

Expressing trauma through art: Yazidi women share stories

In connection with the UN Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the Church of Norway, Norwegian Church Aid, Stefanus Alliance, and The Norwegian Council on Religions and Life Stance Communities organized an exhibit and seminar through which Yazidi women expressed their trauma through art therapy and storytelling.

Image



Surviving Yazidi women from Iraq express trauma through art therapy in this exhibit organized by Church of Norway, Norwegian Church Aid and partners, 25 November 2024.

Photo:

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02 December 2024

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The exhibition, which opened on 25 November, was followed by a seminar on violence against women. Topics in both the exhibition and seminar included the Yazidi women's situations and how freedom of religion is a crucial human right.

The genocide of Yazidis in Iraq occurred ten years ago, on 3 August 2014, in the population of an otherwise peaceful Sinjar region in northern Iraq. The community experienced a nightmare. Heavily armed, the IS terrorist group captured towns and villages, including those belonging to the Yazidi religious minority.

People were brutally slaughtered. Thousands were killed and at least 7,000 women and girls were left captured and subjected to sexual slavery and violence, while boys were forced to become child soldiers. Tens of thousands were driven to flight. It is still demanding for them to return because of the difficult situation, lack of basic services, and stigma in society. The abuses the women have survived are both collective and individual trauma in the Yazidi community.

Art therapy

The pictures in the exhibition were painted by women who survived the atrocities committed by IS. Art therapy is part of the psychosocial support work the women take part in through the Norwegian Church Aid's work against gender-based violence.

Art therapy gives the women the opportunity to express and process what they have experienced. Seeing the images also creates an opportunity for the surrounding community to understand what the women have been through.

Rev. Einar Tjelle, director for Ecumenical and International Relations, Church of Norway, had the opportunity to visit the exhibition last summer, and was indeed touched by the strong stories the surviving women expressed through their art.

“So I decided to ask for this exhibition to be set up in our head office, and cooperate with a few other faith-based organizations,” he said. “The project, facilitated by Norwegian Church Aid in Iraq, uses art as therapy for these women.”

He noted that the IS atrocities and the genocide of 2014 are almost forgotten by many today, so this was an opportunity to raise the voices and awareness a decade later.

“The opening on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against women, Thursdays in Black, and the campaign 16 Days Against Gender-Based Violence, is of course also perfect timing,” he said.

The violence and atrocities are complex. For women who were raped and became pregnant, children could be difficult to deal with not only for the women herself, but sometimes the shame is even worse in the family.

"Impunity is a big problem in the society, and justice and fair trials are much needed," said Tjelle, who believes that rebuilding the community and assisting poor families economically should be a priority.

There are still 200,000 Yazidi still in refugee camps, many of them women are denied freedom of religion—a basic human right.

“Sometimes religious aspects and knowledge are ignored among secular actors,” said Tjelle.

The most important message from Yazidi women is that they don't want to be forgotten. As participants viewed the exhibit and participated in the seminar, during which many women shared stories, they said they learned a lot.

Many expressed grief upon viewing the artwork but, at the same time, felt the women's resilience and strength.

"To own their own stories is key," said Tjelle. "These women are survivors; they are empowered. But they want us to not forget, especially those thousands still in camps, still with deep wounds."