



Understanding the Psychosocial Needs of Refugees

Saara Amri, LPC
Northern Virginia Family Service
Multicultural Human Services

Objectives

- To understand the sociopolitical context and factors that lead refugees to flee their home countries;
- To understand the psychological impact of immigration on refugees and their families;
- To understand the psychosocial issues refugees face once they immigrate to the U.S.

Who are Refugees?

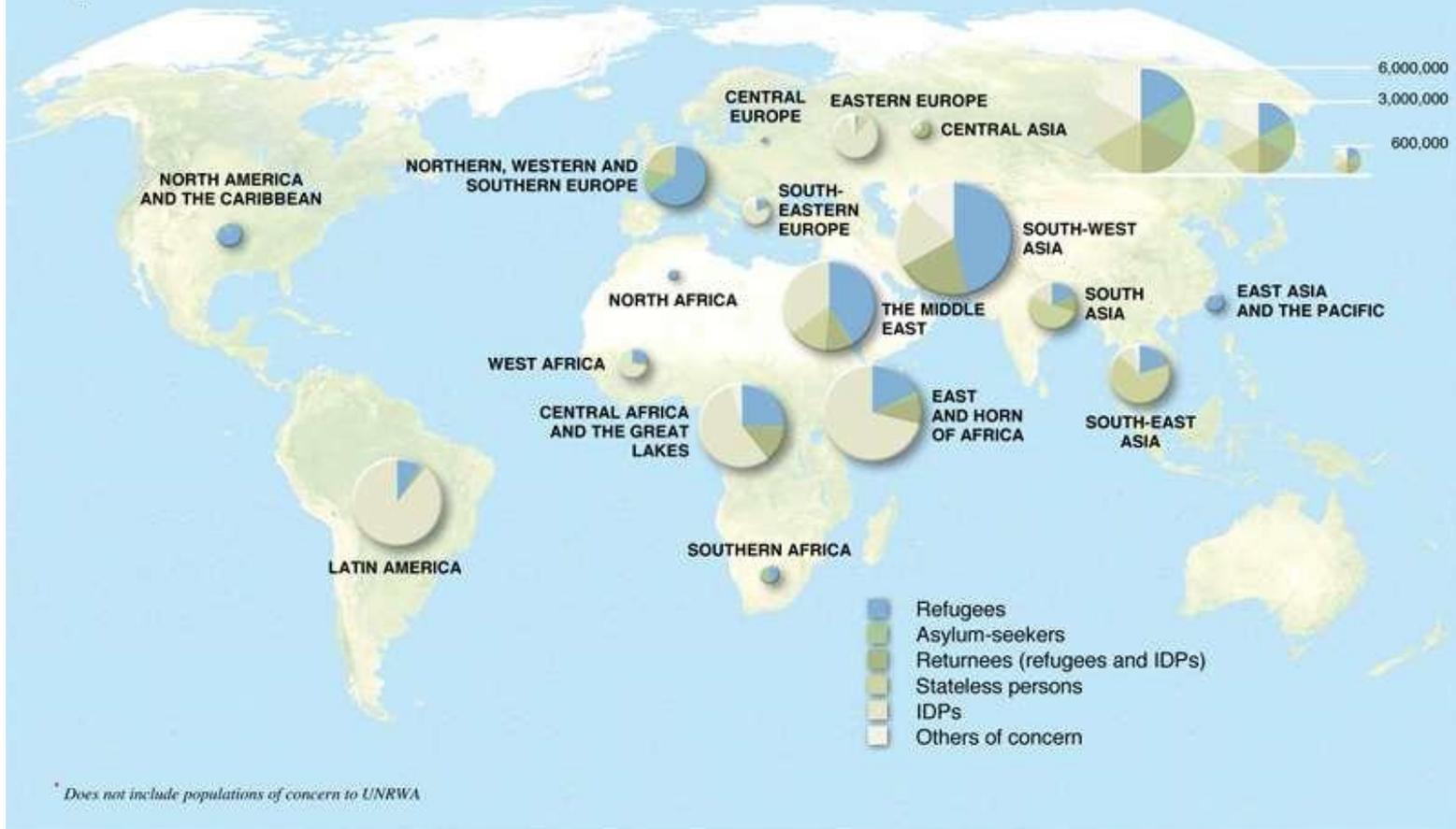
According to the United Nations convention (UNHCR, 1951), a refugee is defined as someone who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion;

- is outside the country of his nationality
- is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

Where are refugees coming from?

According to the UNHCR's 2010 Global Trends report, Pakistan, Iran and Syria have the largest refugee populations at 1.9 million, 1.1 million and 1 million respectively.

Populations of concern to UNHCR* | 2010



How are refugees different from other migrants?

- Refugees are forced to flee their homes, livelihood, families in fear of their life;
- They have no protection or civil rights in their homeland;
- They cannot return home at their own will. If they return home, they could likely face persecution by their government and/or death.

The Refugee Experience

Pre-Migration, Migration, and Post-Migration



Pre-Migration Trauma

- Refugees flee their homeland with little time to prepare or even think about the journey ahead.
- They have often been exposed to years, if not decades, of civil war and unrest.
- Many have witnessed
 - Mass murder
 - Rape
 - The death of loved ones (family, friends, neighbors)
 - The destruction of their homes and communities
- Many refugees have been persecuted by their government to include being detained and tortured on multiple occasions.
- They have lost their jobs and their ability to support their family.
- They have no choice but to find a new home.

Migration Stress

Refugees flee to a host country where they apply for refugee status through the UNHCR. Once granted refugee status, they are resettled to a final host country such as the U.S. The wait for refugee status and resettlement can take years and in some cases, decades (warehousing).

Migration Stress Cont.

- According to the UNHCR, two thirds of the world's refugee population live in urban cities.
 - Refugees are often living on the fringes of large urban cities.
 - The journey to the host country is often long and dangerous.
 - There are few opportunities for employment in the host country.

Migration Stress Cont.

- Most often families are living in extreme poverty with little civil protection from the host country.
 - Basic needs of such as food and shelter are seldom adequately met.
- Women and children are most vulnerable.
 - Children experience interrupted education if they've received any formal education at all.
 - Children are forced to work to support their family and are often exposed to harsh and cruel work conditions.
 - Women are frequently victims of crime and exploitation, namely sex crimes and prostitution.

Post-Migration Stress

- Refugees are resettled the U.S. via non-profit organizations called refugee resettlement agencies.
- These organizations receive federal funding to provide initial reception and placement services to refugees.
- Despite assistance from resettlement agencies, the odds are stacked against refugees once they arrive to a country such as the U.S.

Post-Migration Stress Cont.

- Once refugees arrive to the U.S. they are forced to
 - Find gainful employment in order to support their family.
 - Learn English if they don't speak it already.
 - Learn how to navigate the “system”
 - Public school
 - Social services
 - Legal
 - Medical

The Mental Health Fallout

A compilation of years of Stress and a New Environment



Acculturation

- One of the major mental health struggles experienced by refugees is adjustment.
- Adjusting to a new life in a foreign country can be challenging for the most prepared individual.
- Acculturation can take two forms:
 - Immersion in to and adoption of the dominant culture
 - Immersion and retention of the ethnic culture or culture of origin
- Depression and anxiety are common when there are challenges with acculturation and adjustment.

Change in Family Roles

- Family conflict and violence is often an issue that is observed in the refugee community.
- Children learn English faster than their parents.
 - Children are quickly parentified.
 - Parents cannot keep up with their children's school work and activities.
- Parenting practices from the culture of origin no longer translate to the western culture.
- Women are often put in positions where they are either secondary or primary income earners.

Discrimination

- The post-9/11 climate in the U.S. has led to countless incidents of discrimination against refugees.
- Many refugees of South Asian and Middle Eastern descent have been denied employment, bullied in school and harassed in public.
- Refugees fled discrimination and marginalization only to face similar circumstances in the U.S.
- Discrimination can lead to anger, frustration and withdrawal/isolation.

Trauma

- Refugees experience multiple traumatic events over the course of their lives.
- They experience trauma in their country of origin, during the course of migration and once they've been resettled.
- A traumatic event does not necessarily have to involve violence.
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is extremely common among the refugee population.

Grief and Loss

- Most refugees have lost a loved one in war or during migration.
- There is little to no time to grieve losses.
- In many cases the whereabouts of loved ones are unknown allowing for unresolved losses.
- Loss of property, career, and lifestyle are also significant losses for refugees.
- Unresolved grief can lead to profound depression.

What to look for?

- Trouble with sleep
- Change in appetite
- Hypervigilance
- Body aches and pains
- Irritability/angry outbursts
- Self-isolation/withdrawal
- Uncontrollable crying
- Hopelessness
- Difficulty with concentration and memory
- Inability to perform normal daily tasks
- Substance use

Questions.....

Saara Amri, LPC

Program Co-Coordinator

Program for Survivors of Torture and Severe Trauma

6400 Arlington Blvd #110

Falls Church, VA 22032

571-748-2823