The Inversion of Victimhood

New Social Agency for IDP Yazidi Women?

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Photo by Ali Arkady

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements 3

Abstract 7

Introduction 8
Images of Yazidi victimization 8
Methodology and research design 12

Chapter 1 Agency and Victimhood 17
1.1 Victimhood versus agency 17
1.2 Victimhood as agency 20
1.3 Performance theory 23
1.4 Definitions 26

Chapter 2 Systems of Collective Representation and Social Power in a Context of Structural Violence 30
1 Victimhood in Kurdistan 30
2 Women's rights in the KRI 34
3 Preconceived notions about Yazidis and their victimhood 35
4 Female Victimhood 43

Chapter 3 Victimhood as agency 49
1. Collective victimhood through genocide 50
1.1 The victimhood collective 50
1.2 The competitive victimhood 52
1.3 Victim Hierarchy 54
1.4 Responsibility and solutions: outside the community 56
2. Victimhood resulting from human needs deprivation 58
2.1 Basic human needs 59
2.2 Specialized healthcare 62
2.3 Future deprived 63
2.4 Return home 65
3. Symbolic inversion Agency between self-fulfillment and survival 68
3.1 Careful Analysis 68
3.2 A sense of agency? 69
3.3 A change of heart? 72

Conclusion 76
Suggestions for further research 78

Bibliography 80
Secondary literature 80
Documents via internet 82
Online news articles used for introduction: (not as informative source) 83
Other sources 84
Image titlepage 84

Abstract

Publications in the media on Yazidis, are female victim based and focus on either the sensationalist image of raped Yazidi women, or their 'unexpected' acceptance back into their religious community (that would traditionally banish women that marry men from another religion). While this changing boundary rule through religious ritual has played a pivotal role for the women that have been abducted and abused by the so-called Islamic State (IS), the focus on the *hurt female body* and her relation to the community as – potential - wife and child-barer, do not portray the reality lived by most internally displaced (IDP) Yazidis in the North of Iraq. Nor does it explain the way women in the community experience their victimhood themselves, and more importantly: it ignores their actual and potential agency.

Instead, the focus on rape and religion recreates the idea of a passive female victim and reinforces the idea of a 'backwards' society, by placing emphasis on traditional notions of this often misrepresented community, while in reality the call to accept the women was welcomed by most of the Yazidis in the IDP community. The overflowing imagery of the hurt female body pushes all responsibility of suffering to IS and the community itself, overlooks the importance of structural and epistemic violence that was done to the community long before the current genocide, and still plays a role in the limited effort taken to restore the lives of the Yazidis.

This thesis will give an account of the context in which the current violence towards the community takes place, and will attempt to reveal the narratives of the women in the IDP community that until now remained hidden behind the overwhelming imagery of manifest violence at the hands of IS. In that way, it also attempts to go beyond the gendered representation of the man as active perpetrator or saviour and the woman as passively undergoing her suffering. Instead, this thesis will bring forward the way in which IDP women perform and thereby claim their victimhood and use the available opportunities that flow from 'being a victim'.

This will show that (especially young-) women in subtle ways symbolically invert their victimhood by actively claiming it, as well as showing their ability to contribute to changing the abhorrent conditions under which the community currently lives. Finally, this thesis will highlight how not all opportunities for changing these conditions arise from the efforts of the aid industry, but rather from the emergence of new opportunities for Yazidi men and women which have emerged in the past decades, partly hidden by Orientalist discourse regarding the abilities and needs of the greater ethno-religious group.

Introduction

"Slaves of Isis: the long walk of the Yazidi women"[1]

"Life After ISIS Slavery for Yazidi Women and Children"

"Amal Clooney and IS victim demand justice for Yazidis"

"Freed From ISIS, Yazidi Women Return in 'Severe Shock'"

"Yazidi survivor: 'I was raped every day for six months'"

"Yazidi sex slave raped and tortured by ISIS finds love"

Images of Yazidi victimization

Headlines with accounts of violence against Yazidi women have dominated the news reports on the Yazidi community over the past three years. The headlines above are some examples of the way the suffering of Yazidis is still mediatised in 2017. A large part of the community was forced to flee their homes when the so-called Islamic State (IS) launched an attack on people of this religious minority living across the Sinjar region of Northern Iraq.[2] Approximately 12.000 Yazidis that did not manage to escape the massacre, were killed or abducted in the following days during what by many states and organizations has already been recognized as an (ongoing) genocide.[3] An estimated 360.000 people (of the total of 400.000 Yazidis as counted before the beginning of the genocide) are currently living in camps for internally displaced people in the Kurdisch Region of Iraq (KRI).[4] With a group of 3048 of Yazidi formerly in the hands of IS now returned, there are still 3369 people unaccounted for (of which 1636 are women and girls and 1733 men and boys).

As the many articles and reports on the Yazidi case have emphasised, many of the over 3000 Yazidi women and girls that have been abducted were or are still being

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[2] Report: Yazda, Global Yazidi Organization (September 2017) "An uncertain future for Yazidis: a eport marking three years of an ungoing genocide" available at: https://www.yazda.org/tag/yazidi-genocide/

[3] V. Cetorelli, I. Sasson, N. Shabila and G. Burnham, 'Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: A retrospective household survey', 9 May 2017, available at: http://journals.plos.org/ plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1002297

[4] Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "They came to destroy": IS Crimes against the Yazidi, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/32/CRP.2 (Jun. 15, 2016), p. 33

exploited as 'sex slaves', are forcibly converted to Islam and in some cases forcibly married (again including forced sexual relations). In journalistic research, there is a strong interest in the new religious practice that allows formerly abducted Yazidi women to return to their community despite their circumstances (of having been – forcefully- converted to Islam and having sexual relations with men from a different religion), as this would traditionally mean a Yazidi will be banished from the community. However, it is especially the structural abuse and rape of Yazidi women that are described in detail by media and academics when writing articles on the genocide.

While this introduction also opened with headlines from this repertoire of the sensationalist image of the hurt female body, this is not what I aim to discuss in this thesis. As Michael Griffin states in his article on media images of war, "Images of war [and violence] do not appear randomly (…) War is a high stake enterprise; public perceptions and public support is never left to chance" (Griffin 2010: 8).[5] In his introduction he explains that images and reports that show extreme violence, draw intense public attention and potentially influence the public opinion. These spectacular images are then reproduces by journalists through outlets that notice when and which stories are picked up by the audience – and which are not.

Moreover, media representations reflect cultural perspectives and reproduce cultural representations and reveal political and social authority. This representation is what we come to see as normal or 'truths'. The images currently produced about the Yazidi community also appear under circumstances of conflict. Indeed, the Yazidi women –especially those that recently returned from the liberated Mosul- have endured unimaginable traumatic circumstances and they are in immediate need for medical and psychological attention and if possible (and desired) treatment in an other country. However, I think we need to reflect on the other narratives in the Yazidi community that remain unheard behind the smokescreen left behind on the eyes of an audience confronted with rape and sexual abuse.

The constant portrayal of the 'raped community' and the continued state of surprise by (Western) media outlets that are repeating the story of a traditional community allowing the survivors of structural sexual abuse back into their religious circle - despite their traditional boundary rules- reproduces cultural representations

[5] Griffin, M. (2010). Media images of war. *Media, War & Conflict*,*3*(1), 7-41.

about Yazidis. I think that this repeated narrative of the hurt female body resonates with the international audience and it mobilized many organizations that are willing to help the community, based on the horror described by returned women.

However, this focus frames the genocide and the potential difficulties surrounding the return of the women as a purely 'religious problem'. When using the word frame, I refer to the concept as used by Robert Benford and David Snow, meaning that frames are interpretive schemata that simplify and condense the "world out there" by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment' (Benford and Snow 1992: 137).[6] Is this definition they adopt Erving Goffman's (1974), whose concept of framing is positioned in performance theory, explaining human action as that of a performer who acts out its social role in relation to other performers on the stage that is its society.

The events and sequences of action focused on in this particular framing of the issue for Yazidis is the rape of 'their' women and the reception back into the community. The focus on rape and religion recreates the discourse of a passive female victim and reinforces the idea of a 'backwards' society, by placing emphasis on traditional notions - of this often misrepresented community - while in reality the call to accept the women was welcomed by most of the Yazidis in the IDP community. Why does it matter if this discourse is reinforced? Vivienne Jabri explaines in her work *Discourses on Violence* that discourse is not only a story about ones social reality:

> 'Discourses are social relations represented in texts where the language contained within these texts is used to construct meaning and representation…. The underlying assumptions of discourse analysis is that social texts do not merely *reflect* or *mirror* objects, events and categories pre-existing in the social and natural world. Rather, they actively construct a version of those things. They do not describe things, *they do things*. And being active they have social and political implications' (Jabri 1996: 94-95).[7]

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[6] Snow, D. A., & Benford, R. D. (1992). Master frames and cycles of protest. *Frontiers in social movement theory*, *133*, 155.

[7] Jabri, V. (1996). *Discourses on violence: Conflict analysis reconsidered*. Manchester University Press.

The overflowing imagery of the hurt female body and the discourse on the return of the women, directs all responsibility of suffering to IS and interestingly, to the community itself. More importantly: this frame is distracting from the importance of structural and epistemic violence that was done to the community long before the current genocide, which still plays a role in the limited effort taken to restore the lives of the Yazidis. I argue that these overpowering narratives and reproduced discourses on the position of the women in the Yazidi community, portray an incomplete image of the actual victimhood experienced by Yazidi women in the internally displaced community. To understand the social condition of Yazidi women living in camps arounds Duhok, it is necessary to understand what their social identity consists of. Following the definition of Vivienne Jabri, social identity is

> A product of all that which is located in the realm of society, as a context of communication, power relations, contestations, and dominant discursive and institutional practices (Jabri 1996: 134).

Building on the work of Anthony Giddens - that will be discussed in the methodology-, Jabri argues that since structure and agency can be mutually constitutive, actors can act to change the war structure in which they operate. With our agency, we can emancipate ourselves and break away from dominant rules of social life and create new discourses. In Jabri's work this refers to the creation of discourses of peace, in this thesis I research the creation of discourse of agency in a disempowering context.

Therefore, this thesis will give account of the context in which the current violence towards the community takes place, and will attempt to reveal the narratives of the other women in the IDP community that until now remained hidden behind the overwhelming imagery of the manifest violence under IS's hands. In that way, it also attempts to go beyond the gendered representation of the man as active perpetrator or saviour and the woman as passively undergoing her victimhood. Instead, this thesis will bring forward the way in which IDP women perform and thereby claim their victimhood. It investigated how they use the available opportunities that flow from 'being a victim'. Therefore, I propose the following research puzzle statement:

(How) does the performance of victimhood enable Yazidi women that are currently in IDP camps around Duhok to obtain agency in their own community, in the aftermath of the Sinjar Massacre of August 2014?

Methodology and research design

As already becomes clear from this seemingly paradoxical puzzle, I want recognize both the constraining working of structures, as well as the individual actor role in meaning making practices. In the tradition of sociologist Anthony Giddens, I will thereby position myself in the structurationalist tradition. He argues that the social science should not focus on only the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but instead study social processes ordered across space and time (Giddens 1984 in: Demmers 127).[8] Structure and agency are in that way complementing each other.

To fully understand the performance of victimhood and the potentially resulting agency in its current context, it is necessary to address both the structures in which this performance takes place – constituted by the engrained social structure of Iraq and the KRI and its relation to the Yazidi minority - or: expectations as a result of centuries old reviews about the play and actors upon which the performance of victimhood takes place - as well as the individual actor, that may be clearly obstructed by structure and circumstance but is simultaneously purposively acting on its ability to change her current situation.

Chapter one will start by addressing the state of the arts, with a discussion on the literature on victimhood and agency, the definitions that will be used and elaborates on some aspects of the theoretical framework. Chapter two will focus on the structures that have so far obstructed the potential for visible agency of Yazidi women. It will do so by answering the question:

What are the systems of collective representation on victims, the position of the women in society and on the Yazidi community impacting the (expectations of) social power of the women in this community?

[8] Giddens, A. (1984). The constitution of society: Outline of the structuration theory. *Cambridge: Polity*. In: Demmers, J. (2017). *Theories of violent conflict: An introduction*. Second etition. Routledge.

Chapter three will explore the ways in which Yazidis express their own victimhood, and how this frame helps them to obtain new agency in their community, despite and partly thanks to the negative focus on the hurt female body. However, this final chapter will show that there are more ways in which women are constrained by exclusionist frames that only refer to 'raped women' when speaking about victims. In stead, the women explain how positive relationships, their own ideas about what would improve the lives of the community, but also specific threats that shape boundaries of the community and the 'suffering collective'. This chapter shows the individual agents, and investigates the ability of the individual to symbolically invert her victimhood through a discursive approach:

> 'The discursive approach focuses on the way in which communities construct their limits; their relationship to that which they are not or what threatens them; and the narratives which produce the founding past of a community, its identity, and its projections of the future' (Sayyid & Zac 1998, 261).[9]

This chapter should explain that the Yazidi community cannot be seen as homogenous, and that therefore looking at their current agency, might underestimate the developments that Yazidis already experienced over the past decades. After a discussion on the different desires and abilities in the community this final chapter will answer the question: (How) does the performance of victimhood enable displaced Yazidi women that are currently in camps around Duhok to obtain agency in their own community, in the aftermath of the Sinjar Massacre of August 2014?

As my research question and sub-questions illustrate, this research is designed to produce qualitative data. The thesis should not measure or calculate, but provide an insight on the meaning of action and will therefore attempt to unravel the phenomenon of the discursive performance of symbolic inversion.

In that sense, this thesis is clearly designed from an interpretive epistemology. This thesis takes into account that 'the construction of meaning is historically and culturally specific, and as such can only be studied "in context" and by integrating the self-consious

[9] Sayyid, B., & Zac, L. (1998). Political analysis in a world without foundations. *Research strategies in the social sciences: a guide to new approaches*, 249-267.

perspectives of the informants themselves' also allows agency into the mix (Demmers 2017: 17).

I am interested in the dynamics between structure and agency in the meaning making practices of Yazidi women. While being aware of the structures at work in the Iraqi and Kurdish society, this thesis will also look at the way in which individuals are trying to make meaning of their social situation through performance and the narratives about these performances.

Taking into account the ontological and epistemological perspective, it was only appropriate to conduct interviews with IDP Yazidi women themselves. However, it is not necessary to speak with a big group of people because this thesis does not attempt to measure how many of the Yazidi perform their victimhood, but tries to disentangle how an observable phenomenon enables a people to (re)claim agency. The sample unit was be chosen by non-probability, because the thesis is not meant to be statistically representative.

However, the people selected for the interviews were chosen according to salient features of the puzzle. The sampling was purposive, informed a priori by an existing body of social research on which the research question is based (Boeije 2010: 36). Snowball sampling was an appropriate method in this context. While the research requires interviews with multiple people from different social backgrounds, I did not select people based on a specific (geographical or social-economical) background. For this research it was sufficient to seek people of different age groups and talk to both working, as non working women. For further research it can be interesting to focus on women from a particular city or village, to create a more precise typology of the impact of displacement in relation to one's former situation. Because the question involves a group that is defined by ethnicity and gender, formerly interviewed people could help finding more people that are appropriate to find out how the performance of victimhood could lead to agency.

The most appropriate way of gathering reliable data for this thesis is by doing structured in-depth interviews. However, I also had unstructured interviews, in which I would let the women speak without asking further prepared questions, if this seemed more appropriate in the moment. As part of the methodology I allowed space for learning by default: the first interview rounds I had in Bajed Candala helped to improve the interaction I had with women in the other three camps. The interviews were held in

focus-groups, because this sometimes helped people to speak up. On the other hand, it can cause people to be more cautious themselves or censor each other. Curtis and Curtis for example warn about the fact that interviews with multiple people can be difficult because the interviewer has to contend with group dynamics (2011: 32).[10]

Seen the interpretative character of this research, the way in which the group behaves can also generate interesting data. Taking this into consideration, I conducted both focus-group interviews as well as in-depth personal interviews to see how this impacted the data. While one-on-one interviews gave more space for elaborate answers, the answers were not significantly impacted by the number of interviewees. A variable that did seem to have consequences for the way women answered the questions, is if they worked with the same organization. How this impacted the data will be discussed in the analysis in chapter three.

To improve the readability of this thesis, I have chosen to reference quotes of the interviewees by the codes I used to encrypt these conversations. They are very simple codes of which the two letters in the beginning refer to the camp in which I interviewed the women (BC for Bajed Candala, SH for Sharya, KA for Kabarto 1, and KH for Khanke). The first four digits show the date (DD/MM) on which the interview was conducted (For example: SH220402, was conducted on 22 April 2017). The last number refers to the focus-group or indivial interview the interviewee was part of. In my transcripts of the interviews are also some details about the age of the individual interviewees and –if she was willing to share more details- her city or village of origin. On request of some of the women, I have not included this last factor in the encrypted codes, because of the sensitive information they shared.

This thesis will look at the way inhabitants of four different camps in Duhok, Kurdisch Region Iraq, communicate their victimhood to outsiders. It will do so by analyzing interviews I had with 80 women in the camps through a performative perspective, regarding both the responding NGO's as the researcher (myself), as well as the performers as audience of this performance of victimhood. I will also make use of interviews held with different NGO's, who in this context can be regarded as audience and performer at the same time, because some of their employees were formerly displaces Yazidis that settled in Duhok province and worked in these organizations.

[10] Curtis, B., & Curtis, C. (2011). *Social research: A practical introduction*. Sage.

In that way, this thesis will present the rarely discussed, but vey urgent, other struggles of the community, going beyond the image dominating the media of the Yazidis as raped community. By allowing different narratives to 'make the cut', it should also become clear what victimologies lead to the strongest symbolic inversion, activating (especially younger) women to change their current social situation.

Chapter 1 Agency and Victimhood

Before discussing the particularities of the Yazidi case, it is first necessary to discuss the relationship between ideas of "victimhood" and "agency". To critically address the binary opposition of the two terms that is often implied in the literature, this chapter will illustrate the different standpoints in the victimhood-agency debate. Secondly, it shows how -interestingly enough- most authors present the concepts as incompatible, while this thesis will argue why they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
Moreover, this chapter will start building the case that victimhood can be the very cause of agency, by looking at the performance of symbolic inversion. Finally, this chapter concludes by describing how the concepts victimhood and agency interact by drawing on a performative perspective. Overall, this chapter will explain why it is relevant to look at the performance of victimhood to critically study it without conforming to ideas about Yazidi women resulting from Orientalist discourse.

1.1 Victimhood versus agency

In the past two decades, the debate on agency was fought in many different academic disciplines. In the beginning of the 1990s, for example, the term victimhood was discussed by American feminist writers in relation to domestic violence because there was no legal framework protecting women (Flood, 1999 in: Dahl 2009: 393)[11]. Violence towards women was seen as a private matter that should be resolved by relatives, if seen as a problem at all. Under these circumstances, it was essential to show that these women were no agents of their lives as a result of the abuse and therefore were entitled to the legal status of victim: It required the denial of agency to obtain this status. Activists and scholars demanded legal status for female victims and in that way shed light on formerly invisible structures of inequality and oppression (Agevall 2001: 26-28)[12]. All this placed the emphasis in scholarly research on female victimhood.

[11] Dahl, G. (2009). Sociology and beyond: Agency, victimisation and the ethics of writing. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *37*(3), 391-407
[12] Agevall 2001: 26-28 in: Dahl (2009)

However, later in the nineties, this idea of female victimhood was problematized by critics such as Wolf, (1993), Roiphe (1993) and Denfeld (1995) (In: Dahl 2009:393). They feared female victimhood would demonize men and at the same time portray women as passive or idealized. In response to those unwanted consequences, scholars and activists alike began to focus on 'power feminism'. In that turn, scholars explain that women are entitled to their rights, because they are equal human beings, not because they are better or worse than men (Wolf 1993: xvii)[13]. The emphasis on (female) victimhood was inverted with an emphasis on agency, to assure women would not be seen as "naturally passive" people.

Another worry that was addressed by the terminology of 'power feminism' is the self-fulfilling prophecy that might be brought about by using the term 'female victimhood': that women are not seen as and therefore act like victims purely by the nature of their gender, rather than as a result of any external factors. Therefore, feminist activists and scholars started to challenge the 'victim mentality' by encouraging women to think of themselves as capable actors (Dahl 2009, 394). A discursive example of this change of approaching victimhood is when anti-abuse activists substitute the term 'victim' for 'survivor'. This approach is still used by many public outlets and organizations, Including those that this research has drawn data from – such as, amongst others, the women's rights organizations Daik an EMMA organization for Human Development, which refer to returned vicitms of IS that they are aiding, as 'survivors'.[14]

This does not mean that after the nineties all academics agreed on the importance of seeing victims as capable actors. There are also academics that argue from different perspectives that victimhood should be seen as separate from his or her agency. Ruth Blakely, for example, argued in an article on emancipation from an International Relations perspective, that while critical security studies tend to focus on the individual as an agent of his/her own liberation, many victims of oppression are not able to free themselves (Blakely 2009:599) and should therefore not be seen as agents.[15] She acknowledges the need for a victim to engage in dialogue with its own society to

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[13] Wolf 1993: xvii in: Dahl (2009)

[14] Author's interview with Bahar Ali and Bayan Rasul, Directors of 'EMMA, Organization for Human Development', conducted on 12 April 2017 in Duhok.
and author's Interview with Sozan Ismael, director of Daîk, conducted on 30 May 2017 via Skype.

[15]Blakely, Ruth (2009) "Human rights, state wrongs, and social change: the theory and practice of emancipation" *Review of International Studies* (2013), 39, 599–619.

obtain sustainable emancipatory change, but does not identify the position from which victims would have the chance to 'engage in in the dialogic process' (Blakely 2009:601). I understand that in arguing this she tries to protect victims for being solely responsible for their own oppression. I cannot disagree with her logic, but sticking people in the category of victim, can also imply that these people are passively undergoing their oppression, while victims may in fact actively resist in more or less visible ways.

However, in the past 20 years, there have been more and more authors who advocate not to see people as victims, but as agents. Gudrun Dahl mentions examples of authors that use the 'Agent Not Victim (ANV) trope' (2009:391). The author mentions Pelak (2005), Povey(2003) and Alley et all (1998), who wrote about the agency of unprivileged social groups. However, by stressing that people are not victims, these authors cause exactly what they are trying to avoid: they are suggesting that victimization has consequently removed agency, thereby placing the victim in a humiliated position. Imagine one would have to say Yazidi women are not victims, in order to prove they still have agency. This would be illogical, as they clearly are victims, both of the direct and indirect consequences of the genocide, as will be explained in chapter three.

Dahl, in particular, problematized the morality of writers that are using the ANV trope, suggesting that this approach does not aid analytical theory, but is only part of the self-representation of the authors: "It signals that the author is critical and engaged" - by showing they have critically considered the agency of the person that is viewed as victim by others - but according to Dahl does not add anything for analytical research (2009: 393). Indeed, the following paragraph should explain why it is not helpful to deny victimhood in order to defend agency. However, I do not entirely agree with Dahl's accusation. Describing the complex interaction of victimhood and agency can, I would argue, contribute greatly to the academic debate and especially help to refine analytic theories. I will elaborate on this claim in the following paragraphs.

Most of the authors described above claim agency, or choice, is only possible when victimhood is rejected, and some definitions of victimhood lean entirely on the absence of the power to change one's social situation (Blakely 2009, Talbot 2005, and Schnabel 2012).[16] This portrays a shallow understanding of the spatiality and

[16] Talbot, M. (2005). Choosing to Refuse to be a Victim:'Power Feminism'and the Intertextuality of Victimhood and Choice. In*Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 167-180). Palgrave Macmillan UK.

temporality of victimhood and agency. While a person who is deprived of agency at a certain moment in time and place might wear the label victim for years to follow; one is not permanently and/or fully disempowered. Fortunately, there are some scholars who specifically focus on the assumed opposition of agency and victimhood Drawing attention to missing aspects of this conception.

For example, Joyce Kaufman and Kristen Williams (2010) point out in their work on women in conflict that 'women are not silent victims' (which could indeed be a more damaging narrative than the victimhood itself).[17] They state that women had to fight to be recognized as equal and productive members of society, and that in conflict 'the symbolism and myths of womanhood are used to stoke nationalistic ideas about the survival of the state'. In order to do so, societies come to forget the agency of women when they are being used in an oppressive discourse becoming the breeders of the state, or the potential victim of the enemy.

However, Kaufman and Williams do not deny the victimhood of the women they are ascribing agency to and, rather, see victimhood and agency as going hand in hand. This is very important, because in an attempt to discursively return power to a person, it can work counterproductive to suggest that under current circumstances –namely: being a victim-, this redistribution of agency is impossible. While women can be victims of a conflict, they are at the same time 'active agents in their own right, shaping political and historical processes' (Kaufman and Williams 2010: vii). According to them, it is not necessary to ignore victimhood to also ascribe agency to an individual.

1.2 Victimhood as agency

In most of the work mentioned above, there often is the necessity of denying victimhood to obtain agency (and vice versa). In the final example given above, Kaufman and Williams show that victimhood and agency can in fact coexist. In the final part of this literature review, two authors are presented that go beyond this coexisting and paint a picture of how victimhood and agency can interact more closely.

Schnabel, A., & Tabyshalieva, A. (2012). (eds). Defying Victimhood: Women and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding.

[17]Kaufman, J. P., & Williams, K. P. (2010). *Women and War: Gender Identity and Activism in Times of Conflict*. Kumarian Press.

A scholar that goes a step further is Sissel Rosland, who wrote that "depending on the contextual framework, victimhood can create confidence, empowerment, and agency" (Rosland 2009: 294).[18] She criticized scholars such as Chris Gilliagan, who stress that "the 'victim' is the diminished agent par excellence. Victims are, per definition, passive objects who have been acted upon by other forces, not active agents." (2009: 298) This thesis agrees with Rosland's critique that this definition is unrightfully treating victimhood as a non-historical category and that it conceals the relation between victimhood and agency (294). As explained before, one may be the victim of forces at some point, but still experience agency. In some cases, Rosland explains, one may actually experience advantages such as new agency that result from being victimized in the past.

While the focus in her research lies on political agency (in Northern Ireland), the same can be said for 'social' agency in the society and community under review now. As became clear from preliminary empirical evidence, the Yazidi women do not deny their victimhood and simultaneously experience new agency. What will be analyzed in this study, is how the performance of victimhood in some cases may have led to agency.

In Rosland's research, there is no distinction of what people fall into the 'victim-category', to leave it up to people themselves whether or not they identify as victims (Rosland 2009: 299). The same will be done is this research, that will not be limited to Yazidi women that faced the abuses of IS after being abducted, but also includes women that have been living in the camps for a longer period of time, thus allowing the interviewees to express their own definitions and group boundaries of who was part of the 'collectives of victimhood' (294).

Another scholar who looks beyond the binary opposition of victimhood is Mats Utas (2005).[19] He criticized the 'often gendered opposition of agency and victimhood that typically characterizes the analysis of women's coping strategies in war zones'. By this gendered opposition he refers to men being active as perpetrators or saviors, while women are portrayed as passive victims of circumstance. While his focus is on strategies 'during' conflict and 'in' battle, and not on Internally Displaced (IDP) women, Utas

[18] Rosland, S. (2009). Victimhood, identity, and agency in the early phase of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, *16*(3), 294-320.

[19] Utas, M. (2005). Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering: Tactic agency in a young woman's social navigation of the Liberian war zone.*Anthropological Quarterly*, *78*(2), 403-430.

explains the hidden agency that he finds in the self-staging of women as victims, as a social navigation of war zones. Utas seeks to theorize how “agency is manifested and deployed across the full range of women’s wartime experiences. More specifically, it explores the ways in which self-representations of victimhood and empowerment alike represent different ‘agency tactics’”.

Utas uses the term victimology to describe how women, by their self-staging as victims of war, navigate through the changing social world in a conflict. The victimologies he describes are an organized collection of stories of the most common narratives women use to express their victimhood. He states that:

> ‘precarious as it may be, the war zone is thus not merely a wasteland for young women, but at times may also be a field ripe with possibilities for upwards social and economic mobility, even as it may also contain unforeseen pitfalls that lead to increased marginalization’ (Utas 2005: 408).

In this research I will also look at the way the new possibilities that have unfolded despite (and sometimes as a result of) the precarious situation that the Yazidis live in. Where Utas focuses on opportunities in a war zone, this research shows some of the opportunities in IDP camps around Duhok. This might sound counterintuitive, but while acknowledging the immense suffering, and also the challenges that the ethno-religious community faces, I want to look at how “being a victim” has helped Yazidi women to become more visible and active in their community, in that way symbolically inversing their victimhood.

Symbolic inversion in this context may be broadly defined as “any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms, be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, or social and political” (Babcock 1987: in Kruger)[20]; or, as described in the field of Subaltern Studies, the actions by which “group members attempt to recast the in-group’s ‘negative’ features into ‘positive’ strong points” (Demmers 2017: 47). This is a natural social reaction to negative group evaluation, or in

[20] Babcock, B. A. (Ed.). (1978). *The reversible world: Symbolic inversion in art and society*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

this case: the labeling of victims of IS atrocities, and the stigma that collides with subjects like rape and inter-religious relationships.

To do so, I will start by looking at the context in which the victimhood takes place in chapter two. In chapter three I will discuss how victimhood is being performed, by looking at the victimologies of the women I spoke to in the camp and what small forms of agency result from performing one's victimhood. Without wanting to celebrate the harm that is done to the community, this thesis looks at the ways in which victimhood can lead to agency. In that way we can push the academic debate further to a point where victimhood can coexist with agency, or can even be seen as a potential source of new possibilities that lead to agency. Such a dynamic has been studied in a political and military context before, as for example by Utas and Rosland, but until the date of writing of this thesis was never academically discussed for an IDP community that is known for its belief in traditional gender-roles.

This thesis will show that agency can be obtained through performing one's victimhood, without using arms or having a high political position to invert the victimhood and agency roles. Instead, it will look at the symbolic inversion that takes place in the community actively expressing their victimhood.

Performance theory can help us to understand why and at what moment people express their beliefs about their social situation – or not - and how this can help to activate – mobilize - other people. In this thesis I will be looking at the performance of symbolic inversion, in which a role that is intuitively is associated with weakness and powerlessness is instrumentalized to obtain new forms of agency. This is relevant to research because it can contribute to the debate on victimhood and agency, as well as to the efforts of scholars to get a more honest depiction of the Yazidi community. In that way this thesis helps to banish historically incorrect representation of the Yazidis and current simplified notions about their understanding of the conflict as the community experiences it.

1.3 Performance theory

The main analytical frame to unpack the way in which symbolic inversion takes place amongst IDP Yazidi women, is Jeffrey Alexander's **cultural performance** (2011: 28)[21],

[21] Alexander, J. C. (2011). *Performance and power*. Polity.

which is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation.

While I will look at the way victimhood is performed, this is not to say that its enactment is dishonest or that it should not be taken seriously. On the contrary, given it is such an exception to express what a group of over 5000 women are a victim of in the cultural context, the presentation of this information by themselves or other people in the community cannot be taken for granted. The expression of their victimhood is meaningful. Equally meaningful is the representation of a divergent story of victimhood in a context that only gives space for a specific type of victimhood: that of the hurt female body.

Victimhood is not limited to women that were abducted. Additionally, not all women feel like victims. Alexander adds that the meaning of the performance is not something they necessarily (always) agree with, but the social actors, consciously or unconsciously, do wish others to believe their performance. This research looks at the simultaneous performance of victimhood and the opportunities that derives from being a victim according to the women. The six elements that Alexander used to test the success of a cultural performance are explained below. I will discuss which elements are relevant for this research and what factors are less salient.

Firstly there are the **systems of collective representation** (2011:28), which consist out of **background symbols** and **foreground scripts**. These collective representations give the audience the information they need to form an opinion about the world that helps them to give meaning to events. They constitute the performance's immediate referential text and are the immediate referent for action. To operationalize the systems of collective representation, chapter two will discuss the prevalent ideas about the Yezidi community and the victim-role that guided the expectations of the audience by analyzing both the media as academic sources on Yazidis and victimhood.

However, the collective representations do not speak by themselves. To give meaning to these frames, people have to articulate them in one way or another. That brings us to the second element of the cultural performance: **the actor** (Alexander 2011: 29). The actor's behavior should cause the audience to sympathize with the performer and recognize his goal as their own. While the actors do not have to be convinced about the message they convey, their goal is to project emotions and textual patterns as moral evaluations to its audience. This thesis looks at IDP Yazidi women living in 4 different

camps as actors, again: not to say that their victimhood is an 'act', but to understand how their way of communicating their victimhood interacts with their facilitating network, or audience.

The third necessary element for a successful cultural performance is the reception by an **audience** (2011: 30-31). Like in the theatre, there should be the extension from the 'script' and actor to the observer or audience (2011: 34). If the audience psychologically identifies with the performance, the audience project themselves into the characters they see on stage. This can make the performance resonate with the audience and inspire the audience to take action, in this case: help to improve the lives of this IDP community. The audience identified in this thesis, are the formally and informally interviewed organizations, myself, as I am implicated in this research when being the interviewer to whom the women performed their victimhood, and last but not least: the IDP Yazidi women themselves. Alexander states that in the contemporary world, there might not be an audience at all, but only participants observing themselves and their fellow performers (2011: 35). This is partly the case in this research, as the people performing and being activated by the performance of victimhood are the Yazidis themselves.

Fourthly, in order to perform a cultural text, actors need the **means of symbolic production** that can help them to convey their ideological message (2011: 31). Objects can serve as iconic representations that can help dramatize the morals they are trying to represent. Goffman referred to these objects as 'standardized expressive equipment'. These were not as prominent in this research, unless owning barely anything counts as an iconic representation of their victimhood. In that case the means of symbolic production could be directly interlinked with the mise-en-scène discussed below.

Besides these materialistic aspects, actors also need space, a physical place, to perform and the means to enable their performance. This is leads us to the fifth aspect, which is the **mise-en-scène** (Alexander, 2011: 31-32), that was already implicitly discussed in the introduction. This consists out of the time in which the performance is enacted. In this case, in the spring of 2017, almost three years after the first attacks of IS on the community in Sinjar. Secondly, the 'directoral decisions' made by (elderly) community leaders with moral authority, in this case that could be *Baba sheich*, the religious community leader who stated the formerly abducted women should be welcomed back into society as Yazidis (despite the cultural notion that Yazidi women

who marry with someone from another religion will be banished). Lastly, the *space* in which the performance takes place plays a role in the credibility of the performance. This space can be facilitating or contesting the actor's ideas and therefore greatly influence the impact and success of the performance. The camps in which the interviews were conducted greatly contributed to the performance of victimhood, physically illustrating their deprived living conditions.

Finally, the sixth element of the cultural performance is the **divide of social power in society** (2011: 32). This divide of power, presenting itself in the nature of its political, economic and status hierarchies, and the relations among its elites, profoundly affects the performance process. Not all texts are equally legitimate in the eyes of the powerful, whether possessors of material or interpretive power. Chapter two will illustrate that the people of the Yazidi community currently living in the camps have little social power in society, partly as a result of their absent social power in Iraq before the current genocide. Chapter three will show how Yazidi women have increasing social power in society, partly as a result of their victimhood

If the cultural performance is successfully enacted, this can lead to a (strengthened) collective identity. Like Alexander, I will use Polletta and Jasper's definition of **collective identity**, which is 'an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution' (2001: 285). The interesting aspect in this context is that the collective identity emphasized is that of a "collective of vicims". Chapter three will analyze the victimologies of the interviewed IDP women, revealing different successful discursive practices that create a strong sense of collective identity. By emphasizing rather than ignoring their collective victimhood, some of the women symbolically invert their victimhood: acknowledging their victimhood provides them with a stage to present new stories about their social reality, bringing them new forms of power and agency.

1.4 Definitions

To analyze the effect of the performance of victimhood on the obtainable agency, we should further define what a victim is and in what way we see agency. While many authors from different fields of study discussed above use the terms, they are rarely defined. This may be the result of the everyday and informal use of these words. By

combining of conflict studies, sociology, gender and literature studies I came to the following definitions.

Firstly, a brief discussion on agency is required to understand what is meant by 'social agency' in this research. Agency itself can be broadly defined as 'the individual's capacity to initiate change' (Demmers 2017: 16).[22] More specified within social theory many refer to William A. Gamson, who states that it is

> "the consciousness that it is possible to alter conditions or policies through collective action, a sense of collective efficacy that denies the immutability of the undesirable situation, empowering people by defining them as agents of their own history. [Agency] suggests not merely that 'something' can be done, but that 'we' can do something" (Gamson 1992: 7).[23]

What is helpful to note for this definition is that it seems to point at a 'sense of agency', rather than 'agency' itself. This is useful when using the definition as a building block for questions asked to those actually experiencing it themselves.

However, the agency as described by Gamson refers to altering conditions or policies. In relation to a community that is stuck in a refugee camp, that might not be the most appropriate term. Another author focuses more on an individually felt, or autonomous kind of Agency. Eddy Nahmias refers to autonomous agents as people that are, 'like autonomous nations, are able to govern themselves. They are not controlled by external forces or manipulated by outside agents. They set goals for themselves, establishing principles for their choices and actions, and they are able to act in accord with those principles.'[24] This understanding may help to create a more appropriate definition in this case where the community is not experiencing such the changing conditions or policies as implied in Gamson's definition.

Agency for this thesis will be defined as: *The consciousness that it is possible to establish principles for one's own choices and actions* regarding her norms or values*, and that one is able to act in accord with those principles.* These do not have to be mind-boggling possibilities, as we are talking about a population that is currently displaced.

[22] Demmers J., (2017) Theories of violent conflict, Routledge, New York.

[23]Gamson, W. A. (1992). *Talking politics*. Cambridge university press

[24] Nahmias, E. (2007). Autonomous agency and social psychology.*Cartographies of the Mind*, 169-185.

While the means and power of the community under research is limited, their access to institutions that can improve their living standards for their community, now or in the future. Chapter three will elaborate on the cases in which the – especially younger - women expressed this agency.

In this thesis the word **victim** is a relational term for *a person who in one or more aspects in his or her spatio-temporal and culturally defined context is in a strongly disempowered position, that is: in a misfortunate situation, often for a limited amount of time or at a certain location.* However, I argue that while being disempowered, or being in a disempowering situation, a person can keep its agency, or simplified: the ability to make choices regarding his or her norms or values.

Instead of creating a narrower definition, predefining who is a victim and who is not, I propose to let women define the group-boundaries of the 'victimhood collective' themselves and to decide whether or not they include themselves. It became clear from my interviews that victimhood is one of the temporal defining features of the Yazidi community. In that context, being a victim or calling yourself a victim becomes desirable, as it is a crucial part of the process that helps to include a person in the ethno-religious group.

An important aspect of claiming this victimhood will prove to be its competitive nature. Collective victimhood will be solidified by not accepting the other group's right to feel the same: the other suffering person's victimhood is illegitimate. As Pamela Balinger explains,

> "each group connects its own victimhood to other historical accounts of suffering (...), but denies the other group's right to make the same connection. The other group's suffering is redefined in political, rather than ethnic terms (...) and thus becomes incomparable to the own group's victimhood"(Ballinger 2004: 149).[25]

Moreover, Masi Noor, Nurit Schnabel et all explain that this is not only the case for adversarial groups, but also among groups of victims:

[25] Ballinger, P. (2004). Exhumed histories: Trieste and the politics of (exclusive) victimhood. *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans Online*, *6*(2), 145-159.

> “The concept of inter-group competitive victimhood (CV) refers to a group’s motivation and consequent efforts to establish that it has suffered more than its adversaries (…) nonadversarial groups who are victims of the same (or different) perpetrator group(s) may compare and compete over the severity of their suffering” (Noor, Schnabel et all 2012:351)[26]

The victimologies that I analyse in chapter three, will illustrate how above mentioned conceptualizations of victimhood are constructing the us/them dichotomy needed to legitimize both the victimhood, as well as the ‘right’ to certain benefits that can help women of the community to find agency. Chapter three will show that the community allows flexible categories of suffering as there are multiple causes identified, but simultaneously an exclusivity in framing of their victimhood when regarding people that are not part of their community, as they suffered less and are therefore less deserving of whatever benefits derive from the victimhood. Some internal, but especially external group boundaries are shown to be essential part of claiming legitimized victimhood.

Before analyzing the expressions of victimhood in chapter three, I will discuss the systems of representation in which the victimologies are embedded or that they try to resist. It will show that IS is not the only actor that deeply affected the lives of the Yazidi community.

[26] Noor, M., Shnabel, N., Halabi, S., & Nadler, A. (2012). When suffering begets suffering: The psychology of competitive victimhood between adversarial groups in violent conflicts.*Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *16*(4), 351-374.

Chapter 2 Systems of Collective Representation and Social Power in a Context of Structural Violence

When one is going to see a well-known play, there are certain expectations that impact how the performance of the actor is perceived by the audience. Therefore, it is important to find out what the preconceived notions about the role that is to be fulfilled are. This chapter will elaborate on the context in which the performance of victimhood by IDP Yezidi women is taking place to investigate what these expectations can be. It will describe the already existing systems of collective representation on victimhood in Iraq and the KRG and explores how the current manifestation of the victim role fits into that setting.

Moreover, this chapter discusses preconceived notions about the Yezidis that are shaping the representation of the community in the region and over seas, and how the expectations of the audience differ from the script performed on the ground. It will become clear that the community lived under conditions of structural violence as defined by Johan Galtung, long before the manifest violence we are witnessing today. It will also show that the on-going injustices the Yazidi community caused persistent misunderstandings about the community's abilities and desires.

The chapter will be divided into three parts that explore, respectively: Victimhood in Kurdistan, preconceived notions about the victimhood of Yezidis, and the representation of Female Yazidi victimhood. All in all, this chapter shows how structural and epistemic violence to the community, in combinations with ideas about victimhood in the region, have set the stage for the Yazidi women I spoke to in camps in the Duhok province of the Kurdisch Regional Government (KRG).

1 Victimhood in Kurdistan

This chapter starts with describing the struggle of the Kurds in Iraq to paint a picture about the collective representation and functioning of the performance of victimhood. This is not to assume that Yezidis are necessarily Kurds. This politicized narrative about the origin of the Yezidi identity is not shared among all members of the entho-religious group and should be discussed for a better understanding of the position the group has

in society.[27] After the Gulf War of 1991, when a Kurdish de facto autonomous zone was created, part of the land where Yezidis live was included in the Kurdish Regional Government. In an attempt to create a sense of a nation-state, the KRG referred to the Yazidis as "The original Kurds"(Allison 2017:5).[28] This narrative was preferable for many Yezidis, as many knew when and where their tribe came from through oral history, which preceded Kurdish geneaology (Spatt 2008:400).[29] Moreover, the leading political party -the Kurdish Democratic party of Masud Barzani- is the main "investor in, employer, and protector of the community" (Maisel 2008:5).[30] In the collective towns in particualr, the population depends on jobs offered by the KRG (Savelsberg, Hajo and Dulz 2010:110)[31]. The most urbanized Yazidi population living in Duhok city is not taken into account here, until later in this chapter, as they lived in the KRI since the 90's and are seen as 'integrated', facing different negative consequences from their religious identity than people living in the collective towns and surrounding villages.[32]

While most Yezidis do not see themselves as Kurds, they did face many of the same hardships as the Kurds and other minorities under the Ba'th regime from 1968-2003. All Yazidi areas were subjected to Arabization policies, when between the 1970's and 1980's the community was forcefully displaced to live in collective towns far away from their fields and villages in the mountains (Maisel 2008:1-2). Their land was given to Sunni Arab tribes that were loyal to the Iraqi government (George Black 1993:112-117 in Maisel 2008:2). While the resettlement was presented as "modernization

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[27] Some researchers state that the Yazidis are only recognized as a distinctive ethic or religious group in Kurdistan if it suits the interest of the main Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (Maisel 2008:5). These claims can be the result of the KDP's funding of schooling and healthcare projects in Yazidi villages in the time leading up to elections in the past (Maisel, 2008:5) Regardless, many Yazidis no longer identify themselves as Kurdish after 2014, when the Peshmerga fled the area without warning the inhabitant Yazidis about the advancing of Islamic State forces (Allison 2017:5). Indeed, the displaced Yazidis and Yazidi activists involved with NGO's that I spoke to did not present themselves as Kurds -even when directly asked—while Yazidis that were more politically involved and the employees of the Lalish Cultural Center were always quick in pointing out their Kurdishness (E.g. Interview with Sheich Shamoo, head of Lalish Center and *only* Yazidi Member of Kurdish parliament, on 5 May 2017). While this may not be a representative sample, it does point out the identity community is evolving over time and identity boundary rules of the group are not homogeneous.

[28] Allison, Christine. (2017) "The Yazidis." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Oxford.

[29] Spät, E. (2008). Religious oral tradition and literacy among the Yezidis of Iraq. *Anthropos*, 393-403.

[30] Maisel, S. (2008). Social change amidst terror and discrimination: Yezidis in the new Iraq.

[31] Savelsberg, E., Hajo, S., & Dulz, I. (2010). Effectively Urbanized: Yezidis in the Collective Towns of Sheikhan and Sinjar. *Études rurales*, 101-116.

[32] Author's Fieldnotes, April-May 2017: Informal conversations on multiple occasions with Yazidis living in Duhok city.

projects" to supply the population of disadvantaged villages with electricity, water and sanitation, it later became clear that these were security measures that should prevent inhabitant Yazidis and Kurds from supporting the Kurdish National Movements (Savelberg, Hajo and Dulz 2010:101).

The most remembered part of the Arabization period for the Kurds was the Anfal campaign of 1988. This was a carefully planned and executed operation to ethnically cleanse the north of Iraq - officially referred to as a counterinsurgency operation against Kurdish resistance- in which an estimated 50.000-200.000 people were killed (Al-Ali 2016:6).[33] Thousands of Kurdish villages were destroyed at that time and over 1.5 million of their former inhabitants were deported to camps with no facilities such as water, electricity or sanitation (Al-Ali 2016:6). Others were executed while trying to escape or poisoned by the chemical weapons that were used against civilians of the Kurdish region. During the Anfal campaign, Kurdish women in particular, also were subject to systematic rape. (Al-Ali 2016:7). There is a lot of evidence available that proves many women were sexually abused (and raped) in the camps during the Anfal (Al-Ali 2016, Mlodoch 2011, Hardi 2011). Choman Hardi, for example, illustrates with testimonies, documents and other evidence that it is easy to prove the genocidal character of the Anfal (Hardi 2011:33).[34] Despite all the available evidence, the Anfal remains largely unrecognized in the international arena (Hardi 2011:33).

For now it is important to note that the memory of 'Anfal victimhood' has been and still is of great importance for legitimising claims of Kurdish autonomy (Mlodoch 2012:80).[35] Karin Mlodoch states that there is a hegemonic discourse on victimhood in Kurdistan-Iraq today, as a result of both individual coping strategies and the institutional processes for dealing with the past in Kurdistan and Iraq (Mlodoch 2012:63). This became clear in the everyday language of the Yazidis and Kurds I spoke to while in the field, but also during multiple official events I attended. In the case of two conferences about the future of Yazidis in Iraq, speakers made references to the Anfal

[33] Al-Ali, N. (2016). Sexual violence in Iraq: Challenges for transnational feminist politics. *European Journal of Women's Studies: 1-18.*
NB: Number of casualties differing immensely between governments (Both Bagdad and Erbil) and organizations. See Al-Ali (2016) for a discussion on these numbers.
[34] Hardi, C. (2012). *Gendered experiences of genocide: Anfal survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq*. Ashgate Publishing.
[35] Mlodoch, K. (2012). "We Want to be Remembered as Strong Women, Not as Shepherds" Women Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq Struggling for Agency and Acknowledgement.*Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *8*(1), 63-91.

campaign and spoke about Arabs in a blatantly negative way, presenting all members of this group as antagonists in past and future issues.[36] For example, one speaker said that after the genocide on the Yezidis it should be clear that the Arabs want to erase all other communities.[37] This locally praised academic did not talk about specific militias or groups, but generalized Arab people and referred to 'the Arabs' as a closed entity of people with natural unlawful intentions. Kurdish autonomy was by him presented as a necessity in order to protect the Kurdish people – as well as other minorities - from further victimization of the Arabs.

In the context of Anfal victimization, it also became common fpr edia and government officials to portray especially the women as weak and helpless victims who needed a protection from future harm from the antagonist. Karin Mlodoch noted that media and state discourse was framing the suffering of Kurdish women in terms of their losses rather than their own victimization and the resulting living conditions (Mlodoch 2012:80). In that way, the ethic character of the Anfal is politically instrumentalized, possibly overlooking the complexity of the victimood experienced by the Kurdish women themselves. This is an interesting observation, since the current victimhood of the Yazidi community is also explained in terms of either the sexual abuse of women and girls, or the missing of the abducted women and girls (Buffon and Allison 2016), rather than the suffering in the camps and the delay of reconstructing villages and cities so the community can move back to their homes.

However, in one of her reports from the field, Orly Stern explains that war is not the only violence shaping women's experiences in Iraq. She states that "the reality is that the 'newsworthy' item (in this case, attack by ISIS), falls above layers of harm caused by patriarchy, culture, tradition and poverty. It's the combination of these that shapes how women experience conflict".[38] While my respondents were not comfortable to speak about, for example, their own accounts of domestic violence in the little time that we spent together, in two of the four camps where I held several rounds of interviews, many women would state that domestic violence was a problem for other

[36] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: 'Lalish Forum' debate at Lalish Center, 11 May 2017, Duhok.
[37] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: 3rd Annual Conference for peace and coexistence, 25 April 2017 Lalish Forum 11 May 2017, Duhok.
[38] Orly Stern, (2017) 'War is not the only violence shaping women's experiences in Iraq', Report for Center for Women, Peace and Security studies. Available at: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2017/06/15/war-is-not-the-only-violence-shaping-womens-experiences-in-iraq/

women in the camp.[39] Stern saw in her long-term research that there in fact are many cases of domestic violence in the camps, and does not see this reflected in the way media outlets report on the circumstances for IDP Yezidi women, that focus on the trauma of the minority of the women who experiences brutal circumstances under IS. I –too- have a stinging feeling when reading Dutch news articles that celebrate the welcoming back of the women through a cleansing religious ritual, without problematizing the circumstances the women end up in –in the camps- after the beautiful cleansing has taken place.

2 Women's rights in the KRI

When reading about the Anfal, it already becomes clear that the sexual violence committed by IS forces –however appalling and awful- was not the first occurrence of gender-based violence in Iraqi history. As Al-Ali stated, 'Sexual violence, as we witnessing now [under IS], did not emerge in a vacuum: Iraqi women and men were confronted with sexual and broader gender-based violence pre-invasion Iraq and, as well as in the post invasion Iraq' (Al-Ali 2016:1). Besides the direct violence during battle or conflict, Iraq has a bad reputation regarding the gender-based discrimination and violence women still face in today's society. The most discussed forms of gender-based violence in the country are honour killing, genital mutilation and domestic abuse (Al-Ali and Pratt 2011:258).[40] These topics are shaping the agenda of NGO's and expectations and desires of women in Kurdistan and the Yazidi community.

Over the course of past decades, many national and international NGO's and activist mobilized to defend and improve women's rights in Iraq. Many of them are based in the KRG, which government has used women's and gender-based issues to demarcate itself from the Central Government in Bagdad (Al-Ali 2016:11). While this has

[39] In Bajed Candala Camp, a female NGO worker – and inhabitant of the camp- stated that she saw many cases of GBV for her work but now was not the right time to discuss any details (BC140401). In Kabarto I camp, inhabitants and Social workers (KA230401) advised us not to interview women about GBV, because it could bring them in a complicated position. The tents in Kabarto I were small and close to each other and interviewed women themselves warned us during the interview about how their neighbours could hear every word we said .

[40] Al-Ali, N., & Pratt, N. (2011). Conspiracy of near silence: violence against Iraqi women. *Middle East Report*, (258), 34-48.

helped activists and female politicians to start the improvement of legal protection of women, and the criminalization of gender-based violence, the KRG has not been as active in the actual implementation of new legislation. Instead, as Al-Ali points out in her recent article on Sexual Violence in Iraq, the KRG 'tends to pursue more traditional ways of addressing gender based and sexual violence, using tribal and family dispute mechanisms, often to the detriment of women receiving justice' (Al-Ali 2016:11).

It is important to note that - while a clear cut and easily definable enemy is presented in the current context of violence committed towards the Yazidis - perpetrators of gender-based and sexual violence in Iraq and the KRI have come from various backgrounds. Perpetrators have had diverse ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds, and have been both on the side of the local, stretching from government officials and militants, resistance and insurgent groups, criminal gangs, to relatives and family members, and on the other side by the occupation forces as well (Al-Ali 2016:11).

Minoo Alina (2013), who wrote about honour-based crimes, explains this as a result of the prevailing notions of masculinity in controlling women's bodies, their sexuality and 'honour'. Situating her book in Iraqi Kurdistan, she explains this as the result of hegemonic honour discourse in the KRI, that finds its source in the intersection of ethnic and national oppression, economic marginalization, patriarchy, religion, tribal and kinship structures, as well as displacement and militarization of society (Alinia 2013: 31).[41] The expected issues in the Yazidi community, concerning the possible rejection of the women that have returned after being abused are therefore clearly not only based on perceptions about what Yazidi religion allows, but reflects a more general attitude against (female) victims of sexual abuse.

3 Preconceived notions about Yazidis and their victimhood

The violence that comes to mind when thinking about the Yazidi community is the current sexual violence, that as a result of the mediatisation almost becomes a visible form of violence, or: 'manifest violence'. I argue here that the spectacle of this manifestation of violence hides the structural and cultural violence done to the community on a day to day basis, starting long before their current displacement. Johan

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[41] Alinia, Minoo. (2013) *Honor and violence against women in Iraqi Kurdistan*. Springer.

Galtung coined the concept structural violence in 1969[42] and cultural violence 1990[43], to bring to light the forms of harm done to people that are not direct forms of physical violence, but can lead to the legitimation thereof.[44] Galtung's structural violence can be seen as social injustice (1969: 171). These social injustices are build into societies with unrepresentative social structures and can lead to 'avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally life, lowering the real levels of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible' (Galtung 1996:197 in Demmers: 2017).

When looking at the position of the Yazidi community in their homeland Iraq, the source of their marginalization lays in their systematic underrepresentation, discriminatory laws -including practices regarding ownership of property- and finally the limited freedom of expression. A recent Yazda states that in general, 'no personal law exists to decide on cases related to the rights of Yazidis regarding marriage, divorcement or ownership of property'. The report explains that most of the property belonging to Yazidis in Sinjar, are not legally owned, while Muslim (Kurds) do have their ownership recognized by Iraqi law.[45] Additionally, children born from a Yazidi mother but with a Muslim father will be registered Muslim on his or her Iraqi National Identity Card (this is also the case for children born of war when there is no Yazidi man who can recognize them as their own)[46] These issues are difficult to tackle, as there is a systematic underrepresentation of Yazidis in all key institutions both in Iraq as in the KRG.[47] The Yazda report states that this underrepresentation is equally visible in the majority Yazidi villages and cities:

> Yazidis of the Sinjar and Shehkan districts are de facto part of the KRI region, but do not have the right to vote in KRI elections on the basis that the Yazidi areas are not a formally recognized part of the KRI. Yazidis have, until

[42] Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research.*Journal of peace research*, *6*(3), 167-191.

[43] Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of peace research*, *27*(3), 291-305.

[44] Galtung, J., & Höivik, T. (1971). Structural and direct violence: A note on operationalization. *Journal of Peace research*, *8*(1), 73-76.

[45] Yazda, Global Yazidi Organization (2017) "An Uncertain Future for Yazidis: A Report Marking the Three Years of an Ongoing Genocide"

[46] Author's interview with Bahar Ali and Bayan Rasul, Directors of 'EMMA, Organization for Human Development', conducted on 12 April 2017 in Duhok.

[47] For a detailed description, see Yazda, Global Yazidi Organization "An Uncertain Future for Yazidis: A Report Marking the Three Years of an Ongoing Genocide" September 2017, p. 29.

> recently, not been permitted to create their own political parties in Iraq,64 and even now the views of Yazidi organizations and leaders are not taken into account when policy decisions are made by major political parties, governments and parliaments in either Iraq or the KRI.65 Posts for local governments, mayors and municipalities in the Yazidi areas are not elected, but are rather appointed by political parties, mainly by the PDK. This underrepresentation or outright exclusion of Yazidis from political processes serves to entrench Yazidi disempowerment and prevent Yazidi voices from being heard in relation to matters that affect the community. (Yazda 2017: 30)

Regarding freedom of expression they state that only Yazidi who also self-identify as Kurds have been able to obtain more prominent positions. While acknowledging the "recent increased flexibility from the KRG and the CGI in allowing Yazidi political presentation" they state to be concerned about the suppression of certain political opinions (2017:30). Moreover, whether or not one identifies as Kurdish is not only of importance for political connections, but has a practical downside too: gaining a residency card or driver's license in impossible for Yazidis unless they officially register as ethnically Kurdish(Yazda 2017:31).

Internationally, the Yazidi religion was mostly unknown until the Sinjar Massacre of 2014 shed light on the Yazidi community.[48] The clearly identifiable enemy, IS, is being presented as a clear antagonist for stories about the suffering of the Yazidis of Iraq today. However, their social, economical and educational disadvantages are not the result of recent developments as briefly addressed above. The social injustice is not limited to the institutionalized marginalization of the community. Besides the actual maltreatment of the minority, it is the persistent 'backwards' discourse used in media and in academic literature towards them that greatly impacts the Kurdish perception about the needs and desires of the Yazidis. This can be explained as the cultural violence, which enabled the structural violence described above. Galtung explained cultural violence as 'those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence –examplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic,

[48] Or so it seems as a result of the media reports explaining who the people of this "ancient religion"/ "hunted minority" as explained in Buffon, Veronica, and Christine Allison (2016) "The gendering of victimhood: Western media and the Sinjar genocide."

mathematics)- that can be used to justify or legitimate direct or structural violence (1996:196).

The following paragraps will elaborate the way Yazidis were historically represented in academic literature, and reflects on how these ideas are carried into the present by the Kurdish society and Western representation. In that way it becomes clear how deeply ingrained cultural violence is shaping ideas about the needs and abilities of the internally displaced community. I will do so in order to further contextualize the victim-narrative of IDP Yazidi women, which rests on more than the current visible forms of violence alone.

Chistine Allison (2008, 2017)[49] extensively wrote on the way Yazidis are represented in literature from the nineteenth to twenty-first century. The paragraphs below mostly draw on the work of Christine Allison, and Ester Spat, a scholar who amongst other issues, reported on literacy in the community. They warn about the risk of non-Yazidis reporting on the culture because there have been so many misconceptions about the community as a result of sensationalist or ill-informed non-Yazidi writers (Allison 2008: 1). Since the majority of 'Yezidology' is produced by non-Yazidi writers, the discourse used when describing the community is often still leaning on a microcosm of 'Orientalism' (Allison 2008:2). Perceptions about education, religion and hygiene will be discussed in order to illustrate the unequal position Yazidis have, even within the Kurdish setting.

The first main misconception about Yazidis regards the education of the community. Before going into the field, I was told that Yazidis are uneducated and girls do not go to school at all. While the Yazidi religion indeed has an oral tradition, the last few decades have changed what this means to the community in terms of level of education. In the past, Yazidis had no written texts and writing was even forbidden to its followers, with the exception of the leading sheikh family. Sheikh is the highest class, surpassing Pir and Murid castes. However, the spread of compulsory education, general literacy, the interest of outsiders in Yezidi faith, and the interest of Yezidis in what outsiders have to say about them, has reshaped the tradition of the Yazidis, both in the

[49] Allison, Christine. (2017) "The Yazidis." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. Oxford
Allison, Christine. (2008) "Unbelievable Slowness of Mind": Yazidi Studies, from Nineteenth to Twenty-First Century." *Journal of Kurdish Studies:* 6 1-23.

way they practice their religion as in the way they interact with other communities (Spät 2008:393).

One of the misunderstandings is that Yazidis would be against formal education and that they do not permit their children to go to school (Maisel 2008:6). This can firstly be seen as a result of the relation with the other communities in Iraq. Throughout modern history, Muslims, Christians and Jews, got great autonomy in educating their children about their religions in the language that suited best. Minorities falling outside of the millet systems (confessional communities), did not enjoy this freedom and the Yazidi community was confronted with many attempts of 'official (political) and unofficial (religious, cultural) intrusion, not only on their doctrine and rituals, but on their method of teaching religious knowledge to the children' (Maisel 2008:6).

The common idea that Yazidi do not go to school can be easily defeated. In de 1970's, the first Yazidis graduated from university. Later, in 1979, Khidir Sileman and Khalil Jindy Rashow, two graduate students, got permission from their religious leader to document sacred hymes (Allison 2008:15). While in this example, the university graduates are from the higher castes - Pir and Sheikh - I met many Yazidi, both male and female, from the Murid caste who were or had also been enrolled in a university. This illustrates that there are no longer restrictions coming from the religious authorities. However, it depends on how traditional ones family is whether or not someone is actually allowed to study.

However, it has been dangerous for Yazidis to go to university. Some of the people I interviewed told me about the threats they faced when studying in Mosul, long before Da'esh were a visible entity[50]. This goes for both the students from the rural areas as from the collective villages and from Yazidi from Duhok. An example comes from an interview I had in Khanke Camp with a young women, who expressed her worries about the liberation of Mosul, fearing to have to return to the university were she faced hostile behaviour from Arabic fellow students and where more importantly, her sister was murdered on the grounds of her Yazidi religion (KH060503).

[50] Data on this topic was not consciously collected, but it came up during informal interviews and in one of the interviews in the camps. I have no evidence that can say something about other cities than Mosul. However, there have been five interviewees that shared their experiences about studying in Mosul. One of the interviewees was Ayad Khanky, a history lecturer at the University of Duhok who studies at Mosul University during the attacks on Yazidi scholars in 2007. Seeing that the Lalish-center tried to offer an alternative, I personally came to the conclusion that this is a recognized issue. For more information about the risks of being Yazidi in Mosul, see Maisel(2008) or Savelsberg (2010)

Another example is that of Sozan, the head of organization DAIK ('mother' in Kurdish), who remembers that during Ramadan, all students were advised to wear black hijab. Refusal would mean not to have access to the university, as well as facing threats of fellow students and radical groupings outside of the university.[51] Another informant, scholar Ayad Khanky, told me that he and his Yazidi professor faced death threats while he was enrolled in Mosul University. One day in 2007, he told me, they escaped a planned attack on Yazidi students in which 8 students died.[52] Back in March 2004 already, there had been flyers distributed in Mosul calling for "devine rewards" for those who kill Yazidis (Maisel 2008:4). As Maisel shows in his policy brief, attacks on the Yazidi community were hardly recognized, let alone being investigated. As a protective measure, the Lalish centers started helping Yazidi students from Mosul move to Kurdistan and continue studying in Duhok.[53]

There is a difference in access to education for Yazidi as a result of the location of ones village. Overall, the distinction depends on living either in the "rural" villages in Sinjar, or on the more urbanized parts such Sheikhan, Bashika and the Duhok province. Sheikhan was included in the Kurdish territory after the Gulf War of 1991, as was the holy ground of Lalesh. In this region school education is common, among the young and younger middle-aged generation especially. As a result, illiteracy is slowly disappearing (Spat 2008:394). This was reflected in the women that I interviewed in the camps. Those under thirty-four coming from Sheikhan were usually educated, at least up until high school. The women from Sinjar that I interviewed were mostly under twenty-seven, but the few that were older were illiterate. However, this cannot be seen as representative as I met these specific women in a class that taught them reading and writing in Arabic, explaining the majority of Sinjari among my interviewees to be illiterate.

However, Sinjar, a part of the disputed territories that still belongs to the Iraqi governorate, is known to suffer from overall deprivation. The district suffers from a lack of employment opportunities, persistent poverty and a low educational level (Savelberg et al 2010:108). The people I interviewed said that in most towns there was a primary school, and that they had to travel to the bigger towns for high schools. For university,

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[51] Author's interview with Director of DAIK organization, Sozan Ismael. Conducted on 30 May 2017 over Skype.

[52] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal conversation with Yazidian historian Ayad Khanky on 24 April 2017

[53] Author's interview with Sheich Shamoo, Director of Lalish Social and Cultural Center, 10 May 2017 in Duhok.

one has to be willing to move to a bigger city such as Mosul or Duhok. As explained above, studying in Mosul proved to be dangerous for Yazidi, limiting their education possibilities.

For Yazidis, but also Kurds and Arabs that I spoke to, it is common to live with your family until you get married: this tradition sometimes makes it difficult for girls to reach University if there is a bad infrastructure or unsupportive family. Still, most of the girls I spoke to went high school before, and some previously started university. One of the women I spoke to decided to live in this camp or at least stay in the region until her daughter finished high school and university if she wanted to, after that she wants to move back to Shingal (SH220402). Overall, the belief that Yazidis - and especially Yazidi girls - are not educated is not supported by empirical evidence from my interviews. On the contrary, most women under 35 that I spoke to, saw their access to education as self-evident.

Closely connected to the preconceived notion about their education, is the second misconception that Yazidis are "devilworshippers". As a result of the religious oral tradition, there have been many myths about the Yazidis that were believed, as there were no written sources that could prove otherwise. Eszter Spat wrote about how outside influences have made it seem as if Yezidis worship Lucifer, as the biblical story of the fallen angel reminds of the way the most important figure in Yezidi mythology came to earth. However, Spat explains that in original Yezidi mythology, there is no place for evil in general, let alone for a Devil figure (2008:397). According to one of my interviewees, traditional Yazidi do not even pronounce the word devil because recognizing him by calling his name could summon it to exist.[54]

Details about the Yazidi religion are increasingly well known now to the public. The reputation of the community is improving according to the Yazidi people and organizations I spoke to. According to Sozan from organization DAIK, it is partly as the result of the past couple of years and after Da'eshs attack on Sinjar that people got to know more about Yazidis. She mentioned that Kurds understand now that the people in Sinjar are living a simple life, but are not as underdeveloped as they thought before. The fact that people are less hesitant to reach out to the Yazidi community was visible when the hosting community opened their doors for the people that escaped Sinjar. One of the

[54] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal conversation before interview EM030503, 3 May 2017, Duhok.

displaced women that I ask about the relation between them and the host community states that they have been very helpful. She explained that in the first months, people from Duhok and Sharya would cook for the people that arrived in what later would become Sharya camp, as there were no organizations present yet that could take care of the big numbers of fleeing civilians.[55] Therefore, one could say that there is a shifting attitude towards the Yazidi community. However, their reputation might be improving, but some persistent misconceptions are still rumoured by their fellow citizens in Kurdistan.

The third misconception about Yazidis and the last one that will be discussed in this chapter, is that they would not care about their hygiene. According to Allison, Non-Yazidis in Northern Iraq state with deep conviction that Yazidis never wash (Allison 2008:1).[56] This was affirmed by multiple conversations I had with local Kurds with whom I discussed my research in the camps. An acquaintance that otherwise had been supportive of my research on Yazidi women stated that I should be careful when coming back from the camp. He claimed that while bad hygiene is always a problem in refugee camps, the Yazidi camps are particularly 'dirty', because he thought 'out of traditional reasons' Yazidis never wash.[57] The rest of our company nodded in agreement after this claim. Other people who I told that I interviewed Yazidis advised me to make sure to both wash my entire body with detergent and immediately wash my clothes. One person said he would burn his clothes if he were ever forced to go to a Yazidi camp.[58]

While being in any IDP- or refugee camp obviously brings health risks, nobody warned me about hygiene when going to the Syrian refugee camps for example, in which I had dinner two times a week and would meet up with my Kurdish friends straight after. Instead I was encouraged for working in this 'popular' camp, where there were better circumstances.[59] The better circumstances and reputation may be the result of the fact that -according to my translator- most Syrian people that are living in this camp, see the KRI as their new home because they are pessimistic about the future of Syria.

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[55] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal interviews with inhabitants of Sharya (village, not camp) 26 April 2017.
[56] Allison, C. (2008). Unbelievable Slowness of Mind": Yezidi Studies, from Nineteenth to Twenty-First Century. *Journal of Kurdish Studies*, *6*, 1-23.
[57] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal conversation with four Kurdish men 4 May 2017.
[58] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal conversation in Hotel Duhok 9 May 2017.
[59] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal conversation with four Kurdish men 4 May 2017.

Therefore, people accept their current conditions might be semi-permanent and are therefore trying to make a living from what they have.[60]

In the Yazidi camps, people might not be very optimistic, but they do still have the hope and desire to return to their villages when it is safe again.[61] In informal conversations with aid-workers and government officials, this was mentioned as one of the possible reasons that there is less infrastructures being set up in the Yazidi camps, as Yazidis see their camps as more temporal than the Syrian camps - of which most people know they are not able to return to their war-torn home country, with even less job opportunities than the economically instable KRI.[62] The deprivation of the Sinjar district and the economic disadvantages deriving from living there, as well as the everyday discrimination towards Yazidis regardless of their living conditions as Allison described it (Allison 2008:19), are partly legitimated and maintained by the ideas about the community's beliefs and abilities as described above.

4 Female Victimhood

He final section of this chapter will discuss systems of collective presentation and social power, and focus more specifically on Yazidi women. Besides the already existing notions that shaped the Oriental collective presentation of the Yazidi community such as 'backwardness', women are represented with an additional simplified narrative. Most media reports on Yazidis immediately turn to the spectacle of the hurt female bodies, or in other words: their status of victims of sexual abuse under IS. In these reports, the easy definable enemy Da'esh is the only thing that women have to be saved from. After being rescued from their cruel hands, and when welcomed back into the community, the most spectacular imagery is over, and media lose interest.

[60] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal conversation with Syrian Refugees in Domiz 1 (All Syrian camp close to Duhok):
In Domiz 1, there were numerous small shops and diners, in small brick buildings, sometimes with international fast-food brands such as the 'Pizza-hut' right at the entrance of the camp. Also permanent buildings with facilities such as a gym and a sort of cultural center with dance courses and children's clubs.

[61] Author's interviews: 60/80 Interviewees in Bajed Candala, Kaberto 1, Khanke and Sharya, those that did not want to return explained they want to move to (family) in Europe or work elsewhere in the KRI.

[62] Author's fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal conversations with NGO workers and officials representatives on the Kingsday celebration event of the Dutch Consulate General in Erbil, 27 April 2017

While the abducted women and girls indeed proved to be one of the first concerns expressed by the women I spoke to in the camps, most of the women I spoke to had not been abducted themselves, and dealt with a multitude of issues as a result of living in camps. Moreover, the women that had actually been abducted, also expressed a more complex victimology –as will be discussed in chapter three- and surprisingly also focussed their victimology largly around their displacement and the lack of mental and physical healthcare. This implies also the politically difficult to discuss narrative about the desire to return home to the disputed territory, that is still not cleaned from mines booby-traps left in the houses by IS.

Veronica Buffon and Christine Allison argued that 'Sinjari Yezidis' narratives and subjectives since 2014 are silenced across media representations in the West in favour of a "hyper-visibility" (Baudrillard, 2005, 1990, 1982) of women's "injured bodies", which mobilises a specific narrative of victimhood' (Buffon and Allison 2016:1)[63]. They explain that the portrayal of only "the injured body" conceals the diversity of female roles and positions within the Yezidi community, 'producing a homogenised and undifferentiated image of the "abducted women". The experience of older women, children, widows and the diversity of socio-economic conditions in the specific context of the Yezidi community are thus excluded from the representation that the injured body mobilizes' (Allison and Buffon 2016: 10). Painful enough, this also reflects in the way Yazidi women initially talk about their own victimhood, or the absence thereof.

That this exclusion of representation might have an impact on the women in the IDP camps, becomes clear when trying to speak to Yazidis and NGO workers about victimhood. An example of this is that, while approaching people in the camps to ask about their lives there, they would tried to find 'survivers' for me to talk to in multiple cases.[64] Women would apologize to me for not finding or being a victim of Da'esh. They would remain silent until they got the space to define their victimhood and talk about their own suffering.[65] After we sat down they would tell me about how they are victims of the current conflict too, and most of the women explained their victimhood as being a result from the insecurity as a result of their collective identity, but even more women claimed their victimhood was a consequence from living in the camp. Victimhood seems

[63] Buffon, Veronica, and Christine Allison. "The gendering of victimhood: Western media and the Sinjar genocide." (2016).
[64] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Sharya Camp 22 April 2017 and Bajed Candala, 19 April 2017.
[65] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Bajed Candala 19 April 2017 and Kabarto 1, 23 April 2017.

defined by the desire of researchers and journalists that come to the camps to report on sexual violence in the past, while most of the victimhood of women in the camps is defined by more direct causes.

Allison and Buffon also state that the 'Western media focus on women's bodies moves attention away from the very real suffering of Yazidi men, the workings of *namûs* "honour" and the collective nature of the catastrophe, which includes experience of men, women and children' (2016:2). They suggest in that way that the suffering of the man is overlooked as a result of the victimhood of the women. I think this formulation is incomplete without stating that women themselves are overlooked too, being surpassed by imagery of harmed female bodies, either their own or the harmed bodies of another woman in the community, disregarding the suffering taking place in the camps. Moreover, the focus on the hurt female body is disregarding the resilience of the women in the community that are taking care of their families, work while living in the camps, or go to university despite their circumstances. This reinforces the idea of a helpless and passive victim on the one hand, and on the other hand overlooks the complexity of the suffering that the internally displaced minority faces in camps in Kurdistan, of which the majority is facing issues unrelated to direct abuse under IS.

However, the hypervisibility of Yazidi women, both nationally as internationally, has also helped the community. An example of that is Nadia Murat, a young Yazidi woman who was abducted and escaped from Da'esh in 2014. She travels around the world to advocate for her community.[66] Having been held and raped by Da'esh militants, her stories have mobilized local and international NGO's that try to free girls that are still in the hands of Da'esh. In December 2015, Murat testified for the UN, as part of the effort of getting the crimes against the Yazidis officialy recognized as genocide. Nadia spoke publically about a subject that is usually taboo in the Middle East.

While it is not universally accepted, there is certainly progress in most part of the Yazidi community in terms of discussing sexual violence and holding the man rather than the women accountable for rape according to EMMA, organization for human development.[67] In the case of my interviewees, it was usually the women that were not abused that would talk about the hardship women have faced or are still facing while

[66] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Interview with four people active for organization Yazda, 3 May 2017, Duhok.

[67] Author's interview with Bahar Ali and Bayan Rasul, Directors of 'EMMA, Organization for Human Development', conducted on 12 April 2017 in Duhok.

being abducted by Da'esh members. Victims of sexual abuse themselves, would say that they indeed have been abducted and that they cannot talk about what happened to them in detail (e.g. SH220404). Others would describe their traumatic experience through words that would hide part of the events by stating they had been '*forcefully married'* to multiple men (my emphasis).[68]

Traditionally, the cultural context in Iraq blames woman for being sexually abused (including raped) and victims are cast out of the family (Al-Tawil 2012).[69] In the Yazidi community, women marrying (or sleeping) with men from another community would normally mean they have to be expelled from the community and in some cases killed.[70] However, after the huge scale of atrocities committed by IS, advocacy organizations - such as EMMA Organization for Human Development- convinced the religious leader Khurto Hajji Ismael (referred to as Baba sheikh) to make a public statement welcoming the Yazidi women back into the religion. The stigma on rape lessened when Baba sheikh encouraged the community to welcome the Yazidi women back into society (Neurink 2015:43).[71] Some of the interviewees even claimed women that come back are honoured and loved even more than the others.[72] However, there are still reports from the camps of women being rejected by their husbands because they were raped, but also because not all men can handle the traumatized state in which women return.[73] According to the directors of EMMA organization for human

[68] "Forcefully married" is the generally accepted alternative, when not wanting to say 'raped'. While this can be seen as a cultural practice related to stigma or fear, but should also be seen as part of a coping mechanism. These women have more psychological issues to deal with than shame, after enduring extremely traumatizing experiences for months or sometimes years. The systematic abused have left many women and girls speechless, clinically depressed and in life threatening shock.

[69] Al-Tawil, N. G. (2012). Association of violence against women with religion and culture in Erbil Iraq: a cross-sectional study.*BMC public health*, *12*(1), 800.

[70] Fieldnotes April-May 2017:Journalists I met and Muslim Kurds often refer to well-known case of "honor" killing of a Yazidi girl who eloped with a Muslim in 2007 (April 10, in the Yazidi village Ba'shiqa), which was filmed and shared on YouTube to prove backwardness of the community. See for an analysis of this case of Yazidi "honor" killing:
Phelps, S. M. (2010). The limits of admittance and diversity in Iraqi Kurdistan: Femininity and the body of Du'a Khalil.*Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, *11*(3-4), 457-472.
However, "honor" killing is a widespread issue in Iraq and the Kurdish Region in particular and thus cannot be approached as resulting purely from a (Yazidi) religious perspective. See for example:
Joly, D., & Bakawan, A. (2016). Women in Kurdistan-Iraq: issues, obstacles and enablers. The International Journal of Human Rights, 20(7), 956-977.

[71] Neurink, J., (2015) "De vrouwen van het Kalifaat", EPO. (Translated: "The women of the Caliphate")

[72] Fieldnotes Arpil-May 2017: Informal conversation with IDP women in Bajed Candala while looking for people to interview 19 April 2017 + Interview EM030503.

[73] Neurink (2015) Vrouwen van het Kalifaat.

development, Baba sheikh's message reached some of the girls still in captivity, giving them the strength to (attempt to) escape.[74]

Having brought so much attention to the community, Nadia Murat is seen as a role model or example for women from the Yazidi community.[75] Many girls in the camps also stated they wanted to be activists in one way or another, either though art or journalism. Another example of women speaking about what would normally be taboo, is Parween Alhinto, one of the girls filmed by documentary maker Reber Dovsky.[76] In the documentary, three girls are interviewed about their return into the community after having been held hostage by IS members for several months. However, the documentary focuses on their trauma and their gratefulness for being welcomed back into the community. Being filmed in Lalish, the sacred village of the Yazidi's, the viewer is not confronted with the reality that these girls face after their return, namely living in camps under poor circumstances. This again contributes to the simplified narrative surrounding the harm of the female body, and mystifies the welcoming back of 'survivors', while this practice is known by the community for over two years and well received now.

However, this narrative of the hurt female body did help to get attention fot the Yazidi community. Organizations that mobilized to improve women's rights have better access to the targeted recipient of aiding funds, development projects and education, in communities that are usually harder to reach as result of their geographical location, and perhaps also as a result of the solidified social hierarchies. Harikar, Zhiyan, Yazda, EMMA organization for human development, Acted, and DAIK, are a couple of examples mentioned by the women I interviewed of the countless other organizations that work on the protection and development of women's rights in and outside the camps. While the distribution of aid between the camps is uneven and sometimes clearly

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Author's interview with Bahar Ali and Bayan Rasul, Directors of 'EMMA, Organization for Human Development', conducted on 12 April 2017 in Duhok.

[74] Author's interview with Bahar Ali and Bayan Rasul, Directors of 'EMMA, Organization for Human Development', conducted on 12 April 2017 in Duhok.
And author's fieldnotes April-May: informal conversation with Arjan van de Waerdt employee of FreeYazidis.

[75] Author's interview with Bahar Ali and Bayan Rasul, Directors of 'EMMA, Organization for Human Development', conducted on 12 April 2017 in Duhok.

[76] Yazidi Girls Documentary, Reber Donsky, May 2016 Available at: https://youtu.be/iq8MWOrG5dE

uncoordinated[77], there are clear examples of outreaching programs specifically directed towards the women living in the camps, that women also claim to benefit from, both in their current circumstances as in the rarely discussed future desires. There is no reason to be optimistic about the displacement of the community, but it has brought the community a stage and spotlights to perform in and expressing their concerns and needs.

Concluding this chapter, the pre-existing ideas about the community are still salient when looking at the way Yazidis in the camps are portrayed by media and locals. These narratives and differences in social power impact both the expectations of the audience (organizations, journalists and scholars), as on the other hand the way the actors (the Yazidi community) will express themselves. The narratives on the community are conflicting with the actual abilities and desires of the Yazidis, as well as with the issues most prevalent to this displaced minority. While normally the performance as power is approached by scholars by looking at powerful politicians and the way these people narrate their strength, we see in the case of the Yazidis that seems to be their victimhood that is bringing them forward. Not in all aspects of life of course, as they are still displaced people, living under poor circumstances.

However, the women in the community have found a new platform and are in contact with organizations that would normally not reach them, while the reputation of their community is improving in the KRI. With the spotlights of the international community and NGO's directed on them, they find a potential stage to voice the suffering of their community and remind outsiders to continue the search for their abducted family members. In that sense, being able to perform victimhood at all is what brings the potential for power, even if it is on a small scale. Chapter three will analyze how symbolic inversion is brought into practice during my interviews and according to the organizations I spoke to, by focusing on the stories of the community itself, rather than the stories about them.

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[77] Author's Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Observations after visiting the four camps. Differences in terms of amount of active aiding organizations, but also regarding the quality and quantity of delivered (or absent) drinking water and food.

Chapter 3 Victimhood as agency

In chapter one, I described how Sissel Rosland and Mats Utas agree that victimhood and agency are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They showed that performing your victimhood can actually increase your political agency or can be an agency creating tactic in a conflict situation. Explaining this interaction of victimhood and agency, or even the symbolic inversion of victimhood is a challenging task, as it can quickly lead to presumptuous claims, as most interviewees are unmistakably negative about their current situation.

If only looking at the mobilization of hundreds of organizations and initiatives in the aftermath of the massacre at Sinjar, one could state that indeed, the performance of (in particular famous) Yazidi women has created an infrastructure for aid flowing to the camps. These organizations offering development or empowerment are now (more) easily accessible by women with previously little access to education or life improving institutions. This could technically and potentially lead to more 'agency' in the future. However, the presence of the opportunities does not automatically imply that women have access to these opportunities, nor that this would create a sense of agency.

In chapter two, I discussed the preconceived notions about the Yezidi community and Yezidi women in particular. These notions could lead to expectations about the abilities and desires of the displaced ethno-religious group. Because other narratives remain invisible, Because other narratives remain invisible, it can seem that the only wish of women that have been abused by IS is to be accepted by their community This perception is problematic as it not only reduces the image of the Yazidi women reduced to mother or wife alone, but also carries the implication that the source of the Yazidi community's suffering is restricted to IS (?). In reality, however, this is an overly simplistic interpretation that ignores the much broader range of issues that contribute to the formation of the community's victimhood.

This chapter will look at the script that is being performed on the ground by internally displaced (IDP) women in the camps I visited. It will analyse the way the displaced women express their victimhood by looking at their own *victimologies*, through the framing tasks of the way they defined their victimhood. I will analyse for both dominant victimologies the three framing tasks as defined by Benford and Snow

(2000)[78]: what causes women identify for their suffering, their proposed solutions and their rationale for engaging into action (motivational framing), as some of the interviewed women actively take part in the attempts to change the conditions in which they found themselves. It shows how, in some cases, the victimhood of the IDP Yezidi women is symbolically inversed to agency.

The two most performed victimologies in the camp were those of collective victimhood stemming from genocide and the more frequently referenced idea of victimhood originating from general human needs deprivation. both victimologies incorporate the idea that the collective suffering of the community is caused by other groups and that they are the only true victim of their particular situation.

Additionally, many of the younger women's victimologies expressed a counter narrative for the the expectations brought about by simplified and out-dated information about the minority and proved to be active contributors to the rebuilding of their community. The symbolic inversion of victimhood was most salient in the deprivation of human needs victimology, that showed more opportunities to participate in changing negative circumstances. These women did not deny their victimhood, rather they defined it in different ways to include themselves in the victimhood collective, in order to claim their own rights, or to participate in activities that improve the life of the collective.

1. Collective victimhood through genocide

1.1 The victimhood collective

As explained in chapter one, a victimology is an organized collection of the most common narratives that women used to express their victimhood. Rosland and Utas showed that expressing victimhood can be desirable, as it can bring different types of benefits. Additionally, Rosland claimed that in order to have access to these benefits, one needs to be part of a collective whose suffering is seen as legitimate. This collective is created by us/them dichotomies, creating the victim identity in opposition to an adversarial "other" by showing the adversarial party. Below it will become clear that this us/them dichotomy was not limited to the adversarial group, but extended to other suffering parties as well.

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[78] Benford, R. D., & Snow, D. A. (2000). Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment. *Annual review of sociology*, *26*(1), 611-639.

A minority of the women expressed their victimhood by referring to their position in the attack of IS on the community. While the genocide could be appointed as a main cause of their suffering, their specific problem identification is multifaceted. Interestingly enough, the women usually did not refer to their own, personal suffering when it comes to the current genocide. There are for example only a few stories told about how the women that have not been abducted got to the camps themselves. Details seem too painful to relive, and accounts stay limited to short statements when asked about it directly, such as that of a woman in Kabarto, who said 'we had to run away from Daesh, we had to run. I saw many people, dead. Then we got to the camps and the conditions are very bad. Nobody cares about us. Therefore, we want to move to another country' (KA230401).

Instead of talking about their own experiences, most women focus on collective victimhood, by explaining the suffering of the community and the general losses by the Yezidis in this genocide. They do so by firstly explaining that by being part of the targeted community, they are victims. Most of the interviewees add an adversarial frame, stating it has become impossible for them to trust the Arab community as a result of the genocide. The injustices they thereby experience lays both in the action of genocide, the shock of neighbours aiding IS, as within the inaction of the regional and international community. While almost all interviewees make the general statement that their Arab neighbours betrayed them - despite their previously friendly relations - only a few interviewees share personal accounts of this betrayal.

Additionally, the interviewed women feel victimized as result of their loss of family members and friends. They mostly talk about the women and girls that are still with IS, not about their killed or disappeared male family members. The absence of the women and girls is usually presented in a collective way, even if it concerns individual cases of personal loss. This contributes to the idea of collective victimhood as overpowering narrative when women would discuss their victimhood as resulting from the genocide. Women who are not personally missing any family members themselves showed the same concerns about the women that are still abducted as those with missing relatives. Women use the expression "our girls" for women from the Yazidi community, regardless if they know them or not. For context, see the quotations below:

> 'We cannot talk about what happened to us in the past, we just talk about our girls that are still with Daesh. We don't care about living in the tents as long as our girls come back' (SH220403).
>
> 'I feel like a victim, because our girls are still with IS. (…) We talk about it all the time, because every day, girls return, or we get messages that our women are dead' (KA230402).
>
> 'We have a tent, but we don't care about that. We want to return to sleeping under tree, if we can then have our girls back (SH220404.4).
>
> 'I am free now but many of my family members are still with Daesh. I live, but I am not happy because the others are not safe. I live but I have no life' (KH060502).
>
> 'I am mostly worried about the people that are still with Daesh. If they would return, everything will be good. What makes me very sad is thinking about the question: Until when should we wait and when do you give up?' (EM030501)[79].

All of the women I spoke to expressed their desire for the abducted women and girls to return, and some explained their suffering as a result of the absence of the women in their community. The women quoted above explain that being reconnected with their loved ones and/or the ending of the suffering of their loved ones feels like a priority over all other needs.

1.2 The competitive victimhood

The second distinction that shapes the genocide victimology is the aspect of competitive victimhood. In this form of victimhood, the victim does not accept another group's right to feel the same: the other suffering person's victimhood is illegitimate. I quote Ballinger again when I state that "Each group connects its own victimhood to other historical accounts of suffering (...), but denies the other group's right to make the same connection. The other group's suffering is redefined in political, rather than ethnic terms (...) and thus becomes incomparable to the own group's victimhood" (Ballinger 2004: 149). This will become clear in some of the examples used below, in which one of

[79] For context, an overview of which interviewees from the example above have personal relations with people that are still missing on IS territory:
SH220403: No direct family with IS, but people from the same village.
KA230402: No direct family with IS, but people from their city.
KH060502: Personal friends/family with IS.
EM030501: Family members with IS, both male and female.

the women claims that while others may have suffered, this was a side effect of the conflict, and their religious group was the only group targeted specifically. This resonates with what Masi et all state about competitive victimhood: "The concept of inter-group competitive victimhood (CV) refers to a group's motivation and consequent efforts to establish that it has suffered more than its adversaries", but also "nonadversarial groups who are victims of the same (or different) perpetrator group(s) may compare and compete over the severity of their suffering".[80] The quotes below show that there is not only a reluctance to see specifically Arab people as victim, but also other groups that – just like Arabs- have in fact been targeted by IS.

By referring to their previous suffering, the current genocide and their own innocence, they pose a clearly distinguishable boundary between their own good and peaceful community, and the other bad or evil groups in society. Moreover, the women I spoke to, acknowledge other communities also suffer under IS but make sure to put emphasis on the distinctive feature of slavery and sexual abuse that reveals them as the 'true' victims.[81] In that way the victimhood label becomes kind of desirable, as it implies authenticity of your experience and belonging to the community you are a part of. Here are three of the many examples from Sharya and Khanke camp that show this boundary framing in the performance of victimhood in very distinctive ways:

> 'We are victim because our Yazidi identity caused IS to want to want to kill you. We have many communities is this society, Sunni, Shia, Christ, Moslim, but they only killed Yazidi. We don't have rights or power in this country, that's why they could kill us' (KH060501).
>
> 'We are the only true victims. Daesh wanted to erase our religion. They took our girls, they didn't do that to others' (KH060502).
>
> 'Arabs are victim too, but not in the same way as Yazidi. There is a difference between victims. If someone dies in the war it is normal. (…) But in my case, everyday someone married me (forced 'marriage' is the prefered term for rape). They take girls that don't want to be with the man but they force them to marry.

[80] Noor, M., Shnabel, N., Halabi, S., & Nadler, A. (2012). When suffering begets suffering: The psychology of competitive victimhood between adversarial groups in violent conflicts.*Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *16*(4), 351-374.

[81] According to the Bahar Ali, director of EMMA, Organization for Human Development this idea is partly a result from silence on sexual abbuse in other communities. 'Other communities are not talking about rape. Christian, Turkmen, Shiites, but also Sunni's have also been victimized'. In turn, media cannot expose these stories to the public as they did with the cases of Yazidi women that faced rape.

> Girls from nine years old had a baby from Daesh. Arabs are victim too: they were killed and some taken, but it was only Yazidi girls taken by force to marry'(SH220404).

1.3 Victim Hierarchy

There also appears to be something I will call internal victim-hierarchy regarding the extent to which one has been exposed to the genocide, which exposes a clear idea what stories seen as 'valuable' to share with outsiders. Women that are perceived to be high in this victimhood-hierarchy are expected to share their stories with researchers like me, and other people that are seen as medium that can bring these stories to a broader audience.

While approaching people in the camps, I would ask people if they would like to sit down with me to talk about their lives. Before even bringing up the subject of victimhood, women would regularly excuse themselves saying they are no 'victims' or 'survivors', but that they were willing to help me find as they call it 'cases' to talk to. I would then interview these people first saying I am interested in all stories – and not only of 'survivors' - before being brought to people that were considered 'true victims' by their fellow camp inhabitants.

During the interviews with people that previously saw themselves as standing low in the victim hierarchy who did not describe themselves as victims before, would explain why as a matter of fact, they are victims of this conflict too. In general, the interviewees that I spoke to thought of the 'survivors' as more deserving of aid. Interestingly enough, some of the survivors continuously pointed out that others might have suffered more than they did. The position of 'survivors' in the camp was viewed as positive by interviewed inhabitants and in some contexts describes as 'sacred' or even more important to the community than before.

> 'Every day someone *married* me.(…) Every time I was taken to some new man for one month of *marriage,* then I was moved. (…) I cannot describe everything that happened to me, but it was a bad experience. But maybe others had an even worse situation' (SH220404, my emphasis)
>
> 'In the beginning we received clothes too. As a survivor we would get it first. Overall, we get aid first because they know who we are and what we have been through' (EM030501).

> 'I am not a survivor, I am lucky. When the girls were separated for transport, me and an other girl escaped when the man was busy. The survivors are respected by the community. They went through all the bad things but came home to us. They are like a sacred person to us because they struggled because they are from the Yazidi religion' (EM030501.2).

However, this positive reception of escaped women is not reflected in the description of the organizations I spoke to. For example, the directors of EMMA Organization for Human Development pointed out that there are still parts of the community that find it difficult to deal with the returned women because they see them as ruined, holding on to the traditional ideas about a woman's honour and religion.

Sometimes this leads to cases of Gender Based Violence (GBV), but in the least to stigmatization of the women coming to the camps after the first year, assuming these women had been abducted by IS. Director of EMMA Organization for Human Development, Bahar Ali, states that 'when women and girls are raped in this culture, it is not easy for people to accept it (…) The response of the community was better than everybody expected, community leaders and organizations expected it to be more difficult (...) But still it is not easy, not for the girl and not for her family because of this Arabic culture'.[82]

Whether or not someone would openly discuss what happened to them was according to my interviewees dependent on their age and marital status. While the married women could talk about their trauma openly, one of the interviewees state that younger girls are advised to not discuss it with anybody but doctors or therapists because otherwise it is 'maybe hard to find a man' (EM030501).

While non-Yazidi researchers such as previously mentioned dr. Orly Stern, or organizations such as EMMA Organization for Human Development register cases of negative reception of women that return from IS and show a general concern for Gender Based Violence (GBV), none of the Yazidis I interviewed critiqued other Yazidis. In some cases there were brief references to 'less developed' people in the camps, but these people were not included in the 'us' group when describing the boundaries of the victim collective. This exclusionist boundary protects the 'us'/'them' dichotomy, avoiding

[82] Author's interview with Bahar Ali and Bayan Rasul, Directors of 'EMMA, Organization for Human Development', conducted on 12 April 2017 in Duhok.

confusion over the character of the 'us' that needs to be innocent to keep it legitimate position and benefits of the in-group.

1.4 Responsibility and solutions: outside the community

The interviewees cast blame not only on IS and 'Arabs' for the genocide, but also on the government and the international community for their inaction during and directly after the genocide. Something else that is commonly discussed by Yazidis that are not living in the camp but only came up twice in the interviews, is the abandonment of the Peshmerga forces in Shingal. Interviewees would not answer follow-up questions about this subject or frame their answers carefully, as in the answers below:

> 'The entire world is doing everything bad for us. They knew what was happening but no international forces came in. Yazidis never did anything bad to other people, we always lives in peace and invited people into our homes, and still they hurt us' (SH220403).
>
> 'Before, in Shingal, there were people that could not protect or support us. Today, we live with those people that could not protect us. That makes me feel unsafe. I mean the Iraqi forces and Kurdistan government' (SH220404).

Living in KRG territory, receiving government aid and having mainly Kurdish (in some cases 'retired' Peshmerga forces) men guarding the camps can make it less attractive to appoint Peshmerga or KRG as the responsible for the abandonment of Shingal in 2014. I state this so blatantly, as interviewed Yezidis that are not living in the camps are more vocal about their disappointment in the KRG and the international community.[83]

As the women see the responsibility of the genocide in the hands of IS, Arabs, the national government and international coalitions, this is also where they hope to find solutions. There are three concrete plans of action, that need to be executed by the government with the help of organizations. Firstly, a shared sentiment I found in some of the interviews, is that the Yezidis want their children to learn about Yazidian culture and religion in school too, as they are now only taught about Islam, Christianity and Judaism. It would help the community to feel an accepted part of society.

Moreover, according to the people I talked to, it could create awareness about the community within other faiths if Yezidizm would be part of the curriculum for religious

[83] Author's fieldnotes April-May 2017: informal conversations with Yazidis from Duhok city.

education[84]. In that way they hoped to avoid the reoccurrence of violence towards their community based on misconceptions about their religion (KA230402). In order to make this happen, the Yezidis need influential NGO's to lobby with the government. An idea that is very unlikely to be executed as a result of the underrepresentation of the community in Iraqi and Kurdish Regional Government such as described in chapter two.

Secondly, while the abduction of the men and women cannot be prevented anymore, the Yazidis do hope that the governments and international funds can help them to buy their community members back from IS. Therein lies a challenge for organizations that are being funded by international aid, as most international actors do not want to finance IS. The KRG has made some funds available, but most money comes from private actors. Two women I met in EMMA's Women's Centre in Duhok explain that 'everything in life is bad. I am sick. I am empty. We gave all our money so that we could buy back our family members'. They add that if I or anyone else would give them 20.000 dollar now, they will repay you with 100.000 dollar one day. 'We are waiting to buy our family free' (EM030501). According to conversations with multiple organizations, it is Yazidi families themselves and European diaspora that paid for most of the hostages.[85] However, there are currently no reliable numbers available.

Regarding the genocide, the community hopes for the prosecution of IS members and supporters. In order to make legal claims, it is important for the Yazidis to have the genocide fully recognized. In order to obtain that goal, Yazidis talk to NGO's and international journalists. A young woman at Sharya camp says 'We need Genocide recognition, more help and attention for our lives in the camps too' (SH220404). In Khanke camp a young woman explains to whom it is best to describe your suffering to, if one was planning to share it. 'If we talk to NGO's, they can take our voice and help us.' Her aunt adds that 'Because we cannot talk with any people, sometimes it is good to talk to NGO's so they can talk to others about us' (KH060501).

For that same reason, young women returning from IS territory – that stand the highest in the before mentioned victim-hierarchy - speak with organizations and journalists. They have no time to heal, instead, their stories are instrumentalized to

[84] Author's fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal coversations with Yazidis from Duhok city, also reflected upon by interview KA230402.

[85] Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal conversation with employees from Yazda and EMMA Organization for Human Development. No actual sources for figures or numbers available.

testify the on-going genocide.[86] During the interviews with the directors of EMMA, they explain to me that some 'survivors' who were considering suicide after their return, see their ability to share their stories with the world so to get attention for the atrocities as a reason to stay alive.[87] Journalist Brenda Stoter Boscolo shares similar examples about the women she interviewed. One of the girls she interviewed was not strong enough to see her on the three first occasions they agreed to meet, but took the opportunity of sharing her stories the fourth time Stoter Boscolo visited the Womens Survival Camp, just outside Khanke camp.

A woman in Sharya I interviewed has the same commitment when talking to her, a fellow survivor, and a few female IDP's that did not fall into IS hands. She said that if I have time to return she will tell me more, under the condition that I bring her voice to "the government and organizations in Europe". The performance of victimhood can in that context be seen as a survival strategy, as well as a tactic that contributes to a strong representation of the victimhood collective, as it serves to legitimize the stories of suffering and encourages mobilization for the community.

2. Victimhood resulting from human needs deprivation

One of the notable findings from the interviews and the victimologies that derive from them is that the women mostly describe their victimhood partly as a result of their current situation, that is: their suffering in the camp. Most of the interviewees are connecting their collective victimhood to displacement, rather than solely to being attacked by IS. I should remind the reader that this outcome will undoubtedly be impacted by the fact that most people I interviewed were not abducted by IS, but even those who had been with IS explained their current victimhood as resulting from the poor living conditions and the limited access to aiding institutions, and mental health care in particular.

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[86] Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Brenda Stoter Boscolo, a Dutch journalist was doing research around the city of Duhok at the same time as I was. She interviewed young girls who lived in improvised camps next to the official IDP camps that I visited. She experienced directly how young traumatized girls were encouraged to talk to journalists and researchers. An account of her experience appeared in a Dutch article in 'De groene Amterdammer', available in: https://www.groene.nl/artikel/jezidi-vrouwen-bevrijd-en-nu

[87] Author's interview with Bahar Ali and Bayan Rasul, Directors of 'EMMA, Organization for Human Development', conducted on 12 April 2017 in Duhok.

> 'We are victims because we live in the camps. There are organizations that help us though. We are visited and supported by NGO's. Social workers give support for people with psychological cases' **KA20230405**

Over three quarter of the interviewed women explained their victimhood as a result of their lives in the camp. What they identified as the main injustices differ, but there are 3 reoccurring themes: A lack of basic human needs, limited to no access to (specialized and mental) healthcare, and deprivation of future perspective. These frames are more elaborate as they are expressed as personal experiences, rather than as the state of the community. Still, these stories contribute to the construction of collectives of victimhood, legitimatizing the prognostic frame that explains what should be done and activating both the NGO, community as themselves. In this victimology, I recognized some forms of symbolic inversion of the victim, by activating themselves to aid the collective on the grounds of their victimhood. This seems to be a result of the lack of trust in the 'them' (perpetrator), out of fear for an unattainable 'us' (other victims) and doubt towards the limits of the audience (NGO's and governments).

2.1 Basic human needs

The first frame, basic human needs, has the sub categories: Quality of food, shelter and safety. Here it becomes clear that there are different levels of services between the camps.[88] Some of the interviewees talk about the quality of the food: *'*it is not enough and it is bad: we sell the rice it to get better food: fresh vegetables' *(SH220402).* There are also differences between the camps in terms of the delivery of drinking water.[89] Women that have been in the camp from the beginning onwards, state that the quality and quantity of the food has diminished over the years. While there are many organizations active in and around the camp, three out five of the focus groups mentioned the lack of good food first, explaining that their malnutrition led to more illness. A woman at Sharya camps states:

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[88] Fieldnotes April-May 2017: Imagine that the camps I visited are the more advanced camps with an infrastructure build by NGO's. As a result of the limited timespan of my fieldwork, I did not visit the unauthorized camps, but just by driving through them it becomes clear my observations in the authorized camps do not represent the experience of many other IDP Yazidis that are worse off in Iraq, not to speak about the bordering Syrian camps, that are even more limited in means as a result of Iraqi and Turkish embargo's.

[89] Interviewees from Sharya, Kaberto I, and Khanke all described different amounts of water available to them.

> 'The food in the camp used to be good, we got vouchers/tickets to collect good quality food. Nowadays the food is very bad. They don't give sugar, only rice and oil. They used to give canned food too (fish etc) but not anymore' (SH220405).

This could be explained by the increasing amount of people in the camps, the awareness of the funding parties that the displacement will continue for a long time and they cannot spend budgets as quickly as in the beginning of the emergence of IDP's besides the already present Syrian refugees, but perhaps it could also be connected to the steadily decreasing amount of available funds. This final option will be discussed under 'suggestions for further research'.

The moment I visit the camps, it is hot and dry, but not as hot as it will become in the summer months that will follow soon after I leave, or as cold as it will be in winter. The heat and the cold worry the people. Some describe they have been promised better tents, but are still in the tent they received almost 3 years ago (EM030501). Many women from all of the camps describe living in tents is causing them to worry constantly. People are afraid of fire in the camp, since it could quickly destroy their temporary homes. In Sharya camp people experiences the gravity of the danger, as they state that a fire has killed children there some time ago (SH220405). Many people complained about the quality of the tents as one of the things that reminded them they are still victims. Women also say that the lack of privacy resulting from living in tents that stand side-to-side is making them ill and causes 'problems' (e.g.KH060504). In that sense, the quality of shelter strongly contributes to feeling unsafe.

There are also many safety concerns when living in the camps. Below there is the description of both the physical and psychological safety concerns the Yezidi women expressed.

SH220405.4: 'Here it is not safe. Someone could just cut our tent open and come inside and kill us. We are afraid of fire in the tents too. (More women agree about cutting tents and fire). We don't have a door, whoever wants to come inside of the tent can come. Our tents are standing close to Sharya village, we are not protected by other tents. Sometimes people from the village drink a lot of wine and then they don't know what they are doing and they will come to the tents, I experienced this once. Another day my little brother played with fire, and it was a big problem. If we are not with the children all the time, things can go very wrong. '

SH220404.2: 'The camp is safe but we are still afraid, don't dare to trust. We don't have services here, like water and electricity, that makes it unsafe too. Bad food also makes it easy to get ill.' 'No it is not safe. Before, in Singal, there were people that could not protect or support us. Today, we live with those people that could not protect us. That makes me feel unsafe. I mean Iraqi forces and Kurdistan government. Camps are very close to each other. This is also unsafe, if there is fire, everything could go up in flames. Also, there is no privacy, everything I say can be heard by others. That makes me feel unsafe. Maybe that is because of the Daesh period, I lost my trust in everything.'

Finally, a very important safety risk is that of gender based violence (GBV), one of the themes touched upon but only implicitly mentioned as an issue the women are struggling with in the camps. While it becomes clear from other research that GBV, including domestic violence and child marriage, forms a threat to IDP communities in general and in the Yazidi camps in particular, this research did not find clear data on this subject. This does not mean it is absent in the visited camps, but that it requires a different approach. For now, it could be interesting to think about what else it could mean that the issues that were identified so far all regard harm done by outer groups and the proposed solution require help from NGO's or foreign powers. Again, not focussing on the issues in your own community can be a deliberate strategy to ensure the innocence of the 'us' group is preserved, legitimating the delivery of aid and other forms of help.

2.2 Specialized healthcare

The second recurring theme is that of healthcare. Many people in the camps have in common that they are in desperate need of – specialized- physical and mental healthcare. This goes for both direct IS survivors as for women who suffer from living in the camp. An unexpected but notable issue is the huge amount of disability cases that needed extra medical attention. *These three women have disability cases [in their families]. Maybe if we would live somewhere else, Europe or somewhere, we would receive support for these cases. We need milk, medication, chairs and other additional things for the disabled. Here, there is no care for disabled (*KA20230405)*.* In about I/3 of the focusgroups I interviewed there was reference to disability cases in their family. However, it must be taken into account that some of these cases these were young children who suffered from congenital malformation, while in other it may be disability as result of injury during the displacement.

In general, people see the lacking infrastructure through which aid is distributed as the responsibility of Iraq and the KRG. The women I spoke to feel neglected by the government and some fear to lose the support of NGO's too. This is where a new competitive victimhood frame is exposed. The women experience the relocation of aid funds tagged for the internally displaced, as there were many people fleeing the territory formerly held by IS. A woman in Khanke explains:

> In the past the NGO's became to visit us. Now they are slow and don't come anymore. That is because now there are new refugees coming in: people from Mosul for example. These Arabs now get the help that we used to receive. NGO's are now starting to focus on other people. (KH060501).

From this quote, one can tell that it can be important to keep the label victim and to be able to defend the gravity of your own suffering, leading to competitive victimhood.

Moreover, I spoke to two 'survivors' at Sharya camp, who did not receive free medical and mental healthcare as they slipped through the maze, or as they claim: because they have been forgotten(SH220404). The women I spoke to, appoint governments and NGO's as responsible actors for their victimhood regarding healthcare. They explain that since their suffering mainly stems from their lives in the camps and that therefore the lack of aiding materials is to blame on passive governments or uneven

supplies by NGO's. As a solution, they ask for aiding support from "Europe" and NGO's as described before, but also state to want to help themselves.

Some women for example describe that the suffering of their community in the camps have inspired them to continue their studies, in order to work as a doctor(KA202304), social worker (BC190402, BC190403), psychologist(KA202301, KH060502) or nurse such as this young women in Khanke: 'I want to return to Snuni. I fulfilled my dream, I wanted to become a nurse and I did. I love it, because of the humanitarian nature' (KH060504). Recognizing from the beginning that this genocide would deeply affect the community, some of the young women came up with long-term plans that could help their community from the inside out. A 29 year old Shingali medical worker in Kabarto I stated:

> 'I am a medical worker here at the centre. I studied psychology before, and I am receiving training here to perform as medical worker. In the beginning we could rely on the kind hosting community, but there is more people that need help than there are people that can or want give help. I am happy to help my community. Before it was not necessary to work, but now I think 70/100 IDP's work' (KA202304).

At EMMA organization for human development I also meet some Yezidi women that fled their homes in 2014, but that have a good job and a house now. One of them is now a Social Worker at EMMA, she talks to women that were abducted by IS and helps them to rebuild their lives. "*I am actually a graduated pharmacist. I will do that again but right now, this is more important*" (EM030503). It becomes clear that these women are motivated because they witness the severity and urgency of the situation. They see themselves as part of the solution and selected their (temporal) paths based on their understanding of the reality lived by Yezidis. What will be discussed in the final part of this thesis is to what extent this mobilization can really be seen as resulting from the conflict and whether this is leading to agency. But first, I discuss the way in which women felt deprived of their futures, both in terms of their opportunities as well as their ability to return home safely.

2.3 Future deprived

I found feeling future deprived an interesting frame, because it so clearly contradicts the expectations that chapter two its preconceived notions suggested. The

subcategories are (lacking) development opportunities, such as job opportunities and personal development opportunities, and the access to and quality of education. And finally, the uncertainty about returning home (and in some cases 'living the simple life'). The discussed themes sketch a pessimistic future perspective. The interviewed women over thirty-four years old –often with children- do not discuss their own futures, and instead largely focus their complaints around the future perspective of he children in the community. These children growing up in camps, sometimes having to deal with a second generation war trauma, have limited access to education, and even less job opportunities when they grow up according to the fears of the interviewees. On the other hand, the younger women (under twenty-six) express their victimhood through the limitations of their own development opportunities, but also show how their circumstances motivate them to be involved in actively aiding their community.

Some of the younger women explained that they feel a victim because the conflict or their displacement did not allow them to finish parts of their education. Two An interviewee from Khanke said that for Yazidis it is especially important to finish education, because the community is disadvantaged in many other aspects of life. She stated: 'when we grow up we want to be doctor. We have no rights, therefore we want our people to have good education and university so we can be part of politics and change things for our community.' (KH060502). A girl from Kabarto 1 adds:

> 'I feel a victim because I cannot finish school because of the conflict'. 'In the past I was a very good student. The education here was really bad. My grades became much lower when I went to school here. My future is ruined' (KA230402).

For this they blame not only "the Arabs" who collaborated with IS, but also the governments in Iraq. While people do not complain about the limited development opportunities before 2014 (such as described in chapter two), they do feel that the government is not invested with them right now. Another interviewee describes: *This NGO gives us support and training, not the government, they don't care about us* (KA20230405).

This grim image is slightly brightened when speaking to the younger women, who seemed eager to contribute to concrete solutions of the problem. In order to improve their chances in the future, the women that are able to attend courses and

trainings. Some of the younger interviewed women already found jobs as a result of the courses they are following and through the network of NGO's active in the camps.

> 'When I came here, I had not finished my high school yet, so getting a job was not possible. Here is camp I finished high school, and I'm now going to college. Sometimes I work with a newspaper. If I get the chance I work with an NGO, but they don't always need help. Gian and Yazda for example. First I was working as volunteer, after that I got the paid job. Per section in the camp, there were two people asked by the organization active in the camp, to give psychosocial help to other people in the camp. I am working with the newspaper RGO and Z-agency, I report about the life in the camp, I take pictures too. I like this job' (KH060503).
>
> 'Because we all live here, family and friends experience the same suffering: you cannot tell them everything. Now we work with an NGO, it is very different. If you work, you learn how they help us, and how you can help others. It is very important to us' (KH060503)

2.4 Return home

One of the more complicated aspects of their uncertain future is that of their possible return. This puts their victimhood in a more politicized light, as most of their homes lay in heavily disputed territory. As stated before, many of the interviewees long to return home, to their houses, and live their lives the way they did before if it is safe to return, or move to Europe, where the women assume to be safe from the treats they face in Iraq (and Syria). They also long to live amongst other Yazidis and no longer live together with other communities, specifically the Arab community, as they lost their trust in the Arabs they lived with when IS emerged.

When asked about returning home or collaboration with other communities to guarantee a safe future for Yezidi in Iraq, many of my interviewees mentioned they were unwilling to collaborate with Arab people because they explain not to trust any of them. The quotes below show the adversarial framing, as well as the inter-communal competition over victimhood that was mentioned earlier:

> SH220402.2: INT1: We cannot trust any Arab men. We used to trust to them, but they caused all the bad things that happened to us when Daesh came. The Arab

people that were living around us closed of the road so that Daesh could get us. INT2: Not all Arabs are bad. We have good men and bad men in every community. SH220403.2: INT3w: We cannot work with any Arab people. INT5m: Muslim men took girls from Yazidi girls, that is very bad for the Yazidi religion. If Muslim men take Moslim women, it is normal: not a problem for religion. INT3w: We cannot work with any Arab people, because we cannot trust them anymore. There have been Arab people on television that said it is okay if Muslim men take girls that do not want to marry.

SH220404.3: Arabs are victim too, but not in the same way as Yazidi. There is a difference between victims. If someone dies [in conflict] it is normal. (…)They take girls that don't want to be with the man but they force them to marry. Girls from nine years old had a baby from Daesh. Yes, Arabs can be victim too: they were killed and some taken, but it was only Yazidi girls taken by force to marry.

From the excerpts above, it becomes clear that the interviewees do not feel safe to return to a life in which they live together or collaborate with Arabs. Concerns about inter communal distrust also came forwards in a PAX report about the future after IS (PAX report, After IS, p.53), based on interviews conducted in other camps. On top of that, the excerpts above reveil 'competative victimhood' as described by Noor et all. Claiming victimhood through denying other people their victimhood also surfaced in interviews in other camps, such as in this excerpt from Khanke: *We are the only true victims. Daesh wanted to erase our religion. They took our girls, they didn't do that to others* (KH060502).

All the interviewees want to return home, but all of them state it is not safe to return yet. The women do not literally present this as cause of their suffering, but the women are praising their former lives and claim everything will be better if they could return home. They know it is unlikely to ever be the same again, partly because of the loss of their family and community member, and partly as a result of the destruction of their homes and the surrounding infrastructures. The governments should take their responsibility for the reconstruction is according to the interviewees, but some of them state they do not want to return without the protection of international forces, such as this women from Khanke camp:

'We wanted to return but we cannot. We need the world to recognize the genocide, and they have to protect us. We do not trust our neighbors anymore, all

of them: Sunni, Shiia: we want protection. This is our right. If this is arranged, we will return' (KH060501).

The interviewed women fantasise about what it would be like to return to their old lives, and some of the younger women say they want to contribute to the reconstruction too. *"I want to finish my study and build a new Shingal. If I complete my study and return to Shingal, I can help as an engineer, I am now studying for my Master degree"* (KA230402)

Other young women I spoke to would bring up subjects like the level of high school education in the camps, the quality of food and what that does to a person, job opportunities in the region and about political representation of their ethnic religious minority.[90] They showed that former articles about the community celebrating educational opportunities for Yezidi girls as a result of displacement, forgot to mention the increasing normalization of education for Yezidi women and men in the past two decades in some of the cities.[91] Chapter two pointed out the historically entrenched ideas about Yazidis that bring an additional layer of vulnerability for the displaced community. However, from the interviews illustrated that this is a way more complex community, striving for emancipation for women within the community and their own emancipation in Iraq or the KRI.

There is little international attention for the issues described in the interviews, as media are too busy reproducing the imagery of the spectacle of the harmed female body. This thesis revealed the hidden narratives, that are not published regularly, but are of pivotal importance in shaping the victimhood experience of IDP women, and represent an image that goes beyong the idea of the 'passive female victim'. It showed in subtle ways how victimhood is a label claimed to benefit the community and the individual. Moreover, it proved to be a label that allows the women to express a sense of belonging, and the urgency to change the current social situation. Is that the symbolic inversion as described in the introduction that illustrates how victimhood can be the source of agency?

[90] Author's fieldnotes April-May 2017: Informal conversations In Sharya and Bajed Candala, and recorded during SH220405.

[91] Fielnotes April-May 2017: Expressed by SH220404, confirmed by organizations EMMA and DAIK, and Duhok based historian and researcher Ayad Khanky, whose article on this subject will be published in 2018: A. Khanky. The future for Yazidi children after IS (forthcoming).

3. Symbolic inversion Agency between self-fulfillment and survival

3.1 Careful Analysis

I think that I should put the developing optimism about the potential symbolic inversion into perspective. The definition of agency established in chapter one, was *"the consciousness that it is possible to establish principles for their own choices and actions regarding her norms or values, and that one is able to act in accord with those principles".* The agency as described throughout this chapter, was in fact only the ability of young women to express their suffering, to go to courses or to be employed, and to work in servitude to their community in their own camp. If working on itself would be addressed as agency (based on the principle women want to work and are enabled to do so under these circumstances), I have to be careful not to fall into the trap described in chapter two, namely: the tendency to underestimate the abilities and desires of the actual community –rather than the imagined, reified concept of a underdeveloped religious group-.

When regarding a group as backwards, uneducated, or undeveloped, one may forget to see the potential living standard people envision for themselves, whether that is a future goal or an unexpected level of development to return back to. While the displaced community is indeed struggling with emancipatory issues, just like in the rest of Iraq, their men and women are far from simple. The paragraphs below explore some of the findings in my data that shaped my image of the interviewed women.

Women from a rural background above the age of 36 that I spoke to indeed had a very pessimistic attitude towards their futures and wanted nothing but to return to their former 'simple life' (KA230405). However, I spoke to many younger educated women from both cities and villages who showed to have desires that go beyond the ideas about the community created by literature and myths in society. Moreover, the women who were not educated themselves did talked about the necessity of education and broader opportunities for future of their children, including the girls.

About half of the interviewed women who were working or following courses that could provide them with skills to improve their opportunities, did not work before coming to the camp. These were mostly women over 34 years old. Organizations mobilized on their victimhood and provided some of the women with opportunities that were out of reach in their hometown as a result of lacking funds, infrastructure or

traditional values. Most of the women over 36 were not educated and did not work previous to their lives in the camp.

However, not all women I spoke that were not working, desired to work or get further education, or faced practical challenges seemingly unrelated to traditional values. Firstly, education is free, but transport to university is not. Not all women could practically afford to make those travel expenses. At the same time, I spoke to multiple younger women who were combining their jobs with high school or university in order to sustain their family's household. However, for women with children it is more complicated to be employed, get education or participate in courses, as there is no childcare and few alternative structures in the camp that they can rely on. That is a second issue that stands in the way of women developing their skills and future chances.

Moreover, not all camps have primary school and certainly no secondary school. Therefore, children from some camps need to take the bus to another camp to receive education. As this costs the family money that they need to buy additional food, some families choose not to send their children to school. I spoke to five women who stated to send their children to the farmers to work because they could not afford sending them to school. In the same way, I spoke to 5 other women who stated they could not go to courses or would soon drop out of the Arabic reading and writing course they were currently following because they had to stay with their children:

> 'It's a bad situation here and we need money. While I am in this course now, I will stop next week to work with a farmer. My children don't go to school anymore, we need them to work at the farm too' (KA20230405).
>
> 'I don't do anything, my daughter is disabled and my other daughter has pshycological issues, so I am bound to staying with them at the tent' (KA2023040)

3.2 A sense of agency?

The method of this research does not suffice to claim there was an actual 'sense' of agency among the women. While claiming that younger women that I interviewed make a contribution to the increasing agency of the community, their actual attitude regarding the work they do to obtain remains unclear. Different reasons were mentioned about what working meant to these women and different factors impacted the credibility of such expressions. For example, when interviewing women that were all working for the

same organization, they would be eager to explain the emancipatory process they are going through. Whether they actually felt empowered, or whether they felt the eyes of their organization luring over their shoulders was not always clear to my translator and me. In general, it was in the cases were employees of organizations were present that women would elaborate on their victimhood status the most, while also explaining how their work was helping them cope with their current living conditions.

All of the employed women I spoke to currently work for their community through organizations connected to the camp they inhabit. From the interviews with younger women, it became clear that is generally accepted for women to work as long as it is within the camp - to guarantee safety, but also out of traditional reasons- (e.g. SH220403 + BC190401). In the case of young women from the smaller villages, the opportunities (and permission) they received to work were exceptional. At Sharya, one of the women said:

> *It is normal, we know many people that work. If we work with NGO's in the camp we will meet many people. Before the camp, we were not working. Before it was very bad if girls would go to work, or even school: but now it is normal. If girls finish high school, they could not go to college: now they can. Before they had to work on the land, we lived in a rural community (*SH220402).

In a conversation with one of the IDP women in Bajed Candala who is – like many other women I spoke to – a social worker in her own camp, she explained how interaction with hosting communities and 'urbanized' Yazidis impacted this more traditional part of the Yazidis living in rural areas. According to her:

> 'At home, if a girl would want to go to school, the people would talk about her. It's not good is she goes to school. Girls cannot do anything if the community does not allow it. (…) Now we are in the camp, the girls can go to school. Before, the girl cannot go.
>
> They need the money, therefore they work. We see the European people that work with NGO's here, both women and men are working. We want to be like them, we see they do good. The people say: okay, that girl can work, then my girl, my daughter, can also work. The NGO people give awareness trainings about schools and very good schools. After the Ngo's came, people started sending their children to school. Some of the children did not go to school in Shingal, but now are going to school.

> We have good relationships with people from Duhok and Zakho. Communities from Duhok and Zakho send their people to work in the camps, in the Yazidian camp. They send people and girls. In that way they show that they think this place is safe. The people in the camp then think: if the city people show their trust with their girls, we can do it too, and then they send their girls to work' (BC190401).

Even if is was not for the traditional attitude of some families, women and girls would have difficulties working outside of the camp because the job opportunities are limited, since the KRG is still struggling with the impact of the economical crisis that the KRI slipped into in 2014.

Women in the camps occupied jobs varying from cleaner to doctor, yoga- to cooking instructor, from nurse to journalist and many are trained to be social workers. With the limited aiding funds, it is necessary to work for everybody who is able to under the deprived circumstances. One could say that the desire to work is rooted in the community's survival. Therefore, working women in the camp may not be searching for prestige or accomplishment per se, but still fulfil a role that is inspired by their collective victimhood. This, too, reflects agency or the consciousness that it is possible to change current social situation. The mobilization inside the community seems very effective, as they now what issues to address. This interviewee explained for example how her own community mobilizes on the grievances of the collective: 'We need more teachers for the youth here, there are not enough people to teach the children and the youth. So now our friends are studying to become teacher' (BC190401).

Many of the women I spoke to said that working was also a helpful coping mechanism to deal with the sorrows and boredom that result from them living in a camp. In Khanke camp, I spoke to a group of 7 women who were all working 'with the trash', helping to clean the camp and the little park built within it. They stated:

> 'I'm very happy because I can go outside the home, I see people outside and talk a lot. I'm sad on the other hand that this job is only for 33 days. (3): I am a student and I work too, to help my family. We earn 25.000 Iraqi Dinar per day. (5). I finished my college and work with this NGO, I also work at the hospital, as a volunteer: I am a nurse there.
>
> (6). I like this job, because it is paid. It's help for my family. But it will be over in some days. I hope to find other work, because being outside of the tent is good for

> us. (7). My mother cannot work. We are all girls, so it is very good that I work. It is good to be outside the tent (KH060501).

3.3 A change of heart?

Working was not only mentioned as survival strategy or coping mechanism, but also contributed to self-actualization. Working was described by some of the women as means to obtain their full potential. Interestingly enough, especially some the younger women, explicitly expressed their desire to work in a creative field, or wanted to use their creativity to give voice to the suffering of their community. Here below are two accounts of young women I also interviewed in Khanke camp:

> 'I was looking for a job, because it is good to go outside the tent. I go to visit families and have new friends. I looked for job and got one. It is good if women have jobs and not only the men. (…) When in the past I didn't think about [working]. But when I was going to school I realized that only men were teaching, only my uncles and brothers were working. I didn't want that. I always knew I wanted to draw. I finished my study and then decided to work and do what I want and what I like, to develop my skills. (…) I work for Unicef, I give psychosocial support and help to raise awareness about Yazidi Women. When I go to a family, I make drawings about what I hear. I sell these works' (KH060504).
>
> 'I am working with the newspaper RGO and Z-agency, I report about the life in the camp, I take pictures too. I like this job. (…) I want to complete my studies, to become professional psychologist. I want my family to go to another country, but I want to stay in Iraq, not go to Shingal, and work with a newspaper. If the situation stays like this, I cannot stay in Shingal, if it would be safer, maybe I would live there. Before, I went to Italy, stayed there for 7 days. (…) In Rome, there was an exhibition for the newspaper, some of my pictures were up there' (KH060504).

Overall, the idea of finishing follow-up education was perceived as good and desirable for girls and boys in the camp.[92] This was often described in the context of servitude to the community but also as self-actualization, as describes above by interviewee (3) from

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Author's fieldnotes April-May 2017: Especially discussed in Sharya camp on 22 April 2017 and Khanke camp on 6 May 2016. Do note, Sharya has a school, but Khanke kamp does not.

Khanke, who states that is important for her to work especially as a woman *(KH060504)*. This growing wish to work or awareness about changing perspectives on traditional roles, is visible in other interviews too, especially amongst the women under 30. Many of the young women I speak to manage to go to university despite their living conditions. Sozan Ismael, the director of DAIK, is Yezidi herself and describes this process of emancipation emerging over the past decades. She takes her own life as an example when she says:

> 'Yes, the community is changing. Not only though Daesh, also through time. When I grew up, no women in my village had gone to school. The ideas of my communities are changing. Women can now make their decisions themselves. There are still families that don't allow their girls to study of course, but I have seen many girls already that talked to their family and finished education. More than in the past.'[93]

I got the same impression from the interviews I conducted. While some younger women would explicitly state they were not allowed to go to school if their parents would not agree, many other young women had gone to school and were going to university or working now, explaining that their parents never held them back. According to Ismael, the attack of Daesh on the community brought a new level of awareness about the importance of the development of girls and women in the community:

> 'After Daesh came and caused the big disaster, our community changed, they allowed all the girls to take their rights and even in the camp I visited I saw many families that allowed their women and girls to go work with an NGO as a volunteer (…). The girls themselves take their rights, build their personalities and the future. We destroyed the challenges there were in the past. Even in my own family, they did not allow me to finish my study. But I told them: No, I should finish my education, I want to graduate university and Be Something in the future.'

[93] Author's interview with Director of DAIK organization, Sozan Ismael. Conducted on 30 May 2017 over Skype.

The director of Daik explained that most of the women and girls that escaped from IS the fastest, were women and girls that could read and write. They managed to contact family members to inform them about their locations, as they knew how to use the internet and had memorized phone numbers. According to her, this made people see that for the survival of the community that has been repeatedly attacked, people have to be self-reliant. In that way, the self-fulfilment of women that are working remains closely connected to aiding the community, rebuilding their homes or awareness raising about the genocide. This too, is a form of agency. Being able to help brings purpose to the lives of many of the people I spoke to. Mary Issa, a social worker at EMMA explains that

> 'the only ones who make true progress are the ones that work or make use of our mini-credit to start their own business. Those that can provide for their families. Some men had issues with their wives working, but in the end they see it is better for all'.

As claimed above, while some of the women with a rural background explained it was not done for them to work in their home towns or even to receive education, the younger women from the bigger villages and cities were unimpressed with the level of education in the camps, as they were already ambitioning a job with their college or university degree. The opportunities that arise in the camps should be seen in that context: many women getting the jobs were already in a position to get education and employment opportunities. For the girls and women that did not have the opportunity to get education or be employed before, this is a welcome change and the performance of collective victimhood does lead to agency for them. However, the organizations are more vocal about this potential empowerment, as the people that are being 'empowered' still live under strongly disempowering circumstances.

This diversity has to be taken into account when designing aiding programs, to ensure the community will not only survive but can also continue their own development. People might be helpless under certain conditions, but they are certainly not hopeless. The resilience and abilities of men and women from the Yazidi community should be acknowledged to avoid the seeing their lives in the camp as a continuation of their former lives.

While their victimhood has increased their visibility and the desire of outsiders to help, many of the narratives surrounding their victimhood focuses on the aspect of the harmed female body, while their personally performed victimhood is that of mental

health issues as a result of years of deprived living conditions and uncertainty about the future. This less 'sexy' subject does not seem to resonate with international media or the locals who are mostly focussed on the suffering of the group in terms of hurt female bodies too.

Not only women, but whole community needs emancipation in society. They have been (made) dependant on kind gèstes from the government before the conflict and now rely on NGO infrastructure. While NGO's can help make some steps in preparation, the real change will have to take place on a legal level, both in the KRG as in Iraq, that still apply discriminating laws against the Yezidi community, that has avoided political and legal representation of the community in society.

Conclusion

In this thesis, it became clear that some of the interviewed IDP Yazidi women are enabled to obtain new forms of agency, by performing their - involuntary assigned - role of victim, but also by their performance of collective victimhood regarding both the genocide as well as the current displacement and resulting human needs deprivation.

While it is culturally abnormal to explicitly express that you or members of your community endured sexual violence, it is culturally accepted to openly perform your collective victimhood status. Interestingly enough, Yazidi women speak openly about the rape cases, but the more salient aspect of the victimhood narrative amongst these interviewees was living in a camp, since a majority of the women have luckily not been abused by IS-members. More importantly, women describe the collective aspect of the suffering, rather than their personal experiences.

There are many incorrect ideas about Yazidis that impact the expectations of their capacities and desires as a result of both European Media that is only referring to the traumatized female body, as well as out-dated Arabic and European publications that suggest backwardness of the community. Equally important and perhaps more surprisingly is that the Yazidi community is not only discriminated against by other communal groups, but also less protected by law and underrepresented in high ranking positions in society and politics. This is obstructing change and the community wide emancipation in the broader sense of the word.

The public performance of "famous Yazidi" such as Nadia Murat, but also the performance of women in the camps themselves, are increasing the access of women to institutions that focus on survival and protection, but also on empowerment that goes beyond the traditional gender-roles of the community. Women make use of the aid industry by openly discussing their victimhood, and in that way can get their community the means they need for the improving of their current social situation.

While his has normalized for the community, the international media keeps on covering the –to them- unexpected positive response of the 'traditional' Yazidi community on the reception of the formerly abducted women. The persistent narrative of the hurt female body, potentially distracts from the structural and epistemic violence done to the marginalized community long before the current conflict, that is still impacting the way the community is portrayed –and treated- on a day to day basis.

The narrative focussing on the spectacle of sexual violence, with detailed stories of rape under the hands of IS members, avoids accountability or responsibility on the side of the state or international actors. Moreover, it neglects the agency and possibilities of Yazidi women, that go way beyond 'being accepted back into the community'. Instead, it became apparent from my interviews that many women (and men) have received more education that news articles and academic literature give the community credit for. The community itself plays a big role in the support and reconstruction of the lives of their own IDP community.

Whether the newly found agency of women in particular is sustainable is questionable, both as a result of the instable political and economical aspects, as well as the social aspects of general deprivation of the Yazidi community. Another factor in the case of the empowerment of Yazidi women that men are not included in the emancipation projects and women that now experience new agency, may see their ability to work confined to time and space: their current work in the camp is a necessity for the survival of the community, not necessarily a reflection of what the future holds. Additionally, while their victimhood has helped them to obtain new forms of agency in this specific context, it is also the label of victimhood that is holding the community back, as a result of the structural underestimation of Yazidis in past and present, leading to further marginalization. Most aid seems directed towards survival, rather than future empowerment of the community.

Still, victimhood is causing a ripple effect in the obtainable agency of women in camps, who are living together with people from the same ethno-religious community but with a multitude of backgrounds, skills and desires. Besides living together with people from their own ethno-religious group, it is the interaction with Kurdish hosting communities and urbanized Yazidis working with NGO's that helped to create the space young women had been looking for to perform their agency. Many of my interviewees see themselves and other women accessing the job market with newly acquired skills or: with skills by the education they already had before, but is overlooked by uninformed observers.

While at this stage the victimhood does not result in clearly visible collective action in the form of a movement or social organization, it did result in action for the collective. Women found agency though their victimhood, but not only in the political or militarized way as academic scholars suggested before when describing the process of

obtaining agency by performing ones victimhood. This thesis showed that victimhood and agency can be mutually constitutive, and that successful framing can symbolically invert victimhood. In that way this research has contributed both to the debate on victimhood as on gendered representations in conflict settings.

Suggestions for further research

While this thesis already addressed a multitude of themes, theoretical frameworks and issues, I would like to make some suggestions for possible future research, as a result of gaps I found in both theoretical and empirical aspect. To start with the obvious: I have suggested unraveling the other narratives that surround the Yazidi community and their victimhood. What I did, was researching the other narratives of women in the community, yet again surpassing the men of this diverse group. It would be interesting to get a better understanding Yazidi men, their honor and pride, and the impact trauma has on their lives. How does victimhood –as a theoretical concept and lived reality- impact the abilities and desire of IDP Yazidi men? I am also curious as to see what role men could play in the further emancipation of the Yazidi society.

Secondly, while being in the field, it became clear to me that many of the programs currently aiding the displaced community are struggling with diminishing or even disappearing funds. Especially the organizations focusing on the (re-) empowerment of the community have faced budget cuts of the past year. I wonder, where is this money coming from and how will this impact the opportunity structures that have now managed to get vulnerable girls and women to participate in social life. Will this also impact the women that have recently returned after Mosul's liberation?

What I found interesting to see, but did not find enough data on, were the networks of 'community of practice' in the camps. Women that would help each other to deal with social life, to inform each other of were to get required help and who to trust –and who not to trust-. I think it could be helpful to aiding parties to get a better understanding of how people 'map' the camp. This may be partly depending on how old the interviewees were, as I witnessed that young women seem more active in the network building across the camps.

A final suggestion is to investigate the relation of the community to children born of war, as there is not a lot of research on this, while it threatens the lives of mother and

child, and shows how their perceived social identity in Iraq is influenced both by personal perception, as well as by Iraqi law that only accepts the father's religious identity. Therefore the ID card of the baby of a Yazidi women who has been abducted by IS, will 'brand' the child a Muslim. This will put extra pressure on the relationship between mother and child, as well as between families and the broader community. Moreover, it poses and additional threat to the future of the Yazidi religion and the struggle to maintain and develop the identity of their community.

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