ISIS would take us. Graduation was the dream of every kidnapped Yazidi girl. We were hoping that they would take this into account. We did not choose this thing.*

The 24-year-old survivor who previously described visiting the Director of Education explained how options for re-entry were particularly limited for the survivors who had grown too old for school while in captivity.

*Many of us tried [to complete our studies]. Some came back when they were young and allowed were to study, but if their age is above school age, they are not accepted.*

Nevertheless, education felt even more important to these survivors than it did before. The previously mentioned 30-year-old survivor from Shariya camp expressed a desire to use her education to combat ISIS.

*We go to fight those who wronged us with our pens and our testimonies. We want to break their weapons that kill innocent children. The killing of men, the enslavement of women and the rape. Study is our hope to get out of where we are now.*

A lack of access to education is not something new for Yazidi women and girls. Participants discussed how Yazidi girls have always been discouraged from gaining an education due to the belief, both within the Yazidi community and wider Iraqi society, that girls shouldn't be educated. One young man, a 27-year-old graduate from Essien camp, reflected on this belief and how Yazidi women and girls are still facing obstacles even as beliefs change.

*If a girl went to school and excelled in her studies, she would have been talked about by the people and the village about her, and we would hear and see the encouragement of the parents for us, but we did not see encouragement from them. Before we lived in societies that did not allow women to go to school, and the truth of the matter is that we grew up in poor rural areas and villages, most of them were inclined to agriculture and sheep herding, and that these two needed working hands because they are considered a source of livelihood, so many of them were deprived of an education.*

*In the Sinjar district, although it is a district, it lacked an institute or university for learning. Why? Unfortunately, because of the government's neglect. For this reason, many girls were forced to not complete their studies. Their families prevented them from going to school because of the lack of universities and institutes close to them, and our inability to go to regional or central institutes or universities because of their distance from us and the lack of income.*

The consequences of not receiving an education when they were younger for these women are incredibly significant. The women in the FGDs discussed women they know who cannot read or write, and how this illiteracy compounds the discrimination they already face, both as women and as Yazidis. For example, one woman, a 40-year-old employee from Essien camp, described a fellow Yazidi woman's experience.

*I see one of the most important challenges she is facing is not teaching her to read and write. I see that if she was studying and educated, she would not have*

*needed a man to accompany her to government centres. If a woman cannot read and write, she becomes the victim twice in society.*

A 38-year-old housewife from Essien shared her own experience of not being educated:

*I am a woman deprived of my rights. Do you know what it means to pronounce the word deprived? With this sentence, it means I do not have anything. I've been in Essien refugee camp for seven years. I live in this camp, I am 38 years old, and I am the head of a family. I do not work outside the house because I am not an employee and I do not have a certificate, but I only wash the dishes daily. I do laundry and clean the house and cook food for my children. I also wish that I was a studying woman, I would be the mother and teacher for my children at the same time, I would be a support for them in times of need. When they needed someone to teach them one letter I was looking at them with sad eyes, because previously I was deprived of education due to economic and geographical conditions, and also society was part of this process. They prevented their daughters from studying and didn't send their daughters to schools...Until this day we pay the price for not being educated. Here in the camp when we go to the hospital, market or government department we can't move a step because we don't know anything or even read a single word. For this reason we remain silent and we don't know how to arrange our affairs and the affairs of our children.*

Another of the participants shared the regret women feel at not being educated, while acknowledging that their options were severely limited.

*All mothers wish if time could go back, they would have chosen study and education above all, but this is a dream and not in reality because a large proportion of Yazidi women are uneducated, not studying. This is due to geographic and economic reasons, because the Yazidi population of Sinjar were farmers and schools were kilometres away from their homes, and Sinjar was geographically far from the cities, and does not have a college and a university institute.*

Lastly, participants identified a lack of financial resources as a huge obstacle education for Yazidi girls and women. A 22-year-old student from Essien camp described how her



father passed away while he was a prisoner of ISIS, putting financial pressure on the family.

*My sister and my mother were alone. We did not have a brother and we lost our father, so we were suffering from difficult conditions. My sister was a student at university and she did not have the money to complete her studies, but my uncles helped my sister until she completed her studies. I am also currently a sixth preparatory student but because of economic conditions and the fact that we are displaced we live under a torn tent deprived of our most basic rights. I think how and in what way I will go to university in order to guarantee my future, but I do not know if the financial conditions will help me. When I think about it, I feel bad, because in this century to be deprived of your studies and educational rights for financial reasons is sad and shameful.*

While this participant's sister was able to complete her studies with financial support from her uncle, there were other participants who highlighted that some Yazidi families have had to make difficult and dangerous sacrifices to enable their daughters to access education. One young woman, a 24-year-old graduate from Essien camp, explained how her father gave up his medication so the family had the financial means to send her to school.

*My family and I suffer from severe financial conditions, and previously my father was sick and stopped buying his medicine to give me school money. In this way I continued my studies at the expense of buying my father's treatment. He was sick and his health condition deteriorated, and then I completed my studies under the circumstances.*

A 19-year-old female student from Essien camp explained how she is responsible for her family as her father has special needs, and this has led to her having to compromise her studies.

*I am responsible for my family because my father is one of the people with special needs. For this reason, I was forced to work to take care of my family. I got the opportunity to work as a daily wage labourer for a temporary period so I transferred to online studies to enable me to work for my family. Our financial*

*conditions are very difficult as my father cannot work. I am responsible for buying supplies for my family because I am the eldest daughter in the family.*

While this participant was able to transfer her studies online, some of the young women described having to give up their studies altogether. One of the young women, a 22-year-old student from Essien camp, explained how she had to take on the responsibility of her family.

*Due to displacement and financially difficult conditions, I work for a daily wage, even though I was a sixth student, and I had to leave my studies in order to make a living for my family and to be the breadwinner for them, and I neglected my future.*

The young women also discussed the lengths some of the Yazidi girls in the camps go to in order to afford the fees for their next year of school. One young woman, 22, from Essien camp, explained looking for work in the surrounding fields.

*After the end of each school year, a large number of the girls who live in the camp are looking for work in order to get their school fees for the next school year, so most of them go to work in the potato fields as daily wage workers that do not exceed (Eight thousand dinars). All this for the reasons of the difficult economic living conditions and to obtain their expenses and complete their studies.*

#### **5.4 Women and health**

Linked strongly to living conditions in the displacement camps, the participants were quick to identify the ways that Yazidi women and girls are affected by poor health. For example, a 21-year-old student from the Essien camp explained the impact of the camp's air pollution on her health.

*Because of the air pollution in the camp's atmosphere, there are diseases spread in the camp due to waste and the spread of skin diseases among children and women in the camp, which caused many types of fear and pollution.*

A housewife, aged 33, from Essien camp, agreed.

*Because of living in the displaced camps, there are many health problems, including skin diseases such as lice, scabies, shortness of breath and bad smell due to waste.*

Another housewife, aged 40, from Essien camp, highlighted how the camps have also exacerbated existing health conditions among the displaced.

*I have two sons who have poor eyesight, and my husband has back problems. My eldest son is in the fourth grade of middle school. He loves school and is attached to education. We live in IDP camps, in Essien camp. We do not have an extra tent for study. When the sun sets, my children do not see that well and they need to be inside the tent before sunset. I am a mother to sons who cannot see like the rest of the children. I am sad and devastated to see my children enter before sunset and I cannot to help them.*

Despite all the health problems the displaced Yazidis face, partly due to conditions in the camps and partly, particularly for the women and girls, down to trauma related to their capture and abuse at the hands of ISIS, there are not nearly enough health services for the displaced. One of the survivors, an 18-year-old from Shariya camp, explained how:

*There is a health centre in the Kurdistan Region but this centre is not specialised for survivors. It is supported by a German organisation [GIZ] but there are very few services. There is a gynaecologist but there is no specialised equipment for examinations. There is no treatment or operations there, and even the staff at the centre treat the survivors badly in terms of style, speech and manner of dealing.*

The survivors discussed how difficult it is not to have any healthcare available to them that is informed by the trauma they've experienced. They explained how they need a space that is safe for them physically and psychologically. They highlighted how organisations neglect their mental health requirements, despite their need for continuous psychological social support sessions.

One survivor, aged 20 from Shariya camp, explained how the organisations set up to help them neglect to ensure the healthcare is accessible to them.

*There are Yazidi women and girls that need to travel outside the country for the purpose of treatment, and for which many do not have the right or expense. The organisations responsible for this largely neglect these families who need medication or to complete treatment in order to live. They are left to be humiliated again inside those camps. Here in the camps there is no one to listen to their problems.*

Another survivor, aged 24, from Shariya camp, agreed, arguing that if these organisations set up the appropriate support and made it accessible to survivors in the camp there would be fewer suicides.

*In view of the difficult living conditions that we face and the individual's psyche that is almost exploding from the psychological pressure that occurs with them, the Yazidi community has seen many cases of suicide such as burning, hanging and killing... we need organisations to open courses and psychological sessions.*

One of the most significant obstacles facing the participants in their ability to access appropriate and quality healthcare is finances. For example, one young woman, a 20-year-old graduate from Essien camp, described how:

*Hospitals lack having specialties and sufficient medical equipment. As for private hospitals, they are too expensive.*

As mentioned in the education section, Yazidi women and girls, especially those left widowed, divorced, or orphaned, have very few resources available to them. A 40-year-old housewife from Essien camp explained how her limited finances mean she has to sacrifice her own health in order to give her children what they need:

*At one time, I used to take them [her children] to the doctors, and they used to make glasses for them. Every six months, I had to take them to the doctor, but the last period, because of my financial conditions, I could not complete their treatment. My husband also had six operations. And due to over thinking and instability, I have anxiety and I suffer from severe pain in my head. I often lessen matters from myself in order to give to my children. I do not buy the clothes that I need, I do not go to the doctor in order to provide for my children. There are*

*hundreds of Yazidi women who live like me. We suffer from economic, health and psychological conditions.*

Many of the participants felt that Yazidi women and girls had no choice but to continue to sacrifice their health because they had no way of leaving the camps without the finances to migrate. One woman, aged 20 from Essien camp, described how:

*Displaced girls do not have the most basic rights to the necessities of life, and they fight the economic conditions and sacrifice their health because they do not have the money to leave the camp environment and change the atmosphere.*

Despite the limited options available to them, the 40-year-old housewife shared how important she feels it is that Yazidi girls and women talk about these issues facing them.

*Some of them [other people] say that this is my fate and some do not see the benefit of talking, but in fact we need to talk and unburden our soul from the pain inside us from years of fatigue, illness and instability and feel comfortable.*

## **5.5 Women and employment**

When beginning to discuss employment, particularly the lack of employment available to Yazidi women and girls, the participants were quick to recognise the limitations that exist for all women and girls in Iraqi society when it comes to work. However, one of the young women, a 20-year-old graduate from Essien camp, identified how Yazidi women and girls are uniquely burdened because they have lost so many men in their families due to war and genocide.

*We know very well girls' situation with regard to work within a patriarchal society, which largely rejects the work of girls or women. There are many families who do not have a man to work, so women are forced to work under any pressure and at any cost, and here comes the society's rejection of them, instead of encouraging them to support their families. And exploiting women at work because they need that work, and this is considered the biggest insult to society and the laws of the country. And there is no consideration of women's labour rights.*

In addition to these challenges, a 26-year-old female graduate from Essien camp outlined how Yazidi girls are consistently subjected to discrimination in the camps when they try to work.

*There are many Yazidi girls who own small projects and have great ideas and capabilities and work in multiple places in the camp, for example: restaurants, beauty salons, sewing, kindergartens, music, but there are different groups of people who criticise working girls who work for themselves and their family, for societal reasons, because they are girls and they should not work outside the home. They look at them inappropriately and that detracts from them and their reputation. These girls are also subjected to verbal and emotional harassment by people when all they're doing is demanding their most basic rights and nothing more.*

The participants discussed the role of various organisations in the camps in supporting displaced people into employment. The aforementioned 20-year-old female graduate outlined how these organisations are failing Yazidi women and girls, discriminating against them in favour of Muslims.

*There is discrimination against Yazidis and in favour of Muslims by organisations – they are less likely to hire Yazidi people, and the organisations have a lack of interest in education and camp management. The organisations that are working in the camp tend to accept a strange employee for work rather than us, although we have the same certification and skills. And when there is a job opportunity, we see that girls are marginalised once again, the pressures we face in studying and the lack of space in the camp is not taken in consideration, a stranger will come without having enough skills like us and will be accepted as employee.*

Another survivor, a 20-year-old from Shariya camp, explained how there are many organisations and institutions set up to work for the benefit of the survivors, but in many of these the Yazidi survivors are not accepted because they survivors do not have certificates of competency.

*Job opportunities are not available to survivors despite their suffering, and many survivors desperately need these job opportunities as many are the breadwinners for their families. All these organisations and institutions are working under the*

*banners of humanity minority rights, human rights, survivors' rights and compensation, they do this in name only. They do not work for the benefit of the survivors and their cause. If their goal and their suffering were correct, they would have helped those survivors who were psychologically, healthily and economically persecuted.*

This discrimination is one of the reasons that Yazidi girls are leaving their studies before completion. They feel that there is no hope of employment even if they are to graduate. A young woman, aged 26, from Essien camp, explained how the:

*Distinction between Yazidis and Muslims is very clear in terms of employment, appointments, job opportunities and the right to live in the camp and all of Kurdistan, such as the distinction that occurs between the Yazidis and the Muslims of Sinjar in the dealings that occur by the parties, the people, the government and the organisations.*

Participants explained how Yazidi girls felt that the only option left to them to earn money is to go to the potato fields and work for a small amount. They have no other solution, despite their young age and education.

A 36-year-old woman from Essien camp said providing Yazidi women with job opportunities would reduce their marginalisation, especially when they are heads of their families like herself.

*The main problem in the camps is that there is no guarantee of an end to discrimination against women and girls everywhere, as there are still significant inequalities in the labour market in some areas, with women systematically denied equal access to jobs. The government need to provide job opportunities, especially for women in a vulnerable situation, so that women can find private work for themselves. They must be supported in all sectors in order to reduce the marginalisation currently experienced by women.*

When there are job opportunities available to Yazidi women it can be very difficult for them to take them, especially if there is no-one to look after their children while they're away. A 28-year-old housewife from Essien camp explained how:

*There is no continuous work for women and we need job opportunities for marginalised women, especially women who provide for their families. If job opportunities are available, will you go? Yes, once I got a 40 day job opportunity and went in, but my children's livelihood and future was affected because they had no one to take care of them.*

However, another of the women, a 33-year-old from Essien camp, emphasised how employment can help to foster Yazidi women's independence and help her psychologically.

*Some of the organisations and institutions have provided job opportunities for women but for a limited period. These women need continuous investment in order to be able to form a healthy family away from problems and challenges, suicide and social problems due to economic conditions and displacement. It is difficult for a woman all the time to stay in her tent and have the responsibility of the family. Years and days are the same in the tent, suffering and problems, and the atmosphere does not change. This in itself constitutes a bad psychological state and its result is negative.*

A 33-year-old employed man from Essien camp agreed, explaining how:

*There was a job opportunity and I personally sent my wife to get out of the tents and improve her psychological condition. Other families did not allow women to work outside the home. I sent my wife to convince the families to send women to work, and indeed she succeeded with my idea and many women went to this opportunity. They say shame on the man that the woman goes to work, but this woman broke the barrier and there is nothing wrong with the woman working.*

This suggests that there is the potential for attitude change towards the freedoms of women and girls to work in the Yazidi community. However, they still face substantial obstacles – from wider Iraqi society, the reality of living in the camps and the trauma of the horrors they experienced at the hands of ISIS.



## 5.6 Women and laws

Many participants raised the issue that Yazidi women and girls are only truly recognised and considered by political parties and decision-makers when the Yazidi community's support would benefit them. One young woman, a 24-year-old graduate from Essien camp, explained how Yazidis are robbed of their rights until there is an upcoming election.

*We are genuine Iraqi citizens, but these words only mean something at the time of the elections, for their political interest. They affirm that we are an ethnic minority and we have constitutional rights, but the reality is the opposite. Yazidi girls are marginalised from all service sectors in Iraq and girls are tormented. They were victims and are still victims of war and terrorist acts.*

A survivor, 27, from Shariya camp, explained how decision-makers and organisations are negligent towards the young women and girls who have survived ISIS, even though there is legislation designed to compensate survivors.

*It is true that there is a law for Yazidi survivors by the Iraqi parliament, but it is only ink on paper and there is no implementation by them. If this law is implemented, there will be a number of important compensation measures for women who were captured by the Islamic State, including financial compensation, rehabilitation, medical treatment, and economic opportunities. The law also considers crimes against the Yazidis as genocide and stipulates that the perpetrators of 'kidnapping and captivity' shall not be included in any 'general or special amnesty (forgiveness)'.*

More specifically, Yazidi girls and survivors feel betrayed by the Iraqi government for not taking more action to free girls being held captive in the Al-Hol camp in Syria. Al-Hol camp is one of the camps where ISIS women live in Syria, and many Yazidi women and girls are trapped there. Families of those women and girls demand the government bring their daughters and family members home. But so far the Iraqi government has failed to take action, and the reasons why are unknown. One of the survivors, 24, from Shariya camp, explained how:

*The fate of a large number of Yazidi girls and women is still unknown in the Syrian Al-Hol camp, and there is no serious move by the government to reveal the fate of these female survivors, the captives. Inside that camp there are thousands of ISIS women, steeped in the ideology of ISIS and the approach of killing and capturing the Yazidis. They see that we are the minority. They see Yazidis as infidels. This is the motto of the ISIS women in the Syrian Al-Hol camp.*

Another survivor, 19, from Shariya camp, explained how the survivors in Al-Hol camp cannot reveal they are Yazidi because of fear of repercussions at the hands of those women still linked to ISIS. And yet, the government still does nothing to protect them.

*Al-Hol camp is located in Syria. Yes, they [the government] know, but they say that we cannot go and liberate the women and children. They cannot show that they are Yazidis. They are afraid there of all ages.*

Participants also discussed the fact that the government have not come and seen their suffering in the Iraqi camps with their own eyes, and instead installed an administration that has no displaced people in it. A 25-year-old male graduate from Essien camp described how some survivors were invited to Baghdad, however he feels that this did not adequately show the government their true suffering.

*Why did they not choose once to come and see the suffering for themselves? In the camp administration in Essien, there is no displaced representative and we have a lot. The graduates are men and women, all employees are from the host community, not from the displaced.*

Nevertheless, despite the silence and lack of support from the government, participants spoke about Yazidi women and girls who are stepping forward and speaking out to claim their rights. A 38-year-old housewife from Essien camp described what she has learnt through her displacement.

*I have learnt to look at promising women and the change that they can make in the fields of claiming their rights. It is true that no one encourages displaced women, there are groups and organisations that only gather women and give them courses. It encourages them verbally, nothing more. It means ink on paper or empty words without actual help. There is no serious, effective action taken by*

*anyone. Displaced women are marginalised at the time of the elections and their right to vote is given up. The women were supposed to be encouraged and told that they can achieve democracy and bring about change with their votes, given promises their rights won't be stripped away, but the opposite happens. In every election, a women's representative goes to the Iraqi parliament in the name of the women group. But this is in name only. She is a representative of her party, a politician. Women in the camps must understand that they are on the right path. The road does not seem short and it may take several years until we get a change in our current reality, get a safe place and go back to our homes. It may be a long time until we can be leaders in our city, but in the end, we women appreciate the ability to make our voices heard to the opportunity to be leaders in our city.*

## **5.7 Women and early marriage**

FGD participants identified early marriage as a negative phenomenon taking place within the camps. A women, aged 24, from Essien camp, outlined some of the reasons for this:

*The early marriage of many girls is done for the sake of her dowry - so that her family might cover their expenses for the next year. An unmarried girl can be seen as a disgrace or a problem on the shoulder of the family. Early marriage is seen as better than growing old having no one. This is a very common phenomenon in this society. The marriage of minors has a great impact on their children. Most will likely not be born perfect, meaning that they are physically handicapped or psychologically disturbed when they grow up.*

A 19-year-old female student from Essien camp expanded on the role disgrace has in forcing girls into marriage:

*[There are] rape cases in the community, but for social reasons that are not mentioned. When we come to the side of the law and legal accountability, the defendant is not held accountable because the clans are responsible for solving the problem. But they don't solve the problem with equality, they cover the problem. At the expense of the girl, the girl is given to the person who raped her and they give her in marriage because for the family this is considered a matter of honour and shame.*

Another female student, aged 22, from Essien camp, identified how the lack of adequate schools and quality education contributed to early marriage because it led to girls' needs being ignored.

*The lack of adequate schools in the camps and the lack of assistance for families who lose their tents to fire, is largely neglected by government and other organisations.*

However, as with education and employment, participants recognised that early marriage has always been an issue in the Yazidi community, and it is not just a result of being displaced. As reflected earlier, this was largely due to the agrarian nature of the society, and the desire of farmers to marry early, to have someone to share the burden of labour.

Nevertheless, being displaced has played a particular role in increasing early marriage because, as described by a 22-year-old woman from Essien camp, there is a lack of rehabilitation and no safe environment for Yazidi girls to recover from their trauma.

*[They cannot] integrate with reality. Some of them do not have a breadwinner for their family or in the war their father was killed and their mother kidnapped and she is now alone with her sisters. There is psychological pressure on her and a great responsibility despite her young age and she does not have a second solution, so she leaves school and goes to marry a boy who is also a minor. They are two children who are 16 years old, and therefore the result after some months would be divorce [as they were too young for marriage], and this creates greater problems.*

Divorce was identified as one of the most significant consequences of early marriages, which leaves women and girls as the breadwinners of their families, unsupported and outcast. One of the young men, an unemployed 26-year-old from Essien camp, explained how divorce is increasing in the camps because of early marriage.

*There are problems against underage girls because there is no awareness and this mixing of groups leads to early marriage [girls in the camps are not mature enough thus they do what their friends do, which includes marrying at a young*

age]. *There should be a right of childhood, but there is a failure to provide a safe and stable life and environment, and this creates negative consequences and leads girls marrying at a young age, and now the divorce rate is increasing in the camps.*

A 21-year-old woman, a student from Essien camp, agreed.

*Underage marriage in general in the camps of the displaced is a dangerous phenomenon for the lives of girls who marry at a minor age, and their lives lead to an unknown future, instability, many problems and challenges, and because of their age, because these girls are not the place of responsibility for marriage, a large percentage of people who marry at a young age led to a state of separation (divorce).*

## **5.8 Women, social habits and their environment**

The participants discussed the environment that the Yazidi women and girls live and grow up in. One of the young women, a 24-year-old graduate from Essien camp, described how:

*As a Yazidi girl, I have not yet been able to obtain my most basic rights and freedoms. As a Yazidi young woman, I have lived a tragic life of genocide, murder, and kidnapping, and there are still members of my family with the terrorist organisation ISIS, they are captive and the fate of their lives is unknown. My sisters and I live in a common tent, and even the bathrooms are shared, and sometimes even the clothes and bed are shared. I, and all the Yazidi girls who live in the IDPs camps, do not have privacy, especially as we Yazidi girls live in a clan society... a girl cannot go out alone and wear the clothes she likes, and she cannot make her own decisions and act according to her desires, due to being a girl and living in a clan society. Because of this custom in our society, we avoid and stay away from the things we want and dream about and hope for, because of the fear of the family that these things will damage reputation.*

Every society has its own customs and traditions. In eastern societies, there are closed clan societies which impose specific rules and expectations which can curb freedoms. The

Yazidi are a form of clan society - imposing laws on the lives of their people, particularly women and girls.

However, inside the camps there is no access to the support living in a clan society would ordinarily provide. One 24-year-old female employee from Essien camp described how:

*Yazidi girls in the camp are among the most affected group. Inside the camp, there is no specific party that supports marginalised girls who have been persecuted and they are currently living through crises and suffering. As much as we need financial support, we miss and need moral support and encouragement. There are girls who have beautiful talents and abilities, but no support. The community should take care of them, support them and support their talents, to be prominent personalities, achieve their dream, because the displaced girls need support and assistance at all times.*

## **5.9 Women and online exploitation**

Technology, and the world of social media in particular, was discussed as a negative aspect of the environment Yazidi girls are living in. A 19-year-old female student from Essien camp described how using social media has opened Yazidi girls up to ridicule and abuse which they have then been blamed for:

*With the development of technology and the emergence of social networking sites, there have been negative experiences a result of the use of communication sites by the community. Many Yazidi girls used the communication sites on a daily basis and for many hours. Many were victimised on these communication sites - electronic exploitation by young people and exposure to ridicule and electronic mockery. This silenced the girls. In our tribal society, even if the girl is innocent, the blame is due to her for using the communication sites and showing her image and personal information on her page in the communication sites.*

## **5.10 Women and traditions and customs**

The women in the FGDs identified that beyond the difficulties of displacement they are also restricted by traditions and customs that determine how men and women should

live, both within the Yazidi community and within wider Iraqi society. A 21-year-old female student from Essien camp outlined how women and girls are marginalised within cultural expectations and traditions:

*The daily or monthly expenses that women and girls receive is less than a little in most families compared to young men in their daily expenses. A discrimination that occurs in most eastern societies is choosing a young boy over a girl from childhood until they reach the age as if they are a disgrace to that family. The same goes for inheritance. In most cases the young man gets the largest part or the entire inheritance, and there is no way for women or girl to do that, and even if the family are alone (lost their father) in that case, the decision is up to the uncles. The school fees have had a great impact on the family's livelihood. Marriage of close relatives or cousins to each other was and still is a common phenomenon.*

A 38-year-old housewife from Essien camp agreed that these differences between men and women are established when children are young:

*Since childhood, society has begun to make these differences between male and female, by categorising clothes, toys, and behaviour into "boyish" and "girlish", in addition to the role of education, propaganda and media in this. Thus, social conditions depict the male character: (aggressive - intelligent - strong - active) and the female character: (negative - ignorant - obedient - passive). [Kate] Millett sees that this falls within an ancient and universal scheme to ensure the continued domination of one human group over another, the first being dominant due to the "virtue" of being born male, and the second being subordinated due to the "vice" of being born female [Millett 2016].*

She went on to explain how this belief that men are dominant has affected her, and continues to affect Yazidi women like her.

*Here the mother bears the greatest responsibility (for clothing, eating, drinking, washing, food) because we always repeat this phrase and say the father is the guest and he cannot stay at home because he goes to work to provide material (financial) support for his children, and he is their backbone and provides them with a suitable life. Yes, sometimes the husband, if he is at home and does not*

*have work outside the house, he helps his wife by raising the children, but the domestic work here in the eastern societies the husband does not help his wife, because of societal expectations. This has a negative impact on the cultural future of our societies, and sometimes the woman is the main reason for her husband not helping - by not accepting her husband's help with the housework. She says this is a woman's work, why do you do this and that is why the husband avoids helping his wife, this is from the woman's side... In life they use this phrase 'males for external work, females for domestic work'.*

Many Yazidi women have lost their husbands. In these cases the restrictions placed on them by these traditions and customs can be even worse. They have no choice but to break traditions in order to provide for their families. For example, a 48-year-old housewife from Essien camp, explained how:

*My husband was killed in 2006 by an explosive device along with one of his soldiers. He was a soldier and fought for his country and land, but in the end he was a victim of acts of terrorism and left behind his wife and children who were younger. After the martyrdom of their father, my children suffered a lot. I was responsible for my children and their upbringing and I was sending them to school. I was taking care of all the expenses of the study and at the same time our financial conditions were very difficult, and with the restrictions of society being a widow, I have a kind of responsibility different from the rest of the women who have husband. For a widow or a divorced woman, this is a different matter and I must bear all the difficulties. I saw problems from all sides, even when I send my daughters to school, the blame of society falls on us, why? You send your daughters to school or college, she is a girl, and if there is any problem, you will be responsible. Even when we were in Sinjar in 2014, we were sending our children to schools with great fear. In Sinjar, most of the schools were Muslim, I was supposed to stop my daughter from studying, but she continued to complete her studies, even when we fled from Sinjar to Kurdistan.*

Participants highlighted that women who try to break out of these traditions and customs are sometimes met with violence in an effort to maintain the status quo. The 38-year-old housewife explained that:



*Women are afraid to show their capabilities in the complex political and economic conditions that the country is going through, especially while living in displacement camps. This is the biggest fear for women leaders, those who possess superpowers but must remain silent, their physical potential quashed by violence.*

### **5.11 Women, privacy and personal decision-making**

Young women within the camps have little autonomy in their lives, and their fathers make most decisions for them, such as who they will be friends with or who they should marry. This is a challenge for most young women because they are not included in decisions about their lives. Parents see this as a way to keep their daughters safe in an unsafe environment but are unaware of the pressure this causes for girls and young women. This is not a particular cultural or familial constraint but a result of the experiences Yazidi women went through under ISIS. These same restrictions are not imposed on Yazidi women outside of Iraq (for example in Germany). As already discussed, the lack of employment opportunities for women within the camps reduces their independence. If provided with job opportunities having their own income would contribute towards independence.

A 38-year-old housewife from Essien camp explains:

*I, as a Yazidi woman, cannot make my own decisions, as I belong to a clan community, and there are laws, obligations and responsibility on the Yazidi woman. All this responsibility and pressure regarding social customs and traditions. If a woman is married and has children, she may have a house and a family, and she should take responsibility for her home and children. But she has no right to participate in making all the decisions that pertained to her life, even if the decisions concerned the lives of her children.*

Even those women without husbands are not allowed to make their own decisions. Another woman, 33, from Essien camp, described not being able to make any decisions without gaining permission from her husband's house, in his absence:

*I can't move one step without taking permission from my husband's house because now I am their responsibility and the tribal order does not accept that*

*because I am a widow and my husband is missing and I have not known anything about him since August 3, 2014 until now. My children do not have news about their father, who did not get enough from his tenderness, and now I take care them being their mother and father, this is an enormous responsibility on my shoulders. Sometimes I need treatment or should go to the market, but I can't do that. They find it inappropriate. Being the wife of a missing husband they ask me to complete his documents and send it to the Martyrs Department in Mosul. But I cannot go and complete the file of my missing husband unless my brother-in-law accompanies my journey.*

Women are even further restricted if they then lose additional male members of their husband's family. Not only do they experience further trauma, but they find themselves unable to enter public spaces and thereby unable to make the decisions that need to be made for their family.

A 30-year-old housewife from Essien camp shared a painful example of this:

*On August 3, 2014 I lost my husband. He was kidnapped and I did not hear from him for a few years. I always watched social media and television in the hope that I would see something about my husband. At one time, me, my father-in-law and my mother-in-law were watching a news tape on TV from ISIS. They sent the tape. I saw my husband among a large group of Yazidi men. Then I was very happy. I said, 'Finally, I have a glimmer of hope.' Then my father-in-law and I decided to look for him. We tried everything, and we didn't hear any news.*

*Now my father-in-law has died, and I can't go anywhere because of what society has to say about women going places alone. So I am unable to do anything for myself and my children.*

*My eldest son is 12 years old. He had a shock from the time he lost his father. He suffers from amnesia for seven years. He goes to school and the teachers help him through the school stages. He comes home and ask him what are your homework? He replies, 'I don't remember,' and we have to ask his friends.*

## 5.12 Women and transport

As previously mentioned, transportation is a particular challenge for young women living in the camps. This is due to the cost of transportation, as well as a lack of freedom to travel for women. Since the camps are outside city centres, there are no taxis or minibuses, and instead camp residents have to rely on private cars that charge a higher amount for transportation from the camps to the cities. It is easier for men to travel freely. It is difficult for a single Yazidi woman to travel alone as there is still a lot of fear following their horrific experiences at the hands of ISIS.

A 20-year-old woman from Essien camp described how limiting it is to Yazidi women and girls to not have access to affordable transport:

*Many female students do not have a car subscription in order to go to school, and also many displaced families today are in dire need of transportation in the camps because of their poor conditions.*

## 5.13 Women and discrimination and inequality

While participants in the FGDs had a lot to share about how Yazidi women and girls are discriminated against because of their gender, they were also clear that the Yazidi people have always experienced discrimination on both religious and ethnic grounds. A woman, 26 from Essien camp, described how:

*The Yazidi people, as an ethnic, religious minority, have been subjected throughout their history to massacres, genocide, tragic events, and terrorist group attacks. As a minority, the Yazidi do not have a safe and stable environment. They always live with fear and anxiety, and this leads to an uncertain future within their own country. Pressure to change their religious identity and conform to Muslim norms is ongoing. The instability caused by war, genocide and displacement has led to many problems, including a lack of job opportunities.*

Another of the survivors, aged 20 from Shariya camp, expanded on the history of the Yazidis and how this has led to their marginalisation:

*It is very difficult for a small minority such as the Yazidi living within a large Islamic state. Before the displacement a large proportion of the Yazidis lived in the district of Sinjar and its suburbs. The Yazidi lived quiet agrarian lives far from the developed cities of Iraq, and as farmers and peasants with limited financial resources, most did not gain a formal education. Many lived largely in ignorance, and therefore would not be able to enter into politics, nor hold government positions. This continued to prevent them from having rights within the state. The Yazidi have been subjected to mass exterminations for years at the hands of Muslims because of their religion and ethnicity, and have lived their history in fear and terror from the neighbours.*

A 33-year-old male worker from Essien camp shared how, in his opinion, Yazidi women are not the only ones marginalised in Iraq. There are specific issues faced by Yazidi men:

*We as men have been marginalised by successive governments. Even hospitals and government departments deal with powerful citizens only. People need surgery and cannot have it because of the cost of the operation or because of the late appointments they give the patient. The Yazidi are men, women, and children deprived of our most basic rights. The two governments have destroyed us. We know what the future of our children will be like here. The schools are not good, and our families are in the camps. We fear for them from the cold winter, the heat of summer, and the fires. I cannot guarantee the safety of my family.*

Nevertheless, participants were clear that Yazidi women and girls suffer a unique combination of challenges based on their gender, religious and ethnic identity and their reality as displaced people. A 21-year-old female student from Essien camp described this triple marginalisation in the following way:

*I am a Yazidi girl and belong to an ethnic religious minority. I go to a government department or institution and I am subjected to discrimination and obstruction because of my religion, because I am a displaced person, and I live in IDP [Internally Displaced Peoples] camps, and there is also another issue that we must mention and not forget, is that I am a girl of the Yazidi religion, I am not veiled, and I do not wear the hijab and I am far from obeying the laws that were imposed by an Islamic society and violated the freedom of other religions.*

A 48-year-old housewife from Essien camp saw herself as part of two minorities – a widow who has no support because of the way women are viewed in society, and a Yazidi who has been through years of persecution:

*This is us, the Yazidi women are marginalised and suffer from a loss of our most basic rights. No law protects us and no government parliament gives us our rights. We, the Yazidi minority, have gone through circumstances that no one should have to go through. There is no right to humanity and human rights after seven years of persecution and suffering, Today many Yazidis, especially young people, migrate to Europe and leave the country behind because of economic and political problems. There is racism - because of religion, nationalism, belief, and sects - in Iraq, so people migrate to countries for the sake of safety and security. I always feel afraid because of discrimination on the basis of religion because we are Yazidis, we are threatened, threatened because of our identity. We are killed, and our daughters raped, because of our identity.*

#### **5.14 Women and institutionalised discrimination**

The participants discussed the layers of discrimination they face – due to their gender as well as religious and ethnic identities – and how this is built into government structures, workplaces and even civil society organisations. For example, a 27-year-old male graduate from Essien camp explained how:

*There is a weakness in the professional, technical, administrative and institutional capacities of government agencies and civil society organisations, both quantitatively and qualitatively, with regard to addressing issues of discrimination against women as well as job opportunities. There are no laws regarding women's rights in the country, and they are marginalised even legally.*

A 24-year-old survivor from Shariya camp described her experience of being discriminated against by government departments.

*Even the government departments, when we go to complete a transaction, and they know that we have lost all our documents, they do not tolerate us. The employees will take a bribe in return for completing the transaction you need.*

She went on to explain how for survivors the discrimination is even worse, as there is the added stigma of having been a victim of ISIS:

*There is no interest in the survivors. There are many organisations and institutions that work supposedly for the survivors, but the survivors do not benefit from them. Job opportunities are not available to them in all respects. They are marginalised by government agencies, organisations, institutions, and health centres are not available to them when they need psychological treatment.*

It was clear that the focus group members felt that while on paper there is support for survivors, this isn't the reality. A 27-year-old graduate went on to explain how Yazidi women and survivors are in desperate need of political representation as there is no clear vision for women within the Iraqi government, and no-one to fight their corner. Without political will and accurate statistics, Yazidi women and girls are invisible:

*The masculine mentality dominates the structure and programmes of political parties, as there is no clear vision for the participation of women, just as the parties do not have a clear party program that works to develop women's cadres within them. The government is not concerned with the fate of women.*

*A large number of women have been subjected to murder, kidnapping and threats. The phenomenon of sexual harassment continues to grow, and the weakness of law enforcement agencies has led to impunity for the perpetrators. All women including those from minorities, are being subjected to all kinds of violence, both internally and externally. There is a rise in killings and kidnappings of Yazidi women and adolescents. Minority women also suffer from harassment in life opportunities. There are still large numbers of marginalised women. Also, indirect pressures are exercised in many government departments. There have also been cases of transferring Yazidi female employees from non-Yazidi departments because of their Yazidi divisions.*

A survivor, aged 20, from Shariya camp, spoke about the two Yazidi representatives currently in parliament, and how they do not represent the interests of Yazidi women:

*After the genocide and at the time of displacement, organisations and institutions came under the name of humanitarian aid, but some of them exploited women and the Yazidi cause and worked in the camps for the purpose of their personal interest and not the cause and problems of women. This led to great disappointment and loss of confidence in the organisations who were exploiting their wounds.*

*Yazidi women are deprived of government positions and of the benefits of public spending. There are two Yazidi representatives in parliament, but they work for the benefit of their parties and not for the benefit of the Yazidi people. We need to choose women who are qualified to represent Yazidi women in parliament.*

### **5.15 Genocide and the kidnapping of Yazidi women and girls**

In recent years, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Yazidi women and girls have been forced into marriage, 'sold' or 'given as gifts' to ISIS fighters and supporters. They were often forced to convert to Islam. One young woman, aged 22 and from Essien camp, described her experience in the following way:

*The terrorist organisation ISIS kidnapped and killed thousands of Yazidi women and girls and sold and bought them in slave markets in Raqqa, Syria. These women were, and some still are, being tortured, killed and raped, and forced to change their religion. The liberated women are still living in displacement camps despite their injuries and trauma. And there are no serious moves being made by the government to move genocide charges forward, and hold the perpetrators of these crimes against minorities, especially the Yazidis, accountable. These women demand their rights from the law.*

A 21-year-old survivor from Shariya camp identified this persecution as an attempt by the Islamic State to eliminate the presence of ethnic and religious minorities in the region:

*These women and girls are among the thousands of Yazidis from the Sinjar region in north-western Iraq who have been targeted since August 2014 in the wake of a wave of ethnic cleansing by Islamic State fighters bent on eliminating the presence of ethnic and religious minorities in the region. We experienced persecution, torture, and enforced conversion to Islam, and our mothers and father being killed before our eyes and thrown into mass graves.*

*The horrors that women and girls went through in the grip of the Islamic State caused trauma to them, and led some of them to commit suicide. Gilan, a 19-year-old, committed suicide after being captured in Mosul, fearing that she would be raped.*

*Many women, who were captives, were brought back to their families, but they were mired in despair and pain, as a result of wounds that did not heal due to the horrors they were subjected to, including rape, torture and forced marriage at the hands of ISIS members.*

*We, the survivors, today are in dire need of help from competent authorities and cooperation from all people, because we are the ones who are affected physically and mentally, and this stage is very difficult to overcome.*

*The Yazidi survivors have been double-affected, as they try to cope with the tragedy of losing dozens of their female relatives still in captivity or killed at the hands of Islamic State fighters, while attempting to process their own traumas.*

Another of the survivors, 45, from Shariya camp, explained how young Yazidi women and girls were specifically targeted:

*ISIS forces detained several thousand Yazidis civilians in Nineveh Governorate in northern Iraq in August 2014. The fighters worked systematically to separate young women and teenage girls from their families and the rest of the prisoners, and transferred them from one place to another inside Iraq and Syria. It was the 11 women and the 9 girls who had escaped. Half of them, including two 12-year-old girls, were raped - multiple times in some cases, by a number of ISIS fighters. Almost all of them were forced into marriage or sold, multiple times, or given as 'gifts'. The survivors and girls also witnessed the abuse of other captives.*



*Therefore, what happened to us is not an easy matter, and we need material and moral support at the same time.*

Participants also discussed how young Yazidi boys were affected by ISIS, with one of the survivors, a 24-year-old from Shariya camp, explaining exactly what happened when ISIS attacked Sinjar:

*They came to my village, they took men and killed them. They kidnapped women, girls. Young boys were taken to training camps to train with weapons and on how to use explosions and suicide belts, and how bombers blew themselves up in all countries Afghanistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, etc. They used to come and buy Yazidi girls from ISIS by thousand Iraqi dinars, and women who were over fifty years were forced to work as a maid for them. I was kidnapped on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 2014, and liberated on the 10<sup>th</sup> of January 2017.*

### **5.16 Women and targeted attacks on the Yazidi community**

Prior to the ISIS invasion, there were attacks targeting the Yazidi community. A 40-year-old female employee from Essien camp described a terrorist attack that took place in August 2007 by an unknown terrorist group in Tel-Ezer and Siba-Shekhedre in Sinjar:

*I was very close to the scene of the explosion. My friend was a widow and she had a child. She was building a house for her and her children. Me and my little niece, who is about six years old, went to help her. At that time, the houses were made of mud. I was about to go on my way. My friend's brother was standing at the mirror and combing his hair. Then, I didn't hear any sound, but I turned around while I was lying on the ground and the sky was full of dust and the houses were destroyed and people were screaming out loud, 'Save me!' That young man, my friend's brother, was under the roof of the house calling for help. We went to save him, but the ceiling was too big and we couldn't save him, and my friend's brother-in-law and her children died, under the roof of the house. For a moment I forgot about my sister's daughter who was accompanying me, I turned to her. She was hiding under a small door, and she too was wounded on her knees. I took her and ran into the street. I saw many people injured and I didn't know what happened. Then I saw my father running towards us and saying, 'Thank God you are fine, I thought I lost you'. I asked him what happened and he*

*said, "there was an explosion, and we don't know what happened yet". We went home, my brother and the rest of my family were at the door screaming. Our sister is with two of her daughters and she had three wounds on her head and the rest of her body, we took her home to dress her wounds. As for my other sister and her children, my niece, who was nine years old, we did not even find their bones because the explosion was inside their houses. We lost about 376 people in the explosion of Tal Uzair, and many became disabled and wounded.*

*There were families so far that do not know anything about their victims, and mothers are still crying over their missing children. We have seen a lot of tragedy.*

A 35-year-old housewife from Essien camp highlighted how this demonstrates how much Yazidi women have always suffered and continue to suffer:

*It was summer at sunset, the village was beautiful and calm and Tal Uzair's streets were full of people. There is a place called a union in Tal Uzair, which is one of the places where the most residents of the village gather together. At around 7pm I was preparing dinner and my mother-in-law was sitting close to the wall. The explosion happened in Tel Uzair, Seba Sheikh Khudri, and the village of Uzair, which are three Yazidi zones, at the same moment. They entered the villages in big trucks and blew them up among people. My mother-in-law lost her leg and became handicapped. Yazidi women have suffered a lot and are still suffering. My mother-in-law is an example of a strong, patient and enduring woman. She really continues to live and will resist any difficulties or challenges.*

## 5.17 Women and tent combustion

One of the final issues identified by participants in the FGDs is that of tent combustion. Linked to the living conditions in the camps, the women highlighted the fear they live with every day – that the volatile gas supply will destroy their tent and injure or kill their families. A 38-year-old housewife from Essien camp described a moment in the camps when she thought she was reliving the explosion in Tel Uzair mentioned in the previous section:

*In a single moment, I did not think that I would live and see life again, since we live in tents and my children go to school about 11:00 in the morning every day. I prepare lunch early, so that they wouldn't go without food. At ten o'clock I went to the kitchen and turned on the cook and went to get rice from the store, here the kitchens are so small and narrow we can't fit all the things in the kitchen, and when I came back to the kitchen there was an explosion in the kitchen. Fortunately for me, the windows and the doors were open and nothing bad happened to me. The sound of the gas explosion was very strong, all the neighbours heard the sound, rescued me and extinguished the fire, no one was there except me and my mother-in-law and she was also handicapped by the explosion at Tel Uzair. She could not run but she screamed and said 'what happened,' she was afraid. I thought there was an explosion like the previous time in Tel Uzair.*

The Yazidi girls described how they live in constant fear of their tents burning down, and this just adds to their existing trauma. A survivor, 20, from Shariya camp, explained how:

*The Yazidi girls who are currently displaced have lost many of their ambitions, some of them have lost their studies, they have no work, and they live under the torn tents. They do not know when their tent will burn down and they will be the victims of the fire because there are many cases when that happened in the camps, and people died. So these girls choose to emigrate. They wish to get out of Iraq and the camps, because according to what they say, 'there is no future in this hell because the life of displacement is all suffering, tragedy and persecution', and the law does not respect the existence of minorities.*

The fear of tent combustion seemed to represent the ongoing despair felt by women - having gone through hell already and continuing to live with fear and suffering. This 20-year-old survivor continued:

*I have previously mentioned suffering that has not ended for many years. Every day we hear painful news about the displaced camps. The tents are burning, the gas canisters in the kitchens explode. There are children who died in the fire of the tents. Those innocent children were burned inside their tent. There are mothers and fathers who have lost their lives as a result of displacement, there are many cases of death and suicide that have occurred and the suffering is still continuing in the camps.*

## 6 Conclusion

In this research we presented the problems and challenges facing marginalised Yazidi women and girls as articulated in their own words. These included displacement, family violence, suppressive social customs, economic issues, lack of access to healthcare, both physical and mental, lack of job opportunities, and significantly, gender discrimination. Yazidi women live in camps for the displaced. What is currently being experienced by Yazidi women has become a difficult matter to speak about, because of the levels of persecution, violence, rape, sexual slavery, murder, displacement, kidnapping and smuggling between the borders of the countries of Syria, Iraq and other regions that has been experienced by these women. Yazidi women have been sold in markets for slavery, forced to watch the killing their parents, sexually abused and forced to give up their own religion.

These women and girls are already traumatised from living with the painful reality of these bloody events, wars and killings based on religion, on top of the challenges and problems they then identified as part of this research. In fact, thousands of girls and women are still in ISIS prisons, missing from their families for over seven years. The Yazidis are still displaced, and Yazidi women live under particularly poor economic conditions. They live in camps, without many of the most basic necessities due to the government's lack of interest in them. Many health and economic problems are rooted in displacement, and life has become increasingly dangerous in the camps.

# 7 Recommendations

The following are recommended solutions to the problems facing the Yazidi women who participated in this study:

- Closing the camps for the displaced and returning the women who want to return to Sinjar. There would need to be infrastructure in place to support them to rebuild their lives. For example, providing them with security, safety and job opportunities.
- Yazidi women are in dire need of improving the educational level of their children through building schools, hiring female graduates, increasing the teaching staff, and providing them with study supplies.
- The government must provide job opportunities to widows and divorced women. Customs and traditions within the Yazidi community must also be challenged within this area, so it becomes socially acceptable for these women to work.
- Providing Yazidi women and girls with health insurance, which includes access to mental health support, with particular attention given to survivors and the families of those who were killed.
- Attention must be paid to the female staff in government departments, especially Yazidi women, providing them with opportunities for political and governmental participation.
- Opening institutions to support Yazidi women and girls experiencing domestic violence
- Establishing workshops and courses for women who lack security and are living in a poor psychological state, in order to take care of them.
- Increasing the interest of the departments, institutions and civil society organisations in Yazidi women and their rights. Increasing their understanding of what has happened to Yazidi women, and what is still happening to them due to psychological pressures, their economic situation, war, and being forced to live in unsuitable accommodation. Yazidi women and girls must be listened to.

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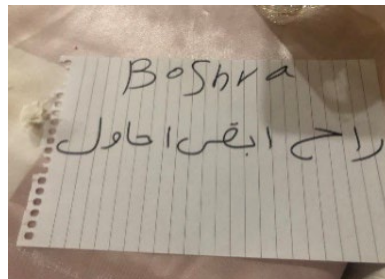
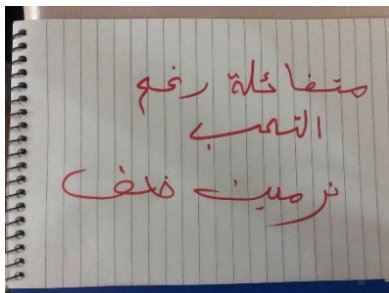
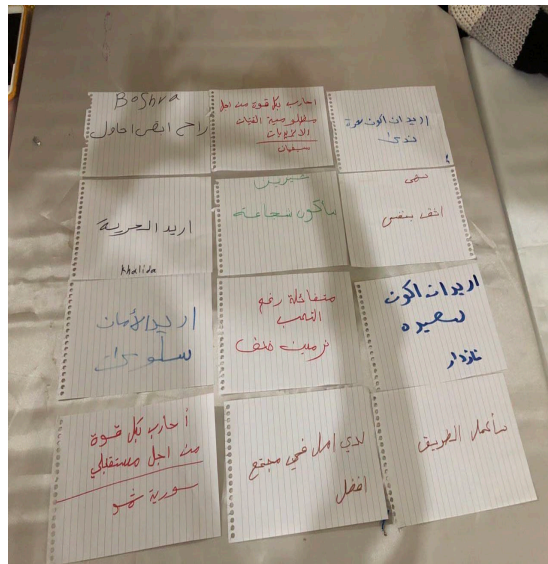
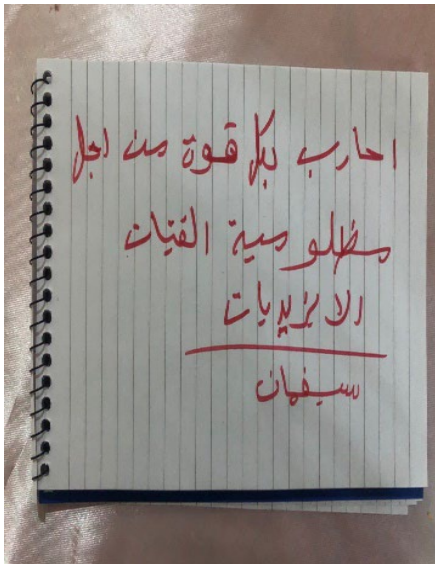
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# Annexe 1: Photos from the focus group discussions

"I try with all my power due to oppressed Yazidi girls."







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