



Shrija Shrestha

Shrija Shrestha is an international student from Nepal. She is a senior public health student here at Slippery Rock University. She is a HOPE peer educator, student staff at Women's and Pride Center, Founder and President of UNICEF club at SRU and vice president of SUMA.

The Refugee Crisis

Addressing Mental Health Challenges

The Refugee Crisis: Addressing Mental Health Challenges



A universal feeling that human beings chase after is peace. Thus, an important question today is, "How hard is it to maintain peace?" Ongoing war and political instability can create difficulties in maintaining peace. The Oxford English Dictionary defines peace as "freedom or a period of freedom from public disturbance or war." In other words, it is a quiet and calm state of mind, and harmony amongst people. Different regions face hardships in regulating life because of issues such as hunger, war, violence, and terrorism. For instance, conflict in a number of Middle Eastern countries has led to disharmony among people and their political representatives. This has caused a refugee crisis to erupt, leading millions of people to flee looking for less violence and some stability. This is important to note, given that the number of displaced people has reached historically high numbers.

There is often a misconception between the differences between immigrants and refugees, but according to the UNHCR, there is a clear difference. Immigrants are people who choose to move to another country to take up permanent residence to improve their lives in ways such as a better job, education or for family purposes, whereas refugees are a group of people that leave their home country to escape war, fear or nation-wide conflict, a definition that can cause trauma by changing how refugees perceive themselves and the world.

After World War II, the United Nations was established, and one of their missions was to set up universal laws to define the status and rights of refugees. More than 66 million people have been forcefully displaced worldwide, and 50% of them

are children. This has profoundly impacted their health both physically and mentally. In grade 5, I learned the definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely absence of disease or infirmity (WHO). I often ask myself how many people in this world fall under the category of healthy people based on this definition. The answer is not all of them, especially refugees who have gone through a traumatic situation while fleeing from one country to another. They face the scarcity and inequitable distribution of relief, even when the access is available. In addition to living through painful situations in their country of origin, some face detention or violence in the destination country. Since they go through a very long journey for their resettlement process in the new country, they can experience trauma during and after their journey to new country. These situations often cause risk for refugees to suffer from a variety of mental health illnesses like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, panic attack, adjustment disorder and somatization.



As noted, the journey from their country of origin to a new nation can itself be traumatic. Migration is classified into three components with specific risk and exposure: pre-migration, migration and post migration. Pre-migration is a stage close to death because of war, which leads to an emotional trauma and mental health illness. Migration is a long and rigorous process. People often encounter violence, poor living situations, and separation from their family. Post-migration is the final and the most complicated stage. By the time they "resettle" in a new country, they have already lost their home, loved ones, and especially their self-esteem. They go through a difficult phase of adapting to new cultural practices such as languages, racism, difficulty in obtaining education, employment and housing, which typically causes depression and anxiety. A long period spent waiting to get accepted by people from the destination country can add new levels of stress that only a refugee can experience. This often leads to a lack of optimism about the future.

Life After Trauma

Asylum

Asylum is the legal protection granted by a nation to foreign nationals, and an asylum seeker is a person who flees their home country to a foreign country and applies for asylum. Asylum can be granted to people who are unable or unwilling to go back because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a social groups or political opinion. People who are legally defined as refugees based on the United Nations 1951 Convention and 1967 protocols are eligible to apply for asylum. The USA became part of the Convention and adopted the protocols in 1968.

Though it may seem that the journey is the most difficult part, the asylum process itself is often long and tedious, with a lot of paper work and the stress of waiting with uncertainty about asylum status. Researcher have shown that refugees seeking asylum display higher levels of mental health conditions than other immigrant populations. There have been many cases prior to being forced to flee; refugees have experienced imprisonment, torture, loss of property, malnutrition, physical assault, extreme fear, rape and loss of livelihood. These mental health conditions, exacerbated by war and fear, have their impact on the asylum process in the destination country. Most of the time, refugees experience difficulties in remembering devastating events and provide a fragmented story. As a result, this uneven story telling might slow down the asylum process. The study conducted by Dutch psychiatrist Laban CJ, Gernaat HB, Komproe IH, Schreuders BA and, DeJong JT, found that the mental health condition of refugees gets worse as the length of the asylum process increases (Laban et al.). Therefore, it is important to have asylum officers who are aware of the prevalence of mental health illness among these groups and are trained to work with them. The other co-factors that add deleterious effects on their mental health are language barrier, social disconnection, financial burden, loneliness, uncertainty about future and fear of deportation

Language and Social Disconnection

Language is not just a medium of communication, but it is also an emotion; it is a root of individual identity. Roughly 6,500 languages are spoken in the world today. One of the major problems that refugees face on their arrival to a new country is language. Some organizations like HIAS Refugee and Immigrant Services, CWS, and IRC provide English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for newly arriving refugees. Along with the language barrier, they face social disconnection because of difference in culture and traditions. This linguistic hardship and the problem of loneliness and isolation in a new country remind me of my journey as an international student in the USA, as it was very hard in the beginning. Even though language was not a barrier in my case, I struggled to gain a sense of belonging. I remember calling my parents at midnight and asking them if I could come back home. I was emotionally shaken because of the distance from my family and I felt socially disconnected from everyone. But I, at least, was here by choice. Most refugees have less agency, and their

experience of trauma as they have to embrace a completely new society as their home becomes more difficult. So many refugees get disconnected from their family members in the process of fleeing and some may never get a chance to see their families again. This can be devastating for any human being who forever leaves their home country without having an emotional and social support from their family members.

Living Standard

It is hard to start over in a completely new and unfamiliar place. A person who was a citizen in their origin country is now addressed as a "refugee" in another. A person who was a doctor, engineer or teacher had to leave their occupation behind and restart their life by possibly working low paying jobs such as a dish washer, cleaner or butcher. Social status plays a pivotal role in defining an individual's living standard. Access to health care, education, nutritious food, and residential area depends on the kind of job people hold in the society. It takes a long time for refugees to adapt to society and settle with their new lifestyle, and this process is made more challenging by often limited access to resources and prestige in their destination country.

Torture Victim Relief Act

One condition for asylum, as I have noted, depends on home nation conditions and allows asylum as an option to those "who are unable or unwilling to go back because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a social groups or political opinion." However, proving that these conditions exist and that a person's fears are well founded can be difficult, even in the case of torture. The definition of torture varies across countries, even as most of them have ratified the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman Degrading Treatment or punishment, commonly known as UNCAT. The CAT defines torture as:

Any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to lawful sanctions. (Garcia)

Even though the United States is a party to CAT, the specific legal statutes and regulations that define torture under US law are different than those articulated in and by CAT. The Torture Act of the U.S. Law defines torture as an act committed by a person acting under the color of law, an appearance of legal power to all that may operate in Violation of Law, specifically intended to inflict severe physical or mental pain or suffering upon another person within his/her custody or physical control

(section 2340(1) of title 18, United States code). The Torture Victims Relief Act of 1998 helps a person who has gone through series of torture in foreign countries and who is entering the United States to access rehabilitation services, including medical treatment as well as social and legal services for victims of torture. Each fiscal year, the Office of Refugee Resettlement administers approximately \$10.5 million in grant funding as part of the Survivors of Torture (SOT) Program under the Torture Victim Relief Act. According to the research conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, 44% of asylum seekers and refugees now living in the United States are torture survivors. Not all refugees get a chance to enroll in rehabilitation service for the required treatment. To provide rehabilitative services to refugees, torture treatment centers make eligibility determinations on two levels: part of the Survivors of Torture (SOT) Program under the Torture Victim Relief Act. According to the research conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement, 44% of asylum seekers and refugees now living in the United States are torture survivors (Kelly). Not all refugees get a chance to enroll in rehabilitation service for the required treatment. To provide rehabilitative services to refugees, torture treatment centers make eligibility determinations on two levels:

- i) assessing eligibility on symptoms and clinical needs.
- ii) A legal determination regarding whether an act was (a) sufficiently severe, (b) inflicted under the color of law, (c) motivated by the perpetrator's specific intent to cause the severe pain or suffering, and (d) committed under the offender's custody or physical control.

People go through several forms of torture and sometimes we cannot put them into words. It is unfair and unjust to several refugees who has not got any form of rehabilitation service just because their torture does not fall under the definition of torture cited above. Not all crimes are the consequence of a specific intent to cause mental health illness, but some crimes like assault and rape can be performed with general intent, which can still harm victims emotionally and mentally. Most of the female refugees across the world are highly vulnerable to all forms of sexual assaults and exploitation, including rape. It can happen either in a refugee camp within the country of origin or seeking protection elsewhere which can cause serious threat to women's mental health. Similarly, refugees also get harassed without any physical confinement to a particular space, for example, a situation where refugee is being harassed by stalking, judging their lifestyle or blocking their walking way. These actions can hamper their confidence level and cause fear and anxiety. So many refugees are still in need of help to recover. So instead of applying a narrow definition of torture, our law should come up with broad criteria and give a powerful sense of belonging to all refugees.

A New Definition of Torture



There are thousands of refugees in need of psychological support. They need more time and help to overcome all the difficulties they face in their adopted country, not just with logistics, but also, psychological and emotional relief. It is important that the Torture Victims Relief Act be considered within a broader definition of torture, a definition that is not so rigid or restrictive

in terms of intent to cause harm and suffering. Not all refugees suffer from physical (visible) torture; the impact of most forms of torture is often invisible but deeply damaging. The Torture Victims Relief Act should be revised to include a treatment program for those who do not meet the criteria of physical torture victims, and also include mental health assistance with an intent to provide relief to those who have suffered mental trauma. In addition, training clinicians to work with culturally diverse patients, providing professional interpreters in all sectors working with refugees as well as establishing different organizations to constantly monitor the living standard of refugees can help them overcome some of their difficulties, especially emotional ones. Along with providing ESL classes to refugees, jobs training, and counseling, asylum evaluation can help them develop confidence with a determination to succeed in their life. I believe it is our moral and human duty to help refugees get access to all the resources that can help them transition into their new life.

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