



SPECIAL FOCUS: REVISITING LEGACIES OF ANFAL AND RECONSIDERING GENOCIDE IN THE MIDDLE EAST TODAY: COLLECTIVE MEMORY, VICTIMHOOD, RESILIENCE AND ENDURING TRAUMA

Gender Roles and Feminism: The Experience of Barzani Single Mothers

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Abstract

Under the leadership of the Ba'athists, in 1983, the Iraqi state arrested some 5,000-8,000 members, all male, of the Barzani tribe of Kurds and subsequently killed them. The mothers, wives, and children of these men were put into compounds controlled by Iraqi security forces. As a result, thousands of children were left without their fathers and hundreds of wives were suddenly left widowed. In a society where patriarchy dominates the homelife, single mothers were left with the challenges of taking up the role of their male partners. The very definition of motherhood transformed as they rose to meet the incredible tasks ahead of them, and indeed, the experience dismantled stereotypical images of motherhood, but not without untold pain and suffering. In this study, an attempt is made to shed light on the experiences of these lonely Barzani mothers and how they were affected by their altered gender roles.

Keywords: Genocide; Gendercide; Barzani Women; Gender Roles; Femininity

Gender roles are socially created. The great discrepancies in gender roles that exist across different political systems attest to the lack of an inherent, fixed social meaning in being a man or woman. In this sense, since “a social role is itself a set of norms that attach to a social position,¹ and ‘even though it is true that gender norms vary historically and culturally’, it is also true (both historically and cross-culturally) that an individual’s gender is, at minimum, a central organizing feature of his or her practical agency.”²

From this perspective, gender in the social field is a constructed phenomenon.³ Whereas certain religious interpretations attempt to establish a set of fixed

¹ Marianne Janack and Charlotte Witt, *Feminist Metaphysics: Explorations in the Ontology of Sex, Gender and the Self* (New York: Springer Dordrecht Heidelberg, 2011).

² Janack and Witt, *Feminist Metaphysics*.

³ J. Lorber and S.A. Farrell, eds, *The Social Construction of Gender* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991), 1-5.



gender roles as if they were natural law, in the end, as societies change and social roles shift, the so-called natural dimension to traditional gender roles recedes and the prevailing opinion that thought these roles were eternal, will prove to be incorrect. Therefore, gender is not a characteristic born with the human at birth, but a social construction developed through the interaction of human beings with each other.⁴

Thus, persecution can appear not only in the form of physical harm and duress, but in many less tangible forms as well. The story of gender, whether on the social level, or on the abstract level, can put women in very difficult situations; in this case, beginning with the destruction of her home and inversion of her life, and ending with the kidnapping and loss of her loved ones. This new predicament was completely different from the life she formerly inhabited. Thus, Kurdish women in general, and the Barzani women in particular, faced great challenges in adapting to this new reality and preserving their dignity. In overcoming their circumstances, these women established new conditions, which not only destroyed the prevailing customs, but also enabled them to overcome a situation that had rarely happened in history.

The story of the Barzanis is not unlike what happened to the rest of the Kurdish people in Iraq, including ghettoization, forced deportation, and loss of their homelands. The Barzanis, along with other Kurds, were gathered together in forced complexes that lacked the simplest necessities of habitability, while the Iraqi state planned to deport them.⁵ The Kurdish people were dispossessed of their jobs, their profession, and ordinary domestic life, isolated within a sparse compound, and surrounded by occupying security forces. The Ba'athist strategy was to isolate members of the Kurdish community from each other in order to dismantle their social and economic structures.

While there are many writings about the extermination of the Barzanis, there are none, to this author's knowledge, that address the issue of gender. Therefore, this essay may represent the first such attempt to write about the Barzani woman in the midst of trauma. In addition, this research has relevant implications for the study of other women beyond the Barzanis, including the persecution of the Faili Kurds and others who were subjected to the inhumanity of the Anfal campaigns, as well as the Yazidi women who were kidnapped⁶ by the Islamic State in 2014 and then sold in the slave market.⁷

⁴ Betsy Lucal, "The Sociology of Gender: An Introduction to Theory and Research," *Teaching Sociology* 33.2 (2005): 7.

⁵ Ibrahim Sadiq, *Origins of the Kurdish Genocide: Nation Building and Genocide as Civilizing and De-Civilizing Processes* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 121.

⁶ "Captives ('Sabaia'): The spoils (*Anfal*) in Islam are allowed, and the spoils are among the captives. They turn into slaves and maidservants. And the rule of the captives is that they turn into a rightful possession of the Muslim man, and he has the right to have intercourse with them and sell them. It can be said that female slaves in Islam are slaves and owned slaves, whether they are male or female, there is no difference. Almighty: 'Or what their oaths possess' means slavery, slaves, and female slaves, and Islam has permitted female slaves and slavery." Mohammed Shadab, "The Role of Female Slaves in Islam" (2019) <https://bit.ly/3otzls9>.

⁷ Nadia Al-Dayel, Andrew Mumford, Kevin Bales, "Not Yet Dead: The Establishment and Regulation of Slavery by the Islamic State," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (online, 2020): 1-24.

The development of gender roles involves a process of learning and adoption.⁸ In many societies, these roles have been distributed according to gender in the social context. The women's (female) job is the housework and overseeing the upbringing of children; the men's (males) is to earn a living, provide security, and maintain the family. The justification for this type of gender division has historical dimensions related to cultural attitudes toward women and their capabilities. "Gender roles are the product of the interactions between individuals and their environments, and they give individuals cues about what sort of behavior is believed to be appropriate for what sex."⁹

In this environment, shaped by particular interpretations of Islam, members of society believe that women cannot carry out heavy work or take on the full responsibility of managing the family, duties which are seen as the purview of men. As a result, in many cases, women become captives of the prevailing social view and fail to reach their full potential.

The focus of this research is on the change in the social conditions of the family, and, in particular, dynamics that emerge when the husband has been kidnapped or otherwise "Anfalized" and forcibly removed from his traditional role as breadwinner.¹⁰ The question here is: Is it possible to change gender roles so that women can take the place of men in managing family life? Can she perform heavy work and change the preconceived social perspective of community members?

"Femininity" is shaped by social definitions and constructions. For Kurdish society in southern Iraq, femininity is linked to a set of general qualities under which the woman's attainment of perfection is linked to the presence of a man. From another perspective, in most Sunni societies, femininity is linked to the existence of an emotional and sexual relationship with a man. In these Sunni societies, a woman who does not have a man in her life may hide her feelings or be forced to suppress them under the pressures of social norms.¹¹

If there is truth in these apparently *natural* qualities, do they hinder women from achieving a socially influential role, as apart from the *social* discrimination imposed on women? In this research, this overarching question is subjected to analysis and evaluation, to know how single women have dealt with the feelings of living without a man. Were they able to live like a female, with all their feminine characteristics intact? Or were they hiding these feelings of femininity, the yearning to be with a man, to the extent that they attempted to appear like men?

⁸ Carol L. Martin, "Gender: Early Socialization: Synthesis," *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* (2014), <https://bit.ly/3CyMUky>.

⁹ Amy Blackstone, *Gender Roles and Society* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 335.

¹⁰ *Anfal* means spoils of war. After the term "al-Anfal" was given to the operations pursued by the Iraqi government against the Kurdish people, it popularly became the preferred name for all such operations targeting Kurds.

¹¹ Bert Garssen, "Repression: Finding Our Way in the Maze of Concepts," *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 30.6 (2007): 471-81. From: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-007-9122-7>.

On the morning of July 30th, 1983, Iraqi security forces besieged the Quds and Qadisiyah¹² complexes, near the Qushtapa district of Erbil; a few days later, they attacked the complexes of Diana, Harir and Bahirka. About 5000 to 8000 Barzani men were arrested,¹³ the majority of whom were from the Khorshidi sect.¹⁴ All the detainees were male Barzanis between the ages of 12 and 70 years. Even those who were not at home at the time when their complexes were surrounded, were arrested by other means.¹⁵

This campaign of arrest and detention led to the complete dismantling of those families, leaving thousands of women suddenly without their husbands, and thousands of children without their fathers. Facing all kinds of problems, Barzani mothers were forced to rely on themselves in order to raise their children and soldier on with life.

Motherhood is a difficult experience, but even more so for single mothers. Women are caught between the particularity of femininity and of motherhood, but in a patriarchal society, she was now able to impose her dominance on all areas of life. There is a tension between the sense of responsibilities of motherhood and the social and traditional expectations of society. A set of criteria will determine a woman's ability and rights, subordinating her to the heritage of values belonging to her society. In this sort of patriarchal culture, motherhood becomes an eternal prison for the woman, as she simultaneously assumes the function of the kidnapped father. This may lead to the modification of gender roles. Here, she plays the role of mother *and* father in social, psychological, and economic terms.

In this research project, we have attempted to study the impact of genocide on the experience of single mothers, exploring psychological, social, and economic aspects, and its impact on femininity and the change in gender roles. The aim is to discover the difficulty of fulfilling the role of a single mother in a conservative society and the psychological consequences caused by genocide.

Psychological Consequences

The mass arrest of the Barzani men left a deep psychological scar on the women whose husbands were kidnapped. After 38 years, many of them still live under the yoke of obsessive fear and anxiety, and some of them still hold out hope for their missing partner's return. This crime not only resulted in the extermination of eight thousand people, but it also cruelly deprived thousands of children of the blessings of their fathers, caused an increase in the incidence of spinsterhood, and inflicted severe emotional distress upon many women who had been married for just a short time before the state

¹² The names *Qudis* and *Qadisiya* indicate the chauvinistic policy followed by the former Iraqi regime. That policy was characterized by inclusiveness in order to carry out genocide.

¹³ I. Sadiq, *Origins of the Kurdish Genocide: Nation Building and Genocide as Civilizing and De-Civilizing Processes* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 103.

¹⁴ In fact, the people known as the "Khorshidians" do not call themselves Khorshidis, but rather refer to themselves as followers of Barzan sheikh, an eminent Khodan. *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Shorish Haji Rasul, *Anfal* (Kurd u Dewletî Îraq) (Silemani: Sivan Publisher, 2003), 42-43.

snatched their husbands from them, forcing the women to wait, hoping for their loved ones' release, forever.¹⁶

This policy, which was carried out by the Ba'athists, was a process of annihilating at least one part of the Kurdish people. These policies were consistent with the description of paragraph (D) of Article Two of the Genocide Convention, of "Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group."¹⁷ Such was the intent of the Ba'athist regime. The Iraqi government was aware that if the men were uprooted, their women would not, or could not, re-marry because of cultural taboos against marrying a single mother.¹⁸

Arranging meetings with these women was not easy. It required networking and preparation. The easiest place to hold these meetings was the village Ble in Barzan. Through some well-known people, we were able to meet eight Barzani women. It took some time to hold those meetings. On the one hand, it was difficult to find them, and on the other hand, it was not easy to determine the right time to meet each of the victims. We had to interview them at different times and in different places. They also are elderly and cannot talk for long periods of time. In addition, it was better for the interviewer to be a woman, because for these female victims, a conversation with a female researcher is culturally more appropriate and reliable. Therefore, Dr. Media took on the task of conducting these interviews.

The pain and suffering, but also the toughness, of these women, is hard to imagine. As Gulshan,¹⁹ the first interviewee, put it, "Until now, sometimes I feel like they've come back. I don't know if it's a dream or reality, but I never lose hope" (Gulshan, PI, February 1, 2022). She expresses a form of pain that she considers eternal. The kidnapping and disappearance of her husband places her in an eternal limbo between bereavement and hope, which she expresses in terms of "never losing hope." On a psychological level, the actions of the state have caused this woman to develop an intense form of mental suffering. This specifically corresponds to Paragraph (B) of Article 2 of the Genocide Convention, which states that "Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group" is a genocidal act.²⁰

Thus, this target group, whose only crime is belonging to a certain group, has been exposed to serious physical and mental harm. The mother quoted above has been forced to live her life – or to give up her life – in waiting. This is a psychological defense mechanism for coping with an inordinate loss.

What she may not know is that her coping mechanism is linked to a suppression of her sense of femininity, which can be related to insisting on

¹⁶ O. H. Salih, *Genocide u Tawanekani Rijemi Baath diji Barzaniyekan (1975-1991)* (Rojhelat, Hewlêr: le Zimanî Şayethal u Belgekanewe, 2017), 17.

¹⁷ "United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect," UN. (1944), <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>.

¹⁸ Y. Dizeyi, *Afal, Karesat, Enjam u Rehendekani* (Erbil, Mukiryanî, 2010), 215.

¹⁹ Pseudonyms.

²⁰ "United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect," UN. (1944), <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>.

wearing black dress to symbolize mourning and not marrying for a second time. After she became certain of her husband's death, she said:

I don't wear colored clothes. Black clothes make me calm. How can I think of getting married again? A faithful person after such a complicated situation does not think about such marriage again. Who thinks of marrying again, assumes that she feels like a woman, but I do not have that feeling since my husband was kidnapped (Gulshen, PI, February 1, 2022).²¹

This expression arises from a painful interior, because of a crime for which the state is responsible. By ripping their husbands away from them, the state effectively widowed these women and subsequently caused them to suppress their sense of femininity. This repression may involve both conscious and unconscious aspects. Consciously, they may choose to wear black and refuse to consider remarriage, as a form of symbolic loyalty. Unconsciously, they may be overwhelmed by social customs and traditions, which command them to act in such ways.

Another interviewee, Zearina, emphasized the original moment of trauma that continues to endure:

Consider the moment they took my husband. His image does not leave my mind and my eyes. I know he died, or was killed and 'anfalized,' but my children are the ones who console me. Sometimes I say to myself, God is great, and he may return one day (Zearina, PI, February 1, 2022).

By admitting that she still hopes that her husband may return one day, she has rejected reality in favor of a belief she knows cannot be true, but whose emotional power is stronger than reality.

Since the role of the father in traditional Kurdish society is so strongly defined and clear, she thinks if her husband has died, then she must assume his role, or even a male identity. She continued:

Actually, I was a child when I got married, but since then until now I consider myself as a man. What marriage are you talking about? If the husband dies, the wife must live as a man (Zearina, PI, February 1, 2022).

Here, the woman touches on two kinds of pain. The first is that of marriage in childhood. The second is the suppression of all desires, and particularly of the feeling of femininity, which is a conditional relationship. If a man is alive and part of a woman's life, then she feels her femininity, but in the case of the loss of her husband and his absence, this feeling disappears and this desire to feel feminine will gradually die as well, or be suppressed, challenging the cultural

²¹ Referring to the arrest of her husband with the other Barzanis.

presupposition that only men can be dominant. Another interviewee, Ameena, spoke in her own way and said:

It was morning when they came and took my husband. At that time, the tea was ready and he wanted to have the breakfast, but when he heard the noise, he said I will go and see what is happening outside. I told him, have your breakfast and then go, but he said, 'I will be back soon,' but he went and he didn't come back. And then for a long time I was worried because he went hungry and without breakfast, so I always asked the kids, aren't you hungry? (Ameena, PI, February 1, 2022).

After 38 years, she is still living with her memories and a sense of longing and warmth. Her perceptions surrounding that fateful day are a cluster of bitter and complicated memories, forming a wound that does not heal. She is certain that her husband is no longer alive and will not return. She is also sure that the tragedies are much greater than momentary hunger, but as a form of defense to calm her soul, she focuses on an aspect of that day which may help her to forget the sheer tragedy of the following events and remind her of a happy domesticity – a kind of psychological therapy for herself. She continued:

We never thought about getting married again, because one of them got married after her husband was kidnapped, but she was killed by her relatives, so we didn't think about that (Ameena, PI, February 1, 2022).

In this quote, Ameena expresses sublimated anger toward the prevailing culture and traditions, which did not allow these women to freely choose their future. Her reference to the honor killing is evidence of the far-reaching impact of the genocide on women in the community. Here we can see how the consequences of the genocide, in light of local cultural taboos, caused a woman to lose her femininity, to not think like a woman, or even think of living as a female. These interviewee's femininity was exterminated along with their husbands.

A sixth interviewee, Gulala, who still looked strong after so much tragedy though her eyes were a little dim, noted:

What we saw was unspeakable misery and fear. They left us to die, without water, electricity, or food, and not just for a day or two, or a month. We were waiting, and I was pregnant; I did not know his gender. I used to pray that he be male and replace his father, and that his father's name would not be lost. Until he was born, I did not know the taste of sleep. I was suddenly waking up, thinking that my husband had come back (Gulala, PI, February 6, 2022).

The situation described by Gulala is a terrible characteristic of genocides. In addition to kidnapping the men, the perpetrator has also deprived the remaining civilians of electricity, food, and water for an extended period of time while surrounding them with security forces. Obviously, pregnant women need

additional services and healthcare support. On top of immediate survival concerns is the sociological layer of the pregnant woman worrying about raising her child without a father, or of bearing a daughter instead of a son. Gulala also echoed what others said in terms of refusing to re-marry because of societal and religious pressures, as well as the need to assume the man's role.

We decided collectively not to get married again, because we were all suffering from the same situation. All the husbands were taken prisoner, and besides, we have been told that religion does not allow us to marry again. It was considered as a great sin, because none of us knew what happened to our husbands. Therefore, we ourselves used to be like men. None of us thought that we were women who needed men, because we took the man's place (Gulala, PI, February 6, 2022).

The actual position of religious law toward a second marriage following the death of a first husband is not clear; there is no definitive religious text in this regard. All that exists is the temporal jurisprudence of some Muslim jurists. The main perspective is that women should not re-marry until they gain conclusive information about the captive or missing person.²² This effectively places women under a form of social duress. The result is a collective decision to refrain from re-marrying. In general, this situation makes these women strong, as it forces them to fend for their survival and that of their children.

These women were surrounded by the presence of all these conditions, the result of which was the suppression of their desires as a moral rule. On the other hand, their resolve to not re-marry, to carry on as if they were men, required loyalty, intelligence, and courage. These perspectives further encourage their adherence to society's moral standpoint. There are those who are proud of this position: "The women who survived the genocide were able to register an honorable identity, because they were not ready to marry again."²³

Social Status and Family Responsibility

The loss of their husbands, fathers, and sons also exacted enormous economic costs on the surviving family members. In addition to losing their husbands, these widows also bore the responsibility for the care and upbringing of children.²⁴ In order to earn a livelihood, they resorted to dozens of hard jobs. Mothers were able to take the place of the father, and take care of their children with their heads held high and proud.²⁵ Thus, in addition to the personal psychological struggles, they had to face society, to look for work and assume novel responsibilities. Rabiya explained:

²² *Ahkam Zawjat al-Ghaib Walmafqud* (أحكام زوجة الغائب والمفقود) (Islamicsham, April 2014), <https://islamicsham.org/fatawa/1705>.

²³ M. Khurshid, *Anfal, Nasnamei eteweyek* (Erbil: Chiwarchira, 2016), 35.

²⁴ R. R. Barzani, *Genocide ya Bawkan* (Erbil: Dara Publisher, 2016), 183.

²⁵ Khurshid, *Anfal*, 35.

Our duty was heavy. We did not know whether to raise children, or work and get some money. We did anything, just to raise our children (Rabiya, PI, February 1, 2022).

Nazdar, another interviewee, reveals that women were not used to working outside the home, but were forced to do so by circumstance. It was physically and mentally draining, but the community came around to support them in critical ways, too. This participant added:

People looked at us with kindness. We knew their attitudes toward us, especially the people of Erbil. They did everything they could, even if secretly. They helped us with money, clothes, and food, in all ways (Nazdar, PI, February 1, 2022).

In times of disaster and difficulty, people rarely think of themselves only. The genocide of the Barzani men, although tragic, increased social cohesion and helped reduce some of the victims' concerns. In this regard, Gulcheen added:

The Ba'thists cut off everything from us – water, electricity, and food. Any store that sold us something was punished, but the people, especially the people of Erbil, were good to us, and they secretly sold us what we wanted (Gulcheen, PI, February 6, 2022).

Regarding child care and their upbringing, Shireen stated:

In fact, none of us had that experience of taking care of children and at the same time taking action in order to gain a living. This reality weighed heavily on our shoulders, and our hearts were pounding, but we had to do whatever the children were asking for (Shireen, PI, February 7, 2022).

In many cases, the difficult circumstances gave people a hidden strength to face reality and bear its heavy consequences. In fact, during good times, such stress cannot be tolerated. These women who thought they were weak, gained a strong will. They shared the same burdens in facing a common tragedy, a situation that brought them together and inspired others with in a similar spirit of perseverance. This is what prompted them to keep going and escape from their dire personal circumstances. Zearina sadly added:

I was not able to get milk for my son and my mother-in-law, so I ground flour and sugar and mixed them with water and gave it to my child, but he vomited after a while. Then, I went to Erbil and the shop owner gave me a carton of milk, but I had to hide it so that they would not confiscate it from me when I returned to the compound (Zearina, PI, February 1, 2022).

Recollecting this experience decades after the fact is easy enough, but the lived experience of witnessing the crying and sickness of your child, traveling to the city, which takes more than forty minutes by minibus, and searching for milk

to buy in secret, away from the eyes of informants, is difficult to imagine. At least the kindness of the shop owner would have reduced the pain. And this story did not happen only once, but recurred daily, and for a long time and in various forms.

Thus, the survivors of the lost men felt that people outside the compound in which they were confined played a vital role in supporting their steadfastness and sense of calm. In addition, most of these women had not studied in school, or even regularly left the house unaccompanied by their husbands prior to the tragedy. Gulshen added:

We did not know how to work outside the home, and we did not know that getting money was so difficult, but we took responsibility and we did not think that this work is difficult but we were thinking about how to get the money (Gulshen, PI, February 1, 2022).

The difficulty of earning money and finding a livelihood was multiplied by the constant surveillance by the security state over their lives. She continued:

My daughter was playing outside the house when she stepped on a piece of glass and injured her leg badly. We took her to a hospital in Qushtapah, but when they found out that we were Barzani women, they did not allow her to be treated. After we left, one of the nurses followed us, apologizing, and gave us some cotton and medicine and said: "Take it and go so that no one knows," and he gave it to us for free. If the security men knew, they would have punished the nurse severely (Gulshen, PI, February 1, 2022).

As evidenced here, being a Barzani was considered a crime. This case recalls the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany. Both groups were marked for lesser treatment and deprived of many services. And for an outsider to help them in defiance of the state's policy was to potentially risk their life. Some of the ordeals suffered by the women were nearly unbearable. Gulshen stated:

I had two children, and five other children [to look after] from my husband's other wife. We both endured torment in order to get them a piece of bread (Gulshen, PI, February 1, 2022).

For the care of seven children, two wives had to endure the extreme heat and cold of the Erbil plain, without electricity, and furtively carry home what meager groceries they could buy through an economic siege, and somehow learn how to bear it all and carry on. It's an understatement to say that it required great patience and endurance.

In addition to these bad circumstances, the women had a great fear of the general social opprobrium against young women working. In order to leave the compound to go work and earn a living, they would have had to pass through all the guards and intelligence officers stationed there. It was very difficult, especially given the well-known mercilessness of the Ba'ath. Therefore, they had to leave in a roundabout way, as Gulala described:

Young women among us did not dare to go to work alone, so we would go out as a group of five or six, with an old woman, and thus we would get rid of them (Gulala, PI, February 6, 2022).

While the security guards harassed them, there was another problem in the lives of these women. Although they were self-reliant with regard to working and securing a livelihood, they still had to fear harassment from men, particularly regime loyalists, outside the compound too. To get rid of this problem, the elderly stepped in to help deflect any harassment and encourage the young women. All the participants in this research spoke positively about the humanitarian treatment by the people of the region, but they remained fearful toward members and collaborators of the Ba'ath regime. Rabiya described their conditions as follows:

We endured a lot of hardship. Our children were deprived of school, we were all deprived of water and electricity. We didn't have anything. One day, one of the men working there opened a water pipeline for us. Suddenly, the Ba'athists knew about it, so they came and poured out even the water that was in the jugs on our shoulders (Rabiya, PI, February 6, 2022).

The state, with all its might, put these women under extreme pressure, to the extent that its policy falls under the definition of genocidal action under Paragraph (C) of Article 2 of the Genocide Convention for "Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part."²⁶ The measures adopted by the regime were clearly intended to create such conditions, from tearing apart families, to restricting freedom of movement, to starving the complex of food and water.

However, the people of Erbil did not give up their support for the Barzani women. Shireen testified to this:

If there were not honorable people, especially the people of Erbil, and if they had not cooperated, our situation would have become worse. One time I asked a driver to drive me to Erbil, and he said to me: "You must say to the [security forces] that this man is my father and we live in the locality of Badawan, in order to get rid of them and so that they do not know that you are a Barzani." So, I used to go to Erbil in order to make a livelihood for my children (Shireen, PI, February 7, 2022).

This statement offers further evidence that the Barzani women were regularly targeted, but the local people's kindness helped them to survive. Nazdar told us:

²⁶ "United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect," UN. (1944), <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.shtml>.

The bravery of the people of Erbil will never be forgotten. They used to prepare job opportunities for us. In the presence of the Barzani women, they would not provide work for others because they were aware of our condition and that we needed to work more than others (Nazdar, PI, February 7, 2022).

This statement is resounding proof that the support and assistance of the local people completely thwarted the Ba'athist plans. The outpouring of local support also helped to give them the strength and patience they needed to bear their hardship. As a result, it created an internal force that was essential in order to triumph over these bitter conditions – the only way out of this human tragedy.

Changing Gender Roles

Gender (as opposed to sex) is not a trait that is born with humans, but rather a socially constructed product, and the result of a disciplined political and social process. Likewise, social values and norms are considered social phenomena that are in constant flux. With regard to the distribution of work within the Barzani family, the role of the man is to work outside the home and to maintain the family and its security. On the other hand, the role of the woman is cleaning the house, preparing the cooking, and taking care of the children. In normal times, the members of each gender perform their normal roles. In the usual daily activities of the family, the distribution of work, rights, and duties is reflected in the reality of social status.²⁷

Social conditions may change in relation to gender, especially if a group faces some crisis or exceptional situation: If there is a rupture in the capabilities of the traditional gender role, the role must be filled, no matter what. Gulcheen describes this in the following way:

For fear of our honor, if we were a group of women we would take turns guarding until morning and we thought if we were vigilant that they would not be able to transgress us (Gulcheen, PI, February 6, 2022).

In the culture of Kurdish society, honor is a serious matter and people care about it accordingly, so the Barzani women resorted to guarding themselves in order to preserve their honor – for fear of unwanted comments, harassment, and infringement upon their rights. Preserving the family and maintaining social customs and order was generally a male job, but after the extermination of the Barzani males, the females took it over and played a pivotal role. In this regard, Gulshan stated:

If I got any kind of work, I would accept it, and I did not care whether that work was for males or females, because I was obliged to get some money, for the sake of my children (Gulshan, PI, February 1, 2022).

²⁷ S.M. Bianchi, M.A. Milkie, L.C. Sayer, and J.P. Robinson, "Is anyone doing the housework? Trends in the gender division of household labor," *Social forces* 79.1 (2000): 191-228.

Here, not only does the role of the worker change, but the form and type of work also changes, meaning that the woman performs all kinds of work, without asking about the type or gender associations. She succeeds in tasks she had never practiced. The Barzani mother went to work without thinking about the status connotations or working conditions, because she simply had no other solution; in the end, she proved that she can triumph over the practice of work. She refuted the idea that a woman cannot do certain kinds of work as a result of being a woman and because her body is not suitable. Rather, she proved that this is only a social division imposed on nature, predicated on social values and norms developed across generations. Similarly, Zearina explains how the women subverted such norms:

We were not accustomed to this situation without men. We were afraid of the excesses of the army and the soldiers, so we guarded ourselves, and sometimes the children slept in our arms while we were guards (Zearina, PI, February 1, 2022).

Thus, born as a woman, she was accustomed to the social construction that divides men as guardians and women as helpless objects to be protected. Before the tragedy, she did not think of life without a man. But under her new conditions, without a man, she worked, guarded, and maintained the family structure, raising a generation of males who now lead and defend their homeland. These victorious mothers completed their roles and retired, but the prevailing traditional social division has returned because the exceptional circumstances have ended, and the wife is still waiting for her husband.

During the crisis times, gender roles were mixed, with all duties suddenly falling on only one half of the population, the circle of women. The woman remained a mother, yet took on the role of the father as well, and she created a new culture in the process, one of steadfastness, in which the children surviving that hell are proud of it – all in spite of the genocidal machinations of the Ba'athists. Thus, Amina stated:

I used to carry bags of cement to the third floor of the building. I did not think that this work was for men and I could not do it. I used to do it, and I could do it, and I felt peace of mind, because when I came home, I had money to buy bread for my children (Amina, PI, February 1, 2022).

Perceived gender differences in aptitudes and suitability to different forms of work are the result of cultural and social customs. However, these traditional customs may, and do, change for a simple reason: socialization. The process of socialization not only changes gender roles, but it also breaks the boundaries of habit and creates and organizes entirely new templates. In the case of the Barzani Kurds, the woman does not remain a weak creature that cannot do hard work, but she becomes ready to do all kinds of work. Confirming this reality, Gulala stated:

Because of poverty and poor conditions, we started working, especially in the city of Erbil. We did all kinds of work, from farming to construction. The important thing was that we got our rights with our own hands for the sake of our children (Gulala, PI, February 6, 2022).

The human being has the ability to quickly adapt to harsh new circumstances. A person can gather all their physical and technical strengths to survive. Here, Rabiya agreed that the distribution of work according to social norms is incorrect, as society gives opportunities to one sex but not the other. She stated:

I had to go to work, and my heart was with my children. My son was older than my daughter. I left the girl with my son. One day, I had left the teapot on heating, and the teapot had burnt out. And because the heating was powered by oil, and there was little oil in it, the fire went out on its own, otherwise, the children would also have burned (Rabiya, PI, February 6, 2022).

The mother discloses two feelings in this recollection. First, is the concern for her children's safety, which she endangered by leaving the teapot on the stove with her unsupervised children inside the house. Second, is the mother's necessity of leaving the house to make a living. She demonstrates that she could both be concerned about her children's safety and be out of the house working. Motherhood should not be a hindrance for women to work. Social customs and traditions, as well as popular religious discourse, use motherhood as an excuse to isolate the woman inside the home. Contrary to such traditions, these Barzani mothers *had* to provide food for their children, irrespective of the risks of leaving them at home unattended. If her conditions were more stable and easy, the mother would have had a better understanding or safeguards against inadvertently causing a fire while her children were left alone at home.

In studying the lives of these mothers, we can see that in caring for themselves and for their children, they did not think much about improving their living conditions beyond securing basic safety and survival. Shireen explained:

The house of my cousin's wife was behind our house, so we broke through the wall from the side of the kitchen, so that we would not go out and enter through the main door, and so that no one would know that our house was empty at night. At night, I would take the baby's cot to their house to sleep there, or she used to come to our side to sleep in our house (Shireen, PI, February 7, 2022).

The Ba'athists induced a lot of anxiety and stress for these mothers. As stated above, preserving their honor and defeating the Ba'athists were the focus of these mothers. The scenes of survival described by the various women quoted above share an element of plucky courage and tenacity in common with the stories of Jews who hid themselves to survive Nazi persecution, as depicted in the film *The Pianist*.

In Kurdish culture, as with many others, it is unthinkable for women to do the work of gravedigging, but in the compulsory complex where they lived, the mothers had to undertake that grim job as well. Nazdr as a mother told us:

We were doing everything by ourselves, even the things we never thought of. One time, one of our children fell into a well and choked. There was no one there to help us bury him. We, a group of mothers, got up, we dug a grave and buried the child. Here, we learned to dig the graves too. We were forced. What do we do? The woman must work even at what she did not do before (Nazdar, PI, February 7, 2022).

In the abstract, this incident is easy to think about, but within the framework of social custom, it is very difficult. This story demonstrates that previously unassailable gender roles can change at an instant if social conditions change as well and create new demands. The Barzani woman sees herself as a mixture of femininity (as a mother) and masculinity (as guardian of the family's security).

Another role in which women rarely participate is animal slaughter. From a religious point of view, there is no objection to a woman slaughtering any kind of life,²⁸ but such is not allowed by social custom. Gulcheen stated:

In our knowledge, it is the man who slaughters, and from the religious point of view it is not permissible for a woman to slaughter the chicken, so when I wanted to slaughter the chicken, I would present the knife to my son, and I would take his hands and slaughter, and all this to convince myself that I did not slaughter (Gulshen, PI, February 1, 2022).

In most towns in Kurdistan, the work of slaughtering animals and selling meat is restricted to men. But the Barzani women, as a form of psychological self-defense against transgressing this social norm, had their young male children slaughter chickens, even if it was their mother's hand that guided the knife.

The changes in gender roles, and all the other changes in these women's lives, were the result of the Ba'ath Party's acts of extermination. Gender roles are a set of social templates developed over time, which men and women learn according to their gender within the process of socialization. Here, the norms were reversed, with the woman following a set of social roles intended for the man.

Women assumed roles that were widely understood as being the exclusive domain of men, and performed them well – from gravedigging, to preparing and burying the dead, to carrying cement, and farming. This confirms the words of the scholar and feminist activist, Judith Butler, who says that gender roles are executive and performative actions, and not part of human nature; that is, we implement them as roles. In addition, our understanding of biological differences, between the male and female sex, is set in a social framework.

²⁸ “Hal Yajuzu Lilmarati Al-thbha Biyadiha? (هل يجوز للمرأة الذبح بيديها?),” *Islamweb* (October 25, 2001), <https://bit.ly/3wiYBIZ>.

Conclusion

The genocide of the Kurdish people has a dark history in the memory of the people of Kurdistan. The effects of that crime were clearly reflected in all fields of life, especially among the survivors and those who directly lost their loved ones. This crime of course upended the lives of the single mothers who lost their life partners. The areas of their life affected by the crime were their social interactions with others, economically sustaining their families, stark changes in gender roles, and the suppression of feminine feelings.

The crimes of the Ba'athist state did not end at pushing the men from these families into mass graves, but affected thousands of women and children, stranding them in exceedingly difficult and bewildering circumstances. They were trapped inside government-monitored complexes, without social services, electricity, or water, or even the freedom to bring in anything from the outside. Due to the patriarchal nature of Kurdish society at the time, they had to abide by the prevailing social customs, which included not re-marrying after the loss of their husband. Naturally, this led them to adopt the man's role in maintaining the family, and required suppressing their femininity. The existence of women in traditional societies such as Kurdistan is conditioned by the presence of a man, and women's interests can be ignored. In the event of the husband's disappearance, for example, the woman's feelings are sidestepped, her possible desires for re-marrying and starting a new life are eliminated, with her consent or without it.

In the experience of the Barzani women, the definition of motherhood was removed from its traditional meanings, taking on a new form which had not occurred before on this magnitude. These mothers were not mothers like before: They took on the role of men as well. They viewed their children from a completely different perspective, from the eyes of both mother and father at the same time.

Traditionally, preserving social customs and family traditions was the man's job. In Kurdistan, these single mothers were forced to take on the role of the man, because the genocide took away their father, brother, uncle, and husband. This led to a transformative change in gender roles and their re-formation according to contemporaneous social reality. This process of change was reflected on more than one level, including work, family security, burial of the dead, slaughter of animals, and so on. Meanwhile, the people around these unique women helped and supported them, as their perseverance in the face of utter tragedy won their respect. In fact, social cohesion was at its highest level. In this sense, the changing social roles led to a change of values in the social fabric itself, directly affecting people's thinking.