

Treating Yazidi rape survivors

A psychologist has brought more than 1,000 victims of Islamic State sexual violence to Europe to get medical and psychological treatment

Rebecca A. Clay, September 2016, Vol 47, No. 8

During the 14 months one Yazidi girl was held by the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, she was sold as a slave eight times and raped more than 100 times. Now 8 years old, she is unusual only for her extreme youth.

The girl was one of 1,400 Yazidi rape survivors who German psychologist Jan Kizilhan interviewed in 2015 and early 2016 during 14 trips to refugee camps around the Iraqi city of Dohuk. With 95 million euros from the regional parliament of Baden-Württemberg, which was spurred to help by a newspaper article Kizilhan wrote about the Yazidis' plight, he has since brought 1,100 women and girls back to Germany for medical and psychological treatment.

A Yazidi himself and head of the department of mental health and addiction at the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University, Kizilhan immigrated to Germany from his native Turkey as a small boy in 1973.

Systematic rape is part of IS's genocidal plan against the Yazidi, a Kurdish-speaking group now living primarily in northern Iraq.

But the individual trauma of rape isn't the only trauma these women and girls face. The Yazidi aren't Muslim. Instead, they practice an ancient religion that centers on worship of a peacock angel responsible for both good and evil.

As a result, IS views them as devil-worshipping infidels and therefore less than human.

Women aren't the only targets. Yazidi men are typically executed, and children forced to become child soldiers and Muslims. According to a new report from the United Nations Human Rights Commission, IS is guilty of three charges: war crimes against the Yazidis, crimes against humanity and genocide.

And this isn't the first time the Yazidi have been persecuted. They have faced multiple attempts at extermination dating back to the Ottoman Empire. Today, the global population of Yazidis is less than a million.

The women and girls Kizilhan has brought to Germany are now living in 22 cities across the country, housed in groups with social workers and translators. Some are still in what Kizilhan calls the stabilization and orientation phase of treatment. "They need a feeling of security," says Kizilhan, so the psychologists and social workers working with the women and girls are striving to give them a sense of structure. They're also guiding them in everyday activities, such as going to the doctor or buying food at the supermarket.

Others have begun psychoeducation and psychotherapy. "Some don't know anything about psychology," says Kizilhan, explaining that many come from small villages.

Psychotherapy must be adapted for Yazidis, who come from a traditional culture and don't like to talk openly about sexuality and rape, he adds. Because storytelling is a big part of Yazidi culture, the project uses a narrative therapy approach that gives participants plenty of time and space to talk. That approach also lets survivors tell their stories indirectly, Kizilhan says. "We might ask, 'Do you know someone who was raped? How do you imagine they feel?'" he says.

The therapists involved in the project also need to understand that Yazidis may express their distress differently than Europeans. "One of the Yazidis came to me and said, 'I have a burning liver,'" says Kizilhan. "In the western part of the world, we express emotions through our hearts."

Some humanitarian groups and others have criticized the project for removing the Yazidi women and girls from Iraq, arguing that they should be treated in their own cultural context. But, says Kizilhan, their homeland doesn't really exist anymore. The Yazidi stronghold of Sinjar, for example, is 90 percent destroyed, he estimates. Plus, treatment simply isn't available in northern Iraq. There are just 26 psychologists and psychiatrists for the 5.5 million people who live in the region, he says.

To help solve that problem, Kizilhan is now using additional government funding to create an institute at the University of Dohuk to train physicians, psychologists and social workers in trauma-informed psychotherapy for the Yazidis.

He's also writing a book on the psychology of IS. "How can they be so brutal?" says Kizilhan. "That's one way I cope myself—to try to research and understand."

Further reading

- "On genocide and trauma." *Financial Times*, 2016. "Help for Yazidi survivors of sexual violence." *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 2016.