Cultural Taboos and the Stigma of Sexual Violence Among the Middle East Minorities

SINI K[1]

Abstract: Sexual violence aimed at minority women in the Middle East has been greatly overlooked and systematically ignored. The stigma associated with sexual assault, grounded in honor-based cultural codes, religious conservatism, and patriarchal norms, frequently perpetuates secondary violence through imposed silence. This study analyses how minority groups, such as Yazidis, Assyrians, Kurds, and Mandaeans, respond to the intersecting influences of gender, ethnicity, and religion, with sexual violence serving as both a tool of oppression and a symbol of communal shame. Cultural taboos function as destructive tools that control bodies, regulate grief, and limit voice. The study draws on memoirs (such as Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* and Badeeah Hassan's *A Cave in the Clouds*), survivor testimonies, NGO reports, and theoretical frameworks from Judith Butler and trauma studies to examine this phenomenon. Sexual violence remains a critical issue, particularly within Middle Eastern minorities, where cultural taboos and stigma contribute to the challenges faced by survivors. This study emphasises the importance of survivors' narratives, presenting storytelling as a form of resistance. It advocates for frameworks that address stigma, strengthen legal protections, and facilitate communal healing.

Keywords: Sexual violence, cultural taboos, stigma, minorities, survivor testimony, trauma studies, gendered oppression.

Cultural Taboos and the Stigma of Sexual Violence among the Middle East Minorities

Sexual violence continues to be one of the most culturally silenced and stigmatised forms of gendered oppression in many communities. Established concepts of sexual purity, honour, and family reputation persist in influencing the regulation of women's bodies and the interpretation of violations against them. In various cultural contexts, the perceived sexual integrity of a woman is tied to her individual identity as well as the moral standing of her family, community, and cultural group. Sexual violence results in survivors experiencing shame, while the actions of those who commit it are often covered up by patriarchal norms that define womanhood with chastity and social status. This process transforms sexual assault from an individual trauma into a socially constructed sin, which is displaced onto the victim through silence, isolation, or moral blame.

The cultural taboos surrounding sexual assault are part of larger power structures, such as ethnic politics, religious authority, and patriarchy. Sexual violence is seen as a danger to communal honour rather than a breach of human rights in many areas, where survivors are pushed into silence and where public discourse about rape is prohibited. Research in anthropology and sociology has extensively documented how these taboos regulate female behaviour, reinforce gender hierarchies, and sustain cycles of silence that prevent healing and justice. The outcome is a widespread culture wherein survivors usually face greater repercussions from their own communities than from the perpetrators who victimised them.

Sexual violence within minority communities, especially those facing political marginalisation, ethnic discrimination, or religious persecution, worsens the consequences of stigma. Minority women experience gendered violence while also contending with communal anxieties regarding external judgment, cultural erasure, and social fragmentation. Their bodies serve as symbolic battlegrounds for broader conflicts regarding identity, purity, and survival. Cultural taboos in these contexts not only silence individual survivors but also convert sexual violence into an instrument for regulating community boundaries, controlling the mobility of women, and sustaining patriarchal authority.

The stigmatisation of sexual violence among Middle Eastern minorities must be understood within a broader global and historical context. Honor-based value systems, strict gender norms, and culturally embedded concepts of shame combine with political violence and ethnic persecution, resulting in complex vulnerabilities for minority women. This study contextualises the experiences of Yazidi, Assyrian, Kurdish, and Mandaean women within a broader discursive framework, analysing how cultural taboos influence and reinforce the violence they endure. This study also examines survivor testimonies, memoirs, and multidisciplinary research to analyse the production, enforcement, and resistance of silence. It shows how minority women, despite significant structural constraints, convert stigma into a platform for narrative agency and collective resistance.

Sexual violence targeting minority women in the Middle East is neither unintentional nor distinct; rather, it constitutes a deeply rooted and systematically generated phenomenon, shaped by interconnected historical, political, and cultural factors. Minority communities, including the Yazidis, Assyrians, Kurds, and Mandaeans, have historically faced systemic marginalisation, placing women at the centre

---

[1] **SINI K,** Research Scholar (Part-time), Department of English, University of Calicut, Kerala, India, & Assistant Professor, Department of English, Amal College of Advanced Studies (Autonomous), University of Calicut. Kerala, India.

of various vulnerabilities related to gender, ethnicity, and religion. The emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria from 2012 to 2014 demonstrated the deliberate use of sexual violence as a strategy for genocide and sociopolitical control. ISIS characterised Yazidi women as "concubines" and "spoils of war," thereby providing a discursive justification for mass abductions, sexual enslavement, and attempts to forcibly assimilate them into its ideological structure (United Nations 18). The actions in question were not isolated incidents but rather elements of a deliberate strategy aimed at undermining cultural identity, reinforcing sectarian hierarchies, and instilling fear in minority populations. Assyrian, Kurdish, and Mandaean women experienced parallel patterns of gendered violence, including forced marriages, abductions, and sexual coercion, revealing the systematic targeting of minority women within broader political and ethnic conflicts.

The way that sexual violence appears, is interpreted, and dealt with in Middle Eastern minority populations is greatly influenced by cultural norms. Honor-based value systems in many of these countries portray women as the moral representatives of their families and communities, making female sexuality a site of social identity. Sexual purity is not only a personal trait in such contexts, but also a socially regulated marker for communal prestige. As a result, when sexual violence occurs, even when it is clearly an act of intimidation, the victim is sometimes subjected to guilt, mistrust, or repressive attitudes, because her apparent "violation" is regarded as a danger to the group's integrity (Murad 139). The outcome constitutes a form of secondary victimisation that enforces silence, erasure, and self-blame upon those who have survived.

Judith Butler's theory of "ungrievable lives" provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon. In this theory, Butler asserts that certain forms of suffering are not recognised or met with compassion, because they disturb the prevailing cultural norms (34). In communities governed by honour, the trauma of survivors becomes socially incomprehensible; public recognition risks revealing the vulnerabilities of the community, thereby challenging established patriarchal and communal norms. The emphasis on silence converts the body of the victim into a disputed space, necessitating regulation to uphold communal unity.

Badeeah Hassan's testimony reveals both emotional and disciplinary pressure. She describes being compelled to keep quiet about the details of her captivity, not for her emotional protection, but to prevent her experience from "dishonouring" her family or disturbing existing social hierarchies (189). These expectations demonstrate the dominance of patriarchal cultural narratives, which lead women to internalise the notion that their trauma is a personal burden instead of recognising it as a collective injustice. The resultant silencing limits possibilities for healing and justice while simultaneously maintaining a broader culture that normalises, underreports, and structurally obscures the violations against minority women.

Sexual violence against minority women in the Middle East results in both physical harm and a situation similar to social death, where survivors exist biologically but are symbolically marginalised from community life, deprived of acceptance, and made socially invisible (Mbembe 40). This phenomenon is particularly evident within Yazidi communities. Women returning from ISIS captivity face the dual challenges of trauma from their experiences and the burden of honour-based expectations that turn their bodies into symbols of shame. Suicide attempts among returnees are documented in several reports, highlighting the terrible effects of social exclusion and the intrusion of necropower into regular interpersonal relationships. This suggests that violence against minority women functions through two mechanisms: the explicit violence of armed groups and the more subtle, culturally ingrained structures that govern bodies, sexuality, and expression.

Silence becomes both a cultural requirement and a survival strategy. Public discourse regarding sexual assault may endanger a survivor's future, social status, or physical safety. Dunya Mikhail, in *The Beekeeper of Sinjar*, documents how survivors frequently express the difficulty of deciding between expression and silence; one woman admits, "If I speak, I will break apart. If I stay silent, I will break inside" (77). This "double wound" shows how cultural taboos intensify psychological trauma by making the effects of the first assault worse and then pressuring the victim to forget about it. For minority groups, silence serves as a protective mechanism against external stigmatisation; acknowledging sexual violence may reinforce prejudiced narratives created by majority populations or hostile groups. The responsibility of protecting communal dignity is unjustly placed on women's bodies and voices.

The weaponization of sexual violence extends beyond the Yazidis, illustrating broader regional patterns that affect various marginalised minority groups in the Middle East, such as Assyrians, Kurds, Mandaeans, Shabaks, Turkmen, Coptic Christians, Baha'i women, Palestinian women, and Ahwazi Arabs. In times of political upheaval or armed conflict, these communities face increased vulnerability due to their status as ethnically or religiously marginalised populations and the patriarchal structures that govern women's bodies as symbols of communal honour. This dual vulnerability allows armed groups and state actors to employ sexual violence as a tool for establishing control, dismantling collective resistance, and changing demographic structures. For Assyrian women, ISIS incursions into the Khabur River region in 2015 included documented cases of sexual assault, kidnapping, and forced displacement, all of which were strategically designed to terrorize the community and dismantle its cultural continuity (United Nations 25). Kurdish women, targeted by ISIS fighters and other extremist factions, endured abduction, forced marriages, and sexual enslavement intended to fracture familial networks and enforce ideological domination. These patterns reveal a calculated attempt to use women's bodies as battlegrounds for ethnic and sectarian restructuring.

The Mandaean women, who are part of one of Iraq's oldest ethno-religious minority groups, were also victims of militia-driven violence in the mid-2000s, which caused widespread relocation and the destruction of their community life. The ladies endured threats, harassment, and sexual abuse. Reports on human rights indicate that Mandaean women were particularly targeted because of the group's perceived religious distinctiveness, leading them to be subject to forced conversion and sexual exploitation (Human Rights Watch, Iraq Minorities 14). Women of the Shabak community in northern Iraq have faced assaults from ISIS and other armed groups. The Shabak, marginalised due to their syncretic religious identity, experienced sexual violence caused by sectarian cleansing. Women were abducted, forced into slavery, or used as tools to compel male relatives to relinquish property or escape contested areas (Minority Rights Group 8). During the period of ISIS control, Turkmen women, especially those from Tal Afar, experienced similar abuses, including sexual slavery, intimidation, and forced conversion, which were employed to undermine Turkmen identity and reinforce territorial dominance (United Nations 47).

Coptic Christian women in Egypt have historically faced abduction and forced marriage, often accompanied by sex slavery. Documented by human rights organisations, these acts serve two functions: exerting pressure for religious conversion and reinforcing patriarchal authority within extremist ideologies (Amnesty International 22). Baha'i women in Iran, who are already marginalised from public life due to systemic discrimination, experience harassment and custodial abuse, including sexual threats and assault. These acts serve as state-sanctioned strategies to discipline those who disagree and suppress minority identities ("UN General Assembly Report on Iran" 19). Palestinian women under occupation endure various forms of sexualised violence, such as intimidation at checkpoints, harassment during detention, and humiliation during home raids. Scholars argue that these actions, although not necessarily constituting explicit sexual assault, represent gendered strategies of domination aimed at weakening psychological resistance and reinforcing militarised control (Abu-Lughod 56). Reports indicate that among Ahwazi Arab women in southwestern Iran, sexual abuse during political detentions reflects a pattern in which the state employs sexual violence as a form of punishment against communities advocating for cultural and linguistic rights. These actions serve dual functions of punishment and deterrence, thereby reinforcing the marginal political status of the Ahwazi minority (Human Rights Watch, Iran: Attacks 11).

These examples indicate a significant regional trend in which minority women serve as symbolic targets for the implementation of wider political agendas. Sexual violence serves as a strategic instrument for demographic manipulation, sectarian control, and cultural disintegration. Those who target women weaken the social structure of minority groups, disrupt the continuity of lineage, and impose narratives of shame that damage community cohesion. The weaponization of the female body reveals the intersection of gender hierarchy and ethno-religious marginalisation, demonstrating that sexual violence against minority women is not incidental but rather integrated into broader agendas of territorial, ideological, and cultural control.

Minority women have developed significant forms of resistance through testimony, memoir, and public advocacy despite existing constraints. Nadia Murad's *The Last Girl* reconceptualises sexual violence as a political crime rather than a source of individual dishonour, asserting, "What happened to us is not our shame. It is the world's shame" (Murad 204). Her narrative disrupts patriarchal norms that enforce silence, transforming personal trauma into a global ethical responsibility. Similarly, Badeeah Hassan documents the tension between imposed silence and the necessity of asserting her truth by using her testimony to reclaim agency and counter efforts at erasure (67). These narratives function as counter-discourses: they reveal the disciplinary norms that reduce minority women's suffering and create alternative epistemic spaces where survivors can articulate their own meanings, identities, and demands for justice. This resistance highlights the need for interventions centred on survivors that tackle both structural and cultural aspects of violence. Effective frameworks should demonstrate cultural sensitivity, incorporate trauma-informed principles, and address the intersecting vulnerabilities associated with gender, minority identity, and displacement. Legal protections must extend beyond prosecution to encompass safeguards for survivors facing communal stigma. Community education can confront honour-based ideologies that attribute blame to survivors, while public endorsement from religious and tribal leaders can aid reintegration and uphold the dignity of women returning from captivity. Narrative reclamation serves as a crucial tool for healing and political intervention, allowing survivors to convert silence from a position of constraint into one of agency.

Understanding sexual violence within minority contexts demands a recognition of the continuum of harm generated by both physical assault and the socially constructed stigma surrounding it. Honour codes, patriarchal structures, and necropolitical practices perpetuate violence beyond the immediate act, influencing the lives of survivors long after the initial trauma has occurred. Within these limited confines, women encounter the complexities of silence, resistance, and self-representation, thereby challenging and unsettling established structures of power. The accounts of Murad, Hassan, and other minority women reveal how the act of storytelling reshapes individual identity, confronts cultural prohibitions, and fosters innovative possibilities for communal and collective healing.

The issue of sexual violence against minority women in the Middle East should be comprehended not solely as a byproduct of war or extremism, but as a complex phenomenon where cultural, political, and necropolitical forces intersect. This study presents the narratives of survivors, demonstrating how marginalised women challenge the systems that aim to silence them and transform the cultural perceptions of honour, purity, and trauma. Their voices bear witness to the immediate ethical need for responses that emphasise dignity,

justice, and healing. By engaging in acts of narrative resistance, minority women assert control over their bodies and histories, transforming imposed silence into a realm of resilience, political agency, and profound cultural significance.

Work Cited

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard UP, 2013.
- Amnesty International. *Egypt: Abductions and Forced Conversions of Coptic Women*. Amnesty International Publications, 2016.
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Verso, 2004.
- Hassan, Badeeah. *A Cave in the Clouds: A Young Woman's Escape from ISIS*. Amazon Crossing, 2021.
- Human Rights Watch. *Iran: Attacks Against the Ahwazi Arab Minority*. Human Rights Watch, 2019.
- Human Rights Watch. *Iraq's Minorities: Forced Displacement and Sexual Violence*. Human Rights Watch, 2015.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Duke UP, 2019.
- Mikhail, Dunya. *The Beekeeper of Sinjar: Rescuing the Stolen Women of Iraq*. Serpent's Tail, 2018.
- Minority Rights Group International. *No Way Home: Iraq's Minorities on the Edge of Extinction*. Minority Rights Group, 2016.
- Murad, Nadia. *The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State*. Tim Duggan Books, 2017.
- United Nations. *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*. UN Human Rights Council, 2015.
- United Nations. *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*. UN Human Rights Council, 2016.