

# Displaced Yazidi Women in Iraq: Persecution and Discrimination Based on Gender, Religion, Ethnic Identity and Displacement

Throughout the history of their presence in Iraq, the Yazidis have experienced harassment, persecution, killing and displacement. Most recently, they have been exposed to genocide from the Islamic State (ISIS) group after they took control of Sinjar district and the cities of Bahzani and Bashiqa in the Nineveh Plain in 2014, destroying Yazidi homes, schools, businesses and places of worship. Yazidi people were killed or forced to convert to Islam. Over 6,000 were kidnapped, including over 3,500 women and girls, many of whom were forced into sexual slavery. Men and boys were murdered or forced to become soldiers. Any remaining citizens were displaced. Seven years later, more than 2,000 Yazidi women and children were still missing or in captivity, more than 100,000 Yazidis had migrated abroad, and over 200,000 Yazidi people were still displaced, living in camps.

## Key messages

- Displaced Yazidi women and girls in Iraq face discrimination on account of their gender, their religious and ethnic identity, and their displaced status.
- All of the Yazidi women and men taking part in this study identified displacement as the highest priority issue affecting them. Employment and economic disadvantage, education and health were also key issues of concern.
- Yazidi women and girls have been exposed to genocide and have experienced gender-based violence and persecution, yet they face a lack of trauma-informed services and reintegration support. Many are lone household heads, struggling to feed, clothe and educate their children in displacement camps. This leads Yazidi women to feel that, even after experiencing persecution at the hands of ISIS, they continue to experience discrimination as women from an ethnic religious minority at the hands of the government and other agencies.

## Context

The Yazidis form part of the Indo-Aryan peoples, such as the Persians and the Kurds, and most of them speak Kurdish, while the Yazidis of Bashiqa and Syria speak Arabic. Prior to 2014, there were an estimated 500,000 Yazidis living in Iraq, however population numbers are now unclear. The Iraqi Yazidis lived largely near Mosul and in the Sinjar Mountains region.



The Yazidis sanctify the sun as a sacred source in the cosmic system that provides beings with spiritual, intellectual and physical activities. They prohibit premeditated murder, usury, fornication, usurping the money of an orphan, and assaulting others. Yazidis advocate goodness, peace and tolerance, and believe in peaceful coexistence with all human beings.

## Methodology

### Focus Group Discussions using participatory ranking

The research was carried out through focus group discussions (FGDs): three in Essien camp for women aged 25 and under (15 participants), women aged 26 and over (11 participants), and men aged 18–35 (13 participants); and one in Shariya camp for women survivors of ISIS capture (11 participants). The perspectives of women of different ages were sought to highlight how the challenges and threats experienced impact women across their lives. The perspectives of men were included to learn more about their views on the issues faced by Yazidi women and girls. Participants were selected from different locations and backgrounds, and the views of both married and unmarried women were sought.

The FGDs were conducted using open-ended questions and participatory ranking. The discussions generated rich qualitative data. This was complemented by quantitative data collected through the participatory ranking to inform analysis. Participatory ranking enables participants to identify challenges and rank these in order of their priority.

### Researchers from the same community as participants

The research was conducted by three Yazidi women who are themselves displaced due to the terrorist activities of ISIS. After escaping ISIS persecution, the researchers have worked with a range of civil society organisations and Yazidi survivors' networks. They are committed to promoting women's rights, freedom and dignity.

## Key findings

Fourteen key issues were identified by participants overall and ranked in order of severity, starting from the most severe and widespread. For the women and men in all four focus groups, the issue ranked as highest priority overall was displacement (identified as the most severe and widespread issue by 13 of 50 participants). This was followed by the economy (eight participants), education (six participants), employment (five participants) and health (four participants).

### Displacement

Many Yazidi women have been living in camps in Iraq since 2014, through extreme weather conditions and with only the most basic facilities. Women and their families are living in unsafe conditions, with cooking and heating facilities increasing risks of fires and dangerous pollutants. Women and girls are vulnerable to gender-based

violence, exploitation and abuse in the camps. The lack of space and privacy also means there is nowhere to keep belongings and nowhere to study. Health facilities in the camps are minimal, and support services for traumatised survivors of kidnapping and sexual slavery are sporadic and patchy.

These conditions have profound impacts on women's physical and mental health, and suicide among young Yazidi women has become an increasing problem. The lack of support leads Yazidi women to feel that even after experiencing persecution, displacement, rape and torture at the hands of ISIS, they continue to experience discrimination as women from an ethnic religious minority at the hands of the government and other agencies.

### Economy and employment

Many displaced Yazidi women are lone household heads, due to the high numbers of men being lost through war and genocide. There are very few employment opportunities and no social security to help the women provide for their families. Unemployment was raised as a key issue, especially by participants in the FGD for younger women. Some young women do not feel motivated to continue their education, as they feel there will be no job opportunities for them upon graduation. FGD participants discussed the intersectional barriers at work for Yazidi women; they noted how employment has the potential to foster independence and recovery from trauma, but also commented on the low status and exploitative nature of the work open to Yazidi women. Some participants had tried to find employment with the organisations working in the camps to support Yazidi survivors, but despite their relevant experience, they found opportunities closed to them, either due to a lack of formal qualifications, or a preference for employees from the majority religion. In addition, Yazidi women encounter discriminatory attitudes towards women working outside of the home, experiencing verbal and emotional harassment from members of wider Iraqi society and from within the Yazidi community itself. When this is combined with a lack of childcare, the barriers to employment and economic independence for Yazidi women are high.

### Education

A large number of Yazidi girls and young women have been deprived of education while in captivity and after displacement because of a lack of schools in the camps and their families' economic situations. FGD participants gave several examples of women who cannot afford to send their children to school, and some of the younger women participants described the sacrifices they and their families had to make so that they could attend school. They also discussed other barriers; some girls had been told they needed to travel to Mosul to sit examinations before they would be allowed to restart their education, a policy that recognises neither the economic barriers facing Yazidi girls, or the trauma that returning to Mosul, a city where they were captured and their lives destroyed, would invoke. In addition, participants noted that discriminatory attitudes around women and education within the Yazidi community itself created further barriers. Older women in the focus groups expressed their regret at not being able to read or write, teach their children, or understand and advocate for their rights.

## Health

A key concern expressed in the FGDs was the lack of trauma-informed healthcare in the camps. It was felt that this absence was contributing to increasing numbers of suicides and cases of psychological distress among Yazidi women. In addition, displacement and life in the camps has increased the likelihood of particular health issues, such as lice, scabies, breathing difficulties caused by air pollution, and injuries caused by tent fires. Participants noted that the health facilities available to them are basic in nature; if they require more specialist or intensive treatment, camp residents must find the funds to travel to, and pay for treatment at, private hospitals. For Yazidi women and their families already experiencing severe economic marginalisation and trauma-induced health conditions, this option is not within their reach.

Other issues discussed by FGD participants included: early marriage and honour-based violence; a lack of access to justice and legal redress for the persecution Yazidi people have experienced; and gender stereotypes within both Yazidi and wider Iraqi society that restrict women's and girls' autonomy and choices, particularly widows and other single women.

## Policy recommendations

The following recommendations aim to address the marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion faced by displaced Yazidi women in Iraq. They are designed to address the priority issues identified by FGD participants, and by the researchers' own knowledge and expertise as displaced Yazidi women in Iraq.

- The government should put into place a plan for closing the camps for the displaced and returning Yazidi women to their areas of origin, whenever they desire this. Infrastructure must be put into place to support them to rebuild their lives, providing them with security, safety and employment opportunities.
- The government should prioritise improvements in education through building schools, investing in teachers and educational resources, and supporting female graduates.
- Improved employment opportunities for widows and divorced women are essential. Along with creating new jobs, policymakers and employers should also challenge customs and traditions within the Yazidi community, so that it becomes socially acceptable for these women to work.
- The government should ensure that Yazidi women and girls benefit from health insurance, and that social security is available for lone female headed households.
- Yazidi women working in government departments should be offered greater opportunities to participate in political and public life.
- The government should provide and fund inclusive support services for survivors of domestic violence and abuse, as well as services to support children and families.

- Specialist, trauma-informed support should be provided for Yazidi women who lack security or are dealing with the psychological impact of the persecution they have experienced.
- The government, state institutions and civil society organisations in Iraq must listen to the voices of Yazidi women and girls, making sure that all work to address their needs is survivor-focused and based on their experiences and priorities.

### Further reading

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## Credits

This policy brief draws on the CREID paper 'Challenges and problems faced by Yazidi women as a result of displacement' by Turkiya Shammo, Diana Amin Saleh and Nassima Khalaf. It was compiled by Jenny Birchall and edited by Amy Quinn-Graham.

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

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

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DOI: [10.19088/CREID.2022.010](https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2022.010)

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