

# **REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS**

## **The Role of Psychologists and Some Recommendations for Intervention**

# BACKGROUND

**In the last 10 years, at least 100 million people have been forced to leave their homes for economic, social, religious, political or ecological reasons, and seek refuge within or outside the borders of their countries.** The number of people displaced against their will has been increasing over time, and even the COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions (e.g., restrictions on mobility between countries or the closing of borders) have not succeeded in stemming the flow of people fleeing natural disasters, armed conflict, violence, persecution, and other situations where human rights are being violated.

**Refugee and asylum-seeking people** are one of the groups most affected by various forms of **prejudice and discrimination**, stressing pre-existing conditions of deep **vulnerability**.

The **human rights violations** they face may include the denial of their civil and political rights (such as arbitrary detentions or torture), their economic rights, their social and cultural rights (such as the right to healthcare, housing, or education), putting them at **increased risk of poverty, violence, and inequality, as well as Psychological Health difficulties and problems**.

**Psychological Science plays essential role in defending human rights**, in particular, of those of excluded and vulnerable groups. **Psychologists are essential in the direct and indirect support** of this population, and ensuring compliance with international laws of protection and reception, healthcare access and other social responses that are required. Therefore, they must make a **commitment to promote and protect refugees and asylum seekers' rights**.

## IN FIGURES

› The UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) estimates that there are currently around **84 million people displaced against their will worldwide, of whom 42% are children** under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2021). By 2021, the number of people displaced against their will was twice the amount recorded a decade ago.

› These figures include people in very different situations and include international refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced people. Among the 84 million people displaced against their will, there are **26.6 million refugees and 4.4 million asylum seekers**.

› **In Portugal**, out of a population of approximately 10.3 million inhabitants, there are an estimated **1700 people with asylum status** (UN/DESA, 2019) and more than **888,000 international migrants**.

# THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGISTS

Psychologists who work with refugees and asylum seekers (children, young people, adults, or elderly people) intervene in complex, multifaceted and dynamic social problems and issues, and help them solve them by fostering their **adaptation skills, resources, and resilience**.

They also aim to **prevent risk and vulnerability situations, decrease discrimination and social exclusion**, and facilitate conditions that will improve their **quality of life and well-being**.

Thus, they can intervene in a **wide range of services and social responses** (e.g., Social Welfare Services, Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People at Risk, Private Social Solidarity Institutions, Non-Governmental Organisations, Hospitals and Health Centres, Schools and School Groupings, Local Associations and Parish Councils, and Vocational Integration Offices), including **individual interventions** (e.g., intervening with people with Psychological Health problems such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), **community interventions** (e.g., intervening in situations of poverty, unemployment or educational exclusion) and **public policies design** for migration, poverty, social exclusion and inequalities.

The **main objectives in psychological interventions involving refugees and asylum seekers** include:

› **Identifying people in vulnerable situations** and/or with Psychological Health problems and **facilitating their access to social, educational or health services**, to identify measures that will minimise negative impacts and enhance positive impacts.

› **Protecting and promoting their human rights**, ensuring their dignity and safety, and respecting their right to inclusion, non-discrimination, participation, and cultural diversity.

› **Collaborating with other professionals and organisations** to ensure that psychological, physical, social, educational, vocational and legal needs are heard and addressed.

› **Studying the impact** of the migration process, cultural adaptation, separation from family, and situations of vulnerability in terms of stress and well-being, as well as **identifying the adaptation strategies** and resources for this population.

› **Educating, training, and raising awareness among the various agents** in contact with refugees and asylum seekers about their pathways and needs, as well as the negative impact of any kind of discrimination, and the positive impact of cultural diversity.

› **Advocating and contributing to public policies** aimed to combat social inequality and foster respect for human rights.

› **Establishing links between research and professionals/services** working with refugees and asylum seekers, with the aim of providing effective, evidence-based services and responses.

Although there are **Psychologists working directly with these people**, within multidisciplinary teams, performing coordinated and cooperative activities in various contexts, **any Psychology professional**, from any area of specialty, **may encounter refugees and asylum seekers who require their intervention**.

# SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INTERVENTIONS INVOLVING REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Below, we have put together a series of general recommendations for intervention involving refugees and asylum seekers – **applicable to any context and type of professional practice in Psychology.**

## SENSITIVITY TO DIVERSITY AND SPECIFIC SOCIOCULTURAL SKILLS

Psychologists working with refugees and asylum seekers need **specific training and knowledge (understanding and know-how)**. It is essential to be sensitive to diversity and to understand the different contexts and individual experiences specific to the migrant's journey, social origin, language, code of values and symbolic references.

For example, it is necessary to acknowledge and understand that there are various ways of expressing mental suffering in cultural terms, and to avoid the use of undifferentiated notions of suffering that may lead to inappropriate processes of pathologisation (e.g., misinterpreting a culturally specific ritual as a symptom of a mental disorder).

In this sense, they should invest in their capacity to establish a **non-stigmatising and non-discriminatory relationship**, garantindo que desempenham as suas funções com base não-ensuring that they perform their work based not only on their professional Code of Ethics, but also on a **commitment to respect human rights, inclusion and the valuing of cultural, religious and linguistic diversity, as well as the right to self-determination and autonomy.**

## COORDINATION WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS

Psychologists should be able to look at and to intervene in psychological, social, educational, occupational, cultural and legal aspects, but also historical and geopolitical ones, as well as to coordinate with other disciplinary areas, namely Anthropology, Sociology, Ethnology, History, Biology and Medicine/Psychiatry, through **dialogue and complementary action**, which is crucial for attaining the multi-disciplinary integrated solutions and responses required in these situations.

In this context, it's also important **the cooperative work of Psychologists with cultural mediators and interpreters** – who should be seen as essential partners in establishing communication. Psychology professionals should also look out for the Psychological Health and well-being of mediators and interpreters (given the intense emotional exposure they are subject to).

## COMBATING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION, PROMOTING INCLUSION

Psychologists have an active role in combating the phenomena of racism and discrimination in educational, work, and community contexts, specifically through the development of:

- 1. Social integration programmes and the promotion of existing personal, social, and professional resources** in the communities
- 2. Awareness-raising activities** on issues related to human rights, migration and cultural diversity

Psychologists have an essential role in **deconstructing discriminatory beliefs, attitudes and behaviours** towards asylum seekers and refugees, in promoting a **positive view of cultural diversity**, in favouring **intercultural learning**, and in intervening to reduce the negative impact of prejudice and inequalities, for example, by creating **social awareness campaigns and programmes for work, school and community integration**, or by **supporting governmental organisations and associative movements** intended to empower these people and groups.

In organisations specifically, Psychologists can encourage organisational leaders and managers to include diversity in their vision and goals/outcomes, and to **promote the hiring of refugees and asylum seekers**. They can also conduct transparent **recruitment processes** in which diversity is valued, encouraging refugees and asylum seekers to apply.

In the case of Psychologists working in **school contexts**, they can collaborate with teachers and educators to develop tools and strategies to facilitate the **inclusion** of asylum-seeking and refugee children and young people in the school community, especially when there is a need to help them **integrate and resume their education**.

Psychologists themselves should carefully consider and acknowledge their own prejudices and stereotypes, and assess any impact these may have on their intervention (and, if necessary, make a referral to other colleagues).

## PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PSYCHO-SOCIAL ASSESSMENT

In the context of psychological interventions for refugees and asylum seekers, Psychologists carry out processes of evaluation, psycho-diagnosis, analysis and follow-up of the psychosocial needs and indicators of individuals, groups and communities, including the state of their health; well-being and quality of life; cognitive, emotional and psychological capacities; social resources; Psychological Health and behavioural problems; and social determinants that may create or perpetuate inequalities and social exclusion.

However, **psychological assessment requires redoubled care in this context**, since the instruments available and the specificities of this population may lead to biased interpretations, whose results may ultimately penalise them. Many of the most frequently used psychological tests lack the guaranteed **validity or adapted standards** needed to reliably assess people from specific cultures and languages, and include parameters from cultural contexts different from those of the people being assessed.

**The lack of culturally adapted tests increases the risk of pathologisation and decreases the possibility of identifying the real needs of this population.** Therefore, at all stages of the assessment process (interview, administering of tests, report writing, and feedback), Psychologists should be especially attentive to the social, cultural, and linguistic context of refugees and asylum seekers, namely when assessing their skills and abilities.

## INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION IN PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES

Psychologists who provide **psychological support** (psychological consultations and/or psychotherapy) to refugees and asylum seekers who are children, young people, adults or elderly, should always bear in mind that there may be an ethnocentric bias in the approaches and methodologies used. In order to guarantee more effective interventions, Psychologists seek to **enhance their awareness and skills for culturally sensitive professional practice**; they intervene in what may be the **fragilities/risk factors** of refugees and asylum seekers, as well as in their **strengths, protection factors and resilience**; and always recognise the **self-determination of the person**, respecting their skills and choices as agents of change.

**The psychological and psychosocial assessment of refugees and asylum seekers must**, therefore, be **culturally adapted**, which involves a previous effort to **adjust the assessment methods and instruments to the culture and capabilities of the individual or group being assessed**.

An assessment that respects multiculturalism should include insights into the Psychological Health of individuals, based on historical, family, economic, social and community information, to enable a **culturally sensitive psychological assessment**. Ideally, the assessment will be carried out in the person's native language, with the help of **interpreters/mediators**, to try and understand the person's narrative regarding their migration route, personal history and personal skills. In addition to immediate needs, the psychological assessment should also cover a wide range of issues, not only focusing on psychological factors, but also on housing conditions, financial, spiritual and health aspects, thus avoiding an exclusive focus on needs and losses (which would contribute to creating/reinforcing a "victim identity" and foster a sense of helplessness and hopelessness) and **enhancing resources and skills**.

Although not all refugees and asylum seekers require trauma-focused **psychological intervention**, they often suffer from Psychological Health problems such as PostTraumatic Stress Disorder. In such cases, the use of evidence-based interventions to deal with trauma are effective responses that promote integration, while helping to reduce suffering and feelings of isolation.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION WITH UNACCOMPANIED MINORS

Psychologists work with unaccompanied minors and should always aim to protect their rights and interests, provide support, as well as to promote access to Physical and Psychological Health services, housing, provision of daily needs, and resumption of their educational path, as well as enhancing their healthy development.

They acknowledge the specific condition of this population, namely the physical absence of parents or other legal guardians and intervene in a way adapted to their needs and living conditions. In this context, they **interact with various services and entities** (e.g., schools, associations, and communities), and seek to coordinate individual psychological interventions,

classroom support or group interventions. As an example, **in school settings**, Psychologists collaborate with teachers and educators to develop tools and strategies to make it easier to include asylum-seeking and refugee children and young people in the school community.

They promote intercultural dialogue and respect for linguistic, cultural and religious diversity, by working together with the educational community to foster multiculturalism through collaborative responses.

## PROMOTING EMPLOYABILITY

Psychologists have the skills to enhance the employability of refugees and asylum seekers by **playing a part in defining or developing their route to insertion or reinsertion in the labour market, in cooperation with services and structures** (e.g., Institutes of Employment and Vocational Training or Vocational Insertion Offices), through **direct interventions** (for example, by developing the skills to produce a CV, or preparing for a job interview) or by implementing **career management and language skills programmes**.

Whenever organisations take on refugees and asylum seekers, extra care should be taken when welcoming these workers. Psychologists can assist in **developing systems to receive and integrate** refugees and asylum seekers that facilitate their adaptation and performance, help them understand their roles, tasks, and the organisational culture, and establish relationships with other workers.

## INTERVENTION IN CRISIS AND EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

The intervention of Psychologists with refugees and asylum seekers is especially important at critical moments (for example, when they are being welcomed into a country). Psychology professionals are aware of the fact that **only specific skills in crisis intervention, interpersonal communication and teamwork, and specific skills in prevention, intervention and the fostering of Psychological Health and social integration** will provide the basis for them to respond appropriately to the needs of these individuals, families and groups, while reducing risk factors for Psychological Health and enhancing the aspects of protection and resilience.

## COLLABORATION IN THE CREATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES

Psychologists working with refugees and asylum seekers have the ability to **influence and support the design of public policies** that strengthen the rights of these populations. This may imply the creation and promotion of more and better-integrated support services that provide a response throughout the life cycle and that guarantees the satisfaction of basic needs and the access to health care and social responses, enabling a dignified and autonomous life

By undertaking advocacy work, Psychologists can also communicate with managers and policy makers (from different contexts and at different levels) and participate in the process of devising, implementing and evaluating fair and sustainable public policies. Psychology professionals are also prepared to facilitate collaboration and **systematic communication between health, education, judicial and social systems** so as to create a strong **interdisciplinary support network** and **improve the effectiveness of the services provided.**

## SUPERVISION

On the one hand, Psychologists should **seek adequate supervision** when working with refugees and asylum seekers. On the other hand, given their skills in multiculturalism and understanding of the impact of direct and indirect exposure to the trauma experienced by refugees and asylum seekers, Psychologists are in a privileged position to **supervise other colleagues and professionals** from health and social services, volunteers and interpreters/cultural mediators working with these populations.

Supervision may have one or more of the following objectives: (a) to consider intervention practices (psychological or others); (b) to develop skills for culturally sensitive practices; (c) to manage the impacts of working with cases of abuse, injustice and trauma and prevent vicarious traumatisation; and (d) to coordinate and evaluate interventions to improve team performance.

## RESEARCH

Refugees and asylum seekers should be a subject on research Psychologists' agenda, as **research findings are essential for grounding practices and policies in the scientific evidence produced.** Psychologists can devise and implement research projects aimed to explore the impact of the migration process on the Psychological and Physical Health of individuals and families, and to identify the resources and skills that contribute to fight stereotypes and discrimination, and to promote healthy integration of this population.

Psychology professionals can also **devise projects to evaluate the effectiveness of clinical, community and school interventions,** by identifying the factors that facilitate or hinder acculturation, language acquisition, identity development, academic performance, relationships, and psychological health, among many other variables.

They should ensure the participation of refugees and asylum seekers in the construction of research projects, and be sure to obtain their informed consent. Wherever possible, research findings should be shared and discussed with these populations.

## SELF-CARE

Intervention with refugees and asylum seekers is often emotionally demanding work, as it involves contact with people in situations of great vulnerability and suffering. In addition to **respecting the ethical limits of the professional relationship** (for example, Psychologists must refrain from giving money or clothes directly, but rather refer to services that can provide

this support), it is necessary to **respect the time and space needed for self-care** – an ethical imperative that is, likewise, fundamental for conducting competent and good-quality professional practice.



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