Role of women after genocide among Barzanian families in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Abstract

**Background and objective:** Genocide of Barzani people in 1983 led to the disappearance and death of 8000 Barzani males. After the genocide, Barzani women played an important active role which has been ignored by almost all research studies. The present study was an investigation into Barzani women’s lived experiences in order to figure out their role after the genocide of Barzani people.

**Methods:** The present investigation was a qualitative investigation which was carried out by inductive content analysis method. The required data were obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 10 Barzani women who had survived the Barzani genocide. Finally, analyzing the collected data through inductive content analysis method led to the extraction of the main themes and subthemes.

**Results:** The data analysis led to the emergence of three main themes namely, "making enormous efforts," "raising the children well," and "creating the family's future" which proved that Barzani women played a significant active role during and after the Barzani genocide.

**Conclusion:** Barzani families, especially their women, have been through a large number of problems and challenges and consequent mental and physical harms as a result of losing their spouses and sons to the Barzani genocide; therefore, they need special assistance particularly from nurses and medical personnel in hospitals.

**Keywords:** Genocide; Barzani Kurds; Barzani women; Kurdistan Region of Iraq; Qualitative study.

**Introduction**

Simply defined as a coordinated attempt to destroy a group of people because who they are,1 genocide can be the worst experience that a group of people can face. One of the most horrible genocides experienced by Iraqi Kurds was the genocide of Barzani people, which led to the arresting and exterminating of Barzani men in mass graves. As a result of this genocide which is also called gendercide, 8000 Barzani men who were 14 years old and more were transported to southern Iraq and killed by the Baath Regime on July 30th, 1983.2 This crisis was one of the results of the Algiers Agreement of 1975 based on which Iraq, Iran, and Turkey decided to create a security belt within 10 to 20 km from the border and move all the population residing that region.3

In addition, a review of the history of Iraq over the last four decades reveals that this country has constantly experienced political and economic challenges. Although both Iraqi men and women have gone through the same experiences and equally acquired survival skills during this period, different western and local media and research studies have depicted the women as passive victims and neglected their role as active participants during and after armed conflicts.4-7

As a major part of the Iraqi population, Kurds have always been involved in the ongoing violence in the country. In this regard, different studies have focused on different aspects including the Kurdish women’s situation throughout this period of violence. These studies have focused on violence against the wives of the Peshmarga8 and violence-coping strategies among Kurdish women victimized by genocide.9 However, research focusing on the women role’s in
social, political, and economic issues has presented contradicting results; therefore, it is highly recommended that more empirical research should be carried out in order to understand women’s experiences more deeply.

To the best of the authors’ knowledge, research studies have failed to consider the active role of Barzani women who challenged the stereotype of seeing women as passive victims during violent events. After the genocide of Barzani Kurds, leading to the death of almost all Barzani men, Barzani women had to play their previous roles as women and also shoulder the responsibilities of their husband or sons; however, this active role of Kurdish women has been neglected in research studies. This active role of Barzani women has been neglected in relevant investigations; therefore, the present qualitative study was aimed at investigating the Barzani women’s active role after the genocide of Barzani families in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

**Methods**

**Study design**

In the present qualitative study, the lived experiences of 10 Barzani women who were survived the Barzani genocide were investigated by utilizing an inductive content analysis method.

**Participants**

The study sample consisted of 10 Barzani women who participated in the present study willingly. In order to select the study sample, a convenience sampling method was utilized. The inclusion criteria were being a Barzani genocide survivor, willingness to participate in the study, and the ability to remember and express experiences related to the period during and after the genocide. The exclusion criteria were lack of willingness to participate in the study and the inability to remember and express the genocide-related experiences and events. The participants' age range was between 50 and 67 years old. They were all Barzani Kurds who lived in Erbil, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

**Data collection**

The required data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participants from July to September 2018. The interviews were carried out at the participants’ home where they could feel comfortable and express their experiences more freely. Data collection continued until data saturation was obtained and no new concepts emerged. In order to elicit information on the participants' lived experiences, the interviews were commenced by asking general questions such as, "What do you remember about the Barzani genocide of 1983?" or “Can you tell me what happened to Barzani the people in 1983?” followed by questions like, "What problems did you face after the genocide?”, “How was your life after the genocide?”, "How did you make a living?”, or "What were your challenges after the genocide?" The participants were given enough time to think and remember their experiences. Each interview lasted for about 50 to 75 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and then transcribed for further analysis.

**Data analysis**

In order to analyze the collected data, a qualitative content analysis method was employed. In so doing, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Afterward, an experienced translator translated the transcriptions which were analyzed via inductive content analysis method as suggested by Elo and Kyngäs (2008). During the first stage of this method, i.e., open coding, the transcriptions were read precisely, notes were taken, and the headings were marked in the margin of the text. To show all aspects of the content, the headings and themes were produced freely. During the second stage, i.e., creating themes, the transcripts were reread several times, leading to merging of similar headings, decreasing the number of themes, and producing broader themes. During the last stage, i.e., abstraction, a hierarchy for the developed
themes was formalized, all themes and their subthemes were labeled with a proper name according to their content, which resulted in the highest possible level of abstraction.\textsuperscript{13}

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the level of soundness or adequacy of qualitative studies.\textsuperscript{14} In so doing, it is necessary to take into account the accurate description of data analysis procedure and justification of the reliability of the results.\textsuperscript{13} In the current study, trustworthiness was ensured by benefiting from the complementary opinions of experts who were three professors in the present study, establishing a good relationship with the participants and obtaining their trust, conducting the interviews at appropriate times and places, and reviewing the transcripts. Moreover, the researcher’s father was a Barzani genocide victim; therefore, she has been living within the same context and has enough experience which adds to the trustworthiness of the study and reliability of the collected data.

**Ethical considerations**

In order to take the ethical considerations into account, the present study was ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of Erbil Polytechnic University. Before the final participants were selected, they were provided with a thorough explanation about the study's objectives, data collection method, and confidentiality of their information, and their freedom to quit the study whenever they wished to. Afterward, informed consent to participation and recording of the interviews was retrieved from the participants. Each participant was given a unique code to keep the collected data anonymous, and the confidentiality of the data was ensured by keeping the files containing the collected data in a safe place.

**Results**

Analyzing the transcripts of the interviews through inductive content analysis method led to emergence of three main themes namely, “making enormous efforts”, “raising the children well”, and “creating the family’s future” which depict the sorrow and problems that Barzani women have gone through during and after the gendercide of 1983.

**Making enormous efforts**

One of the main themes of the present study, as revealed by analyzing the transcripts, was the Barzani women’s enormous efforts to make a living after losing their husband and other male family members. This theme depicts a sad image of Barzani women who had lost their men and sons and were displaced from their homes and had to work hard to make a living. In this regard Participant 2 said:

> “After the genocide, we lost everything, so we had to try extremely hard to make our lives from the beginning. You know, it is really difficult to see that you have lost whatever you have achieved throughout your life and you have to make your life from scratch once again. It’s hard work.”

After losing their husband and son(s), as revealed by the participants, they had to take their husband's responsibilities, too; as a result, they play both their roles as a woman and their husband's role as a man. In this regard Participant 3 revealed:

> “Because the genocide had taken my husband from me, I had to work very hard to make a living and buy food for my children. I had a really hard time making a living, so I had to work long hours every day just to feed my young children.”

As a result of being displaced from their homelands, Barzani families had lost most of their properties and assets, and as a result of the gendercide, they had lost their males, which put a heavy burden on the women's shoulders because they had to work hard to make their lives again. This picture was described by Participant 5 who said:
“After the genocide and being displaced, we lost most of our properties and assets, so we became really poor and we had to find jobs and work hard to tackle the problems caused by that nasty crisis. We had to work hard just to stay alive.”

The cruelty and nastiness of the Barzani genocide that took all males of over 14, which caused tremendous economic pressure on Barzani families, was described by Participant 8 who said:

"While we were displaced and living in camps, they came in large black trucks and took all men and boys over 14. After that day, we never heard anything of our males. It was really sad. We had no one to work and make a living for us. We were extremely poor, so we [women] had to work and earn money to run our lives. It was the cruelest thing I have ever seen in my life. We will never forget, we will never forgive."

Raising the children well
The second main theme that emerged out of the participants’ stories was the Barzani women's attempts to raise their children as their next generation who could save their people and relieve their deep sorrow. This theme shows that although the Barzani women had gone through the worst and saddest experience in their lives, they did not lose their hope and attempted to raise a successful generation. In this regard, Participant 1 said:

"The genocide had a terrible effect on our lives, but we did not give up. We did not forget raising our children in the best way and preparing them for the future. We paid constant, careful attention to raising our children."

The participants kept referring to the fact that they were successful in raising their children although they were under extreme economic pressure. For example, Participant 4 revealed:

"Although our life was really difficult following the genocide, we did not stop paying careful attention to our children. Raising our children in a good way was always a significant issue that we were dealing with in our daily lives."

Moreover, Participant 7 said:

"After the crisis and losing my close relatives including my husband, I had to work hard every day. I used to work really hard so that my children would not feel our shortcomings and the loss of their father. Raising my children well was always my top priority."

They also referred to the fact that despite their problems and challenges, they did not forget their children's education and schooling. For example, Participant 3 said:

"After we were displaced from our hometown, my children had to give up going to school for two years, but I never stopped paying attention to their education, so after the genocide and as soon as a local school was opened, I enrolled my two sons."

Creating the family’s future
The last theme that appeared following the data analysis was the Barzani women’s efforts to create and guarantee their family’s future. As revealed by the participants, they have devoted all their lives to their family’s future by taking their children’s education into account, working, and earning money. In this regard, Participant 6 said:

"We gave our future to our children, and we spent all our life on them so they could be leading in their future life. Today's successful life of our children is the result of the fact that we devoted all our life to prepare them for the future."

Emphasizing her children's educational success as a result of her unwavering attempts, participant 3 said:

"I lost my husband, but I did not give up on preparing my children for their future lives. I have two sons. One holds a PhD and the other one a master's degree. My attempts and their perseverance have made their life successful."

Also, Participant 3 referred to her children’s good future and lives as a result of her hardworking and said:
“The genocide ran us to the ground, so we needed to compensate and stand on our feet again. In so doing, we tried to prepare our children for the future in a way that they would become role models for other people, and now they really are.”

Discussion
As the results of the present study indicated, Barzani Kurdish women underwent enormous grief as a result of losing their husbands and sons to the gendercide of 1983, and economic problems added to their grief and made them look for jobs and earn money to make a living. Moreover, they had to do something about their children’s future, so they raised them in a good way and made a successful generation. From what has been mentioned, it can be concluded that the Barzani women were not passive victims during and after the genocide of 1983, as depicted by most western and local media and research studies; therefore, the results of the present study question and are not in agreement with those reported by previous investigations.4-7 Similar depictions of women as passive victims of genocide are related to the Rwandan genocide, which is reported in a large number of studies15,16,17 However, the results of the present study are in line with the findings of the study conducted by Mlodoch (2012) who depicted Kurdish women as active participants in armed conflicts who wanted to be remembered as brave, strong women and not passive ones.9

The results also indicated that the Barzani women had to try hard to make a living for their families because of their extreme poverty caused by the genocide. Similar suffrage of and pressure on women who lost their husbands to war have been reported by Shahnazarian and Ziemer (2018) who studied the lived experiences of war widows in south Caucasus.18

The results of the present study also revealed that the Barzani women did not forget raising their children well although they were under extreme economic and emotional pressure. None of the previously conducted studies has referred to this fact that the Barzani Kurdish women were successfully able to raise and educate their children and prepare them for a bright future. This finding can also be a challenge to those western and local media and articles that have depicted Kurdish women as passive victims of armed conflicts or genocides. Similar to this finding, some studies have reported that Muslim women take advantage of “motherhood teaching” as a way to educate and raise their children and protect them against the surrounding threatening environment.19

The results also indicated that the Barzani women tried hard to create their families’ future. In so doing, they sent their children to school and worked hard and made a living so that their children did not feel the loss of their father. This finding is in line with those reported by Mojab (2013).20 This finding is another challenge to the stereotype image of Iraqi women, especially Kurdish women, depicted by most western and local media and studies.

Conclusion
The results of the present study indicated that the Barzani women have been through deep grief, numerous problems and challenges, and consequent mental and physical damages as a result of losing their spouses and sons to the Barzani genocide of 1983; therefore, despite their resilience in the face of the problems, they need to be given special assistance and attention particularly from nurses and medical personnel in hospitals.

References