When the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured the Sinjar Province in northern Iraq in 2014, it brought with it the face of terror and death. Without any respect for human life, ISIS launched a brutal genocide against the Yazidi people, an ethnic minority that has lived in the region for centuries. Yazidis were declared “devil worshippers” for practicing their religion and systematically persecuted. Thousands were killed or abducted in a matter of days and many more were forced to seek refuge in the Sinjar Mountains. Yazidi women who fell into the hands of ISIS fighters suffered an especially horrendous fate: they were held captive and sold into sexual slavery, forced to endure some of the most despicable crimes imaginable.

Nadia Murad, a 19-year-old student at the time, was one of the women ISIS captured in Sinjar. From her village, she was taken to Mosul, the nearest major city, where she was forced to endure brutal beatings, mutilation, and rape. After months of torture, Murad managed to escape and reach a refugee camp outside of ISIS territory. Eventually, she was able to claim asylum in Germany. Since her escape in late 2014, Murad has courageously told her story and thereby helped raise global awareness of conflict-related sexual violence and specifically the Yazidi genocide. She has spoken about the need to fight human trafficking before the United Nations Security Council, she has founded a nonprofit organization (Nadia’s Initiative) that helps survivors of sexual violence, and she has published a memoir titled The Last Girl: My Story of Captivity, and My Fight Against the Islamic State. Murad has become a symbol of resistance against ISIS, a source of hope for survivors of sexual violence, and a relentless fighter for peace. For her activism, she was recognized with the 2016 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize.

Murad’s message is much more than just a reminder of the atrocities that were committed against the Yazidis in 2014. It is an appeal to fight for the dignity of humanity by making human rights our first priority. She has given a voice to a persecuted people and to survivors of sexual violence around the world. Her story instills hope in all of us that what will endure is the courage and resilience of women like her, not the hateful ideology of her torturers.

“I want to be the last girl in the world with a story like mine.”

“You can be a voice for them. You can open doors for them that they cannot open”

Nadia Murad at Yale University, on what you can do to help the Yazidi community
Sexual Violence in War

Although ISIS’s systematic sexual enslavement of Yazidi women stands out as an extraordinarily cruel practice, rape and other forms of sexual violence happen in many wars. Sexual violence is often “weaponized” and used to terrorize civilians, especially but not only women. According to the most recent United Nations report on the issue, patterns of rape are currently found in thirteen conflicts around the world (see map below). This means thousands of people become victims every year, many of whom suffer from severe and long-lasting psychological trauma. That is why the work of activists like Nadia Murad, who courageously fight to bring an end to wartime sexual violence, is important to recognize and support with all necessary means, especially considering the issue has often been overlooked in the past. It wasn’t until 2008 that the UN Security Council officially recognized sexual violence as a war crime.

A Global Problem

Countries with sexual violence in conflict-affected settings: Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan (Darfur), Syria, Yemen

Countries grappling with addressing past sexual violence: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Côte d’Ivoire, Nepal, Sri Lanka

Countries with situations of concern: Burundi, Nigeria

Shame and Stigma

A primary reason why sexual violence is used as a weapon of war is to inflict shame and stigma on the civilian population. In many cultures, rape victims are subject to humiliation, in some cases even abandonment by their families.

“There is a lot of shame. The women are concerned about their family’s reputation” - Razia Sultana

Widespread sexual violence therefore not only inflicts severe physical and psychological harm on the victims, but is often also an attack on the social fabric of a population, particularly in ethnic conflicts.

Searching for Justice

The aftereffects of sexual violence are often felt for decades. The search for justice after these war crimes have been committed are often hindered by shame and stigma as well as by entrenched male-dominated power structures.

For Bosnian Women, No Justice—and No Seats

In Bosnia, for example, women who experienced wartime sexual violence have struggled to make their voices heard. As Riada Asimovic Akyol highlights, women who were raped during the Bosnian War now face obstacles to achieve political representation in their quest for justice.
In 2016 and 2017, the Rohingya minority was violently persecuted by the Myanmar military causing more than 770,000 people to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. The brutal campaign by state forces included what TIME Magazine called "a sexual violence epidemic." Razia Sultana, a Rohingya lawyer, interviewed hundreds of rape victims in order to document these atrocities. She also established the Rohingya Women’s Welfare Society, an organization that provides counseling to survivors and works to bring the plight of Rohingya women to international attention.

Murad has been instrumental in bringing the plight of Yazidis to the world’s attention. But there are many other activists around the world who also fight every day to stop sexual violence and help affected communities. The two people briefly introduced below have saved countless lives with their courageous work in Southeast Asia and central Africa.

**Razia Sultana**

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**Dr. Denis Mukwege**

The conflict-prone Democratic Republic of the Congo has gained the infamous reputation of being “the rape capital of the world.” The United Nations suspects that eighteen groups, mostly militias but also the state military and the state police, engage in systemic sexual violence. The gynecologist Dr. Denis Mukwege has been treating rape victims in the country for nearly twenty years, growing his hospital to serve an area with 400,000 people. He was briefly forced to flee to Europe but later returned after local women had raised money for his return. He received the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize alongside Murad.

**A Global Response?**

Activists like Murad, Sultana, and Mukwege have helped get the issue of sexual violence in war on the agenda of international politics. In 2019, Germany introduced a UN Security Council resolution to step up the fight on the issue. It passed only after revisions were made addressing U.S. concerns about language suggesting support for abortion rights.

Sexual violence is rife in war zones. We must take action.

This opinion article by Angelina Jolie and German foreign minister Heiko Maas calls attention to the urgency to take action against sexual violence in war.

**The Washington Post**

UN waters down rape resolution to appease US’s hardline abortion stance

This piece in the Guardian describes the difficult process of getting Germany’s UN resolution passed, including why the U.S. raised concerns about its language.
Discussion Questions

What can we do to support survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and assure that the perpetrators are brought to justice?

What needs to change so people who experience sexual violence in war are no longer ashamed to come forward and receive the help they deserve?

Do survivors like Nadia Murad who share their story help others who have experienced sexual violence overcome shame and stigma?

Should human rights play a more important role in U.S. foreign policy? Or are most of these issues, horrible as they may be, outside of our control?

Why do you think it took until 2008 for the UN Security Council to recognize sexual violence as a war crime?

Have gender discrimination in geopolitics and everyday life prevented stronger action against conflict-related sexual violence?

This classroom resource guide is provided by WorldOregon and designed to encourage discussion about subjects related to Nadia Murad’s talk at the 2020 International Speaker Series. The guide is meant to be purely informative; WorldOregon does not endorse any views or opinions expressed in it.

With thanks to the following organizations for resources used:


