

**Moral, Religious, & Cultural
Factors Relating to
Disclosure of Sexual
Violence in Disaster
Situations**

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Background

- A refugee camp is an extension of society into crisis mode: moral, religious, and cultural factors become more pivotal to establish familiarity during periods of trauma
- Disclosure & silence in the context of sexual violence
- Developing a study to look at the moral, cultural, and religious factors related to disclosure
- Culture is an essential consideration of the clinical interview, case formulation and the treatment of an individual (Lu et al; 1995)
- A refugee crisis is fundamentally a cross-cultural concern for a humanitarian organization

Methodology

- Observational study: refugee camps current crisis
- Retrospective study: previous conflicts with recognized use of sexual violence as a “weapon of war”
- Cross-cultural: purpose to identify cultural factors that promote resilience and is the trauma experience independent from cultural factors that affect disclosure status
- Typology: clinical presentation for coping for women victims – disclosure versus non-disclosure

Refugee crisis and sexual violence: Factors

- Risk of sexual and gender based violence evidenced in societies where there is little protection and resources offered to woman who are victims of violence
- Extension of society into the refugee camp – therefore, societies that pose danger for women continue during conflict/ humanitarian crises
- Refugees experience increased vulnerability as social structures and support systems break down
- Family structures often eroded during a disaster resulting in women being left alone unaided by male family members that usually would have been their [only] source of protection

Challenges for humanitarian workers

- Treatment of victims of extreme violence requires culturally-specific protocols
- Understanding of values and beliefs surrounding sexual violence as heavily stigmatized
- Communication and consultation of humanitarian interventions such as community centers or psychological support is a sensitive effort

Consequences of sexual violence: A public health concern

- Between 2009-2012, 3025 presented for mental health care via MSF in DRC, Iraq, Occupied Palestinian Territories with symptoms related to violence: anxiety, mood/behavior related problems & somatization [Lokuge et al; 2013]
- UNHCR: North Kivu, between January and July 2013, protection monitoring teams registered 705 cases of sexual violence

Disclosure: Narrating sexual violence

- A Western psychiatric framework prioritizes the value of disclosure via speech
- Nature of disclosure: i.e. “it happened to someone else”
- Disclosure of sexual violence is essential for subsequent treatment of the woman as well as accountability and justice processes against the perpetrator

Silence: Is it non-disclosure ?

- Shame: a controlling factor for non-disclosure of sexual violence
- Religion: internal coping strategy
- Survival: non-disclosure to protect against persecution and loss of family members, e.g. husband
- Equating non-disclosure with silence is a dangerous mechanism serving the perpetual nature of a psychiatric diagnosis of trauma [bypassing cultural context]
- Denial of an individual's narrative existing at all due to a normative judgment on what counts as disclosure – oral testimony provided to medical professional in humanitarian action
- Silence does not negate suffering: presence of silence is form of embodiment of suffering

Conclusion

- Better understanding of the links between culture, risk perception, and disaster management
- What factors are related to disclosure and role of humanitarian organizations in promoting coping skills?
- Humanitarian organizations play a pivotal role in protection monitoring and training police