https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/10/30/a-yazidi-activist-was-awarded-the-nobel-peace-prize-but-what-happens-next-for-yazidis/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d4724d0aac0a

A Yazidi activist was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. But what happens next for Yazidis?

By Tutku Ayhan

Yazidi survivor, activist and U.N. goodwill ambassador for the dignity of survivors of human trafficking Nadia Murad was jointly awarded the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize with Congolese gynecologist Denis Mukwege earlier this month. It was a long-neglected and symbolic contribution to the efforts of those who struggle against conflict-related sexual violence.

The award also was meaningful for Yazidis worldwide. But will this international recognition really change anything for the persecuted group? Most existing literature and aid have made sweeping generalizations about Yazidis, the challenges they face and their needs. My research attempts to complicate that picture, by examining the changing ways Yazidis perceive and practice gender after the genocide.

Survivors have diverse experiences of liberation and survival

In August 2014, the Islamic State attacked Yazidis in the northern Iraq district of Sinjar, kidnapping and enslaving thousands of Yazidi women and children. While some 1,000 female Yazidi survivors of Islamic State captivity live and receive treatment in Germany, around 2,000 more live in internally displaced-persons camps run by the Kurdistan Regional Government, under precarious conditions, many without any psychological support. Suicides or life-threatening risks remain pervasive in camps. Others live in unfinished buildings outside the camps, trying to reintegrate to life after trauma and focusing on daily survival. Families may not always know how to treat the survivors. And some media outlets have reportedly coerced women into continued trauma by constantly retelling their stories.

In my research, I focus on the challenges Yazidi women face after the genocide and the potential transformative influence of mass violence on gender dynamics in Iraq and in the diaspora. I conducted initial fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan in May 2018 through in-depth interviews with Yazidi male and female survivors in camps, nondisplaced Yazidis, religious and political leaders and policymakers in the Kurdistan Regional Government.

I use an intersectional approach, which considers how different identities interact and create unique experiences of submission and/or privilege for individuals. This approach helps me observe the intersecting effects of social identities within this specific historical, institutional and local context. While conducting my research, I pay careful attention to differences in the individual experiences of older and younger, married and unmarried, urban and rural, captured and non-captured Yazidi women in Iraq or in the diaspora, from different sects. This provides a more nuanced perspective than grouping all these diverse and unique individuals under a single label of "genocide survivors."

Post-genocide gender relations among the Yazidis

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Existing social science literature suggests that war can influence post-conflict gender relations in different ways, either increasing or decreasing preexisting gender inequalities. Sometimes, women face increased domestic violence after conflict. Their voices are ignored, marginalized or hidden by the patriarchal components of the culture of their communities. In other cases, wars may create space for increased female participation in economic, public and political life and increase their agency. Female survivors can get vocal about their experiences and those of others who suffered and survived the conflict. Yet even these gains might be short-lived because of a patriarchal backlash and the reestablishment of gender repressive regimes in the long run.

My initial findings suggest that there is a potential for gender-equal developments as Yazidi women may find space to exert their agency and gain new rights.

Changing perceptions about education was a recurring topic in my interviews. Both the families and the younger generations voiced the importance of girls attending school. Families expressed their concerns for girls to "know more about the world" and "protect themselves" for the future. Some children started school in camps for the first time, an opportunity they lacked in their village in Sinjar.

Displacement also seems to increase women's mobility, living closer to the city, sometimes having to work outside to provide for the family. Some respondents told me that Yazidi women can now go to the bazaar alone while the husband takes care of the kids, or they can work, which was not possible in Sinjar. In camps, the presence of nongovernmental organizations with female empowerment agendas or projects also contribute to the change of gender norms.

Another potential change concerns the marriage patterns. In the Yazidi faith — a religion incorporating beliefs from Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism but with its own distinctive characteristics — intermarriage between sects is prohibited. But migration appears to be transforming marriage norms. A Yazidi scholar told me that people have begun to discuss intermarriage between sects, and some among second-generation Yazidis in Germany already have begun to do so. Even though most interviewees confidently told me that the rule would stay the same forever, we can still likely expect mass migration to change marriage patterns.

What is Yazidis' future after such transformative changes?

Violence might have some positive transformative effects for Yazidi women in terms of gender liberation, but it also risks the dissolution of Yazidi identity. Whereas a liberal feminist approach would put a premium on women's agency and individual empowerment, a multiculturalist approach would prioritize the survival of a persecuted religious minority identity.

But listening to the survivors themselves offers more nuance and context, breaking down wide categories of "women" as well as "community." Indeed, the findings of a recent

study on the German program for Yazidis point to the inadequacy of an individual empowerment vision of the program planners in serving the perceived best interests of some survivors.

When I asked them about Murad's work, Yazidis would tell me that the political leaders "sit and cry with Nadia but forget about Yazidis the next day." With thousands of kidnapped women and children still missing, political authorities have yet to recognize the attacks as genocide or establish courts to hold perpetrators responsible. Despite international attention, Yazidis still lack concrete humanitarian, financial and political help. As one of my respondents said, "there has been much spotlight on the issue, but not much has been done." For them, the genocide is still ongoing.