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Empowering the Invisible: Understanding PTSD in Refugee Women

Rizzi Micaela*

Abstract

Refugee women confront multifaceted challenges, compounded by the traumas of displacement and adaptation to unfamiliar environments. Among these challenges, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) remains an often invisible yet pervasive affliction. This article explores the complex issue of understanding PTSD in refugee women, shedding light on the factors that contribute to their vulnerability and proposing strategies to empower and support their healing journey.

The experiences of war, violence, loss, and forced migration take a profound toll on the mental well-being of refugee women, rendering them vulnerable to PTSD. Gender vulnerability plays a crucial role in shaping the impact of trauma on these women, exposing them to heightened risks of sexual violence, exploitation, and discrimination.

Despite their struggles, many refugee women demonstrate remarkable resilience, drawing strength from community support, cultural ties, and religious beliefs. Empowering their strengths and resilience is essential for promoting their mental well-being.

Breaking the stigma surrounding mental health in refugee communities is an important step in supporting women with PTSD. Culturally sensitive interventions, including access to interpretation services and culturally competent therapists, can enhance the effectiveness of mental health treatments.

Department of Sociology, Anthropology, Social Work, and Criminal Justice, Oakland University, Rochester, USA, E-mail: Micaelarizzi@ac.gmail.com



Community support networks provide safe spaces for women to share experiences and seek mutual aid. These networks also facilitate access to resources and opportunities for skill development and economic empowerment. Improving access to mental health services is crucial for empowering refugee women with PTSD. Governments, NGOs, and international organizations should invest in mental health programs tailored to the specific needs of displaced women, including trauma-informed care, counseling, and support groups.

Education and employment opportunities are fundamental for empowering refugee women. Access to quality education and vocational training enhances employability and fosters a sense of purpose and identity.

Empowering refugee women with PTSD is an endeavor that requires an understanding of their experiences, addressing gender vulnerabilities, and breaking the silence surrounding mental health. By providing culturally sensitive support, fostering resilience, and offering opportunities for education and employment, these resilient women can reclaim their agency and embark on a path of healing and renewal, enriching both their lives and society as a whole.

Introduction

Refugee women often find themselves at the intersection of multiple challenges, grappling with the trauma of displacement and the harsh realities of adapting to new environments. Among these challenges, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) stands as a pervasive and often invisible affliction. The experiences of war, violence, loss, and forced migration take a profound toll on the mental well-being of refugee women. This article delves into the complex issue of understanding PTSD in refugee women, shedding light on the factors that contribute to their vulnerability and exploring strategies to empower and support their healing journey.

According to Weinstein, Khabbaz and Legate “becoming a refugee is a powerful risk factor for indicators of psychological disorders such as stress, generalized stress and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)”. Between 10 and 40% of refugees suffer from mental disorders after having experienced grave traumatic events in their countries of origin. At the same time, different studies have determined that among refugees, the rate of PTSD is higher than any other mental disorder. In addition, this group is ten times more likely to experience PTSD than the general population. In the same vein, the study by Priebe, Giacco, and El-Nagib points to a higher prevalence of PTSD and depression among refugees compared with the general population. Furthermore, refugees that have been submitted to torture and/or rape have the highest rates of PTSD. For example, in a research on refugees from North Korea, significantly higher



rates of suicidal thoughts and alcohol consumption after experiencing rape were found in comparison with refugees who had not undergone such types of traumatic experiences.

According to the UNHCR, refugee women often experience gender-based trauma, described as sexual violence that includes rape, forced impregnation, forced abortion, sexual trafficking, sexual slavery and the intentional spreading of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Along these lines, Ward and Vann establish that displaced women and girls are vulnerable to suffering from sexual violence, including forced sex/rape, sexual abuse by an intimate partner, child sexual abuse, coerced sex and sex trafficking in settings of humanitarian conflicts. For that reason, this population group presents a profile that is especially harmed and vulnerable and that often display symptoms of complex trauma. However, studies focusing on the mental health status of refugee women are scarce. This fact could be due to different reasons. First, upon interviewing extremely traumatized women, there is a serious risk that the questions may act to trigger traumatic content, which could be destabilizing, causing retraumatization and hindering recovery. On the other hand, highly traumatized individuals can have difficulties concentrating long enough so as to complete extensive questionnaires [41]. At the same time, the language barrier can represent another obstacle to communicating with these individuals.

The invisible struggles

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that develops in individuals who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events. Refugee women are particularly vulnerable to developing PTSD due to the compounded trauma they face, including exposure to violence, loss of family members, and the uncertainty of their future. However, cultural stigmas and limited access to mental health services often render their struggles invisible.

The impact of gender

Gender vulnerability plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of PTSD in refugee women. Displacement exposes them to heightened risks of sexual violence, exploitation, and discrimination. These experiences can amplify feelings of helplessness and despair, deepening the scars of trauma. Moreover, refugee women often bear the responsibility of caring for their families amidst adversity, which adds additional stress and emotional burden.

Coping mechanisms and resilience

Despite the challenges, many refugee women demonstrate remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in navigating their traumatic experiences. Community support, connection to cultural roots, and religious



beliefs can serve as essential coping mechanisms. Empowering these strengths and recognizing their resilience becomes crucial in promoting their mental well-being.

Breaking the stigma

One of the first steps towards empowering refugee women with PTSD is to break the stigma surrounding mental health in their communities. By promoting awareness and education about PTSD and its effects, we can foster a more supportive environment that encourages seeking help without shame or fear of judgment.

Culturally sensitive interventions

Mental health interventions must be culturally sensitive and tailored to the unique needs of refugee women. Incorporating culturally competent therapists and providing interpretation services can bridge language barriers and enhance the efficacy of mental health treatments.

Community support networks

Establishing community support networks is essential for refugee women's healing and reintegration. By creating safe spaces for sharing experiences and providing mutual aid, women can find solace in connecting with others who have faced similar challenges. These networks can also facilitate access to resources and opportunities for skill development and economic empowerment.

Access to mental health services

Improving access to mental health services is a fundamental requirement for empowering refugee women. Governments, NGOs, and international organizations should invest in mental health programs that cater specifically to the needs of displaced women. Offering trauma-informed care, counseling, and support groups can make a profound difference in their healing journey.

Education and employment opportunities

Education and employment are key components of empowerment for refugee women with PTSD. Access to quality education and vocational training not only enhances their employability but also helps in rebuilding a sense of purpose and identity, reducing feelings of marginalization.

Conclusion

Empowering refugee women with PTSD is a multifaceted endeavor that involves understanding the nuances of their experiences, addressing gender vulnerabilities, and breaking the silence surrounding



mental health in their communities. By providing culturally sensitive support, fostering resilience, and offering opportunities for education and employment, we can help these resilient women find their strength, reclaim their agency, and embark on a path of healing and renewal. Ultimately, empowering refugee women with PTSD contributes not only to their well-being but also to the enrichment of society as a whole.

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