

Personal reflection

Being a refugee in Turkey and western Europe: how it affects mental health and psychosocial wellbeing

Anonymous

In this personal reflection, the author is a Syrian refugee who describes his experiences as a psychosocial worker in Syria and with refugees in Turkey and Greece. He highlights how women and children lack safety in the camps. The second section discusses how he became a refugee himself. Due to his experiences in Syria, he now finds himself in a difficult situation in the Netherlands, the country where he applied for asylum and has received a permit, but his 'cry for help' remains unheard and unrecognised by the (health) workers in the asylum centre.

Keywords: mental health and psychosocial support, Netherlands, refugees, Syria

Introduction

Four years ago I was working for an international nongovernmental organisation (NGO) in Damascus, as Psychosocial Service and Protection Project Officer. I was also helping the Syrian Red Cross/Crescent with humanitarian aid and distribution of medication and relief items in the areas affected by the conflict. However, the Syrian authorities did not like our policy of helping people regardless of their political affiliations. Twice I was detained and tortured for humanitarian work, and in the end I was threatened with being detained for a third time and had to leave Syria. I went to Turkey with the hope of being able to continue helping others. While there, I was introduced to the work of International Medical Corps (IMC) and worked as a Mental Health & Psychosocial Program Officer for IMC's emergency response team to the Syrian crisis.

Turkey

In Turkey, there are a lot of efforts made by NGOs, as well as local inhabitants, to help the huge influx of refugees. However, the biggest challenges for Syrian refugees in refugee camps are exploitation and the lack of safety. Women and children are not protected enough by camp authorities, and in some cases, the exploitation comes from the authorities themselves.

Moreover, there is no financial support for the refugees. Distributions of goods like food and clothing sometimes do not reach the people who need it the most. Women may have to endure sexual abuse in order to obtain food for their children. Unaccompanied minors are at high risk of being kidnapped and trafficked, or exploited by begging gangs, turning them into beggars in the streets. Most refugee camps in Turkey are guarded by soldiers, and refugees cannot leave the camp without permission of the guards. While access to most refugee camps by humanitarian agencies and NGOs is prohibited, essential services are also, therefore, missing, and shelters are not equipped to protect from cold, rain or winter storms. Also, if a child is born of refugee parents, the child cannot be officially registered. Later this will cause serious problems if, for example, the family is able to travel to another country or when one of the adults has found asylum in Europe and wants to reunite with his family.

In a refugee camp near Gaziantep in south Turkey I met a woman in her late twenties. She lived there with her 10 year old son. They had

lost their family and their house during the shelling of their village. She reported that she had been assaulted and abused regularly, both sexually and physically, by two members of the camp staff. They had threatened her that if she told anyone about it, they would hurt her and her child. Frightened and vulnerable, the woman decided to reach out to the camp management and reported the two staff members. But, instead of being protected, she was threatened and treated cruelly. No action was taken towards the two perpetrators. The woman, in the end, had to flee the camp with her child back to Syria, as the war was even more merciful and safer.

After 18 months both my passport and my residence permit for Turkey expired. I went to the Syrian Embassy in Istanbul to have my passport extended, but the embassy staff confiscated my passport and deprived me of my legal rights. I was so devastated. The only option left for me was to take a boat to Greece. There I worked as a volunteer for Doctors of the World. After four months I travelled on, it was October 2014. At that time, it was very difficult to move to other countries in Europe, most borders had been closed and Syrian refugees were arrested and returned to Greece on a daily basis.

With a complete stranger, I began a journey which would take us two months on foot. The worst part, for me, was the hiding. I had never done anything illegal in my entire life, and had never had to hide. Like every other Syrian refugee, I only wanted to find safety. Yet, I spent two months hiding, jumping at the sight of small animals, and terrified of meeting another person.

Eventually, I did make it to the Netherlands, where I was finally granted asylum.

The Netherlands

In refugee centres in the Netherlands, decent services are being provided to help refugees and asylum seekers. Great efforts are made by Dutch authorities and local organisations

regarding basic needs of shelter, food and security. However, the emotional and mental state of refugees is highly neglected. Many of war refugees have been through traumatic experiences in their home countries and throughout their journey to safety; survivors of violence and torture, survivors of sexual abuse, those who are suffering from emotional distress or trauma after witnessing horrific violence or losing their loved ones, lives and belongings. Added to these are challenges that follow changing the place and context of living, suffering from symptoms of mental illness or having psychosocial difficulties that make it even more challenging for refugees to cope and integrate into the Dutch society and move on with their lives.

Being a survivor of torture myself, I was sheltered in a centre that had been a prison, but was renovated and became a refugee centre. I had a bed in a room with four other guys. All of those colourful edits made to the room could not remove that fact, that in my head this was still a prison cell. The first five nights I slept in a chair in the corridor; the room was so small, the window so narrow, it resembled too much the prison cell in Damascus where I was tortured. No one from the staff ever asked me why I was sleeping in a chair. And I was not the only one.

I tried to seek professional help for my emotional and mental health difficulties. I explicitly asked for a referral to a psychologist, but that never materialised. In refugee centres in the Netherlands, you only have access to nurses. The nurses I met were very kind indeed, but they did not really connect with what I was saying. Some of the nurses I met while interpreting Arabic to English for fellow refugees. I remember how I translated once for a guy, 21 years old, who was quite depressed. He disclosed witnessing the massacre of his family and people of his village by the soldiers. He presented with thoughts of killing himself, but the nurses did not react to his suicidal thoughts. Not much later, he attempted to kill himself.

Another gap is that vulnerable refugees do not get any additional support. I was able to cope because I could pick up my work in helping others. After receiving residency in the Netherlands, I started applying for jobs with NGOs helping refugees and I was able to work for IMC again, in Greece, as a Mental Health and Psychosocial Trainer, providing trainings in Psychological First Aid for first responders, such as aid workers, volunteers, police and the coastguard. In this way, I was able to ensure that support and services being provided to refugees are fit to the cultural context and are coordinated to ensure no harm and the best possible service.

Suggestions

For Syrians, it is a very big step to disclose to a stranger that one has mental health or psychosocial difficulties. If a war refugee manages to overcome this enormous threshold, it should not be ignored, it should be taken very seriously. It would certainly help if, during the information meeting that a refugee

attends when entering a centre, people receive some basic psycho-education on symptoms and complaints related to traumatic experiences, and information on how to seek professional support when needed. Also, that these symptoms may be related to recalling and disclosing in detail the horrific and traumatic experiences they have been through, to the Immigration Police in the interviews that every refugee has to endure. The staff members of refugee centres might also benefit from some training on dealing with people affected by traumatic experiences. I think that some of them are afraid to really listen to the stories of refugees, and do not know how to react when a refugee has a breakdown.

The author is a refugee from Syria, whose name and story is known to the editor-in-chief and can be reached through her at the address below.
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