

ESSAY

REFUGEE MENTAL HEALTH

Welcoming refugees and organizing their integration into European Union society depends on preserving their mental health by reducing stressors before, during and after migration. It is a serious challenge, but European values make it an ethical imperative.

O ur species, *Homo sapiens*, originated in Africa. Between 60,000 and 70,000 years ago, we started to migrate to other continents, probably due to a major climate change which almost caused the species' extinction. To date, we continue to migrate and mix. The result is that, after centuries of racism and discrimination, scientists – and many others, though unfortunately not everyone – realize that human “races” do not exist. In other words, there are no exclusive genetic characteristics corresponding to black people, white people, etc.

The phenomenon of migration is also part of the European Union's DNA. In the aftermath of World War II, the fathers of the EU proposed the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). One of its motivations was to make another “war not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible.” The ECSC made possible the migration of workers – including around 140,000 Italians who moved to Belgium between 1947 and 1957 – who accepted very hard working conditions to try to improve their socioeconomic status.

MIGRATION STRESSORS AND MENTAL HEALTH OF REFUGEES

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are currently about 65 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including about 21 million refugees (over half of whom are under the age of 18) and 10 million stateless people. The vast majority of these forced migrations are towards low and middle-income countries and “only” about 1.2 million towards the EU. But the impact has nonetheless been dramatic.

Several studies indicate that refugees have higher morbidity from several mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression compared to

the native population or family reunification immigrants. That could be due to different type of stressors:

Pre-migration stressors

Many of the refugees reaching the EU from Middle Eastern and sub-Saharan countries have fled due to wars, persecution and extreme violence, such as torture, loss or murder of family members and friends, and rape.

High-income countries should make a stronger commitment to prevent any type of conflict in the world and induce non-democratic countries to respect human rights. This may, at first, appear to be a naive and idealistic statement but instead it is a very concrete one. Besides the obvious ethical reasons, prevention of wars, poverty, hunger, etc. would drastically reduce forced migrations and ultimately be less expensive to deal with than the consequences of these tragedies. Higher investments in cooperation for development to stabilize areas at risk would save hundreds of thousands of lives and reduce the suffering of millions of human beings, just as in medical practice, prevention is much cheaper and effective than therapy.

During migration stressors

Refugees reaching the EU have often traveled for weeks, months or even years. Most of them crossed the Mediterranean Sea, sometimes losing family members and friends along the way (3,771 people drowned or went missing in 2015 alone). Many of them went through countries such as Libya, in which violence is usually inflicted on the vulnerable. For women and minors (often unaccompanied), these experiences are particularly traumatic. That is not ethically acceptable.

The various initiatives taken at the national and international level (Mare Nostrum in Italy, Triton and, very recently, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency)

are certainly positive steps towards saving human lives in extreme risk conditions, but much more needs to be done.

Post-migration stressors

Many studies indicate that long periods of detention for asylum seekers, lengthy and complex asylum processes, unemployment, perceived discrimination and changes in socioeconomic roles (including changes of gender roles) have a dramatic impact on refugees' mental health. Thus, all possible efforts should be made to improve the quality of the asylum seeker centers and accelerate asylum procedures.

HOW UNIVERSITIES CAN HELP IN REDUCING POST-MIGRATION STRESSORS

Universities and other higher education institutions can play an important role in improving the integration of refugees, thus reducing the post-migration living difficulties and possible mental disorders, by providing:

1. Training of experts to help refugee centers and hospitals offer high-quality and culturally acceptable medical services. Fast tracks for the recognition of academic and professional titles should be implemented, as Sweden has recently done.
2. Education opportunities for young people, facilitating access through full recognition of previous studies, skills and titles, creating preparatory and bridging courses, providing more scholarships, etc.
3. Research opportunities for all qualified refugees also in collaboration with the initiative Science4Refugees by the European Commission.
4. Cultural and sport programs, very useful to facilitate integration of young people.
5. Advice to political authorities.

Universities, in cooperation with other civil society organizations, can prepare projects which can be funded under different European schemes:

- The Erasmus+ program is already funding more than 70 projects addressing migration issues
- A call on “Migrants' health: Best practices in care provision for vulnerable migrants and refugees” was recently published within the 3rd EU Health Programme
- The Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) (€3,137 billion for the period 2014-20) promotes the efficient management of migration flows and the implementation, strengthening and development of a common EU approach to asylum and immigration

OTHER POSSIBLE EU ACTIONS

Another European tool which could be strengthened is the European Voluntary Service, a tool to organize training for young Europeans and provide short placements in refugee facilities inside and outside the EU under the supervision of expert staff members. For instance, Sapienza University of Rome, together with the Jesuit Refugee Service/Italia, has recently started to promote volunteer placements for medical students, which are getting very positive feedback. This measure would be very useful in improving the quality of the refugee centers and, in this moment of crisis for the EU, could help to reinforce the European values of peace, reconciliation, democracy and human rights for which the EU was deservedly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012.

CONCLUSIONS

Facing the recent “refugee crisis” and enabling refugees' integration into the EU in good mental condition is a serious challenge. It is also an opportunity to remember our history and behave according to our values. ●



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