Voices of Yazidi women: Perceptions of journalistic practices in the reporting on ISIS sexual violence

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we use a global transnational feminist perspective to explore Yazidi women's perceptions of the nature and impact of media reporting on women and girls who survived captivity, rape, and trafficking by the self-declared Islamic State (ISIS). Through 26 face-to-face interviews of displaced Yazidi women, we identify five narrative themes that characterize interviewees' reflections in the wake of these atrocities, including the sense of pressure women felt from journalists and other sources to share their stories of ISIS captivity; the belief that some journalistic practices are putting women and girls at risk; the recognition of the severe emotional toll on survivors' that results from repeatedly telling their stories; the sense of urgency and usefulness of going public nonetheless; and the resultant feelings of frustration and betrayal that the willingness to share their traumatic experiences has not resulted in a concerted global response to the genocidal attacks against the Yazidi people. Our findings suggest a paradoxical narrative of victimization and resistance in women's media engagement that is indicative of a kind of “bargaining at the intersection of patriarchies” that has implications for journalists covering sexual violence in conflict zones.

Introduction

On August 3, 2014 Islamic State (ISIS) militants brutally attacked Yazidi villages and towns throughout Sinjar in the Nineveh plains of Iraq. They killed thousands, abducted an estimated 6386 men, women and children and displaced the entire population from their ancestral homeland. Militants justified these extraordinary acts of brutality on religious grounds, subjecting women and girls to horrific sexual violence and enslavement (Otten, 2017). According to the UN, by mid-May 2016, 2587 had escaped, of which 937 were women (United Nations Assistance Mission to Iraq, 2016). Following the Mosul liberation, many remain missing and reliable figures are still unavailable. The survivors who escaped are suffering a range of negative emotional and psychological consequences due to the atrocities they witnessed and experienced (Herman, 1992; Hardi, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2015; Tekin et al., 2016; Otten, 2017).

Islamic State abuses were many (Otten, 2017), but the significant media attention focused mainly on sexual violence against women and girls, far exceeding reporting on other crimes against men and boys, or the underlying factors that contributed to the conflict. Local and international journalists went directly to the victims and survivors to report on the details of rape and slave markets. Desperate for help, the Yazidi community that welcomed the women and girls back in an unprecedented move, also facilitated and encouraged them to disclose the horrors they endured under ISIS.

Although the first escapees denied having been raped, they gave astonishing accounts to journalists of the brutality perpetrated by ISIS fighters against Yazidi women and girls. Again, women in the Global South became objects of global media discourse as a “Yazidi rape and enslavement” narrative began to dominate much of the domestic and international news about ISIS (Shackle, 2015). Stories ran with sensationalist headlines such as, “Yazidi woman held as sex slave for three months by ISIS and gang raped speaks out about hideous suffering” (Halkon, 2015), "ISIS sells sex slave girls for as little as a pack of cigarettes” (Smith, 2015) and “Yezidi Women undergo operations to restore virginity” after being raped by Daesh.” (Mustafa, 2015). Human rights advocates questioned whether journalists were harming victims by such reporting, questioning journalists' methods used to elicit information, and the resulting sensationalist publications that exposed victims’ identities (Minwalla, 2015; Amnesty International, 2014; Crawford, Green, & Parkinson, 2014; Shackle, 2015). They also raised concerns that in such a conservative culture, the reports could...
ultimately stigmatize the survivors and Yazidi women collectively (Minwalla, 2015; Shackle, 2015). The framing of the stories with gratuitous details of rape and the publication of images and names, raised concerns about compromising the safety of victims and their relatives (e.g. Biggs, 2015; Callimachi, 2015, 2017; Engel & Novogrod, 2015; Mazher, 2015; Tomlinson, 2014). Human rights groups reported that journalists had violated well-established ethical principles for reporting on sexual violence in conflict zones (Amnesty International, 2014) created by the United Nations Global Protection Cluster and the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (see Appendix). Missing from these critiques of journalists were the voices of Yazidi women, themselves.

In this paper, we explore the perceptions of Yazidi women as sur-

vivors of gender-based violence, and as women who had eluded ISIS capture but were displaced by the attacks, on the how journalists gathered and told their experiences of the genocidal attack. Our re-

search intends to fill an important and timely gap in the scholarly lit-

erature on media coverage of sexual violence in conflict zones as there is little work that investigates how women in communities under siege feel about their experiences with journalists. This project adds to the feminist literature on media, the theoretical understanding of women's agency, and highlights practical considerations for journalists covering gender violence in conflict zones.

Theoretical framework

Our scholarly exploration of Yazidi women's perspectives on jour-

nalist practices that followed the escape of Yazidi women and girls from ISIS captivity is analyzed through the lens of transnational feminist theorists working in feminist media studies. We also pay particular attention to a central feminist theoretical concern with the difficulties women face in demonstrating agency to shape how journalists portray them and their experiences, and to use media discourse among other strategies, to resist oppression. Broadly speaking, a transnational fem-

inist paradigm takes a critical look at the impact of globalization on dominant and subordinate groups from the perspective that current global power relations are the result of historical trajectories that emerged from earlier periods of imperialism, colonialism, slavery and industrial capitalism that have and continue to produce multiple op-

pressions and multiple sites of resistance for people living in the Global South and the diaspora (Mohanty, 2003). Transnational feminist scholars have vocally questioned the construction of “third world women” as “natives” and “other” and in need of liberation from oppressive patriarchal, religious and cultural traditions in ways that obscure the patriarchal arrangements that undergird women’s lives in the Global North (Deepak, 2011).

Additionally, transnational feminist scholars have questioned lib-

eral feminist approaches to global human rights work that ignore the agency and self-determination of non-Western women and assume that women in the Global South are largely “victims,” and that conditions of inequality can be ameliorated by free market investment, or an individual empowerment approach by “white saviors” from the Global North (Deepak, 2011; Grewal, 2013; Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1987). Instead, a broad transnational feminist theoretical framing encourages us to examine the web of nation-states, global financial institutions and corporations, including media institutions, that shape global gender, race, class, national, religious, and cultural dynamics in profoundly unequal ways, (e.g. Hedge, 2011; Shome, 2006; Vujnovic, 2016). Vujnovic (2016) theorizes that global news coverage is rooted in global capitalism that is fundamentally exploitative of women, children, and the poor, and is dominated by violence that is often transnational in nature. Generally, contemporary transnational feminist media theorists call on scholars to further examine not only the intersections of race, class, gender, sexualities, geographies and structural and cultural di-

mensions of global media institutions and practices, but also the social processes by which marginalized groups simultaneously appropriate and resist media representations.

Our research is also informed by contemporary sociological per-

spectives on human agency, as well as feminist social science perspec-

tives on the nature of feminist consciousness and resistance within patriarchal regimes. We draw from the basic sociological principles that structural and cultural components of social systems set forth complex paths of least resistance, or variable sets of choices that seem most reasonable for individuals to make at any given moment in social in-

teraction to ensure a sense of belonging (Johnson, 2014). Depending on the constellation of structural and cultural arrangements, individuals have more or less freedom to reject these paths, as the possibility of human agency, the ability to act on one's own volition, is always present even if the consequences are dire. Specifically, we are informed by Deniz Kandiyoti's (1988) influential concept of “patriarchal bargains” to understand the kinds of choices available to Yazidi women as they engaged with journalists, as well as women's own interpretation of the nature and usefulness of those interactions. By “patriarchal bargains,” Kandiyoti refers to culturally and temporally grounded coping strate-
gies that women “use within a set of concrete constraints” (p. 274), suggesting that “[d]ifferent forms of patriarchy present women with distinct ‘rules of the game’ and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression” (p. 274). Kandiyoti's fa-
mous call to avoid a universalizing and essentializing definition of both “patriarchy” and “feminist consciousness” illuminated the importance of analyzing “the nature of patriarchal systems in their cultural, class-
specific, and temporal concreteness and reveal how men and women resist, accommodate, adapt, and conflict with each other over re-

sources, rights, and responsibilities, [and] dissolve the artificial divi-
sions apparent in theoretical discussions of the relationships among class, race, and gender, since participants' strategies,” in this case dis-
cursive media strategies, “are shaped by several levels of constraints” (p. 285).

Previous literature

Over the past several decades, there has been no shortage of scho-

larly critiques, feminist and otherwise, of media reporting on gender-

based violence. Within this literature, feminist media scholars have raised important questions about women's agency in their appropria-
tion and complicity with the complex dynamics of racialized, gendered, global capitalist media institutions, including work that addresses re-

sistance to and compliance with the representations of female sexuality and violence as depicted in film, internet, and pornography. Other work examines women's engagement with media as a part of organized po-

litical struggle, such as in Sarnavka's (2003) work on the successes and failures of women's human rights activists who use mainstream media as a vehicle for change, and Queen's (2008) examination of the digital content of an Afghan women's rights organization, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), in an effort to show the importance of global and digital coverage for feminist rhetorical anal-

ysis. Geertsema (2009) examines three “idealypical” feminist ap-

proaches to resisting oppressive gender practices and representations in media, namely: 1) liberal feminist perspectives that narrowly focus on women as members of home nation, and focus critiques on improving the coverage of “women's issues” within that nation state; 2) neoliberal, white global feminist perspectives that exercise a U.S.-centric approach that fetishes women around the world through news coverage that lacks understanding or critique, and may be in the service of the relations of global racialized and gendered capitalism; and 3) feminist media practices informed by critical analyses of globalizing forces and con-

nections to local patriarchies, that produce news that foregrounds these local–global linkages, where “reporters understand the culture they work in, give voice to those who are affected by issues and events, and use progressive story stances” (Geertsema, 2009, p. 165).

There is also a decent body global feminist scholarship that ex-

amines the extent to which media accounts of cases of rape and sexual
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