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Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Integration Challenges Among Afghan Special Contributors in South Korea

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Abstract

This study examines the mental health challenges faced by Afghan refugees resettled in South Korea, focusing on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Using trauma theory and ecological system theory, this research explores the impact of pre-migration trauma and post-migration stressors, such as cultural adaptation difficulties, language barriers, and social isolation. Adopting a qualitative descriptive-analytical methodology and utilizing trauma theory and ecological system theory, this study identifies the compounded effects of these stressors on refugees' mental health and their integration into South Korean society. The findings reveal that South Korea's homogeneous society exacerbates these challenges, with limited culturally competent mental health care available. The study concludes that trauma, language barriers, cultural adjustment difficulties, and social isolation are central contributors to psychological distress, and emphasizes the need for systemic and trauma-informed interventions to mitigate these challenges and support refugees' integration.

Introduction

Background of the global refugee crisis

The issue and concept of refugees have been with humans throughout history [1]. As a part of an international effort to protect and assist refugees, the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950. Since then the number of refugees seeking resettlement has increased dramatically [2]. By the end of 2022, the world witnessed a staggering 35.3 million refugees globally. Conflicts and wars are the primary drivers of the current trend in refugee flows. Additionally, other significant factors include persecution based on religion, nationality, race, or political beliefs [3]. Refugees often endure multiple traumatic events throughout their migration journey-before, during, and after. These traumatic experiences, coupled with the challenges of adapting to a new environment, can result in substantial mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) [4].

Afghan refugees and PTSD

For a better understanding of the mental health challenges Afghan refugees may endure, it is essential to look over the historical backdrop of Afghanistan's conflict. The

phrase “*The Graveyard of Empires*” mentioned in the book by Seth G. Jones highlights the geographic importance, mountainous terrain, and resilient people of Afghanistan throughout its history as the main reasons for superpowers' invasion and failure [5]. The long and devastating war and destruction have led to a lack of progress and relevance to mental health issues in Afghanistan [6, 7].

The spread of mental health illnesses among Afghan refugees has sounded the alarm of concern and worry. A World Health Organization report suggested that 17% of the total population in Afghanistan is suffering from mental health illnesses. However, other studies indicate that this estimation could be much greater due to the continuous experience of trauma, limited access to mental health services, and the stigma surrounding mental health issues [8]. An estimated 6.1 million refugees globally, including those internally displaced and those seeking asylum in other countries, are recognized to have originated from Afghanistan [9].

Notably, continuous exposure to trauma is a significant factor in the deterioration of mental health issues, particularly PTSD, among this population. For example, a cross-sectional study by Habib et al. targeted Afghan families living in Haripur, Pakistan the second country

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after Iran, which hosts the largest number of Afghan refugees and revealed that 79.20% of the participants were found to have PTSD [10]. Furthermore, they reported a positive correlation between PTSD and Posttraumatic Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (PT-OCD), with this comorbidity believed to be significant.

Introduction to South Korea's acceptance of Afghan refugees

As a nation with a predominantly homogenous ethnic population [11], South Korea has limited public discussions on multiculturalism. Consequently, there is a stigma and discrimination surrounding refugees, with some members of the general public perceiving them as a threat to the nation's homogeneity [12]. This perception has led the South Korean government to approach refugee applications with caution [13]. Among refugee applications submitted between 2010 and 2020, only 1.5% of the total submissions were granted refugee status by South Korea [14]. For example, in 2018, 500 Yemenis took advantage of visa-free entry to flee the civil war and sought asylum on Jeju Island. among applicants, only two individuals received full refugee status [15]. Despite the rigorous approaches to refugees, North Korean defectors are treated differently. According to the Act on the Protection and Settlement Support for North Korean Defectors, originally enacted in 1962 and revised in 1978, all North Koreans by definition are South Korean citizens, and generous benefits are available for those who can make it reach the South. Giving immediate full rights as South Korean citizens to North Korean defectors is one of those benefits [16]. Given the above scenario, in August 2021, a shift in policy resulted in the rescue and acceptance of 390 Afghan nationals evacuated to South Korea as a part of an international effort to secure those who had direct ties with Korean consulates in Afghanistan [3].

Significance of the Operation Miracle

As part of its global mission, following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan on August 24 and 27, 2021, the South Korean government evacuated local individuals who had assisted Korea during its mission in Afghanistan. A total of 390 individuals, including children, were rescued under Operation Miracle, which marked South Korea's inaugural rescue operation for foreign refugees [17]. Evacuees were designated "special contributors" by the Korean government. They were given long-term residency visas, which enabled them to stay in the country and obtain employment. In addition, social integration programs such as language and cultural programs, are provided in phases so that they are able to integrate well into society [18].

Purpose and significance of the study

Intervention by Afghan refugees with PTSD in South Korea is needed to increase their mental health and social integration. Refugees are likely to suffer from critical post-migration challenges, such as cultural adjustment difficulties and alienation, which become determinants of PTSD symptoms [19]. The evolving role of South Korea in global humanitarian assistance highlights the necessity of providing culturally responsive mental health interventions [20]. Thus, the purpose of this study is to review the available literature on Afghan refugees' post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with a focus on exacerbating factors such as acculturation, language barriers, and social isolation. By examining the quality and availability of mental health care that is accessible to this population, this research aims to provide insight into the constellation of

challenges that Afghan refugees face in integrating into South Korean society.

Literature Review

Global prevalence of PTSD among refugees

Previous studies on refugees have shown that refugees and asylum seekers have significantly higher rates of PTSD than their host population does. A systematic review and meta-analysis conducted by Blackmore et al. (2020) revealed that the prevalence of PTSD among refugees and asylum seekers was 31.46%. The depression rate was 31.5%, anxiety disorders accounted for 11%, and psychosis accounted for 1.51% [21]. These mental health challenges are frequently compounded by pre-migration trauma, post-migration stressors, and obstacles in accessing mental health services [22]. Additionally, longitudinal studies have shown that the prevalence of PTSD is likely to persist even after the process of resettlement, emphasizing the need for prolonged mental health interventions. Refugees face unique difficulties such as cultural adaptation issues, social isolation, and stigma, which are bound to further exacerbate their mental health conditions [23].

Mental health challenges specific to Afghan refugees

Afghan refugees have been exposed to decades of war, violence, and displacement which have led to high rates of PTSD. It has been found that PTSD among Afghan refugees is extremely heterogeneous, with rates of 34% in the UK, 46% in Australia, and 53% in Canada [24,25]. Trauma is often exacerbated by post-migration stressors such as cultural adjustment and social isolation [22,25]. Furthermore, intergenerational trauma is also real, with research demonstrating how PTSD impacts multiple generations of Afghan refugee families [10]. The treatment of PTSD requires trauma-informed interventions and culturally sensitive care [26, 27].

Cultural, social, and historical factors, such as years of displacement, poverty, and political instability, cause a higher rate of exposure to trauma and a higher prevalence of mental health illnesses, such as depression and PTSD among Afghans [8]. Afghan refugees have specific mental health problems resulting from an overlap of cultural, social, and historical factors. The long-term conflict, political turmoil, and pervasive violence in Afghanistan have led numerous refugees to suffer from extensive trauma. The Taliban regime, bombing, and coerced displacement have had long-lasting and significant impacts on their psychological well-being, tending to lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Moreover, the stressors they face after migration further complicate their mental health challenges [10,28]. Language barriers and acculturation pose severe challenges to the lives of Afghan refugees in South Korea. Research indicates that language differences hinder them from accessing mental health services and hamper their acculturation to society. Whereas secondary language acquisition is rehabilitative to others, it exacerbates the symptoms of PTSD from the perspective of the cognitive strain of learning a new language in others [29,30]. Cultural disparities have a two-way effect on mental health status. On the one hand, positive aspects of Afghan culture, such as strong familial bonds and faith-based coping mechanisms provide emotional support [8]. On the other hand, cultural stigma associated with mental health illnesses discourages refugees from seeking professional help [8,31]. Korean perceptions of refugees as outsiders often lead to discrimination and further exacerbate feelings of isolation [29].

Theoretical Frameworks

The trauma theory accounts for how events such as war and forced migration reverse mental health to lead to outcomes such as PTSD. Afghan refugees are subjected to compound trauma from pre-migration violence and post-migration stressors such as isolation and cultural adjustment problems. Research has shown that prolonged exposure to traumatic incidents destabilizes emotional equilibrium and leads to long-term psychological distress [32,33]. This study applies trauma theory to investigate such cumulative effects and highlights the salience of trauma-informed care according to the particular experience of refugees [8].

The ecological system theory examines how individuals relate to family, community, and societal systems. Afghan refugees in South Korea face challenges on several levels: family disconnection (microsystem), limited healthcare access (exosystem), and societal discrimination (macrosystem). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model provides a context for understanding how these interconnected systems influence refugees' mental well-being and integration [34, 35]. The study, on the basis of this context, identifies barriers to integration and possible avenues for systemic interventions.

Methodology

Research design and data collection methods

The current study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical methodology to investigate post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among Afghan refugees. With the support of trauma theory and ecological system theory as paradigmatic lenses, this research explores how pre-migration and post-migration stressors are involved in PTSD symptoms and hinder their integration. The data for this study are derived from a review of the academic literature, reports, and case studies concerning Afghan refugees who were resettled in South Korea in 2021 through Operation Miracle. Government publications, peer-reviewed journals, and credible research articles that address trauma theory, ecological system theory, and refugee mental health concerns are some of the primary sources.

Data analysis procedures

The data were analyzed via qualitative thematic analysis to determine common themes related to Afghan refugees' post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Specifically, the analysis focused on exacerbating factors such as acculturation problems, language barriers, and social isolation. The themes were also investigated to establish their effects on mental health and adjustment into South Korean society.

Trauma theory was employed to understand the psychological impact of pre-migration and post-migration stressors and to identify how accumulated trauma disrupts emotional balance. Ecological system theory was applied as a frame of reference to understand the interaction between refugees and the system in terms of access to mental health care and integration into society. By combining the strengths of these theories, this study illuminates the sequence of challenges faced by Afghan refugees and identifies places of intervention.

Ethical consideration

This study is purely dependent on publicly available literature and poses no threat of confidentiality or harm to individuals. Sensitivity was similarly maintained in analyzing and reporting the findings, avoiding stigmatizing Afghan refugees, and being respectful and adhering to academic principles.

Findings

Challenges faced by Afghan refugees in South Korea

Pre-migration trauma: Afghan refugees who were resettled to South Korea through Operation Miracle faced widespread trauma before evacuation. Decades of war, violence, and political instability in Afghanistan exposed them to displacement, loss of loved ones, and loss of homes. Research has indicated that such widespread exposure to conflict renders people highly susceptible to PTSD, as is evident among Afghan refugee communities worldwide [4,10].

Post-migration stressors: Afghan refugees in South Korea have faced a series of challenges that worsen their mental health state. Cultural adjustment is particularly difficult due to the highly homogeneous society of South Korea and its underdeveloped multicultural mechanisms [11,13]. Language barriers make healthcare difficult to access, and employment and integration programs and legal uncertainty increase refugees' levels of stress [18,29]. Stigma and discrimination towards refugees also exacerbate social isolation [12, 30].

Prevalence and impact of PTSD

The global prevalence of PTSD in refugees is estimated at 31.46%, which is significantly higher than that reported in host populations [21,22]. The prevalence is even higher among Afghan refugees, ranging from 34% in the UK to 53% in Canada, indicating the enormous psychological toll of war and displacement [24,25]. One Pakistan-based study reported a 79.20% PTSD prevalence in Afghan refugees, with symptoms that were also linked to intergenerational trauma [10]. Post-migration stressors such as cultural adjustment problems, social isolation, and stigma also exacerbate their mental health issues [23,29]. These findings underscore the imperative of culturally sensitive, trauma-informed mental healthcare responses. Currently, studies conducted specifically in South Korea that directly address with the prevalence of mental illness, trauma, or PTSD in Afghan refugees are rare. Most studies that can be found address the general refugee population or other groups, such as North Korean defectors.

Contributing factors to PTSD

Cultural adjustment difficulties: Afghan evacuees in South Korea, particularly those brought under Operation Miracle, have faced difficulties adapting to the country's predominantly homogenous society. Limited multicultural awareness and societal stigma have contributed to feelings of exclusion and anxiety [18,29].

Language barriers: Language is a major challenge for Afghan refugees in South Korea. Most find it difficult to learn the Korean language, which makes it difficult for them to access basic services, obtain jobs, and integrate into society. Initiatives such as the Korea Immigration and Integration Program (KIIP) attempt to solve these problems by providing language and cultural education [36].

Social isolation: Social isolation is likewise a significant issue. Afghan refugees are prone to discrimination and poor support networks, which exacerbates their sense of marginalization. Programs such as community housing and cultural orientation have been implemented to mitigate these issues, but their impact is still limited [18,29].

Access to mental health services

South Korea has a highly developed mental health system, with services delivered in psychiatric hospitals, community

health centers, and counseling facilities [37, 38]. Nevertheless, mental health care is stigmatized, deterring many individuals, including foreigners, from seeking assistance [39, 40]. In the case of refugees, such as Afghan evacuees, this is compounded by a lack of language barriers, cultural differences, and a lack of tailored support systems [41, 42]. These schemes, for example, the Korea Immigration and Integration Program (KIIP), focus on learning language and culture but are not designed specifically to meet mental health needs [43]. Enhancing the mental health care of Afghan refugees can involve the integration of culturally sensitive counseling into resettlement and the facilitation of community-based psychosocial interventions [31]. These measures narrow the gap between South Korea's mental health infrastructure and the unique needs of the refugee population.

Discussion

This study revealed the significance of Afghan refugees' mental health problems in South Korea, which are rooted in trauma, cultural adaptation issues, language problems, and social isolation. Trauma theory highlights the psychological impacts of forced displacement and violence, as exemplified by PTSD rates among refugees [44, 45]. These are compounded by systemic issues, considering that the mental health policies of South Korea are aimed primarily at linguistic and cultural assimilation rather than psychological trauma [46, 47]. Ecological system theory also highlights the interdependent relationships between individual resilience, social stigma, and institutional barriers, which restrict Afghan refugees' access to integrated mental health care [48]. Compared with global patterns, South Korea faces particular issues due to its homogeneous population and increased social isolation. Language barriers and mental illness stigma are common to all refugee populations, yet Canada and Germany mitigate them with multicultural support networks and trauma-sensitive care [49]. Lacking particular interventions in South Korea, Afghan refugees must rely on religious coping mechanisms and unofficial support groups, which cannot address severe psychological distress [8, 50].

Conclusion

This study revealed the significant psychological distress of Afghan refugees in South Korea. Key findings indicate that trauma, cultural adjustment difficulties, language barriers, and social isolation are central to psychological distress, particularly PTSD. Through the use of trauma theory, the long-term impact of violence and forced displacement has been accounted for, and ecological system theory has drawn attention to the interplay among individual resilience, social stigma, and institutional barriers to the delivery of effective mental health care. Furthermore, cross-referencing with global trends relieves the unique challenge of South Korea's homogeneous society in enhancing social isolation and limiting community support for Afghan refugees.

Recommendations

Implement trauma-informed mental health policy specifically tailored to the needs of refugee populations and integrate existing initiatives such as the Korea Immigration and Integration Program (KIIP) to include culturally responsive mental health services and community activities. Moreover, there is a need to provide cross-cultural practice training to help mental health practitioners provide effective and inclusive care for Afghan refugees, as well as to partner with community-based organizations to build accessible and secure support systems for those experiencing mental health challenges.

Limitations of the Study

While this study is useful in providing critical insights, there are some limitations that are important to acknowledge. The reliance on secondary data is significant in this study and, as such, might not be able to obtain an extensive analysis of Afghan refugees' lived experiences in South Korea. The research is also limited in focus to Afghan refugees and cannot be extended to other refugee groups. Finally, the absence of empirical data restricts an in-depth examination of the evolution of these challenges over time. Future research should explore longitudinal mental health outcomes, the effectiveness of community-based interventions, and comparative studies with countries offering trauma-informed care to refugees.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interests.

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