

HEALING TRAUMATIZED YEZIDIS

Bringing Therapies to Victims of Atrocity Crimes

In 2014, Islamic State (IS) terrorists attempted to eradicate the Yezidi people through a deliberate genocidal campaign—of killing, kidnapping, hostage taking, enslavement, sexual exploitation and rape. As IS advanced, many fled to Mount Sinjar, a place of great religious significance to their community. Some 50,000 became trapped before the international community intervened. IS captured an estimated 3,500 women and girls who were sold as ‘sex slaves’ to IS fighters. About 7% managed to escape and return to their communities in the Kurdistan Region of Northern Iraq. Many free Yezidis now live in camps for internally displaced persons in Northern Iraq, fearful of further IS attacks, and too afraid to return to their homes.

The [Free Yezidi Foundation](#) (FYF) operates two centers inside the Khange IDP camp—one for women and one for children. FYF’s aims are threefold: restore a sense of normalcy; offer opportunities for learning and new skill acquisition; and create a safe and nurturing environment.

Despite the trusted care, support and training the FYF centres provide, until recently they offered only very basic stress-reducing activities and Psychological First Aid (PFA). But such modest interventions are generally not sufficient to prevent adverse consequences of untreated trauma—such as PTSD. That requires the application of evidence-based, trauma-focused therapies. This is where GIST-T has provided technical assistance in project design and helped secure funding from UN Women Trust Fund.

Stabilization interventions and in-depth psychological therapy for survivors are now made available for three groups of survivors: those personally abducted by IS terrorists and who suffered devastating sexual violence; those who fled IS and avoided capture, but know they were targeted for abuse and violence because of their religious identity; and those at risk of developing vicarious trauma through the horrific stories that have been and are being shared.

Existing funding supports two full-time trauma therapists, two interpreters and one driver for a period of two years. Four hundred women and girls annually will receive EMDR individual and group therapy. To sustain these efforts, two significant innovations will be implemented and evaluated: (1) creation of an all-female Yezidi PFA brigade; and, (2) identification and training of Yezidis with an aptitude and disposition to become mental health paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals will be trained in using simplified trauma therapy protocols using the GIST-T Confronting Stress and Trauma Resource Kit. These two innovations will potentially have significant application elsewhere in Iraq, and beyond.

On behalf of FYF, GIST-T (i) offers support in filling vacancies and reporting, (ii) seeks further funding for the training, evaluation and applied research components, and (iii) raises funds for project extension beyond the two-year funding period of UN Women Trust Fund.