

## **What is the cultural understanding of Mental Health Support in Iraqi Kurdistan?**

The main findings revealed that a lack of understanding of what mental health support means and entails in the cultural context is based on differences between the provider and receiver of the support. Differences in expectations, knowledge, the words used to describe concepts, outlooks towards the future, how to approach the support, the way of sense-making, the suitability of solutions to certain problems, the expression of feelings, how society supports each other, and the communication of it all. This research concludes that mental health projects in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps can lack sustainability, practicality, and cultural appropriateness. The Western (provider) understanding of mental health, being rather different from the people living in the IDP camps (receiver) in Iraqi Kurdistan, impacts the support effectiveness.

The high rate of displacement has left the Kurdish Iraqi society with a large public mental health crisis. Most mental health methods apply Western psychological theories and implement psychological support by experts from outside the affected community. To provide citizens of a camp with the appropriate mental health and psychosocial support, it is essential to understand how their culture influences their perceptions and what consequences it has on aid. This research is highly needed to emphasize the '*necessity*' of culturally sensitive mental health support. It allows the intercultural exchange of experiences and viewpoints between various actors within the humanitarian field, which makes it also highly relevant.

The goal of this thesis is to learn about what kind of consequences different understandings of mental health, based on different cultural backgrounds, can have on the support. To find answers to the research questions, the methodology is based on the grounded theory by Charmaz. The data was mainly collected through interviews with western psychologists working in the context of humanitarian aid in Iraqi Kurdistan and local mental health workers as well as professionals being responsible for implementing the structures and processes in building a mental health system in IDP camps.

The Kurdish understanding and framing of mental health are so new that it still lacks enough local knowledge to fully make sense of the concept, which increases the stigmatization and negative connotation of the term. Kurdish professionals acknowledge the importance of mental health support and emphasize awareness campaigns as a prevention strategy. Due to the limited words that can be used to explain the concept of mental health, which is mainly shaped by the English language, the stigmatization of the support increases as well as the lack of understanding of how the Western world makes sense of it. The lack of expression of feelings, especially among men but also women, perpetuates the stigma around mental health and makes accepting mental health support seen as a weakness, whereas, in the West, there is a lot of attention towards feelings. The uncertain prospect of IDPs and the lack of outlook on the future also make long-term mental health support seen as not entirely essential. The Western perspective is more accustomed to mental health and its impact on livelihoods and had more time to research and explore the term, making it less stigmatized. Those results can be used as lessons learned or recommendations for international humanitarian organizations before implementing a mental health support project in an IDP camp in Iraqi Kurdistan. For example, to offer support that is based on anonymity and bears the necessary sensitivity when talking about mental health issues, and communicate that accordingly to the target group.