



Free Yezidi Foundation¹ Statement

29 April 2019

Yezidi Children Born from Rape; Rights of Yezidi Women

The Yezidi Spiritual Council, the supreme body charged with binding religious decisions for Yezidis, has in the last days addressed the very difficult issue of children born to Yezidi mothers from the rape of Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) members. This is an incredibly difficult matter for Yezidi civilian and authorities alike.

Generally, both mother and father must be Yezidi for a child to be considered Yezidi. It appears that the Yezidi Spiritual Council initially decided that these children, though born from Daesh fathers, could be accepted into the Yezidi community with their mothers. This was the interpretation of many of us when reading the initial decision. However, largely due to outcry among the Yezidi population, a clarification was issued days later. The clarification stated that such children would *not* be welcomed as part of the Yezidi community.

The atrocities committed by Daesh make it extremely difficult for Yezidi civilians or leaders to accept their children into the community. Yezidis will feel that 'Daesh blood' should never be accepted. However, the Yezidi women who were captured, raped, and gave birth to such children are now faced with immense difficulty and further trauma. FYF has treated a number of women with children born from Daesh rapists. In some cases, Yezidi mothers have chosen to leave the children behind and return to the Yezidi community. In other cases, Yezidi mothers wish to remain with and protect their children. These mothers find themselves facing serious challenges. Often, their families will not accept the children born of rape. The mother herself bears the burden of the trauma of enslavement and rape, along with stigma and shame of wishing to care for her 'Daesh' child.

The Free Yezidi Foundation neither agrees with nor rejects the Yezidi Spiritual Council's decision. These are difficult cultural and religious matters. But the primary concern is the manner in which such decisions are made.

Like many other Middle Eastern societies, Yezidi society is dominated by male decision-making. In this case, Yezidi men have decided whether or not Yezidi mothers should be allowed to remain with their children. The Yezidi community suffers from intense, prolonged trauma, and the presence of the children of Daesh members in the community would certainly be troubling. However, the trauma facing the Yezidi mothers themselves is far greater. The impact of such decisions on Yezidi mothers is not heavily considered, and that is because of rampant discrimination and sexism against women within Yezidi society. As a traditional, insulated ethno-religious minority, Yezidis have developed our own ways of surviving. Unfortunately, one negative aspect of our social structure is the subjugation of the rights of women.

The Yezidi Spiritual Council appears ready to test social norms through forward looking practices. This included the attempt, now failed, to accept the children of Yezidi mothers conceived through

¹ The Free Yezidi Foundation is an apolitical Yezidi civil society organization based in the Netherlands dedicated to providing humanitarian and human rights assistance to Yezidis in need. FYF is led by Yezidi women.

the rape of Daesh fighters. This also includes the decision to ‘accept’ Yezidi women back into society even after they have been raped by Daesh members. But we as Yezidis must also think carefully about that decision. Should such a decision even be necessary? Without such a decision, would it have been acceptable for Yezidi families to reject their own daughters, wives, or mothers because of the horrors inflicted upon them by Daesh? This could only be possible in a society where the value of women is extremely low, in comparison to international standards. We as Yezidis must urgently and forcefully improve the treatment of women in our society.

There are other instructive examples of religious and cultural oppression of Yezidi women. In many cases, Yezidi women will marry upon the decision of their parents. In some cases, the woman or girl will participate in the decision making. In many other cases, the woman or girl will have no choice. This has been a problem prior to the Daesh genocide perpetrated against Yezidis. Currently, early marriage and forced marriage are of great concern in the Yezidi community, including in the IDP camps. There are some unfortunate cases where young Yezidi women have burned themselves to death rather than live a life that is forced upon them by their parents. This trauma did not come from Daesh, it came from inside our own society. Therefore, this is something we Yezidis can and should fix.

We Yezidis have rightly appealed to the international community for aid and assistance during the attempted eradication of our people and the horrific crimes of sexual violence committed against Yezidi women. When young Yezidi women are forced to marry much older Yezidi men in the camp, we as Yezidis must think carefully about the image and the reality of our own traditions and work very hard to modernize our culture. If not, those who rallied to support Yezidis as an endangered, surviving community will notice the maltreatment and abuse of women existing within our own society.

Relatedly, in many cases Yezidi women are restricted from education at an early age. In the Yezidi community, there was and remains a great challenge for Yezidi girls to attain an education beyond primary school. Some families do not wish this for their young girls. This archaic practice should end. We Yezidis must begin to treat girls and boys as equals and help provide basic skills and rights to all of our children.

Another matter of concern to Yezidis living in the diaspora, especially Europe, is relationships with members of other communities. In Europe, there are a number of Yezidi men who have relationships, wives, and even children with non-Yezidis. This is generally kept quiet, as it is considered a ‘shame’ to be hidden. However, if a Yezidi woman would have a relationship with a non-Yezidi, she would be executed. This is a so-called ‘honor’ killing. This happened recently in Europe, where a Yezidi woman was shot in the face as a result of her relationship. In other cases, Yezidi women are lured to Sinjar, where they are executed far away from any rule of law. The double standard and the subjugation of women’s rights and the value of women’s lives compared to men’s is stark. We as Yezidis, especially those of us who live in the Western world and understand international law and human rights, must think very carefully about these old traditions and how to change them to fit in with the current times, laws, and norms. Yezidi family members exiling or executing women in the community is never, ever acceptable.

Of course, many other communities in Iraq face similar problems in terms of oppression of women and gender rights. But we are concerned specifically with the Yezidi community, and the fact that



abuse and maltreatment occur in other Iraqi communities does not normalize or justify these problems among Yezidis.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that there are many good, heroic Yezidi men who believe in women's rights. In such families, women have the good fortune of being treated more fairly and can live better, freer lives. But this in itself exposes the problem – only the presence of more modern, kinder men in the family can 'grant' women their rights. Women's rights in our society is not automatic and inalienable. This is wrong. Yezidi society must move forward into the 21st century, and we must dramatically improve our behavior towards women.

The Free Yezidi Foundation deals with many women who struggle with the issues of forced or early marriages, mistreatment and abuse, and other serious social problems. We also deal with those Yezidi mothers who have children from Daesh fathers through rape. The decision by the Yezidi Spiritual Council must therefore be seen through a wider, gendered lens. This decision, or shall we say the reversal of the original decision, has been based on the wishes of the larger Yezidi community. And by this, we mean Yezidi men, whether political or tribal leaders, with the exclusion of Yezidi women. Once again, the decision of the community comes at the expense of the wishes and needs of Yezidi women; in this case, Yezidi mothers who must choose between Yezidi society on one hand and their children on the other.

FYF abhors the disgraceful and inhumane behavior of Daesh members, including Daesh women, who planned and carried out the most unspeakable crimes against innocent Yezidi civilians. However, it is unacceptable to abandon Yezidi mothers because of their will to remain with their children. These Yezidi mothers have the sole right to decide to raise their children. Neither Yezidi society nor the families of these mothers have the right to make such decisions. Whatever choice the Yezidi mother makes, we as the Free Yezidi Foundation will provide her with all support possible. Our women's center has been and will remain a safe space for Yezidi women, including these Yezidi mothers, regardless of any decisions from community figures or religious authorities.

The Free Yezidi Foundation calls for the resettlement abroad of Yezidi mothers who have children born from Daesh rapists. These mothers and children will not find safe haven in Iraq. According to Iraqi law, a child born from a Muslim father will be considered Muslim regardless of the mother's identity. [This is only one of a multitude of discriminatory regulations that adversely affect women and religious minorities in Iraq.] To provide relief and any prospect of a life for these mothers and children, options in foreign countries should be provided as soon as possible.

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