

# World Association of Cultural Psychiatry

## Position Statement on the Migrant Crisis around the World

### Subscribed by:



World Association of  
Cultural Psychiatry



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## **Preamble**

The World Association of Cultural Psychiatry (WACP) was founded to encourage international collaboration, friendship, scholarship, research and compassionate mental health care around the world. Sharing and exchanging best practices, and improving the safety and quality of mental health care as a priority, emphasizing an objective focus on the diversity of cultures, legal systems, commissioning processes and wider political and social issues such as stigma, discrimination and prejudice against the mentally ill and their families, our organization has contributed to improvements in these areas, even though problems persist and our work will continue. Human resources and consistent support and funding from public and private agencies are required in order to make sure that the quality of care provided everywhere responds to expectations

compatible with a profound respect for the dignity of all human groups and communities affected by mental illness or emotional ailments.

During the past several decades, there has been a steadily increasing recognition of the importance of cultural influences on life, general health care and mental health, in particular. Culture impacts practically all aspects of mental illness and, thus, culturally relevant care is needed for patients of diverse ethnic, racial, social and cultural backgrounds. From a social perspective, the world has witnessed rapid and significant changes magnified by political crises and information disseminated through a world media nourished by sophisticated technological advances. One of the realities resulting from these facts is that countries, regions and societies all over the world are becoming multi-ethnic and poly-cultural in nature. An undisputed evidence of this process is the massive presence of migration phenomena both within and between nations worldwide. The many implications (and consequences) of migrations in statistical, human and clinical terms urgently require in-depth examination of their precipitating factors, and multiple actions oriented to improving the cultural competence of health and mental health professionals. A resulting comprehensive medical and psychiatric care would respect identities and beliefs, and wholly consider the ethnic, racial and cultural background of each and every immigrant patient.

The theme of the 4<sup>th</sup>. WACP Congress is appropriately titled **Global Challenges & Cultural Psychiatry: Natural Disasters, Conflict, Insecurity, Migration and Spirituality**. It takes place at a time of inexorable and dramatic intensification of violence and turmoil in different parts of the world, causing widespread destruction and increasing numbers of displaced people, immigrants and

refugees. Internal and external migrations, pervasively growing in, for instance, Latin American countries and Latin America-North America fluxes, have recently reached dramatic, almost overwhelming levels in parts of the Middle-East, Asia and Africa, with practically millions of people displaced within their countries or continents, or forced to move mostly towards European countries. The World Migrant Crisis and its American and European versions are, thus, results of chronic socio-economic inequities and the intensification of political conflicts and religious wars. The mass movements of people generate great mental health risks among the immigrants, their enclaves in the receiving/host countries and the latter's overall social stability, resulting in a big volume of trauma-induced psychopathologies (depression, anxiety, psychoses and PTSD, among others).

*This WACP Position Statement on the World's Migrant Crises is a resolution adopted by the Association Executive Board in the context of the 4<sup>th</sup>. World Congress of our organization. It aims at providing a forum for vivid discussions, open debates and progressive actions. It will include specific considerations about the situation in Europe, the Americas, Asia and Africa, intending to identify common and distinctive factors, as well as making concrete suggestions and recommendations for action.*

### **General Background**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)<sup>1</sup> estimates in 59.5 million the number of people forcibly displaced worldwide in 2014. This figure includes Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced People (IDP) and Stateless People. War, conflict and political turbulence in many regions of the world have increased the number of displaced people fleeing complex

emergencies and disasters. They often end up in marginal sections of urban areas or large camps under minimal living conditions. Developing countries host over 86% of the world's refugees, compared to 70% ten years ago.

### **Middle East-Europe**

There were 19.5 million refugees worldwide at the end of 2014, 14.4 million under the mandate of UNHCR, around 2.9 million more than in 2013. In turn, 5.1 million Palestinian refugees are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The Syrian civil war, complicated by the irruption of ISIS, presents, however, the most severe and dramatic picture. By the end of 2014, Syria had become the world's top source country of refugees, overtaking Afghanistan, which had held that position for more than three decades.

Today, on average, almost one out of every four refugees is Syrian, with 95 per cent located in surrounding countries. Last year, 51 % of refugees were children, the highest figure for this age group of refugees in more than 10 years.

In 2014, the country hosting the largest number of refugees was Turkey, with 1.59 million people, now reaching nearly 2 million. Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, currently sheltering 3.6 million Syrian refugees, are reaching a breaking point and even experiencing food shortages, overwhelmed as international humanitarian funding is falling far short of the amount needed and some time promised. Many would rather attempt the dangerous journey to Europe rather than stay for years in impoverished, overcrowded refugee camps, where they can experience more violence, rape, diseases and even death.

About 38.2 million people were forcibly uprooted and displaced within their own country and are known as Internally Displaced People (IDP). Continued fighting in Syria brought the number of IDP in that country to 7.6 million. As well, Iraq witnessed massive new internal displacement as a result of the Islamic State (or 'ISIS') offensive across multiple parts of the country.

Statelessness refers to the condition of an individual who is not considered a national by any state, although stateless people may sometimes also be refugees. Syria has more than 300,000 denationalized Kurds, Kuwait has 93,000 Bidoon (*bidoon jinsiya*)<sup>2</sup>,

Furthermore, 1.66 million people submitted applications for asylum in 2014, the highest level ever recorded. With an estimated 274,700 asylum claims, the Russian Federation became the largest recipient of new individual applications in 2014, although as of September 2015, Germany has 256,000 formally registered refugees out of an estimated 800,000, predicted to reach 1 million by the end of the year. Similarly, Sweden with more than 190,000 asylum seekers just this year is the country with, proportionately, the largest number of immigrants per capita; more than 20,000 (12 %) of them are children and adolescents making the journey (mainly from the Middle East, but also from other distant countries such as Afghanistan and Somalia, without their parents or other responsible adults.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, in 2014, the USA received 121,200 refugees from the Middle East.

Thus, it is clear that, in 2015, Europe is struggling to cope with the large-scale influx of migrants making their way across the Mediterranean, the biggest since the aftermath of World War II<sup>4</sup>. This has sparked a crisis as countries

struggle to cope with the influx, and has created divisions in the European Union (EU) over how best to deal with resettling people. Squalid conditions in makeshift refugee camps and heartbreaking scenes like the photograph of a drowned Syrian toddler, have contributed to bring Europe's current refugee crisis into the global spotlight. According to the UNHCR, more than 380,000 migrants and refugees have landed on Europe's southern shores so far this year, up from 216,000 arrivals in the whole of 2014. The voyage from Libya to Italy is longer and more hazardous. The migrants are fleeing persecution, poverty and conflicts that rage beyond the continent's borders. Not all manage to arrive safely: according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM)<sup>5</sup>, more than 2,700 migrants are reported to have died trying to make the crossing this year; altogether, 2,988 people have died in the Mediterranean in 2015.

With tensions running high, Europe's leaders remain divided on how best to respond to the crisis. A disproportionate burden is faced by some countries, particularly Greece and Italy. Germany has recently promised to accept about 1 million people over the next 12 months; other countries have begun to take a more humanitarian line, albeit slow and narrow in its implementation. On the other hand, in many cases the rhetoric has been profoundly xenophobic and racist, invoking as their justifying arguments the protection of religious identities or the security of the potential host communities. There have been references to an imminent "collapse of European civilization", or to a "swarm" of migrants advancing even beyond the coast of Western Europe. All of this happens in the midst of growing conservative political trends in the continent, and muddled policies with regards to the areas of war and conflict.

## **Latin America-North America**

Throughout a period close to one century, migration from Latin American countries (particularly Mexico) to the United States (primarily) and Canada, has been a persistent social phenomenon. Initially, the motivating factor was the need of workers to build and establish railroads across North America and even expanding to communicate with “South of the border” countries; later, a strong agricultural development in the U.S. determined the hiring of people who, in addition to having a hard work ethics, were willing to receive a lower payment<sup>6</sup>. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Century, economic and socio-political factors in Mexico, Central and South America (such as unemployment, public budget deficits, government instability, social disorganization, family needs, civil wars, administrative corruption, etc.) have been the main reasons behind an increasing Hispanic migration. The main characteristic of Hispanic newcomers in the last five decades has been the so-called “undocumented migration”, the “illegal” migrants who, nevertheless, remain in the US for many years, work in many, mostly low-paying areas (primarily agriculture) and remain marginalized and discriminated against. Throughout the last 15 to 20 years, Hispanics or Latinos have consistently constituted just over half of the foreign-born population in the U.S. According to recent census figures, there are 54 million Hispanics living in the country, 17 % of the total population and the largest ethnic minority in the country. Projections for 2050 (104 million) and 2060 (128 million) confirm a pattern of consistent growth.

Mexicans are the largest subgroup (33 million in 2013, 63 % of the total Hispanic population). More than 11 million (28 % of all U.S. immigrants) are immigrants proper according to 2013 statistics<sup>7</sup> Other Latino groups include

Cuban/Caribbeans, Puerto Ricans, Central Americans (the largest subgroup coming from El Salvador) and South Americans (the largest subgroup coming from Colombia). Between 2000 and 2010, the Puerto Rican subgroup grew 36 %, Cubans, 44 % (a number of them escaping from Cuba by boat) and others, 22 %. Of note, the elderly Latino sub-population is currently one of the largest segments among the “baby-boomers”.

The most common features of the Hispanic population in the U.S. are lower income, lower educational level, significant unemployment, the second largest number (after African Americans) of people in jail, and the most numerous households. More importantly, from a socio-cultural vantage point, the pace and level of assimilation to the so-called “American lifestyle” (culture in its many forms, economic and civic life) is the slowest among Mexicans and other Latin Americans. This trend persists even though immigrants who arrived in the past 25 years have assimilated faster than their counterparts of a century ago, according to a report by the conservative Manhattan Institute for Policy Research<sup>8</sup>.

Adding to the unstable and unpredictable realities, there were 662, 483 apprehensions in 2013 by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and the U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement, two agencies responsible for the identification and removal of “inadmissible noncitizens”. Sixty-four percent of all apprehensions (420, 789) were reported by the Border Patrol in 2013, up from 364,768 in 2012, and about 98 % of those apprehensions (414,397) occurred along the Southwest border. Additionally, 35 % or 229,698 persons were subjects of “administrative arrests” in 2013. The leading countries of nationality (93 %) of

those apprehended were Mexico (64 %), Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Furthermore, 648,783 individuals in 2012, and 616,792 in 2013, were deported <sup>9</sup>.

In short, Latino immigration to North America is a massive picture that has been present in the world scene for over a century. In spite of high economic costs (payments to the so called *coyotes*, usually gang members that supposedly conduct the immigrants across the border) and dramatic reports of violence at different points of the long migration journey (e.g., rapes, sexual commerce, extortions even on the top of trains carrying the migrants; or total neglect, hunger and even assassinations) this crisis, perhaps due to its longevity, does not seem to attract the public attention the way the current wave of Middle East migrations does. It is there to be examined, however. Its extremely significant impact (both in numbers and in severity) on the life of the immigrants themselves and on the citizens of the host countries is undeniable. The cultural and clinical costs of this phenomenon cannot be demeaned or neglected.

Almost as a footnote, other migration-related facts are also seen in Latin America. For instance, the Dominican Republic has an estimated 900,000 to 1.2 million undocumented individuals of Haitian origin, many of whom are stateless or at risk of statelessness.

### **Asia and the Pacific Region**

Only twenty Asian countries have followed the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, while the whole region is home to 7.7 million people, more than half of whom are refugees, 1.9 million internally displaced (IDPs), and 1.4 million, stateless persons. The majority of the refugees originate from Afghanistan and Myanmar. The Afghan refugee situation is dramatically protracted. Up to 96

per cent of them are living in Iran and Pakistan, which have generously hosted them for over three decades.

The Myanmar situation is no less delicate. For several decades now, people from different ethnic groups have been fleeing to avoid conflict and violence. Currently, an estimated 500,000 refugees are in zones of neighbouring countries such as Karen and Karenni in Thailand, Chins in Malaysia, Rohingyas in Bangladesh and in large urban centres. There are over 400,000 IDPs in Myanmar, more than half of the population of the Kachin and Rakhine states. This includes over 140,000 people displaced during inter-communal violence two years ago, many of whom have undetermined citizenship status.

Sixty-three percent of the 3.5 million refugees live outside camps, mainly in urban environments where they are basically unprotected, exposed and vulnerable to all kinds of stressors. Those living in camps have limited freedom of movement, many lack documentation and risk detention and deportation. Detention practices and other forms of restrictive asylum policies continue to spread, limiting the refugees' access to basic services or to the labour market; the consequences are predictable: they become victims of exploitation and abuse, with women and adolescent girls particularly vulnerable to the actions of sexual predators.

In view of this situation, many refugees and their families are risking their lives to cross the sea in search of safety and protection. UNHCR has documented this irregular departures particularly in the Bay of Bengal at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border area.

## **Africa**

Massive new displacements caused by conflict, violence and human rights abuses are likely to continue to affect many African countries in 2015. Although the projected numbers of people of concern are expected to decrease slightly (from 15.1 million in 2014 to 14.9 million this year), due to repatriation, resettlement and other durable solutions, many problematic areas remain. The scale of the displacement caused by the upheaval inside the Central African Republic (CAR) (611,000 displaced), South Sudan (1.5 million in 2013, 200,000 in 2014)), and Yemen (85,000) is likely to continue in the years ahead. A renewed fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo that displaced 1 million people, brought the total number of IDP in that country to 2.8 million. <sup>10</sup>

In recent years, some core values of the traditionally laudable protection system in several African countries have been challenged, including difficulties for the access of Human Rights advocates to people in need of international protection. In Southern Africa, an increase in mixed migratory movements has also led to growing hostility towards refugees, putting pressure on asylum and protection space.

A significant proportion of Mali's population - 267,000 people - remains displaced internally and externally. The insurgency in the federal states of Adamawa, Borno and Koko in north-eastern Nigeria has provoked the displacement of a large number of people, forcing more than 650,000 to flee their homes within the country, and an estimated 70,000 to take refuge across the borders with Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

In this complex context, organizations such as the UNHCR have continuously worked to alleviate this collective suffering. The subscribers recognize efforts such as those in the last five or six years, for the implementation of a comprehensive durable strategy for the Angolan refugee situation, a Tripartite Agreement for the repatriation of Somali refugees, re-establishment of peace and security throughout Ivory Coast and other countries in Western Africa, and a Regional Return and Reintegration Strategy for the Sahel and the Government's Accelerated Strategy for northern Mali.<sup>10</sup> Improvement of conditions in return areas throughout the continent and consistent work towards a community-based approach that fosters social cohesion, must be complemented by concrete protective measures of the health, mental health and socio-cultural values of the affected populations.

### **WACP Calls for Action**

- ❖ We call on all European Governments to respect, uphold and administer the UNITED NATIONS REFUGEE CONVENTION (1951) with fairness and promptness, to act with humanity and compassion and to not let the evil of Europe's past history taint or threaten to repeat itself. European Governments with influence in the regions of conflict and wars (in the Middle East, Asia and Africa), and with permanent positions at the UN Security Council, must intensify their efforts to resolve these conflicts, assuage their consequences and bring about an end to the migration crisis.
- ❖ We extend this call to the U.S.A. Government (Executive Branch and Congress) to join others in reaching the same objectives as well as,

particularly, to adopt and reinforce policies aimed at establishing more practical, flexible and humane rules and proceedings regarding the management of the Hispanic waves of immigrants from Mexico, Central and South America, their treatment by bureaucratic personnel and offices and social agencies in different regions and States.

- ❖ We call on all Governments of countries in the receiving end of immigrants (particularly Europe and the U.S.A.) to act with promptness and fairness in assessing, screening and deciding on the legal status of migrants. Prompt decisions on refugee and asylum status must be done with humanity and dignity. The host populations must be reassured, their fears and concerns addressed, and their leaders encouraged to become actively involved in assisting with constructive re-settlement programmes.
- ❖ We call for all basic health care to be provided to migrants, with a clear emphasis on the immediacy of physical care, e.g., injuries from violence, war, rape, malnutrition, fractures, pregnancy and childbirth, basic immunizations, chronic medical conditions, etc., as well as emotional and psychological care (effects of torture, violence, rapes, deaths, traumatic stress, etc.). WACP can act as a reservoir for cultural understanding and recognition of the importance of cultural influences on life and mental health.
- ❖ We call for respect to and protection of individual cultural, religious and spiritual dignity, valuable features revered by most people, after the long haul of the migration journey and its traumatic sequelae. Paying attention to the acculturative processes and providing safeguard and protection to

avoid or prevent coercion and fear-inducing procedures, behaviors or maneuvers are key components of the immigrants' survival and the strengthening of their own resilience.

- ❖ The WACP will actively work towards the organization of international meetings on the subject of the World Migrant Crisis and its different expressions in several continents. The purposes of such events would be to bring together government officials, politicians, advocates, media, communities, health and mental health professionals, clinicians, social organizations and researchers in the field, engaging them all in the formulation of concrete and well coordinated actions, with emphasis on positive use of clinical resources and cultural factors in the management and recovery of mental health affected by the traumatic experiences of migration. The collaboration of other organizations with strong political and international impact (UN, EU, OAS, WHO, WPA, EPA, APA, etc.) should be actively pursued for the materialization of all these objectives.

## ***Additional points***

***Refugee Convention.*** Under international law, **THE UNITED NATIONS REFUGEE CONVENTION, 1951**, refugees must not be forced back to the countries they have fled, a principle which forbids the rendering of a true victim of persecution to his or her persecutor. Host governments are primarily responsible for protecting refugees and most states fulfill their obligations to do so. Others, however, avoid their responsibility by pointing to a lack of resources, the country being full in its capacity to host more immigrants, threats to national security, fears of domestic political de-stabilization, or the arrival of even greater numbers of refugees.

***A note on terminology.*** The BBC uses the term migrant to refer to all people on the move who have yet to complete the legal process of claiming asylum. This group includes people fleeing war-torn countries such as Syria, who are likely to be granted refugee status, as well as people like those from Latin America to the U.S. or Canada who are seeking jobs and better lives and who governments are likely to rule as “economic migrants.”

## ***References***

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR: UN Refugee Agency UK. <http://www.unhcr.org.uk>

<sup>2</sup> Refugees International. <http://www.refintl.org>

<sup>3</sup> Sweden Immigration Authority. [www.migrationverket.se](http://www.migrationverket.se)

<sup>4</sup> Europe Migrant Crisis. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news>

<sup>5</sup> International Organization for Migration. <http://unitedkingdom.iom.int>

<sup>6</sup> Durand J, Massey DS, Charvet F. *Soc Sci Quart* 2000; 81: 1-15

<sup>7</sup> Migration Policy Institute, Spotlight, February 26, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. September 2015 Report on immigrants' acculturation.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. DHS' Office of Immigration Statistics, 2013 Report.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a02d7fd6.html>