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## UK Newspapers' Portrayal of Yazidi Women's Experiences of Violence under ISIS

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# **UK Newspapers' Portrayal of Yazidi Women's Experiences of Violence under ISIS**

## **Abstract**

Although as of early 2019 ISIS has lost all of the territories it occupied, scholarly and media attention has continued to focus on its barbarity and brutal treatment of the women living in its former territories. The extremist group has committed a long list of severe human rights violations since it seized territories in Iraq and Syria. In this article, I aim to illustrate the reporting of this violence against the Yazidi women from 2014 to 2019 by the UK's national newspapers because the media's portrayal of these women shapes public opinion and policy towards this group in relation to the violence they have endured. The results indicate that while UK national newspapers give preferential treatment in their coverage of Yazidi women's experiences of violence, abuse, and torture, they often ignore these women's agency and activism in terms of the extent to which these women resisted and coped with the atrocities they endured.

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## Introduction

On August 3, 2014, the so-called Islamic State attacked the area around the Sinjar district of Iraqi Kurdistan and first killed hundreds of Yazidi men before kidnapping the women and children.<sup>1</sup> Despite very few people had heard of the Yazidis before this attack, in the days and weeks following these events, the international media and western governments began to follow the Yazidi community in earnest. 2014 saw a great deal of international media coverage of the Yazidi women who had suffered violence at the hands of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The so-called Islamic Caliphate's strict interpretation of Islam allowed it to legitimize all attacks and atrocities it committed against its enemies. Within the context of Yazidis, ISIS's Research and Fatwa Department declared that unlike Christians and Muslims, the Yazidis are a pagan minority, and so, they can be "robbed, killed, displaced, and forced to convert to Islam because they are not the People of the Book."<sup>2</sup> When ISIS seized the territories in 2014, the women were subject to sexual and domestic violence and ISIS' English-language magazine *Dabiq* justified this brutality by claiming that Islam permits sex with non-Muslim slaves, including girls.<sup>3</sup> The international community especially denounced the plight of these Yazidi women and girls in the strongest terms because of the brutal treatment they suffered under ISIS.<sup>4</sup> One of the survivors of this violence, Nobel laureate Nadia Murad, a leading advocate for survivors of sexual violence and genocide has come to represent the public face of the Yazidi, publicizing these survivor's narratives and championing their rights.<sup>5</sup>

In early 2019, with the United States-backed forces' announcement that they had driven ISIS out their final stronghold of Baghuz, this territorial victory served to raise international attention to the devastated lives of the Yazidi people who had been living within ISIS' former territories. Even though ISIS's barbarity has targeted other smaller ethnic groups including both Sunni and non-Sunni, and Christians, Shiites, Sunnis, Shabaks, Kurds, and Alawites, this article explores how the UK national newspapers have covered the Yazidi women's experiences of violence from 2014 to 2019.<sup>6</sup> It covers the period in which ISIS seized the Sinjar district of Iraqi Kurdistan and the accounts of these women's escape or rescue that began to appear in the international media. Specifically, examining how the UK news media has covered this humanitarian problem is important because the media plays a significant role in forming public opinion and public

policy. In addition, very few studies have examined the British media's representation of Yazidi women, which became particularly apparent in the search for articles. As Carll states, "the media not only reflects what is occurring in our society, but also reinforces stereotypes of how women are viewed, both as victims and perpetrators of violence."<sup>7</sup> This article's key finding is that the UK media tends to cover these women's experiences of violence based on gender stereotypes of what a victim should look like, which further reinforces women's victimization rather than focusing on these women's self-autonomy after all the atrocities they have endured.

## Of News Frames and Stereotypes

This article aims to trace the representation of Yazidi women in British newspapers from 2014 to 2019 and investigate how the British press has represented the coverage of stories relating to Yazidi women, drawing on Entman's model of framing. Entman's model provides an important basis for this article as it highlights journalist's intentions as they select which news events to cover and it rejects the idea that journalists simply select frames unconsciously in the course of communication. As a concept, a wide range of disciplines such as psychology, discourse analysis, media analysis, and economics use framing to understand and investigate communication and communication-related behavior.<sup>8</sup> Robert Entman offers a model for framing which provides the most widely employed definition in political communication:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evolution, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically, frames diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe.<sup>9</sup>

Foundational works in media framing described frames as schemata of interpretation or interpretive packages.<sup>10</sup> On one hand, Goffman argues that it is not easy for human beings to interpret their personal experiences and make them meaningful. Therefore, we apply interpretive schemas or primary frameworks to interpret events meaningfully.<sup>11</sup> Entman, on the other hand, evaluates framing in

relation to the media and demonstrates the process by which journalists cover any event or issue. He asserts that frames operate in at least four different locations in the communication process: The communicator (which he refers to journalists), the text, the receiver, and the culture.<sup>12</sup> Communicators are those who decide what to include or omit, guided by existing frames. The text is the second location where we encounter framing. In text, there is a need to consider the absence and presence of certain keywords, phrases, stereotyped images, source of information, and sentences that reinforce certain images of the event or the issue covered. Regarding the receiver, he points out that although the communicator intends to guide the receiver's thinking and conclusion, the receiver may or may not reach the same conclusions about an issue. Lastly, Entman includes culture as another important frame; here, socially constructed sets of common frames about discourse and thinking apply.

With this in mind, it is crucial to analyze the framing patterns newspapers use because newspapers' choice of topics, information sources, and perspective, affects their reader's perceptions and reactions. For example, Nacos states that the media tends to report news within the bounds of explanatory frames that cue the audience to place the reported events, issues, individuals, groups, and state actors into a contextual framework of reference. These patterns influence the way we define and respond to the issues reported.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, in 1996, Entman posited, "a frame operates to select and highlight some features of reality and obscure others in a way that tells a consistent story about problems, their causes, moral implications, and remedies."<sup>14</sup> That is to say, the reporters, editors, producers who shape the news media's outputs decide what and whom to cover and how.<sup>15</sup> As Scheufele and Tewksbury put it, "media effects are dependent heavily on people's homogenous networks and their selective informational diets, which reinforced existing attitudes rather than change them."<sup>16</sup> This is, however, not to presume that journalists influence their audience's perceptions using their homogenous networks and their selective informational diets only. The mass media also depend heavily on predispositions, schema, and other audience characteristics that influence the way they deliver messages in the news.

In McQueen's words, "television re-presents the real worlds, at a superficial level, in ways that are analogous to how we 'interpret' experiences through our sense of seeing and listening."<sup>17</sup> According to Hall, these media-filtered representations of reality serve to propagate

distorted, exaggerated, and/or misleading stereotypes as true representations of individuals or group's into a reductive set of oversimplistic characteristics.<sup>18</sup> Further, the mass media's insidious reach across societies and borders serves to establish these characteristics as true characterizations of particular individuals or groups. However, Scheufele and Tewksbury believe that media-filtered representations, which are the exact same schemas that journalists use, do not necessarily try to spin a story or deceive their audience. In fact, framing is "a necessary tool to reduce the complexity of an issue" in a way that makes it accessible to lay audiences.<sup>19</sup> This raises the question of how this process of representation functions in the news media.

The rich body of research on media representation illustrates that power relations fundamentally and inextricably inscribe all forms of representation.<sup>20</sup> Entman argues that "since power is the ability to get others to act as one wants and assuming coercion is not an option, exerting power to affect behavior in a democracy requires framing—'telling people what to think about'—in order to influence the attitudes that shape their behavior."<sup>21</sup> According to Orgad, power relations shape media representations, which, in turn, further shape and propagate these power relations by constructing knowledge, values, conceptions, and beliefs that further bolster these relations of power.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the production of knowledge, conceptions, and beliefs by the media portrays particular knowledge, values, conceptions, and beliefs as meaningful or truthful while the media suppresses or discredits other knowledge, values, conceptions, and beliefs as false, marginalized or frames them as deviant. These categories include gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, age and sexuality, and occupations.<sup>23</sup> Hall's 1997 work also reflects this notion: Stereotyping tends to occur in contexts that feature gross inequalities of power and power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group.<sup>24</sup>

As discussed earlier, the communicator decides what stories are covered and how to report them. At this point, however, it is important to differentiate between bias and slant in the news. According to Entman, "slant occurs when a news report emphasizes one side's preferred frame in a political conflict while ignoring or derogating another side's."<sup>25</sup> Journalists bring the opinions of particular individuals groups or organizations to the fore by interpreting in a particular way, which then causes the news coverage to be more or less favorable towards an individual or group. In other words, the process of news making and news-production is not straightforward. Although

objectivity norms help journalists report objectively, “journalistic production processes cannot guarantee continuously equal treatment of competing frames when competitors’ skills differ and relevant facts change frequently.<sup>26</sup> Regarding news biases, however, reporters and editors allow their personal opinions and ideologies to guide their news decisions and ultimately influence the way they cover any issue or event. Entman proposes three major meanings of bias pertaining to media coverage; a) news that purportedly distorts or falsifies reality (distortion bias); b) news that favors one side rather than providing equivalent treatment to both sides in a political conflict (content bias), and c) the motivations and mindsets of journalists who allegedly produce the biased content (decision-making bias).<sup>27</sup> We need to make distinctions among these three concepts to be able to understand the media’s role in distributing power so that we can analyze media communication in terms of how it frames textual content.

The literature on media and conflict reveals different types of media frames pertaining to political conflict related to this article’s research question. There is a need to address news frames used to cover conflict, as the media are by far the most important source of information about politics and conflicts for most people.<sup>28</sup> The literature identifies a handful of frames featured in the news such as the conflict frame, human-interest frame, economic consequences frame, morality frame, and responsibility frame.<sup>29</sup> Of these, the conflict frame provides the source of much discussion. This frame is important for this article as well because it emphasizes the conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions as a means of capturing audience interest. Because of the genetic definition of conflict, researchers can operationalize the concept of conflict frames in different ways in their studies. To highlight the distinction between different types of conflict frames, this paper discusses two possible dimensions of conflict frames under the umbrella of conflict framing: Interventionism and substantivizes.<sup>30</sup> In the former, the journalistic voice is visible in news-based conflict frames; in other words, journalists intervene in the news message. In contrast with interventionism, non-interventionist conflict frames provide detached descriptions of a particular political conflict in that they do not include journalists’ interpretation of the issue covered. Next, substantive frames mainly focus on issues and ideas, while non-substantive frames highlight concepts such as strategy. Thus, these conflict frames help to analyze how the UK national newspapers have covered the Yazidi women’s experiences in terms of the extent to which the reports mention ISIS’s violence, the women’s experiences, and

journalistic voice. The next section discusses transnational feminist studies as a theoretical framework to situate the Yazidi women's portrayal in the context of the broader literature.

## Theoretical Framework

This exploration of UK newspapers' portrayal of Yazidi women borrows from transnational feminist theory, and, more broadly, from the general feminist concern about the difficulties women face in demonstrating agency. Transnational feminist theorists assume a critical stance toward Eurocentric analytic paradigms and criticize the effects of discursive colonization on marginalized women's lives and struggles. According to Mohanty, it is not the framework that has changed. Rather, she asserts that the relationship between political economy and culture remains crucial to any form of feminist theorization. She points out that "it is just that global economic and political processes have become more brutal, exacerbating economic, racial, and gender inequalities, and thus need to be demystified, re-examined, and theorized."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, transnational feminist scholars wish to highlight the material complexities, realities, and agency of third-world women's bodies and lives. These complexities reveal that unequal global gender relations cause the myriad global problems affecting women. Therefore, we need to organize the discussion of issues affecting women regardless of these women's socio-economic and historical backgrounds.

Postcolonial and transnational feminist theories share the same central themes: Power and resistance. They focus on the complexity of power relations rooted in historical and transnational contexts and the agency of non-Western women.<sup>32</sup> Postcolonial feminist theory is concerned with the agency of third-world women, which discourses of colonialism, development describes as the passive victims of oppressive religious and cultural traditions, and the West represents these women as requiring protection.<sup>33</sup> Following this line of reasoning to its logical extent, Angharad Valdivia challenges orientalist stereotypes about third world women and offers a useful frame of reference for the representation of third-world women. In her book (2000), she demonstrates how third world female subjects and their images assert agency and resistance that defy simplistic renditions of her as a monolithic other.<sup>34</sup> In other words, as third-world bodies enter the global realm of representation and discourse, it is impossible to describe these bodies from a

homogenous orientalist perspective because of the complex nature of their presence.

Regarding the role of the media as it relates to transnational feminist practice, Vujnovic argues that the “media shows responsibility towards the subjects whom they present, as it [the media] has the potential to play an adverse role on the lives of women and transnational organizing.”<sup>35</sup> She goes on to explain that the mainstream media agenda provides little information about women’s narratives of sexual violence, terror, and labor exploitation even though they represent global issues. These rarely exposed realities, however, when these issues are covered by the media “they are seldom told in the way that would challenge dominant discourses.”<sup>36</sup> To challenge this dominant discourse, Couldry and Curran offer to work on what they call alternative media, which offers exceptional opportunities for women around the world to tell their stories.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, in line with this article’s examination of UK newspapers’ portrayal of Yazidi women’s experiences under ISIS, it is necessary to investigate what forms of subjectivities such images of the injured body conceal.<sup>38</sup> The injured body serves to blind us to women’s diversity of roles and positions within their community and frames women as agency-less actors against the narrative of victimhood. Moreover, the media’s use of images of the injured body also overlooks individual women’s experiences from different socio-economic backgrounds.

## Data Collection and Analysis

In this article, the researcher analyzed 190 UK national newspaper articles reporting on Yazidi women published over six years from 2014 to 2019. The researcher selected articles from 2014-2019 to highlight evaluations and changes in how UK national newspapers portray Yazidi women’s experiences of violence under ISIS. This article evaluates whether how UK national newspaper articles portray Yazidi women five years after the 2014 genocide remain rooted in conventional gender stereotypes. The researcher aims to demonstrate how UK newspapers have portrayed these women since ISIS seized the Sinjar region of Iraq, home to hundreds of thousands of Yazidis. Analyzing UK newspaper representations can reveal how the frames the British press uses to portray Yazidi women serve to structure how we, as individuals in a global world, situate these women in relation to Western societies, and

especially in relation to British society. Even though previous literature has examined the portrayal of Yazidi women's experiences of violence, little empirical research exists on how UK national newspapers' represent Yazidi women, particularly in terms of how readers perceive their images after the women had managed to flee.<sup>39</sup> The researcher follows Kaitlynn Mendes's logic in selecting newspapers to gather such data rather than any other media such as films and television because

[newspapers'] daily publication and wide circulation give them potential for quickly disseminating timely information about the women's movement to millions each day. Newspapers also present a forum for many types of styles-news, features, editorials, comment, letters to the editors, advertisements and cartoons-all in the same publication.<sup>40</sup>

The researcher gathered newspaper articles from the electronic newspaper database Lexis Nexis, which enables researchers to collect articles from an extensive database of national and international newspapers. As this paper is only concerned with UK national newspapers only, the researcher searched for articles that met the following conditions

- Published between 2014 and 2019, and
- Cover Yazidi women's experiences of violence.

The researcher used the following keywords in different combinations to retrieve articles: Yazidi women, ISIS, Islamic State, Yazidi genocide, gender-based violence, and Yazidi survivor. The researcher scanned the articles in the search results to check whether Yazidi women and their experiences of violence were, in fact, the primary topics. Next, the researcher selected 190 news stories for content analysis provided that their main topic included Yazidi women who had lived under ISIS rule.

The researcher selected 190 UK national newspaper articles from The Independent (n=57), The Telegraph (n=9), The Mail online (n=63), The Mirror (n=26), The Times (n=20) and The Guardian (n=15). The researcher chose a range of the most widely read newspapers to reflect a broad spectrum of political perspectives and socio-political frames. Specifically, The Guardian provides a left-of-center perspective while The Telegraph provides strong foreign coverage and adopts a center-

right stance while The Independent adopts a non-aligned, liberal viewpoint.

In the context of the newspaper analysis, the researcher used a quantitative content analysis approach to identify the most frequently occurring words in each article within the context of Yazidi women living under ISIS. The researcher then transposed these data into charts to provide a visual representation of the statistical data on the selected items. Next, the researcher performed content analysis using NVivo qualitative analysis software on the articles to gather qualitative data on the specific meanings of the selected texts in terms of how the articles represent the Yazidi women who had been living under ISIS. This software enabled the researcher to identify, organize, and reliably code these data into specific themes along with examples of each theme category. The researcher also used the NVivo node summary report function to examine the frequency with which instances of each theme appeared in each article and the total number of times instances of each theme appeared across all the articles to analyze the most common ways in which the articles represented the Yazidi women's experiences of violence under ISIS.

#### *Quantitative Analysis of the Preliminary Data Results*

Table 1 shows that Mail Online published the highest percentage of news stories about Yazidi women between 2014 and 2019 (33 percent) followed by The Independent (30 percent) while Mirror and The Times published nearly the same percentage of articles (13 percent and 10 percent, respectively) and The Telegraph published the lowest percentage (4 percent).

Table 1. The frequency of news stories about Yazidi women in the six British newspapers

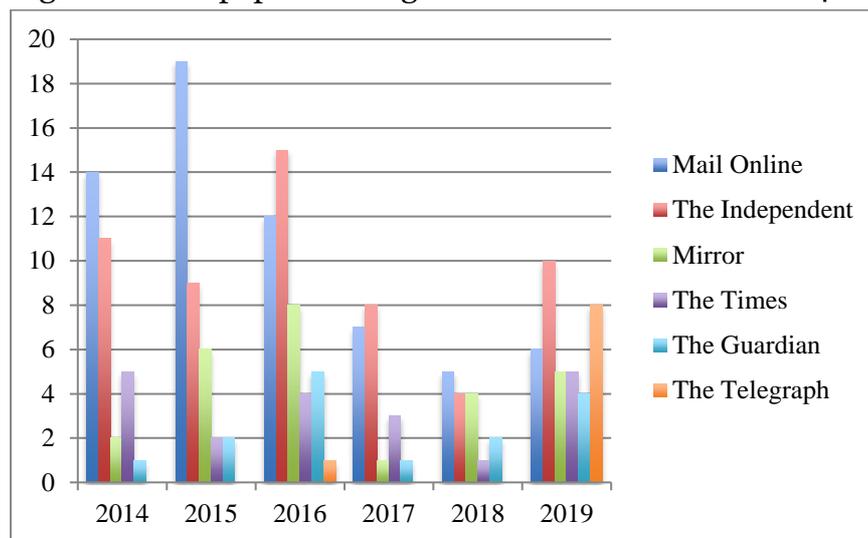
<b>The Mail Online</b>	63	33.2
<b>The Independent</b>	57	30.0
<b>Mirror</b>	26	13.7
<b>The Guardian</b>	15	7.9
<b>The Times</b>	20	10.5
<b>The Telegraph</b>	9	4.7
<b>Total</b>	190	100

Source: Author

Note: The researcher reviewed all the literature in this table.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of news stories on Yazidi women in the sample newspapers over six years. Two of the six newspapers, The Mail Online and The Independent, published the greatest number of news stories during the timeline, while The Telegraph published nine articles only, of which eight articles are from 2019. From 2017 to 2018, only 20 and 16 newspaper articles featured Yazidi women’s experiences of violence (respectively), while the highest percentage of such news articles was in 2016 (45 articles). The number of news articles on Yazidi women in 2014 was less than the number in 2015 and 2016. This is likely to be because ISIS took over most of Iraq’s territories including Sinjar in 2014 and very few people had heard of the Yazidis before this. Therefore, as ISIS’s treatment of women began to appear in international media, the interest in women’s experiences under ISIS increased in 2015 and 2016. This led to an increase in the number of articles published on Yazidi women as a result.

Figure 1. Newspaper coverage of Yazidi women from 2014-2019



Source: Author

Notes: The researcher reviewed all the newspapers in the figure.

### *Qualitative Analysis of the Preliminary Data Results*

The preliminary data coding revealed two distinct themes relating to the representation of Yazidi women by UK national newspapers

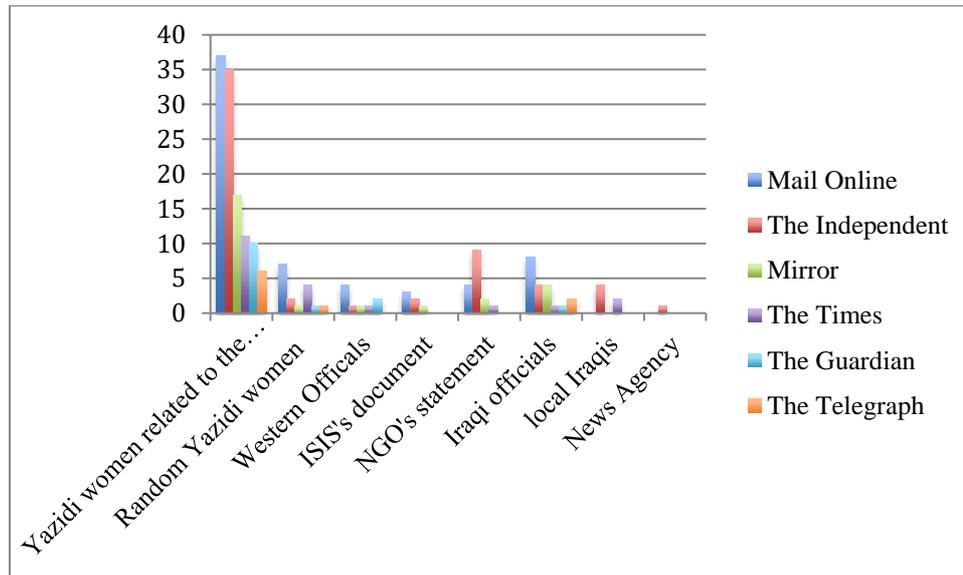
- The types of information sources used to gather information about Yazidi women in relation to their experiences under ISIS; and

- The demographics of the journalists writing about the Yazidi women's experiences.

*Journalistic sources of information about Yazidi women's experiences under ISIS*

The sources of information journalists choose to use when gathering information for an article influences the formation and perspective of the news agenda as well as shaping the journalistic frame of reference used to portray a particular news event. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the majority of the newspapers sampled tend to depend on Yazidi women's statements about their own experiences, a quality that allows us to analyze how the newspapers have framed such statements. For example, while Mail Online and The Independent provides Yazidi women with the most comprehensive opportunity to retell their experiences, these newspapers also relied on accounts from Iraqi officials on these women's experiences of violence under ISIS rule. The news items that relied on Iraqi officials and local Iraqis mostly appeared in 2014 when the journalists had been able to gather information from women themselves. Therefore, the newspapers relied on Iraqi officials and local Iraqis' accounts. It is also worth mentioning that six of the newspapers published news items based on ISIS documents such as leaflets or fatwas on treating Yazidi women as slaves.

Figure 2. Information sources newspapers used to gather information on the violence experienced by Yazidi women



Source: Author

Note: The researcher reviewed all the newspapers in the figure.

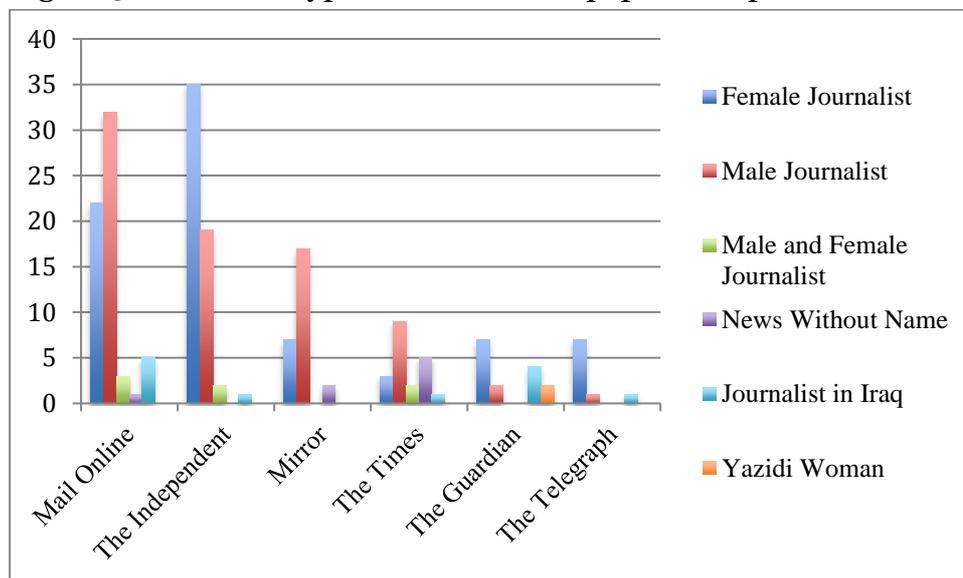
### *Who is Making the News?*

Figure 3 shows that the female and the male journalists wrote the majority of the articles about Yazidi women (81 and 80, respectively). While The Mail Online utilized male journalists more than females, The Independent published more news stories by female journalists during the sample period (35 out of 57). In The Mirror, female journalists writing articles about Yazidi women's experiences of violence under ISIS came second to male journalists while this newspaper did not publish any items written by journalists in Iraq. The Times omitted journalists' names on five occasions (5 out of 20). The only newspaper that did not make use of journalists located in Iraq and Syria to cover Yazidi women's issues was The Mirror. Over the six-year sample period, only The Guardian published two news items written by Yazidi women themselves regarding their experiences of violence under ISIS rule.

With these results in mind, one important issue worthy of examination is whether journalists' gender relates to how they portray the Yazidi women's experiences. In other words, this raises questions about whether female reporters provide a more gender-sensitive account. However, the literature has not reached a consensus on this: Some researchers assert that female journalists do provide a more gender-

sensitive account<sup>41</sup>, while others insist that the sex of the journalist does not affect the values they express regarding women's issues.<sup>42</sup>

Figure 3. Journalist type for the six newspapers sampled



Source: Author

Notes: The researcher reviewed all the newspapers in this figure.

## Qualitative Analysis

One of the limitations of quantitative content analysis is the data's lack of contextual richness. Therefore, analyzing the news coverage of these women who experienced violence under ISIS is essential to achieve a deeper understanding of how the media represents these experiences and how these portrayals may influence public opinion and policy. Therefore, in this section, the researcher provides an analysis of the findings of the qualitative findings focusing on the words used to describe how the articles portray female agency in general as well as the consequences of this gender-based violence against the Yazidi women.

### *Linguistics Forms to Describe Yazidi Women*

From a functional linguistics perspective, linguistic forms are associated with specific ideological and social functions and newspapers use these functions to depict particular individuals and groups in certain ways.<sup>43</sup> In the articles about the Yazidi women's plight, the data show that three main linguistic forms frequently appeared to depict the Yazidi women: Victims, sex slaves, and (rape) survivors. The following paragraphs provide an analysis of the

prevalence of these linguistic forms together with contextualized examples of each.

First, 59 articles used the noun victim to portray the Yazidi women; this term was referenced 94 times to express the notion that these women were the victims of ISIS's gender-based violence. For instance, one article stated, "as the self-declared ISIS caliphate crumbles in its final pathetic pocket, bedraggled Yazidi victims are emerging still to tell of their horror stories."<sup>44</sup> Another article explained, "In the confusion and lack of a processing system, Azima—like other IS kidnap victims—was bundled into the same camp as other suspected IS brides and children."<sup>45</sup> In general, the word victim is not, in fact, an uncommon word used to describe women who have experienced violence, even if they successfully managed to escape and survive the violence.

Second, the news articles used the noun sex slaves to describe these women. Notably, this term is the most referenced word in the news articles, appearing in 130 articles and referenced 323 times. Thus, the majority of the news items used the term sex slaves nearly three times more often to portray these women's treatment under ISIS. For example, *The Guardian* states "More recently, more than 7,000 Yazidi women are believed to have been taken hostage as sex slaves by ISIS."<sup>46</sup> *The Mail Online*, on the other hand, preferred to use capital letters to express how many times one particular Yazidi woman was sold as a sex slave; "Yazidi mother-of-four, 24, who was bought and sold as an ISIS sex slave FIVE times is finally free."<sup>47</sup> What is worth stressing is that in 2014 when ISIS controlled vast swathes of the territories in Iraq and Syria, journalists started to describe those who have been kidnapped as sex slaves even if there had not been much information about the women themselves regarding how ISIS intended to treat them.<sup>48</sup> However, other newspapers chose not to use the word sex slave in 2014. Instead, the journalists stated, "more than 100 women and girls were kidnapped."<sup>49</sup> Another article covers the Yazidi women in a way that does not portray them as passive victims: "hundreds of Yazidi women captured by Islamic extremists...looks like a deliberate attempt to co-opt them into service as the wives of fighters."<sup>50</sup>

Of 190 news items, only one article that challenges the term sex slave, published by the *Independent* in 2016. However, a researcher and lecturer in Islamic Studies at the University of Birmingham is concerned about how the term sex slave oversexualizes what these women have experienced.<sup>51</sup> Again, the extent to which these women are

the victims of violence is more highly emphasized compared to the ways they have resisted and overcome this violence. This kind of portrayal then avoids us to see the whole story that includes women's resistance and agency.

Third, the noun survivor to describe the Yazidi women appeared in 58 articles and 92 references. For example, one article stated, "Most of the survivors, who were forced to convert to Islam have been allowed to return to Yazidi communities."<sup>52</sup> However, even though the articles describe these women using the term survivor, a tendency to associate the word 'rape' with survivor is evident. For instance, The Guardian published an article entitled "Yazidi Leaders to Allow Isis Rape Survivors to Return with Children."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, The Independent also chose the term rape survivor for a headline; "Yazidi Leaders Issue 'Historic' Call For Children of Isis Rape Survivors to Return Home."<sup>54</sup> What is salient about these articles is that when Nadia Murad has been the subject of the news items, these articles have more often labeled her as a survivor of wartime sexual violence compared to other women who have also managed to escape. For example, Nadia Murad has also been labeled a Yazidi activist, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and Ms Murad by different newspapers, instead of simply a victim.<sup>55</sup>

### *Examples of Women's Agency*

Despite all the atrocities these women have endured, some of the articles (although not many) mention the Yazidi women's resistance to ISIS' brutality and focus on positive aspects of their lives. As noted earlier, the news coverage on women's experience tends to be dominated by how they have suffered from victimization rather than describing the extent to which they have resisted and coped with this victimization. That is to say, some Yazidi women managed to escape ISIS captivity, as documented by Amnesty International who required adequate medical care and support services.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, to help them cope with the atrocities they have endured, the way the mainstream media portrays these women is crucial, because, until the media covers their activism and agency in the post-conflict era, we are more likely to view them as simply the passive victims of mass rape at the hands of ISIS. This is not to presume that the journalists alone have the responsibility to counter this view, but given the fact that they cover the ISIS's brutality against the Yazidis in general, there is also a need to highlight all sides of the story (for example, how they developed strategies to cope with the brutality they experienced). For example,

based on the interviews she conducted with the Yazidi women, Caty Otten describes how some Yazidi women resisted the ISIS's violence. She points out "during their stay in captivity, the women tattooed themselves with the names of their husbands or fathers, so that they could be recognized if they were killed, or embroidered other women's clothes with their loved one's names and numbers, so they would not be forgotten."<sup>57</sup> However, in British newspapers, only 27 articles present narratives that frame women as escapees (referenced 35 times). For example, in a 2019 article, one woman stated, "Today I reached the democratic forces and they said 'we will let you go out of the Islamic State'...and thank God, they helped me and let me out."<sup>58</sup> A separate article covered another women's story of escape in 2019; "The walk to freedom lasted 53 hours and little boy cried all the way. It was not their first escape attempt—Faryal had tried five times before to flee ISIS."<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, these women's own perspectives on their future lives also appear in 16 articles with 24 references. Of them, The Guardian provided a Yazidi woman with the opportunity to talk about their experiences: "Under ISIS we were strangled and now we are free, but even before that, women stayed at home. We did not go out and work. In Jinwar, I've seen that women can stand alone."<sup>60</sup> Another woman stated, "I never lost hope. I always believed that Daesh would be defeated because of their torture, and their killing, and their cruelty towards innocents. It should be called the Unjust State, not the Islamic State."<sup>61</sup> Another woman also states

After we got to Syria, I was taken to the Rawanga refugee camp. I trained on a sewing project run by a charity called the Lotus Flower. They taught me how to make things I could sell. Now I have my own sewing machine and train others. I am the breadwinner; it stops me thinking about what happened.<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, the news items sampled barely mention women's activism (appearing in only five newspapers and referenced five times). Women in each of these examples have dedicated their lives to helping others cope with the atrocities, even though they themselves experienced the same brutality. Therefore, these articles illustrate women's strength to move on with their current lives. For example, an article published by The Independent tells us of a Yazidi woman who has returned to her family in Duhok, and "started volunteering for the German International Society for Human Rights as they distributed aid to

refugees.”<sup>63</sup> Another news item covers a woman who managed to escape ISIS's brutality and now she is active in the NGO, Yazda, which is attempting to bring the perpetrators to court.<sup>64</sup> Given these statements, it is interesting to note that when women narrate their own experiences of violence, they are more likely to mention the positive aspects of their lives, unlike the journalists who focus solely on the violence and the abuse perpetrated upon them.

### *The Consequences of Violence against Yazidi Women*

The newspaper articles sampled discuss the different kinds of consequences of ISIS's brutal treatment of women from 2014 to 2019 in the following terms: Trauma, suicidal tendencies and/or death as a result of rape, indoctrination, revenge, and resistance. Surprisingly, only a few articles mention how these women have been able to start new lives after the brutal attacks against them and other civilians. Indeed, one of the consequences of ISIS' brutal treatment of Yazidi women is the serious psychological trauma they have suffered since they were set free from ISIS captivity; the atrocities they have endured are not easy to deal with and deeply affect them psychologically and physically.

18 separate articles and 23 specific references describe trauma as one of the most severe consequences of the violence these women experienced. In *The Mirror*, a Yazidi woman in her 50s states, “they were starving, terribly frightened and traumatized. They had broken arms from being beaten, the kids wept at night, wetting themselves from nightmares.”<sup>65</sup> In another article, Dr. Nagham Nawzat Hasan, a Yazidi gynecologist, described the women who were raped as “very tired, unconscious, and in severe shock and psychological upset” after treating them.<sup>66</sup>

Another consequence of this violence is the high level of suicidal tendencies and heart failure brought on by PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder) because of the years of torture and rape. This theme appeared in five articles and has five references. For instance, *The Times* states, “It is no surprise that families I met shared their concern about suicide rates. There have been 18 such deaths and a further 22 attempted suicides across all the displaced communities in northern Iraq.”<sup>67</sup>

Surprisingly, one unexpected theme that appeared in the newspapers was indoctrination. This theme appeared in two articles and has three references. In fact, it might be too early to claim that some Yazidi women embraced ISIS's ideology, given the fact that Yazidis are not Muslims and the way they were treated affected them psychologically and physically. If it exists, assessing the extent of the Yazidi women's indoctrination on a one by one basis can reveal its existence. However, one of the newspapers claimed that two Yazidi sisters "wore face-covering niqabs and refused to take them off, despite the fact that Yazidi women do not cover their faces."<sup>68</sup>

Further, it is noteworthy that revenge and resistance on the part of these women are the least mentioned aspects of the consequences of their experiences of violence under ISIS. For example, the themes of revenge only appear in seven articles and attract only ten references. However, the themes of resistance appeared when some of the women had tried to kill themselves in order to avoid rape or set themselves on fire to look less attractive (appearing in 36 items, referenced 41 times). For instance, in an article published by The Mail Online in 2016, a German doctor revealed, "In a panic she poured gasoline over herself and lit a match, hoping it would make her so ugly they would not rape her again."<sup>69</sup> Therefore, the newspapers sampled deem these women's experiences of violence, abuse, and rape more newsworthy than the other consequences they faced. For instance, one article depicts women's resistance as a final act of resistance and states, one Yazidi woman had:

a tattoo of her husband's name, inked in kohl and water on the back of her right hand. It took five days to complete, and the pain lasted even longer. It was, she sometimes told herself, a reminder of a life that could still be hers. At other times, she lost all hope."<sup>70</sup>

## Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, the researcher has investigated how Yazidi women's experiences of violence have been portrayed by the UK news media from 2014-2019. In the first part, the researcher quantitatively examined the coverage of Yazidi women; in the second part, the researcher analyzed the UK newspaper's portrayal of these women to provide a detailed and comprehensive description of this coverage. The results, although complex and multifaceted, lead to several significant

conclusions. For example, the quantitative data show that the Yazidi women's experiences and the ways they have dealt with the trauma and atrocities have received minimal attention from the media. The media's main approach tends to be to return to the genocide of 2014 and cover the women's discourse on these events and emphasize the ways in which they were abused rather than bringing the way they cope with the violence they experienced. This is not to claim that newspapers should not cover the 2014 genocide anymore, but given the women's lives after they managed to flee or were set free, there is a need to provide a more comprehensive narrative about these women's experiences to provide a more comprehensive account of the complex nature of the violence to which they were subjected. Otherwise, such a representation avoids highlighting the different dimensions of violence that influenced women's everyday lives and detracts from an in-depth understanding of the decisions these women took for themselves in the post-conflict era.

When examining the portrayal of Yazidi women's experiences in news articles, the articles the researcher examined were more likely to portray them in terms of victimization: Labeling as victims and sex slaves. Even if they used the term survivor, there is a tendency to link it with the word rape. These kinds of representations relate to several prevalent gender stereotypes and themes about the third-world and prevent a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted aspects of these women's lives, despite the fact their stories of escapes have also appeared in the international media (even in 2014 following the genocide in Sinjar). Given that the media contributes to the public's understanding of what a victim 'looks like', the media often portray Yazidi women as the passive victims of sexual violence.<sup>71</sup> As Best writes in her book *Victimization and the Victim Industry*, labeling women as victims encourages others to see such women as passive and lacking self-autonomy, which further erodes their ability to gain control over their lives.<sup>72</sup>

In conclusion, this article has revealed the great lengths to which the media portrays Yazidi women as victims and/or sex slaves rather than covering their resistance, activism, and the way they coped with ISIS's brutality. It is apparent in the news articles sampled that the latter are much scarcer than narratives about these women's experiences of rape and abuse, even five years after the genocide. The findings highlight that unless we understand the complex nature of the violence these women experienced and the ways in which women's lives are impacted

by such violence and abuse they have suffered, the media is more likely to resort to publishing news articles that frame these women as passive victims, lacking agency, which simply reinforces their role as victims. Ultimately, such skewed characterizations then influence the formation of erroneous public opinion and policy toward them at both the societal and policy levels.

## Endnotes

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