

COMMENTARY

Silent Scars: Addressing the Invisible Mental Health Burden of Displaced Populations

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ABSTRACT

Millions of people around the world are impacted by displacement, which frequently leaves unnoticed emotional scars. Internally displaced people and refugees experience trauma, uncertainty, and protracted adversity, which can result in mental health issues like anxiety and depression. Despite the urgency, stigma, a lack of capital, and cultural barriers continue to restrict access to mental health care. From caregiving in unsafe environments to gender-based violence, women bear additional burdens. Compassionate and culturally aware mental health care is crucial. Making this a top priority is essential to assisting displaced people in recovering their health, regaining their dignity, and starting over.

KEYWORDS

Displaced populations, Mental health, Trauma-informed care, Stigma, discrimination

INTRODUCTION

Displacement has become an escalating global issue. Displaced individuals are those compelled to leave their homes or regular places of residence, often due to conflicts, violence, persecution, or natural disasters, without crossing an internationally recognized border(1). As per the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), more than 120 million people are displaced globally(2). This situation is usually accompanied by the loss of homes, livelihoods, and social connections. While essential needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare are prioritized, the mental health impact of displacement is often overlooked. The psychological challenges faced by displaced people, though significant, are less visible. They are at a much greater risk of developing mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), stemming from forced migration, traumatic experiences, and the difficulties of resettlement(3).

Aim: The purpose of this commentary is to highlight the invisible burden of trauma among

displaced populations, examine barriers to mental health care including gender-specific challenges, and advocate for comprehensive interventions alongside a global call to action.

The Unseen Impact of Trauma

Many displaced people go through incredibly upsetting experiences, which are frequently the main causes of mental health problems. The trauma of losing loved ones, seeing their homes destroyed, and constantly worrying about their safety greatly raises the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in refugees escaping conflict areas. Severe emotional disturbances can affect children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development, making them particularly susceptible (4). These difficulties may be exacerbated by the lack of basic necessities, inadequate educational support, and family separation. Because of the uncertainty, extended detention, and unstable living conditions they experience, internally displaced people (IDPs) and asylum seekers are also especially vulnerable. Their psychological and emotional suffering is exacerbated by these

circumstances. Their psychological and emotional suffering increases by these circumstances. Host countries and humanitarian organizations, which prioritize immediate survival needs, frequently overlook the unique mental health burden caused by the combination of pre-displacement trauma, which includes exposure to violence, loss, and emotional suppression, and post-displacement struggles, which include resettlement difficulties, uncertain legal status, lack of social support, and the strain on resilience.

Barriers to Mental Health Care

Lack of access to quality care is one of the main obstacles to meeting the mental health needs of displaced populations. Many are kept in overcrowded shelters or camps with limited resources, and there are few mental health services available. Stigma, discrimination, lack of awareness, linguistic and cultural barriers, and overburdened healthcare systems are additional obstacles (5). The stigma associated with mental health is especially detrimental because it deters people from getting treatment, which exacerbates their conditions. These issues become more difficult to resolve if prompt action is not taken.

Gendered Dimensions of Mental Health

Displaced populations, particularly women and girls, face heightened risks. Displacement often exacerbates the threat of gender-based violence, including sexual assault and exploitation, leading to long-term consequences for survivors(6). Additionally, the responsibility of caregiving in displaced settings often falls on women, who may have to care for children, the elderly, or family members with disabilities, further adding to their emotional strain. Mental health services for displaced women must take these gender-specific vulnerabilities into account and provide trauma-informed, culturally sensitive care. Supporting women's mental health can also have a broader impact, as their well-being is closely tied to the well-being of their families and communities.

The Need for Interventions

Interventions aimed at addressing the mental health of displaced populations must take a comprehensive approach that considers both immediate and long-term needs. Early intervention is crucial, with a focus on trauma-related issues as well as the challenges of resettlement, while also addressing the social determinants that influence mental health. Mental health services should be integrated into broader humanitarian efforts, ensuring that psychological support is as accessible as basic necessities like food, shelter, and

healthcare. Mobile mental health units and community-based programs can help reach displaced individuals in remote or under-resourced areas. It's essential to design culturally sensitive interventions that take into account the backgrounds of displaced populations, incorporating local coping strategies and traditional healing practices(7). Additionally, training local healthcare workers and volunteers in trauma-informed care and psychological first aid can build long-lasting support systems. Peer support groups where displaced individuals can openly share their experiences in a safe and supportive environment can help reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen community resilience. Reducing barriers to care, such as stigma and discrimination, should be a top priority through educational campaigns that promote mental health awareness and encourage people to seek help. The goal should be to create a system where mental health care is normalized, accessible, and sustained, ensuring better psychological outcomes for displaced populations.

A Call for Global Action

The mental health of displaced populations cannot be treated as an afterthought. It needs to be a priority in public health and humanitarian efforts. A global, coordinated response is urgently required. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and international entities such as the UNHCR must collaborate to make mental health care an essential part of the humanitarian agenda. This can be accomplished by increasing funding for mental health services, integrating mental health support into primary healthcare systems, and creating safe spaces for psychological support within refugee camps and displaced communities. Additionally, policies should be established to safeguard the mental health of displaced individuals by ensuring they have access to employment, education, and social services, which are crucial for fostering a sense of stability and hope.

In conclusion, addressing the mental health of displaced populations is not just a humanitarian obligation, but a critical step towards restoring their dignity, resilience, and ability to rebuild their lives. The scars of displacement go beyond physical survival—they are deeply emotional and psychological, often invisible but equally destructive. Early, sustained intervention that prioritizes mental health is essential. By integrating mental health services into the broader framework of humanitarian aid, providing culturally sensitive care, and reducing stigma, we can ensure that displaced individuals are not only given a chance to survive but to heal and thrive. As the world faces growing displacement crises, a global, united effort

is needed to prioritize and protect the mental well-being of those who have lost so much.

SUMMARY

Displacement leaves a psychological and emotional scar in addition to a housing and survival crisis. Given that millions of people are still displaced globally, humanitarian response must include mental health treatment. We can move from reactive to proactive care with systemic inclusion, early intervention, and culturally tailored interventions. Putting mental health first helps displaced people regain their resilience and sense of control while also restoring their dignity. To ensure that mental health care is accessible, equitable, and sustained for all displaced groups, international collaborations and legislative action must be coordinated.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors declare that no generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were used in the writing or preparation of this manuscript.

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