

Educating the Future: The Transformative Role of Barzani Youth in Kurdish Society after Barzani Genocide

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Abstract

Background and Objectives:

The 1983 Barzani Genocide's legacies—unresolved disappearances, intergenerational trauma, and ongoing forensic/memorial work—frame rising youth roles as memory brokers and civic problem-solvers. This study examines how Barzani youth ascribe meaning to inherited violence and enact transformation in everyday community repair (volunteering, survivor accompaniment, cultural revival, local advocacy, digital memory stewardship) across the Barzan valley, Erbil, and Duhok, and how gendered, rural–urban, and classed positions shape participation and institutional linkages.

Methods: Hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990) guided a qualitative design. Purposive sampling recruited 12 Kurdish youths (38–46 years; survivors or first-generation descendants). Semi-structured interviews (60–90 minutes) were conducted July–September 2024 in private, participant-chosen settings; audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated. Analysis followed Van Manen's six activities with holistic, selective, and detailed readings. Trustworthiness was ensured via prolonged engagement, member checking, and

peer debriefing. Ethics approval was granted by Hawler Medical University; pseudonyms preserved confidentiality.

Results: Four themes emerged: (1) Memory, Identity, and Emotional Inheritance—post-memory, Barzani-specific identity, and a dialectic of trauma and resilience; (2) Education as Empowerment and Resistance—access/representation and Kurdish-medium learning as political-cultural resistance; (3) Youth Leadership and Societal Transformation—civic engagement, service-oriented problem-solving, and gender-balanced leadership; (4) Barriers, Aspirations, and Future Visions—corruption, unemployment, and party patronage alongside pragmatic hope, civic-tech micro-innovations, and nation-building visions.

Conclusion: Barzani youth convert inherited grief into ethical orientation and practical civic action—remembering as refusal of erasure, education as resistance, and inclusive leadership—while navigating constrained political opportunities. Policy and programming should resource survivor-centered, youth-led initiatives; culturally sustaining Kurdish-medium curricula; gender-equitable leadership pipelines; and

accountable municipal channels, while mitigating politicization and volunteer fatigue. Findings inform transitional justice, forensic identification and memorialization, and inclusive development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Keywords: Barzani Genocide; Kurdistan Region of Iraq; hermeneutic phenomenology; intergenerational memory; education as resistance; youth leadership; civic engagement; transitional justice

Introduction

The 1983 Barzani Genocide refers to the mass kidnapping and execution of around 8,000 Barzani males from all age groups – boys, youth, men, and elderly – by the Ba’athist regime in the early stages of Anfal campaign (collectively referred within Anfal as genocide according to Iraqi High Tribunal-Iraqi High Tribune, 2007; MoMAA-2024). Forty years later, its unresolved disappearance cases are among its enduring legacies as well. Intergenerational trauma and ongoing recovery and memorialization efforts exhuming identifying victims (ICMP 2023; MoMAA 2024). In this environment, Barzani youth—grandchildren of survivors and young people from the most impacted communities—have come to play essential roles as memory brokers, social catalysts, and architects of justice and accountable governance.

This qualitative study focuses on how Barzani youth make sense of and perform “transformation” in routine contexts of community repair – via volunteering, survivor accompaniment, cultural revival work, overdue local advocacy projects, and digital memory-stewardship. Over the period from 2021 until the present, phenomena like those identified in this trend assessment will persist as long as institutions and aid actors are working to resolve displacement across the KRI; though at a neighborhood and village level gaps are increasingly being filled by younger generations with respect to social services and social cohesion through civic or philanthropic channels (BCF, 2023; IOM, 2024). Nevertheless, their agency is negotiated through

structural conditions – precarious livelihoods, migration imperatives and the entanglement of party–society relations, as well as the moral vocation of narrating the past. The research is centered around investigating youth narratives that span the Barzan valley, Erbil and Duhok and looking at gendered, rural–urban, classed dimensions of participation informing debates on youth-led peacebuilding, transitional justice in hybrid political orders and co-production of memory between survivors with the new generation (ICMP, 2023; MoMAA, 2024).

Although youth lie at the heart of recovery, little is known about how Barzani youth build trust, care for their victims or negotiate through institutional linkages in post-genocide settings. The urgency of breaking down the instrumental chains holding youth back is particularly felt as forensic identification and memorial initiatives proceed, the dynamics of displacement evolve, and more, culturally rooted sustainable policies and programs are designed to better meet the needs of these generations (ICMP, 2023; IOM, 2024). With regard to the case of KRI, this research is expected to generate empirically rich insights that can be used by governments, educational institutions and civil society actors to better situate their strategies on promoting survivor-centered justice transformation, memory intergenerational transmission and inclusive development in KRI b) while minimizing the risks of politicization (BCF, 2023), as well as volunteer fatigue through providing evidence-based recommendation (MoMAA, 2024).

Method

Study Design

This qualitative research adopted Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to investigate the lived experiences of Barzani women in the aftermath of the 1983 genocide. This method has been chosen because of its abilities to show a very profound interpretive approach to personally experienced stories and in this case, in line with issues such as survival,

emerging leadership and post conflict community reconstruction.

Participants

To identify Kurdish youths residing in Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a purposive sampling method was used to come up with twelve participants. Respondents had either survived the genocide of the Barzani or were the first generation to the survivors. Inclusion criteria presupposed the willingness of a participant to be included in the study because of newly acquired legal obligations of family or community membership after genocide. Individuals without direct experiential relevance or who declined participation were excluded. The participants' ages ranged from 38 to 46 years.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between July and September 2024. Interviews took place in private settings chosen by the participants—predominantly their homes or trusted community environments—to facilitate open dialogue. The process of data collection went on before the thematic saturation was achieved meaning that no new information was revealed. Interviews started with more open questions like, “How would you describe your life after genocide?” and “How did your position change in your family or community?” These were submitted by the more focused ones such as, how did you start supporting or leading others and how did you handle the death of your male relatives emotionally. The average session of the interviews was 60 to 90 minutes. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was guided by Van Manen's (1990) six methodological steps (outlined in Table 1). Transcriptions of interviews were checked and re-read several times so that interpretive depth and accuracy was present. Through holistic, selective, and detailed reading techniques, significant meaning units were identified, coded, and synthesized into overarching

themes that captured the essential elements of participants' experiences.

Table 1. Van Manen's Six Methodological Activities and Corresponding Research Procedures

#	Van Manen's Activity	Research Implementation
1	Orientation to lived experience	The principal investigator, himself a descendant of genocide survivors, contributed deep contextual insight.
2	Exploring lived experience	Direct engagement with youths who had undergone social and leadership transformations.
3	Thematic reflection	Themes emerged through interpretive and phenomenological analysis.
4	Phenomenological writing	Drafts were iteratively developed to authentically represent participants' experiences.
5	Maintaining focus on the phenomenon	Themes were consistently grounded in the core lived experiences of the youths.
6	Balancing parts and whole	Individual codes were linked to broader thematic structures to ensure coherence.

Trustworthiness

Prolonged engagement, member checking, and peer debriefing with mighty peers to ascertain academic peers, were used to guarantee the credibility of findings of the study. The richness and authenticity of the data was promoted by the development of effective researcher-participant rapport. The researcher's personal connection to the Barzani genocide and academic expertise in

gender and trauma studies added contextual depth and enhanced interpretive validity. The themes and interpretations in all of them were based in participant accounts and triangulation has been done by reading the transcripts multiple times.

Ethical Considerations

The experimental procedure involved ethically clearance of the Ethics Committee of the College of Nursing of Hawler medical University (Project No. XX, Approval Date: DD MM YYYY). Information was extensively provided to the participants about the objectives of the study, confidentiality of data, and their rights such as the freedom to withdraw themselves at any time. Informed written consent was obtained from each participant. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms (e.g., Youth 1, Youth 2) were used, and all data—both physical and digital—were stored securely.

Results

Following the analysis of the data collected from the interviews, four main themes along with their two subthemes were extracted. The initial big theme was “Memory, Identity, Emotional Inheritance” which had two subthemes which included “Intergenerational Memory and Cultural Identity” and “Trauma, Resilience, and Emotional Landscapes”. The second key theme was, “education as empowerment and resistance” with two subthemes: 1) educational access, agency and representation and 2) learning as political and cultural resistance. The third overarching theme was “Youth Leadership and Societal Transformation” with its two subthemes being “Civic Engagement, Leadership, and Activism” and “Gender, Youth Roles, and Social Change”. The fourth main theme was “Barriers, Aspirations, and Future Visions” with two subthemes “Structural Inequities and Socio-Political Challenges” and “Visioning Futures and Nation-Building”. The main themes and their subthemes are presented below along with relevant direct quotations from the women and activists.

Main Theme 1: Memory, Identity, and Emotional Inheritance

This theme is an exploration of how Barzani youths have engaged with the legacy of genocide through personal and collective memory, forming identity and emotional continuity. In this regard, Youth 1 said:

“I grew up with the names of the missing whispered at dinner, like a roll call that never ends. My grandmother’s stories stitch my identity to a past I didn’t live in but feel in my bones. The grief is not only pain; it’s a compass pointing me toward who I am as a Barzani youth. Remembering is the way I refuse erasure after the genocide.”

Moreover, Youth 4 revealed:

“Sometimes I think our family albums are made of absences—the spaces where uncles should teach me more than the faces that remain. We inherit emotions like heirlooms: sorrow, defiance, and a tenderness for each other. Carrying them shapes how I speak, what I study, and what I won’t tolerate. Memory is not a museum for me; it is the ground I walk on after what our people endured.”

Subtheme 1.1: Intergenerational Memory and Cultural Identity

Regarding the first subtheme of the first main theme, Youth 1 said:

“I never met my grandfather, but I carry his name, his village, and his struggle in every part of who I am.”

Moreover, Youth 5 said:

“Our identity is not just Kurdish—it’s Barzani. That means we carry the past, even if we didn’t live through it ourselves.”

Subtheme 1.2: Trauma, Resilience, and Emotional Landscapes

About the second subtheme of the first main theme, Youth 3 said:

“Sometimes I feel like I inherited sadness. But I also inherited strength—the kind my mother used to survive.”

In addition, Youth 8 revealed:

“It’s a strange feeling—to grow up with grief you didn’t witness. But that pain taught me to keep going.”

Main Theme 2: Education as Empowerment and Resistance

This theme highlights how formal and informal education serves as a transformative force for political awareness, cultural resistance, and community development. This theme was obtained from quotations like the following two taken from Youths 3 and 7, respectively.

“For me, education is a quiet form of resistance—every book I finish plants roots against forgetting. At university I studied history and law to challenge the narratives that tried to erase the Barzanis in the genocide. Teaching Kurdish to younger kids is as political as any protest. Knowledge makes me less afraid and more useful to my community.”

“My parents never had the chance to finish school, so each exam I pass feels like reclaiming something stolen. The workshops we run on digital literacy turned into circles where we talk about rights and accountability. Through study groups we transform frustration into plans. Education turns grief into tools we can use for change.”

Subtheme 2.1: Educational Access, Agency, and Representation

Regarding the first subtheme of the second main theme, Youth 2 and Youth 9 respectively said:

“For my family, education wasn’t just about success—it was about survival. It gave us a voice we were denied for decades.”

“We deserve to see ourselves in textbooks—not just as victims, but as contributors to history.”

Subtheme 2.2: Learning as Political and Cultural Resistance

On the second subtheme of the second main theme, Youth 3 revealed:

“Studying Kurdish history is my way of fighting

back. Knowledge is our weapon—they tried to erase us, but we’re writing ourselves back in.”

Moreover, Youth 10 said:

“When I learn in Kurdish, I feel like I’m reclaiming something they tried to take from my grandparents.”

Main Theme 3: Youth Leadership and Societal Transformation

This theme focuses on how Barzani youth engage in civic life, challenge social norms, and reshape Kurdish society through activism and innovation. Regarding this theme, Youth 9 stated:

“I helped start a youth council because being told to wait our turn felt like another kind of silence. We organize clean-ups, voter education, and dialogues between elders and students to rebuild trust in Kurdish society. Challenging norms begins small—girls chair meetings, boys take notes, everyone speaks. The ripples are slow but real.”

Moreover, Youth 10 said:

“Our team built a small group to pinpoint problems—broken pipes, unsafe roads—and send reports to local officials. People said activism is only protests, but innovation can be a megaphone too. When we solve problems, we also reimagine what leadership looks like. We’re not just beneficiaries anymore; we’re architects.”

Subtheme 3.1: Civic Engagement, Leadership, and Activism

About the first subtheme of the third main theme, Youth 4 and Youth 11 respectively said:

“I organize because I believe we owe it to our ancestors. Their silence was forced. Our activism is our freedom.”

“Leading youth groups isn’t just about events—it’s about shaping the future they tried to deprive us from.”

Subtheme 3.2: Gender, Youth Roles, and Social Change

Regarding the second subtheme of the third main

theme, Youth 7 and Youth 12 respectively revealed:

“As a young woman, I’m told to stay quiet—but my activism proves that change needs our voices too.”

“Our generation is redefining what it means to be a Kurdish youth—girls and boys, all leading together.”

Main Theme 4: Barriers, Aspirations, and Future Visions

This theme examines the structural challenges youth face while highlighting their dreams, ambitions, and efforts to build a better future. This theme was obtained from quotations of Youth 2 and Youth 12 who respectively stated:

“Sometimes the barriers feel like a concrete wall—unemployment, bureaucracy, and the lingering fear our parents carry from the genocide. Still, I hold a vision where memory empowers rather than paralyzes, and public services are fair. I have studied public health and have plans to rebuild clinics in the villages that were emptied. Hope, for me, is a strategy.”

“Corruption and party politics can close doors before we even knock, and girls face extra locks. I dream of a social enterprise that hires survivors’ families and funds scholarships for rural youth. To get there, I’m learning finance by day and organizing debate clubs by night. We’re building the future piece by piece, even when the path is crooked.”

Subtheme 4.1: Structural Inequities and Socio-Political Challenges

Regarding the first subtheme of the fourth main theme, Youth 3 said:

“We still face corruption, lack of resources, and inequality. But the hardest part is being expected to stay silent.”

Moreover, Youth 6 stated:

“Even with a degree, doors remain closed if you

don’t have the right connections. The system wasn’t built for us.”

Subtheme 4.2: Visioning Futures and Nation-Building

On the second subtheme of the fourth main theme, Youth 1 and Youth 8 respectively revealed:

“We don’t want revenge—we want justice and rebuilding. We want to create a Kurdistan our elders dreamed of.”

“Our future isn’t just about jobs or freedom. It’s about building a nation where no one’s story is erased.”

Discussion

Based on four cross-cutting themes—memory/identity, education as resistance, youth leadership, and barriers/future visions—this study elucidates how Barzani youth converts the inheritance of genocide into moral practices at a routine scale, political subjectivities at an immediate level, and nation-building oriented toward a long horizon. Comparing against contemporary notions of intergenerational memory trauma, memory activism scholarship, youth civic engagement in Iraq, and culturally sustaining education as part of politically progressive ethnography, findings align with—but complicate the current literature; especially through geographically specific identity work within Kurdishness which must account for “hope as strategy” amid persistent structures.

Memory, identity, and emotional inheritance

The participants’ language – “a roll call that never ends,” “family albums made of absences,” memory “as ground I walk on” – evokes what Marianne Hirsch calls post-memory, the condition in which descendants of survivors inherit affective, ethical, and identity-defining relationships to events they did not personally witness (Hirsch, 2012). Their insistence that remembering “refuses erasure” resonates with memory-activism scholarship showing how publics mobilize remembrance to claim visibility and rights in the present (Gutman, 2017). In the Kurdish case, Human Rights Watch’s documentation of the Anfal campaign situates these

testimonies in a historically specific repertoire of state violence, including the 1983 mass disappearance of Barzani men and boys (HRW, 1993). Digital memorial projects such as the Kurdistan Memory Program further reinforce a living archive that the youths' words actively inhabit and extend (KMP, 2016-2023).

The first subtheme (i.e., intergenerational memory braided with a Barzani-specific identity) brings about an issue that has remained largely untouched by more overarching theories on collective/cultural memory (Assmann, 1995). Instead of a universal Kurdishness, participants express a micro-collective identity ("it's Barzani") that comes with its names, locations, and responsibilities. This nested identity aligns with ethnographic accounts of Kurdish tribal/lineage affiliations as enduring social grammars, even as they are reinterpreted by younger generations (van Bruinessen, 1992). Psychosocially, the youths' descriptions of "inherited sadness" alongside "inherited strength" mirror contemporary work on intergenerational transmission of trauma and resilience, which emphasizes both biological and sociocultural pathways without reducing inheritance to pathology (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018). Comparative literature on genocide-affected communities (e.g., Holocaust, Rwanda, Yazidis) similarly documents how grief can structure moral horizons, not solely symptom profiles, and how remembrance can be a proleptic practice oriented to justice (Hardi, 2011; Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018).

What distinguishes this study is the affective pragmatics of memory: youth render remembrance actionable—as a compass (moral orientation), a curriculum (what to study), and a boundary (what not to tolerate). That nuance advances memory research beyond commemoration and into practice: memory here functions as survival infrastructure for the future.

Education as empowerment and resistance

Participants described education as "quiet resistance," a way to "plant roots against forgetting," teach Kurdish, and turn grief into tools for change. In a way, this concurs with Paulo Freire's inspired

motto to conscientize and transform as an iteration of critical pedagogy but contextualized in the actual production knowledge within a Kurdish context making knowledge itself political (Freire, 1970/2005). Similarly, recent work on global education in displacement/post-conflict has emphasized how schooling is exactly a place of belonging, future-making and civic learning, more than credential (Dryden-Peterson 2021).

The first subtheme (i.e., access, agency and representation) is in line with evidence that suggests inclusion in the curriculum and parity of representation matters for both outcomes and identity (Paris and Alim 2017; UNESCO 2020). Some of these opportunities can be described as significant policy openings for Kurdish-medium education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The participants' desire to see themselves in textbooks "not just as victims" is consistent with what researchers have found under the rubric culturally sustaining pedagogy as a way of resisting curricular erasure (Paris & Alim, 2017). The second subtheme (i.e., learning as political/cultural resistance) precedes broader bodies of literature on language rights and politics of mother-tongue instruction, suggesting that learning in one's home language enhances cultural survival and civil participation (UNESCO, 2020).

The combination of formal education with "rights circles" and digital literacy workshops is contemporary cue in the current study. A blend of these kinds serves the young people's civic learning in and beyond classrooms across the MENA region, using digital tools so that peer-led deliberation is supplemented by real-world problem-solving (Tufekci, 2017). In sum, these findings corroborate and update the "education as resistance" literature by showing how Barzani youth braid canonical schooling, language reclamation, and civic-tech practices into a continuum of empowerment.

Youth leadership and societal transformation

The third theme depicts a leadership style that is processual ("girls chair meetings, boys take notes"), service-oriented (monitoring broken pipes and roads), and dialogic (elder-student forums). This

harmonizes with research into Iraqi youth since 2019's Tishreen protests: leaderful instead of leaderless organization, civic mutual help, and an emphasis on the state's obligations (Arab Barometer, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2020). While much scholarship has dealt with Baghdad and southern provinces, this study adds some much-needed nuance from KRI, where tactics of contention are quite different due to varying political opportunity structures and dangers. Forward change has often been realized through municipal problem-solving rather than sustained street campaigns (Amnesty International, 2021).

The second subtheme of the third main theme on gender is strongly in line with recent analyses of Kurdish feminist praxis. As Dilar Dirik (2022: 139) describes, Kurdish movements naturalized women's leadership, communal decision-making, and a reimagined political subject. The straightforward declarations by the participants – “change needs our voices,” “girls and boys, all leading together” – carry on this wave of normative change as well as they are responding to it: young girls have been silent and never been leaders before. This micro-level corroboration of macro-level transformations illuminates how gender norms are reworked in routine civic spaces (not just at iconic sites of conflict or revolution) through everyday co-gender leadership and illustrates the wide-ranging dimensions reforming due to spontaneously emergent civic change.

Barriers, aspirations, and future visions

The participants referred to unemployment, bureaucracy, corruption, party patronage and gendered constraints as resembling hitting a political equivalent of concrete wall, which is something well-documented when it comes to Iraqi/KRG governance studies. Unsurprisingly, Transparency International confirms that Iraq is one of the most corrupt environments in the world based on its latest Corruption Perceptions Index with profound implications for youth trust and opportunity (Transparency International, 2023). A spate of recent World Bank monitors laments the “post-ISIS, post-oil-shock” double whammy, with

gradually recovering fiscal space amidst sluggish private-sector growth and high youth unemployment/underemployment — disproportionately affecting disadvantaged first-generation graduates (World Bank 2022). In KRI alone, established rights organizations have recorded incidences in which repression (especially of protests and resistance) has helped lock young people into what they perceive as restricted civic space (Amnesty International, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021).

The attention of an inquiry into how a hopeless young generation can ever find enough hope to engage in potent citizen engagement via practical civic entrepreneurship (e.g., social enterprises; community health initiatives) and innovations in service-monitoring is truly unique. This agrees with scholarship on everyday peace and pragmatic problem-solving in fragile settings, which in turn is built around incremental institutional repair and social trust through concrete small victories (Lederach 2005; Mac Ginty 2014). It further builds upon prior Iraqi protest research by revealing how KRI youth border-cross different forms of contentious energy into governance-adjacent innovations, highlighting an “innovation-as-megaphone” logic (as opposed to protest repertoires) that is less common but perhaps more feasible under semi-closed political contexts.

The results of the current study affirms that structural constraints in Iraq/ KRI are durable but not ineluctable (World Bank, 2022; Transparency International, 2023); the leadership of Kurdish women is indeed an ideational and organizational reality (Dirik, 2022); education serves as a space for identity maintenance and civic action (Dryden-Peterson, 2021; UNESCO, 2020); and memory practices can be future-oriented (Hirsch, 2012; Gutman, 2017).

The findings also highlight the significance of a Barzani intra-Kurdish identity and how subgroup histories shape youth pathways. It demonstrates “memory operationalization” – how remembrance concretely shapes choices (fields of study, teaching practices, leadership designs). And it documents

civic-tech micro-innovations as activism-by-other-means in KRI.

Yet intergenerational trauma discourse forewarns empathetic suffering (Yehuda & Lehrner, 2018), whereas such inheritance proves to be both a wound and wellspring – more dialectical than deterministic for these youths. Similarly, whilst protest scholarship often focuses on the high-risk contention in Iraq, these narratives reveal a quieter civic repertoire that may eventually institutionalize accountability from below.

Conclusion

This study offers a finely grained portrait of Barzani youths who convert inherited grief into civic grammar: remembering as refusal of erasure; education as resistance; leadership as inclusive process; and hope as a deliberate strategy amid structural constraints. In dialogue with recent research, the findings confirm that intergenerational memory can be a resource for ethical orientation and that culturally sustaining education strengthens civic capacity. The findings extend previous work on Iraqi youth by illustrating KRI-specific repertoires of action – service-oriented engagements with the public, gender-balanced facilitation jobs, and attempts to use computer coding tools in order to solve civic problems – all in an unpropitious political environment. Moving beyond diagnosis, this study captures young people who are designing the future they want, weaving memory into institution-building in forms that hold out pragmatic direction for policy prescriptions, program development strategies and scholarships to support them in leadership.

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