

### **Refugee Mental Health: Is it an unrelieved burden?**

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A refugee is a person who "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality. Due to fear, he is unable or unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country and not willing to return to his motherland."<sup>1</sup>

Developed countries contribute most of the funding to assist refugees; developing countries host the vast majority of the world's refugees. In many developing countries, refugees were a large portion of the total population. In Pakistan, the ratio of refugee to total population is 1: 149 (1,088,100 refugees), Canada 1:815 (39, 500 refugees), West Bank and Gaza 1:2 (1,685,800 refugees), United States 1:1,678 (176,700 refugees) and Iran 1:70 (994,000 refugees) etc.<sup>2</sup>

It is estimated that about 1% of the world's population has been displaced either from their home or from their home country.<sup>3</sup> In addition to physical problems, these persons are at higher risk for mental disorders because of multiple stressors they experience. Economic, social and cultural conditions before and after displacement influence the mental health of refugees according to a meta-analysis. Existing data indicate over 42 million people can be considered refugees because of war, political violence or related threats.<sup>4</sup> These refugees are particularly vulnerable to the development of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and somatization.<sup>3</sup>

Children, who comprise at least a quarter of asylum seekers, are exposed to numerous risk factors for psychological disturbance, including exposure to violence, forced displacement, and multiple losses.<sup>5</sup> Few studies have suggested that refugee children incur significant morbidity.<sup>5</sup> Accessing mental health care pose difficulty for refugee children who are at increased risk for mental health problems.<sup>6</sup>

Statistics Canada reports that each year Canada accepts approximately 225,000 immigrants. Of these, 20,000 are refugees.<sup>7</sup> Mental health issue is an important priority of the government for this population. A study conducted on a cohort of Sudanese refugees in Canada indicates that qualities of home that Sudanese lack during resettlement points to critical gaps that must be filled by mental health and other service providers to promote positive refugee mental health in countries of resettlement.<sup>8</sup> A study<sup>9</sup> conducted on 600 Somali refugees in Minnesota confirmed that almost half of

the Somali male patients are under age 30, 80% of whom presented with psychoses, compared with the rate of psychoses (13.7%) in the non-Somali control group of same aged males at the clinic. The older male, and the majority of Somali female patients, show predominantly depressive and PTSD symptomatology.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), half of the world's 20 million refugees are children. Majority of refugees in Central Africa are children (57%), service is provided to estimated 7.7 million refugee youth under age of 18 by UNHCR. A large body of research has documented that refugee children exhibit symptoms of PTSD at alarmingly high rates, as high as 75% in a community sample. Refugee children in addition to PTSD, also experience acculturative stress as well as stresses associated with migration and displacement.<sup>10</sup>

Pakistan has been the major hub for Afghan refugees for quite some time. An anecdotal report mentions that there are 1.7 million Afghan refugees registered by the Pakistani government. Statements by W.H.O. officials describe high mental health problems among these refugees. They mention about 2 million Afghans as suffering from mental illness. The commonest among these are: depression, anxiety, adjustment disorder and psychosomatic disorder. A fact finding mission to Pakistan found that 30% of Afghan refugees who seek medical care at local facilities are presenting with psychosomatic complaints resulting from psychological illness. Quoting an article published in Journal of American Medical Association, 81% of 160 women studied reported a decline in their mental health status. Depression was found in 97% of these women.<sup>11</sup> A local study<sup>12</sup> in Peshawar, Pakistan confirms the high prevalence of PTSD among Afghan refugees. Another study indicates the prevalence of mental issues among refugee children.<sup>13</sup>

A field study conducted in Karachi mentions about somatic symptoms among Afghan refugees as a common way of expressing distress. Most common presentations in the local clinic were medically unexplained aches and pains.<sup>14</sup> There is still a dearth of literature on mental health issue of refugee in Pakistan. None of the very few studies conducted can be generalized based of findings.

It appears that refugees are more vulnerable to the development of mental illness for a number of factors. There is need for effective mental health service for refugees in

order to address the still hidden burden of mental illness.

Input from various health organizations and government is highly desirable. Is this too much to ask?

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