The ways of coping with post-war trauma of Yezidi refugee women in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study shows the strategies for coping with the post-war trauma of Yezidi refugee women who escaped from the Sinjar genocide by ISIS in August 2014. The interviews that became the basis of this research were done only for the psychological support of the women staying at the Diyarbakir Refugee Camp in Turkey between January and March 2015. This research was shaped with aim of understanding the women, sharing their experiences, and being these women's voices, therefore the interviews given by Yezidi women were evaluated with grounded theory methodology. Coping strategies included gratitude for surviving, finding meaning for massacres, politicalization, being self-enclosed, mourning rituals and worship, strengthening women's solidarity, and showing solidarity with sexually attacked women through silence. War trauma reactions included mental unpreparedness, the sense of being betrayed, verbalization about the genocide (but not the sexual attacks), re-experiencing the trauma and mood changes.

Coping with post-war trauma of Yezidi refugee women in Turkey

Natural disasters, and other events that result in unexpected violence to the body's integrity and threats to life, to oneself or to close relatives, lead to psychological trauma due to the creation of helplessness and intense fear (APA, 2015). War is a man-made disaster which results in people being uprooted, or even exiled. In addition to these things, it affects survivors more severely than natural disasters (Pedersen, 2002; Tol et al., 2010). Humanity witnessed another brutal man-made disaster in August of 2014 in Iraq, targeting the ethnic and religious Yazidis. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a terrorist organization that attacked Sinjar, where over 200,000 Yazidis were located in Iraqi Kurdistan. After the 'be Muslim or die' declaration of ISIS, the Yazidis had to abandon their residential districts within 2 h, leaving all of their possessions in the homes (Escaped, 2016). The military forces dependence on the Barzani1 government had retreated from their positions in Sinjar with the purpose of defending themselves, so Yazidis were abandoned to their own fate. While the people with cars were able to escape to the Dahok region of Iraq, the ones without any vehicles had to go to Sinjar Mountain on foot, facing starvation and dehydration, to seek refuge in Dahok (Barber, 2014), or in Turkey (Bassano, 2016). Meanwhile, hundreds of People's Defense Units (YPG)2 came to Sinjar in order to help the Yazidis, even though they were too late to prevent the massacre. Almost 5000 Yazidis who could not escape from Sinjar were killed in only 5 days, between August 3rd and 8th of 2014, and approximately 5000–7000 Yazidi women were taken into slavery by ISIS (Escaped, 2016). YPG attempted to save the remaining Yazidis who got lost on the Sinjar Mountains and helped them cross the border into Turkey by means of opening a corridor through the mountains toward Rojava in northern Syria (Bassano, 2016). Then, refugee camps in Turkey were built quickly by Kurdish Municipalities of People's Democratic Party (HDP)3 by their own efforts, one of them located in Mardin and the other was in Diyarbakir. Like the researcher of this article, a lot of volunteer activists worked at refugee camps to support the refugees. It is a well-known fact that people who are forced to leave their homeland suffer from severe traumatic experiences due not only to war, but also from re-traumatization caused by poor living conditions after war in the country where they find refuge (Brune et al., 2002). Because these camps were built by the efforts of only municipalities without being subsidized by the government, their opportunities were highly limited. In order to supply minimum living standards, such as shelter, food, clothing, and primary medical care, local people shared their own food, local markets contributed food, feminine, and baby care products, local pharmacies supplied medicine, and private hospitals supplied health care. As well, a small amount of money was transferred from the salaries of all employees who voluntarily

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1 Masoud Barzani (16 August 1946) is an Iraqi Kurdish politician who has been President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region since 2005. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masoud_Barzani.


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extended their work hours for the camp's needs. Therefore, Yazidis had to endure the limitations of their living conditions in the refugee camps in addition to the war trauma. Unfortunately, these Yazidi camps were closed in January 2017 by the Turkish government, under the state of emergency after the failed coup attempt, and Yazidis were forced to uproot again (Al-Monitor, 2017). This was not the first time they had been uprooted in their history (Suvari, 2004). To understand why Yazidis have been targeted over hundreds of years by other ethnic and religious communities is crucial to comprehend their current situation from a historical and ethnographical perspective.

Being a Yazidi in history

Yazidis are a Kurdish ethnic group living in Northern Iraq, Armenia, Syria, Southeastern Turkey, Azerbaijan (Suvari, 2003), the Caucasus (Izady, 2015), and since the 1990s, in Germany as a result of migration (Nicolaus, 2014). Although it is impossible to give a clear number because of their dispersed settlement, the Yazidi population is roughly estimated to be about between 500,000 (Bassano, 2016), and 650,000 (Acyilixlidiz, 2010). Currently, they constitute less than 5% of the Kurdish population (Izady, 2015, p.153). Their language is Kurdish and their religion is Yazidism—their name comes from ‘Yazdan’, meaning pure, merciful, and generous God, and ‘izid’ means angel. Yazidis believe in a god; they are monothetic, and have been influenced by Islamic Sufism due to the land they have historically settled in. However, their belief system is very complicated and shows influence from many sources including ancient Zoroastrianism (Nicolaus, 2014; Suvari, 2009). Endogamy (marriage within the community) is highly protected in their communities and exogamy is punished as anathema because they consider themselves as a chosen people (Suvari, 2005). Also, they have a strict caste system composed of secular individuals, clergy, and executive classes; exogamy is allowed neither among other ethnic groups without Yazidi origin, nor between their own castes (Suvari, 2005). So, it can be said that Yazidism is not only a belief system among their religion is Yazidism due to the fabrications against Yazidis even today continues to cause of their dispersed settlement, the Yazidi population is roughly estimated to be about between 500,000 (Bassano, 2016), and 650,000 (Acyilixlidiz, 2010). Currently, they constitute less than 5% of the Kurdish population (Izady, 2015, p.153). Their language is Kurdish and their religion is Yazidism—their name comes from ‘Yazdan’, meaning pure, merciful, and generous God, and ‘izid’ means angel. 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