

Feature

Help for Yazidi survivors of sexual violence



In August last year, in the searing heat of a refugee camp in northern Iraq, psychologist Jan Ilhan Kizilhan found a 16-year-old girl with burns over 80% of her body. She had no eyes, no ears, and no nose. Weeks earlier, although already safe in the refugee camp, she had doused herself in petrol and set herself alight so that her former Islamic State captors would no longer rape her.

Kizilhan found another girl that month, this time an 8-year-old who had been held captive for 14 months. During that time she had been sold eight times and raped hundreds of times, five or six times a day.

Kizilhan is a researcher at Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University in Stuttgart, Germany, and is chief psychologist of the Special-Quota Project, a programme funded by the State Government of Baden-Württemberg. The project aims to bring women and children who have been held hostage by Islamic State to Germany for care on 1100 specially issued visas. Kizilhan was there to find women in need of help.

"I spoke with more than 1400 women, each of their stories was worse than the last", he says. "Even for someone like me with experience in hearing such things, it was very hard to deal with. The question I ask myself most is how humans can be so cruel to another human. You look in religious texts and you see nothing like this. How can they be so evil?"

In July and August, 2014, fighters tore into Kurdish northern Iraq and committed a horrific genocide under the black banner of Islamic State. Much of it happened in the Sinjar district, about 120 miles west of Mosul, where one of the biggest communities of Yazidis (a Kurdish non-Muslim religious group) live. Islamic State fighters took more than 7000 people hostage, killing around 5000, mainly men.

Captured women and girls have been subjected to sexual violence as an explicit Islamic State tactic, says Kizilhan, "to break the dignity and the honour of the communities. Also because they believe that if they rape the Yazidi women they will make them Muslim." Some women and girls have been lucky enough to escape or be bought back for thousands of dollars by their families.

In January, 2015, Kizilhan and his colleagues on the project set up an office in the Iraqi city of Duhok, about an hour's drive from the Turkish border, near 24 refugee camps, each with 18 000–20 000 refugees, mainly Yazidis. Through these camps and their collective 400 000 residents, they searched for women to bring back. They were armed with a list given to them by the Turkish Government and other non-governmental organisations of 800 women who had escaped Islamic State capture.

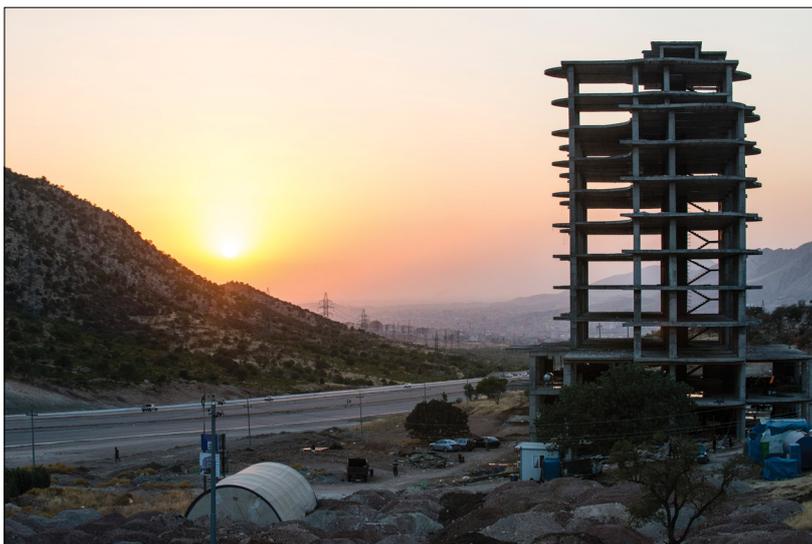
With Kizilhan was Michael Blume, a Baden-Württemberg official who heads the project. Together with an Iraqi doctor and colleagues from the German visa office, the two assessed every woman they could find for eligibility. In tandem, preparatory work was done in 22 cities and towns in Baden-Württemberg, which accepted 1000 women, and in Niedersachsen and Schleswig-Holstein, which accepted 70 and 30 women, respectively. As well as preparations for medical and social care, preparations were made to help the women integrate into society. The women, the last of whom arrived in Germany in February this year, are given German lessons, their children are given schooling, and all medical care and housing is provided for free.

The project has been criticised both at home and abroad. A humanitarian mental health specialist with an international agency who wishes to remain anonymous says that, in principle, mental health and psychosocial support services should be given where refugees live.

He added that "the Special-Quota Project seems to be based on several questionable assumptions, such as that the effects of rape and torture are just in the mind of the survivor and require individual treatment. But there are also consequences that will not be addressed by temporary evacuation of the survivor: shame, stigma, rejection, and the destruction of a whole social world."

"Sending survivors of sexual and gender-based violence to foreign countries for treatment is not the most obvious action to take", he adds, "much more should be invested in the Kurdistan Region itself to strengthen local capacity to

Published Online
March 23, 2016
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(16\)30004-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(16)30004-9)



Yazidi refugees sheltered in a building under construction in Duhok, Iraq

provide services to help not only the survivors but assisting their families, communities, and local services to support them better.”

In email correspondence, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq acknowledged that the capacity of the international community and local authorities is seriously overstretched, making the provision of good-quality services for survivors of sexual violence a challenge.

The office points to various initiatives that have been put in place to address the challenges. Such initiatives include support for governmental agencies in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, such as the Department of Health, the Department of Combating Violence against Women, and the Department of Labour and Social Affairs.

International and national organisations such as Norwegian People’s Aid are helping to build capacity, but UNHCR notes, “there remains a significant gap in investment in capacities, both technical and institutional, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq—much more needs to be done with the assistance of the international community to strengthen services in Iraq and build long-term capacity in the country”.

Blume stands by his and Kizilhan’s decision and the project’s method. “I agree in the long run that it’s best to help people stay where they are but for these cases in our eyes it was emergencies. We made very hard decisions and we believe that the women we took back, who were very ill and had no support—their husbands or fathers had been killed, remember—might have died if we left them there.”

The project has trained social workers, psychologists, and doctors in preparation for the special circumstances of dealing with trauma in people from different cultures. The lessons they have learned, says Blume, bear relevance for the treatment of these women wherever it is given. Last month, The Ministry of Science in Baden-Württemberg gave Kizilhan €1 million (about £780 000) to train psychologists in northern Iraq and set up an Institute of Psychotraumatology and Psychotherapy at the University of Dohuk. The project will start in January, 2017.

One such cultural difference, says Blume, is that the concept of psychotherapy can be alien to most Yazidi women. “The culture is very communal: you can ask them

something simple like how are you but it’s hard for them to focus on their personal experience”, he says, adding that such avoidance might also be a coping mechanism. “Instead they will just say that they want their children to be OK. So we’re working slowly, first helping them to stabilise in the new environment, build up trust again, and start slowly with doing yoga and breathing exercises. Most I think want to talk about what happened but are not ready.”

When they are ready to begin psychological treatment, adds Kizilhan, further complications exist. “When you’re talking about Yazidis they are facing three types of trauma, not just their individual recent trauma but a historical trauma too—they faced genocide 73 times during the Ottoman Empire.” Such deep-rooted traumatic instability, he says, complicates narrative therapy, in which an individual is helped to identify with their history and values to confront the problems they have.

The third trauma is a collective one. 3500 women and 1200 children are still held captive by Islamic State. Mass killings, and the mass graves that follow, mean that most individuals are not sure whether loved ones are alive or dead. “These two extra traumas—historic and collective—make treatment very different from, say, the treatment of a German person with trauma.”

Kizilhan gives an example of a patient in the project whose 4-year-old daughter is still in the hands of Islamic State. “She has blonde hair and blue eyes so she was taken by a commander for himself and he says when she turns 9 he will marry her. Of course the woman is busy with her own trauma but all night and day she is also thinking about her daughter and what will happen to her. You have decompensations, crises, some suicide attempts. It’s very normal if you know what these women have experienced.”

Blume adds a final thought in support of programmes that help people to evacuate areas at war. “There are lots of people who make it to Europe but they are more or less only the strong and the wealthy, the ones who can afford to pay for trafficking to Germany or even Greece”, he says. “In the future we need to think about ways that we can help the ones who aren’t strong enough to escape or run themselves so that we can bring them out and give them a chance to start anew.”

Dara Mohammadi

For more on funding of the Institute of Psychotraumatology and Psychotherapy at the University of Dohuk see <http://mwk.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/service/presse/pressemitteilung/pid/therapeutenausbildung-im-nordirak-zur-behandlung-traumatisierter-fluechtlinge>

Essay

Silver screens: cinema comes of age

Warren Schmidt waits an eternity for the office clock to hit 1700 h. He gets up from his executive chair, takes his briefcase, and departs from the last occupational shift of

his life to head for his dreary company retirement dinner. This is the opening of *About Schmidt* (2003). Schmidt refuses to wither after his wife dies and finds a purpose;