



**SEEKING REFUGE:  
FAITH-BASED APPROACHES  
TO FORCED MIGRATION**

Poverty and Peacemaking II  
March 3–4, 2017 at Princeton University

## Health, Mental Health, and Migration

Sana Malik, Wichita State University (Moderator)

Debra Boudeaux, Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation

Sadia Kalam, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)

Cathy Motamed, International Rescue Committee/NJ State Office for Refugees (NJOR)

Salwa Ahmad, Princeton University (Student Rapporteur)

Dr. Sana Malik, the moderator, began the conversation by outlining refugee health as a multifaceted issue that involves many layers and impacts a particularly vulnerable population. Mortality and morbidity rates can be expected to rise, and health is vital in camp settings, where refugees tend to suffer from malnutrition, disease, and reproductive health issues. Since war induces trauma, concerns are also compounded from a lack of security. Malik described the breadth of experience these panelists had regarding refugee health at all levels.

The panel presentation involved explaining the international, national, and local perspectives to gain an insight to the complexity of refugee health issues. The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation is a faith-based organization that provides services in refugee camp settings in Jordan, Syria, Thailand, and Tanzania. The Foundation focuses on providing outpatient clinical care and services for basic needs, and it also organizes group activities and offers cash for relief assistance. Debra Boudreaux revealed that when children are asked what they wish for, they reply that “they wish to have a home.” She asserted that *people* created this situation, and *people* can find the solution, through education. By educating ourselves, we can spread the message, which is necessary because “If the USA cannot recognize this situation, the whole world will not have peace.” She provided an anecdote of visiting a camp and seeing two young boys fighting each other because they had been exposed to violence. Hence, her key takeaway was that we need to utilize education to improve the current situations of these groups.

Next, the RWJF presentation emphasized creating a culture of health and ensuring children have equal opportunities to lead the healthiest lives possible. Sadia Kalam explained that RWJF is invested in reversing childhood obesity and achieving health equity. A key takeaway from this presentation was that greater adversity or trauma experienced as a child makes it more difficult to achieve a healthy life. Therefore, Kalam stressed the importance of stretching our current understanding of health in order to achieve better overall health outcomes. The RWJF created “Caring Across Communities” to provide immigrant or refugee populations with a way to access mental health services.

Third, Cathy Motamed provided an overview of NJOR, and highlighted that New Jersey is one of the top eight states in terms of receiving and resettling refugees. The recent shift in the refugee demographic to more Syrians has resulted in changes in how NJOR approaches resettlement. The



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NJ Refugee Health Program has the following primary objectives: initial medical screening and surveillance, ongoing health care, and health education. The program also entails Medicaid and Medicare coverage since refugees are entitled to these services, and it also strives to ensure medically accurate interpretation for those who speak different languages. They advocate for the Public Health Model as the best scenario for the refugee program to follow, consisting of primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention efforts to identify, mitigate, and prevent illnesses. NJOR also contracts with federally-qualified health centers throughout the state, such as the Newark Community Health Clinic and Project H.O.P.E. in Camden County. Finally, Motamed touched upon refugee mental health, and conveyed that besides health screening provided through the refugee health assistance program, not enough is happening to accommodate these needs, especially since finding medical providers of specialty services is a major gap. She argued that moving forward, there was a great need to integrate mental health support in social service programs, train providers on mental health screening and related issues, and focus on trauma-informed care and practice.

After the panelists spoke about their respective organizations, other participants joined the conversation to discuss their perspectives on mental health issues. Participants suggested that health systems ought to be geared towards using psycho-social methods of identifying mental health problems, instead of just being solely treatment-based. Many argued that we do not have tools to address mental health issues, although there is room to innovate and create new approaches so that prevention is no longer overlooked. A few participants discussed utilizing the creative arts as mental health resources because they allow for expression and communication, as well as social connectedness, which could help cope with mental health challenges.

Moreover, the participants discussed at length potential improvements in messaging for refugees during orientation and integration periods. Motamed commented that it would be helpful for refugees to undergo a health-specific orientation piece, in which they could receive an explanation of “the anatomy of our medical system.” Participants considered the merits of employing resettled refugees to help with orientation because their language and vocabulary would serve as resources to help incoming refugees, which could also save organizations money on hiring external resources to accomplish these tasks.

Near the end, participants discussed the need to acquire a better understanding of refugees’ origin countries since a cultural gap often exists in the workforce that responds to resettlement. Whereas finding coverage is not always an issue, finding resources that are both linguistically and culturally appropriate is difficult. Currently, there are no existing policies to address this issue, therefore it remains a gap that must be considered in the very near future.