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Voices Against Torture is published on the Unceded Homelands of the displaced xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), selí 'lwl̓ itulh (TsleilWaututh), and skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) Coast Salish peoples. We pay respect to the Elders past and present and are grateful for the many diverse Indigenous peoples who, over generations, cared for these shared Traditional Territories. We recognize the truth of violence, the painful history of genocide, and the forced removal that took place on this Ancestral Land. We are committed to the everyday actions that can help transform colonial impacts and help us move towards a culture of healing. This also means to us deeper alignment with the values rooted in anti-oppression and universal trauma-informed care, supporting a society based on equity, equality, and justice. We hold ourselves globally accountable to all human rights and to all Traditional Custodians of the Land wherever they now exist or compelled to co-exist. We comprehend that this Land Acknowledgement is a small but essential step in our ongoing process of remaining in right relations and continuum towards transparency and accountability.

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Editorial

The 2024 Annual Overview of Torture Trends and Developments, presented by Dr. Alice Jill Edwards, UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, highlights alarming global patterns. The report states:

“The year 2024 has witnessed devastating levels of torture and other violations of human dignity in armed conflicts” ([Source: UN OHCHR](#))

Similarly, Global Prison Trends 2024 reports that:

“There are more people in prison than ever before, estimated at 11.5 million. Only 30% of prison systems operate within their intended capacity, leading to widespread overcrowding. Pretrial detention remains the norm in many regions, while racialized and Indigenous populations continue to be disproportionately incarcerated. Punitive drug policies, poverty, and inequality are key drivers of the increasing number of women in prison. Prisons worldwide face severe insecurity and deteriorating conditions.” ([Source: Penal Reform International](#))

Beyond issues of incarceration, the report also presents urgent statistics on **forced displacement**, including refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and stateless individuals. According to UNHCR, at the end of 2023, approximately **117.3 million** people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, and other factors disrupting public order. This trend has continued into 2024, with displacement figures expected to surpass **120 million** by year-end.

Further notes:

- **The increase in forced displacement at the end of 2023 represents an 8% rise (8.8 million people) compared to 2022.**
- **This marks the 12th consecutive year of rising displacement.**
- **Currently, 1 in every 69 people globally (1.5% of the world’s population) is forcibly displaced—nearly double the number recorded a decade ago.**

[Source: UNHCR Global Trends Report](#)

The Urgent Need for Policy Reassessment

These reports present a deeply troubling picture of escalating **torture, human rights violations, mass incarceration, and forced displacement** in 2023-24. The data underscores the failure of **international human rights organizations and national governments** to effectively curb these trends. Existing international and national policies must be **revisited and revised** to incorporate **evidence-based and more proactive strategies**.

VAST Canada’s Focus on Human Security and Racial Discrimination

In response to these pressing concerns, **VAST Canada** has chosen to center its **2025 Annual Symposium** on the implications of human security fragility, particularly in light of **rising racial discrimination and torture**.

Farooq Mehdi and Frank Cohn



RESEARCH



ACCULTURATION STRESS AND IDENTITY CRISIS AMONG AFGHAN REFUGEES IN PAKISTAN

Syed Hussain Murtaza, Nelofar Kiran

Abstract: The study aims to investigate the relationship between acculturation stress and identity crisis among Afghan refugees in Pakistan. To measure acculturation stress (the S.A.F.E. acculturation stress scale) by Mena et al. (1987) and identity crisis (identity distress scale) by Berman et al. (2004) were used. The total sample comprises 400 refugees, including 210 males and 190 females with an age range from 21 to 40 years. Data collection employed purposive sampling techniques, and data was collected from Islamabad & Rawalpindi. Acculturation stress, resulting from cultural adaptation challenges, is associated with higher levels of identity crisis. This highlights the need for culturally sensitive support services to address both acculturation stress and identity crisis. Afghan refugees experiencing greater cultural adaptation challenges are more likely to encounter identity confusion and uncertainty. The findings indicate that the majority of Afghan refugees reported experiencing cultural shock and disorientation upon arrival in Pakistan. Additionally, they reported difficulty understanding and navigating Pakistani customs and norms, leading to feelings of being overwhelmed and anxiety. This cultural adaptation stress triggers an identity crisis, with 70% of refugees reporting uncertainty about their identity and sense of belonging. This study, which was conducted in Pakistan, addresses a major gap in the understanding of various psychosocial experiences among Afghan refugees. Overall, these findings hold implications for intervention programs aimed at supporting Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Keywords: Acculturation Stress, Identity Crisis, Afghan Refugees, Pakistan

Introduction

Refugees are individuals who are compelled to leave their home country in search of safety elsewhere. They cannot return due to the threat of persecution based on their identity, beliefs, or expressions, as well as due to armed conflict, violence, or significant social unrest.

Many have had to escape with little more than the clothes they are wearing, abandoning their homes, belongings, jobs, and loved ones. In the process, they may have experienced human rights abuses, suffered injuries during their journey, or witnessed the death or assault of family members or friends (UNHCR).

Refugees often face dreadful life events such as losing their homes and loved ones and having an unclear future due to the instability of their new life. They desire to move away from the abusive environment and start over somewhere new (Jibeen, 2019; Ruiz and Bhugra, 2010; Tamang, 2009). It is essential to keep in mind that over ninety-five percent of Afghan refugees reside in Pakistan, making up one in four refugees globally. According to data from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (2015), over 63 percent of Afghan refugees live in Pakistani cities while residing in camps or villages. Refugee camps are divided areas only accessible by Afghan refugees; they usually lack even the most basic social facilities and opportunities for economic development; many have turned into permanent residences for refugees, some of whom have been there for more than ten years (Dzeamesi, 2008). Research has identified that Afghan refugees in Pakistan are facing feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression due to the sudden changes in their environment, customs, and social norms. The language barrier hinders their communication and limits access to essential services, education, and job opportunities, exacerbating feelings of alienation. Moreover, adapting to new cultural practices and social interactions can be challenging, leading to difficulties in forming relationships with local communities and integrating into society. Cultural differences often impact their job opportunities, and as migrants, they struggle to navigate the local job market or face discrimination, making it harder to achieve financial stability. This further leads to identity crises when they feel torn between their heritage and the need to assimilate into

Pakistani society, which can lead to confusion and a sense of loss (Gonzalez, 2024; Hamid, 2024).

Acculturation refers to the process through which individuals from one culture adopt the beliefs, values, customs, and behaviours of another culture, often as a result of migration or prolonged exposure. Culture might lead to stress when there are challenges in adapting to a new culture. The acculturation stress usually stems from Language barriers, Discrimination or prejudice, Loss of social support networks, Conflicts between old and new cultural identities, etc. (Poyrazli et al. 2010). The literature suggests that refugees' low subjective well-being may be explained by inadequate acculturation since they encounter a variety of stressors and difficulties connected to acculturation that necessitate coping mechanisms (Safdar et al. 2009). It is crucial to remember that refugees have to cope with negative pre- and post-migration experiences in the host nation, and research suggests that the latter may have a greater influence on mental health than the former (Berry, 1990; Beiser, 1991; Liebkind, 1996).

"The psychological, cultural, and political considerations as well as surrounding circumstances also play an important role in building an identity, and refugees are active in the moulding of their identity" (Ager, 1999, page 2). Identity, according to (Kuus, 2007), is "not as an unweaved, coherent thing, but as a collection of conflicting elements and an evolving and debatable target." In this sense, identity is seen to be inextricably linked to a person's personal history and developmental stages.

Literature suggests that an individual's role is essential to identity creation as well as maintenance. This is an ongoing process when a single person acts as a mediator. Identity dynamics deals with both the societal as well as private aspects of one's identity - an array of these elements creating a 'rank of identities' that a person must choose how to construct (Pani, 2011). Many academics contend that "the identity restructuring is based on elements that bring together or separate someone from others, with the individual actively selecting the ways to identify themselves" (Mutanen, 2010); nevertheless, in certain circumstances, the state or society makes the decision rather than the individual.

Refugees faced varying levels of acculturative stress while striving to integrate and had to negotiate new

areas for themselves (Barajas, 2024). Berry uses the word "acculturative stress" to replace the earlier term "culture shock," which is linked to psychological stress models as a reaction to the integration process.

Some immigrants described their experience as an "identity crisis," while others described it as a painful form of "cultural electrocution." Surprisingly, some have attempted to mitigate the effects of cultural clashes by merging the greatest features of both civilizations. Refugees suffered depressive sensations of suffering, tension, moodiness, worry, loneliness, and trauma while transitioning to settlement society.

Hosseini et al. (2024) mentioned that Afghan refugees in Pakistan have created a unique set of challenges for both the host country and the refugee population. Acculturation stress, resulting from cultural adaptation, can lead to identity crises among refugees (Gómez et al., 2014). Despite the significance of this issue, there is a dearth of research on acculturation stress and identity crises among Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Previous studies in Pakistan have focused on the mental health and well-being of Afghan refugees qualitatively (Khan & Farooq, 2022). However, there is a need to explore the specific challenges of acculturation stress and identity crisis faced by this population. To address these gaps, this study employs a quantitative approach, surveying a larger group of Afghan refugees to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences (Khan et al., 2014). This approach complements existing qualitative studies, which have relied on in-depth interviews or focus groups (Wadood et al., 2020).

Method

Objectives

1. To investigate the relationship between acculturation stress (general stress and family stress), and identity crisis among refugees in Pakistan.

2. To study the role of different socio-demographic variables with study variables (acculturation stress and identity crisis) among refugees in Pakistan.

Hypothesis

1. There is a positive relationship between acculturation stress (general stress and family stress) and identity crisis among Afghan refugees of Pakistan.
2. There is a higher acculturation stress in female Afghan refugees than in male Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

A probability purposive sampling technique was used to obtain data from four hundred Muslim Afghan migrants. Most of the sample lies in the age range between the age group of 21 to 40 years (n = 400), and 65% males & 35% females participated in the study. Most participants were married (N = 113), belonging to middle-class socioeconomic status (n = 154), and 158 participants were Afghan passport/visa holders. Their year of arrival in Pakistan was less than a year. All participants of the study can easily understand the English language.

Sample

Table 1

Frequencies and percentages of demographic variables (N=400)

Variables	f (%)	Variables	f (%)
Age		Education	
21 to 25	124(31.0)	Matric	104(26.0)
26 to 30	112(28.0)	Intermediate	218(54.5)
31 to 35	92(23.0)	Graduate	78(19.5)
36 to 40	72(18.0)		
Gender		Job Status	
Male	210(52.5)	Working	230(57.5)
Female	190(47.5)	Not Working	170(42.5)
Birth Place		Economic Status	
Afghanistan	386(96.5)	Upper Class	28(7.0)
Pakistan	14(3.5)	Middle Class	308(77.0)
		Lower Class	64(16.0)
Year of Arrival		Documentation Status	
Less than 1 year	208(52.0)	Proof of Registration card	6(1.5)
More than 1 year	192(48.0)	Afghan Citizen Card	44(11.0)
Marital Status		Afghan Passport/Visa	316(79.0)
Married	226(56.5)	No documents	34(8.5)
Unmarried	174(43.5)		

Table 1 indicates a demographic distribution that provides insights into their characteristics. The sample's age range is relatively evenly distributed, with 31% between 21-25 years, 28% between 26-30 years, 23% between 31-35 years, and 18% between 36-40 years. Males slightly outnumber females, making up 52.5% of the sample. An overwhelming majority (96.5%) are born in Afghanistan, with only 3.5% born in Pakistan. The sample is split between those who have resided in

Pakistan for less than 1 year (52%) and those who have resided for more than 1 year (48%). Most participants are married (56.5%), have intermediate-level education (54.5%), and are employed (57.5%). The sample is predominantly middle class (77%), with most holding passports/visas (79%). The age categories (21 to 40) align with Erikson's psychosocial stages: identity exploration, intimacy formation, generativity, and middle adulthood reflection (Erikson, 1963). These stages capture refugees'

varying experiences and challenges as they navigate their new environment. This categorization helps understand psychosocial experiences among different age groups of Afghan refugees in Pakistan.

Instruments

Social, Attitudinal, Family, Environmental (S.A.F.E) Acculturation Stress Scale

The English version of the S.A.F.E. Scale is a 24-item, 6-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not stressful) to 5 (very stressful). The instrument has two subscales: general stress (21 items) and family stress (three items). The scores of each subscale are computed by taking the respondent's mean score, which is greater than two and indicates agreement with the targeted notion. Cronbach's alpha for community samples is reported to be .89, whereas, for the present study, Cronbach's alpha for subscales ranged from .85 to .91.

Identity Distress Scale (IDS)

The English version of the Identity distress scale is a 10-item 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very severely). These include long-term goals, career choices, friendships, sexual orientation and behaviour, religion, values and beliefs, and loyalty to specific

Results

Table 2

Correlation for acculturation stress and identity crisis (N=400)

Sr.	Scales	1	2	3	4
1	AS	-	.86**	.44**	.29**
2	GS		-	.42**	.28**
3	FS			-	.48**
4	ID				-

Note: ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$, AS=Acculturation Stress; GS= General Stress; FS= Family Stress; ID= Identity Distress.

Table 2 shows a moderate to strong significant correlation between acculturation stress and its subscales as general stress and family stress. At the same time, a

groups. The Cronbach's alpha for this study ranges from 0.82 to 0.91.

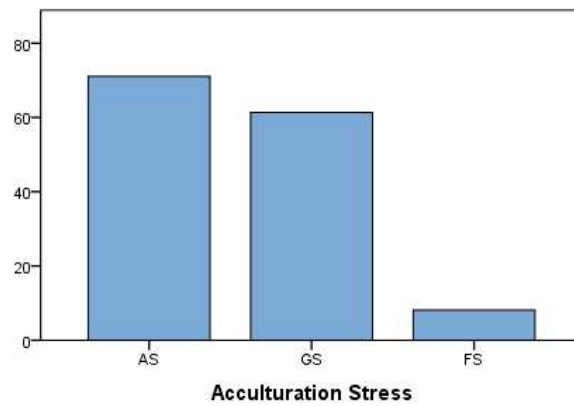
Both instruments were pretested before collected data, and in the pre-test of the instruments, it was established that the study sample more can easily understood and comprehended the instruments in English

Procedure

After securing permission from the ethical research committee (consisting of two professors and a research coordinator) at the National Institute of Psychology, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. Data was collected from various scattered Afghan communities living in Pakistan. Information about the Afghan migrants living in Pakistan was acquired from the participants either individually from Hazara colony Rawalpindi and the Refugee community from Bharakahu Islamabad. After securing written and oral consent from each participant, data was collected on a self-report form containing questions related to their psychosocial issues. After data collection, the data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science-26 (SPSS-26).

moderate to weak correlation exists between different domains of acculturation stress and identity crisis among Afghan refugees.

Figure 1: Mean related to Acculturation Stress (S.A.F.E)



The above bar graph shows Afghan refugees in Pakistan experience the highest levels of acculturation stress (mean=71.05), followed by moderate general stress, and

relatively low family stress. Acculturation stress is a significant source of stress due to cultural adaptation challenges.

Figure 2: Mean related to Identity Distress (ID)

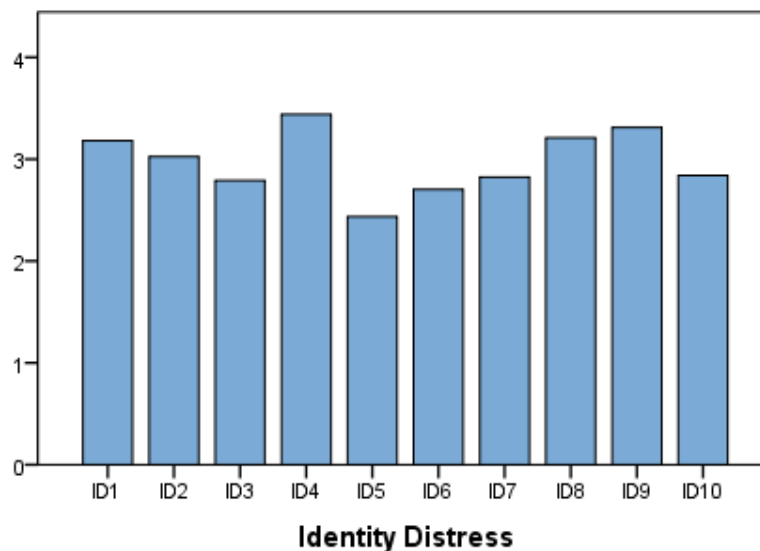


Figure 2 bar graph shows the varying levels of identity distress among Afghan refugees in Pakistan, with mean values ranging from 2.44 to 3.44. The results show that ID4 (3.44) and ID9 (3.31) exhibit the highest levels of identity distress, indicating significant challenges in maintaining a sense of self and cultural identity. ID1 (3.18), ID8 (3.21), and ID2 (3.03) also show relatively

high levels of identity distress, suggesting difficulties in navigating cultural differences and adapting to a new environment. In contrast, ID5 (2.44) and ID6 (2.70) display relatively lower levels of identity distress, indicating stronger resilience and coping mechanisms in maintaining their cultural identity.

Table 3*Mean Difference between Gender on acculturation stress and identity crisis (N=400)*

Variables	Gender				<i>t</i> (398)	<i>p</i>	<i>Cohen d</i>
	Male (<i>n</i> =210)		Female (<i>n</i> =190)				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
AS	70.99	16.36	71.14	18.93	2.21	.93	-
GS	61.32	14.57	61.35	16.50	1.91	.98	-
FS	8.11	2.17	8.09	2.29	.08	.93	-
IC	27.92	7.74	26.16	6.56	2.28	.02	.24

Note. *M*= Mean, *SD*= Standard Deviation, AS= Acculturation Stress, FS= Family Stress, IC= Identity Crisis.

Results in Table 3 show significant mean differences exist between male and female Afghan refugees on acculturation stress and identity crisis.

Discussion

The Positive link between acculturation stress and identity crisis implies that refugees with higher levels of acculturation stress are more likely to have identity problems (see Table 2). Previous research has continuously highlighted the complex association between acculturation stress and psychological distress in refugee groups (Tonsing et al., 2015).

As immigrants face problems in adjusting to a new cultural setting, they frequently face a slew of stressors, such as language barriers, social isolation, prejudice, and cultural dissonance. These stressors can severely damage a person's sense of identity and well-being, leading to increased levels of psychological discomfort, including identity crises. Schwartz et al. (2010) emphasized the negative impacts of acculturation stress on refugees' mental health outcomes, citing its role in worsening identity-related challenges and existential dilemmas.

Moreover, results also indicate that the acculturation stress regarding general stress and family stress is significantly positively associated with identity crises. Furthermore, the data show that acculturation stress, as measured by general stress and family stress, is strongly positively correlated with identity crisis. This means that refugees with higher levels of general and familial stress are more likely to experience identity crises.

The positive relationship between acculturation stress and identity crisis is consistent with prior research, which found that studies by Berry (2005) and Schwartz et al. (2010) repeatedly confirmed the negative consequences of acculturation stress on refugees' psychological well-being. Similarly, Schwartz et al. (2010) underscored the significant impact of acculturation stress on refugees' mental health outcomes, emphasizing its association with heightened levels of psychological distress, including identity crises.

The study discovered that female migrants had higher levels of acculturation stress than male refugees. In contrast, male refugees reported higher levels of identity crisis than females (Table 3). Previous research has consistently highlighted the distinct challenges faced by female refugees in navigating their sense of identity in the context of displacement and resettlement (Wadood et al., 2020). In the present sample, it was observed that female Afghan migrants struggle more to adapt to vastly different social norms and values in their host country, leading to feelings of alienation and identity loss. Moreover, traditional gender roles and expectations may clash with more liberal views in the host society, creating tension and confusion about their identities and roles.

Studies have shown that women often experience heightened levels of psychological distress and identity confusion compared to men, stemming from factors such as trauma exposure, family roles, and societal expectations (Lee, 1998: 155). The current study's

finding of higher levels of identity crisis among female refugees aligns with this existing body of literature, reinforcing the notion that gender plays a significant role in shaping the refugee experience.

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CASE STUDIES



WHY DON'T YOU GO HOME?

Matthew Daniel Brown

Reader's discretion is advised. This story contains recollections of war, mental and physical abuse, and child labour.

In December of 2006, I felt safe and truly happy for the first time in my life. But very soon, my psychological problems started to surface.

Any psychologist with experience working with refugees will tell you this is normal.

When you're being tortured or when you're a refugee, your fences are up; you're in survival mode, and you don't necessarily exhibit strong symptoms of trauma. But once you're in a safe place, your mind and memory start to review all the traumas and horrors that you've lived through. And that's when your mental health can go downhill rapidly.

I started having panic attacks two weeks after arriving in Canada in December 2006. But I knew next to nothing about mental health and didn't have a clue that I was having panic attacks. I was getting extreme heartbeats, and my brain was going blank unexpectedly. I thought I had developed heart problems due to years of long-distance running. And that's what I told a general physician that I visited. He checked me out and said I was healthy. He also had no clue that I was having extreme panic attacks.

I say extreme panic attacks because as a young marathon runner, I had a very strong and healthy heart, but the panic attacks raised my heartbeat to over 220 bpm, whereas even at the peak of a very fast 5 or 10km race, my heart wouldn't pass the 180 bpm.

But panic attacks were just the beginning of my psychological battles. After those panic attacks, it took more than 17 years to get properly assessed and receive proper help and treatment.

What was causing panic attacks, you might ask. Let me take you back to 1991, the first of my high school years.

Street Soccer

In my teen years, I spent all of my free time playing street soccer. I wasn't particularly good at it, but I loved the running part of it because it made me exhausted, which numbed my senses and made my parents' physical and emotional abuse feel less painful.

Before reaching high school age, I had endured years of constant physical and emotional abuse by my parents and

teachers. But their level of abuse was so severe and chronic that it can only be dubbed physical and mental torture and child labour. So, I grew up with constant feelings of anguish and exhaustion.

Anguish, because I was always anxious about the next round of physical or verbal abuse that was awaiting me.

And exhaustion, because after each round of beating or after each day of labour, I was exhausted and fell asleep, on many occasions hungry.

I will give some examples of their abuses and the childhood labour that I was subjected to in the next section.

So, extreme exhaustion was a very familiar feeling to me, and my mind associated extreme exhaustion with sleep; extreme exhaustion had a soothing effect on me.

One day, after everyone had gone home, I was sitting on the side of the street, not wanting to go home. Zein¹, one of the kids in the neighbourhood, was passing by. I think he was going to the local store to get himself and his siblings some snacks. At that time, he was a better soccer player than me, but unlike me and like most other kids, he played only half an hour to an hour a day.

He came up to me and asked: **Why don't you go home?!**

I replied: There's nothing to do at home!

This wasn't the only time some kid or adult would ask me that very same question.

But I couldn't tell them:

- I was afraid to go home.
- Staying out was my way of escaping my prison (my home) and the daily torture by my parents.
- Running is my painkiller.

Deep inside, I thought, "They wouldn't believe me!"

But to me, the torture was real. So real that although I was addicted to running and always had pain all over my body after the games, I kept playing because running had a calming and soothing effect on me. It helped me forget my emotional pains for a few hours.

¹ For privacy purposes I haven't used his real name.

I knew that when I went home, I would be abused again, and staying out was only delaying the daily abuse, but I still stayed out and played until exhaustion.

Let me give you a better picture of the home that I grew up in, and the abuses and childhood labour that I was subjected to.

Home or Prison?

Born into an arranged or probably forced marriage

I was born in a village in central west Iran, surrounded by mountains and far from civilization. I was firstborn into an arranged marriage (in fact a forced marriage). My mom was forced to marry a stranger from a village far from hers. I have heard from my aunts later in life, that:

- She was an unhappy bride. Reluctant to socialize with my dad's family, she cried a lot, often alone, locked in her room.
- Annoyed by mom's withdrawal and cries, my dad would give her a beating once in a while; a total of 3 or 4 times when she was pregnant with me. He used his leather belt.
- She refused to breastfeed or even hug me as a baby; in my first few months, my mom left me on the hard floor crying for long hours until my aunts or cousins would hear me and come and pick me up. They fed me cow milk for a few months until my dad managed to make a trip to the city and bring some baby formula.

My Extremely Violent and Abusive Parents

My dad, a true coward in my view, ran an absolute tyranny at home and was extremely violent towards his wife and children.

My mom always had blue or dark bruise marks on her arms and always tried to hide them from me. I've been told that mom always had bruises on her back and thighs. I clearly remember a handful of times when she had bruises on her face and neck; she wouldn't go out of the house for a few days so neighbours and relatives couldn't see it.

What's most painful and unacceptable to me is that she believed her husband had the right to treat her that way.

My mental picture of my mom is of an irritable, violent, and abusive woman. She was always physically, verbally, and emotionally abusive, literally every day. Her parenting methods and techniques were nothing short of a mad jailkeeper or a dark age slaver.

My Daily Routine of Abuse and Labour

During my primary school and junior high years, I endured malnutrition and child labour along with daily beatings by my parents and teachers. I was often whipped

by a leather belt or flogged with cables, metal rulers, or skewers.

Whipping with his leather belt was my dad's favourite way of beating me and my mom. When he whipped me, my best response was to avoid resisting or running. Because he would get even more riled up and hold his belt from the tail end and beat me with the buckle, sometime.

It was best to find a corner and curl up into a ball to minimize the impact on my head, face, and private parts. He didn't care where the belt landed.

I do vividly remember that when he whipped me, he would clench his teeth together and beat in a manner that in Iran is commonly known as "beat to kill". Peeking through my arms to see if he's tired of beating yet, I could always see his teeth showing, clenched together, and his jaws as tense as a crocodile's.

These were the years when the Iran-Iraq War had increasingly more impact on Iran's economy. In my neighbourhood in Tehran, all life essentials were rationed including drinking water.

My mom had 5 young children and couldn't leave home. I was her oldest. Although I was only 7 years old, she would send me to stand in lines for bread, milk, and other rationed food items for a minimum of 4 hours a day, even in the coldest days of winter. I had to do that, otherwise we wouldn't have bread to eat, which meant we would go hungry, and I would get a beating from my dad when he got home at night.

I also had to stand in line drinking water and fuel, a couple of times a week. I had to carry five or six 40L containers of water, for about a kilometre, the distance from the water tank to our house. The fuel containers were very unsafe and always leaked. My hands and clothes were always contaminated after getting fuel. As the oldest child in the family, I also had to do any chores that came up in the household, such as doing the dishes and (hand washing the) laundry, sweeping and dusting the house, cleaning the toilet, and babysitting.

I was always exhausted and depressed at the end of the day. But then I had to do my school homework and study for the daily quizzes. We were given an average of 50 to 60 pages of homework every week and had to complete one or more quizzes every day. Teachers didn't have a lot of time to teach us, so basically, we had to study at home, learn the subject well, and do well on the quizzes and exams!

I was regularly punished by my teachers because I could never finish my homework.

Running, my painkiller

Although I played with other teenagers, I couldn't make close friends. I would just stay out after school and stand on the sidelines of a soccer game for a team to pick me up and let me play. Once the game was over, I was alone again.

I didn't know anything about mental health. So, I didn't know that because of what my parents did to me since birth, I was a very distressed child and later a very awkward and withdrawn teenager. Even other awkward kids stayed away from me! And I didn't understand why. But I knew that something was wrong.

Fortunately, I did realize that running and exhaustion served me as an emotional stabilizer and painkiller. So, as long as there was someone to play with, I kept playing. I was always the last kid to leave the game.

Later, during my university years, I took up running as my sport of choice. While studying engineering, I also joined a professional running club and advanced to the national level.

Towards the end of high school, I was convinced that going to a state-owned university was the only way to escape my torture. Because state-owned universities had dormitories.

I knew that I wasn't the smartest kid in the block, but I decided to study hard to get to the best engineering school in the country. I had to do that because it was my only way to escape home and fight the idea that I was worthless and didn't deserve to live, ideas that my parents used daily.

As a child, I had no option but to suffer daily torture and child labour by my parents and teachers, but as soon as I was able to, I found a way to escape them. My escape route was admission to a state-owned university.

During my university years, I avoided going home or contacting my family as much as possible. I would only do so when the dormitories were closed for a handful of days each year.

Not surprisingly, my roommates and my classmates would sometimes ask me: Why **don't you go home?!**

Even dormitory caretakers and one of my professors asked me that question once or twice.

My Ultimate Escape

Despite my efforts to stay away from the family, my parents' abuse continued. After graduating from university, I had to serve in the military. But my country was ruled by dictators, and I was reluctant to serve in their military.

Besides, although I didn't know anything about psychology, chronic depression, and anxiety disorders, I knew I was different from other young men and didn't feel safe enrolling in the military!

But my parents and some of their relatives (who worked for their country's intelligence services) locked me up and tortured me for nearly 4 months to force me to serve in the military.

Even my mom participated in the regular beatings. In one of the beatings, my mom left a deep claw mark on my neck that was more than two inches long. I still have a scar from that. I was a grown adult at that time, with two master's degrees.

Eventually, they dropped my exhausted body at the nearest military base and told the officers that I was not willing to serve.

I was then sent to a remote military base. I was in that base for about two weeks before I managed to escape and find my way to a neighbouring country. But during those two weeks, they broke my left thumb and my right big toe.

I had to resort to smugglers to take me to the neighbouring country. Escaping the military base and travelling with smugglers was a scary experience on its own, but it was even more traumatic to travel inside another country with a different language, alone and without enough money. I had to get to their capital city and find the UNHCR offices. That was a horrible journey full of traumas.

Once I reached the UNHCR offices, I registered as an asylum seeker. A year and a half later, I was recognized as a UNHCR refugee.

Life as a refugee was extremely hard. For almost two years, I was without a safe shelter and sometimes had no shelter; I wasn't allowed to work, and many times I went hungry for 2 to 3 days in a row; and suffered continuous harassment. But worse than being homeless was the uncertainty. I had no control over my daily life or my future.

Eventually, in December of 2006, the government of Canada brought me to the city of Edmonton, in the province of Alberta.

Coping Mechanisms

When I arrived in Canada in 2006, I arrived with a lot of mental health issues, but I was blind to my psychological ailments and vulnerabilities.

I had no family nor any relatives to alert me about my poor mental health, my anxious behaviour, my vulnerable disposition, and my withdrawal.

Furthermore, during the medical screening process in January of 2007, no one recommended psychiatric screening, nor did anyone alert me about my poor mental health.

By mid-2007, I managed to see a community counsellor at a non-profit organization that ran a settlement program for refugees. However, the community counsellor only touched my issues on the surface. I was taught a deep breathing technique and a muscle relaxation technique and was told that with patience and persistence, my symptoms would decrease and eventually dissipate.

Relying on that advice, I embarked on life in Canada, not realizing that I wasn't getting an adequate diagnosis and that a deep breathing and muscle relaxation technique was far from adequate treatment for my condition.

In addition, I kept a consistent routine of running and swimming and watched my diet and sleep patterns as part of my coping mechanism. But my condition persisted, yet I kept telling myself that "I'm getting better".

Six years later, after many failures and rejections in my career and social life in 2012, I had an episode of depression, a PTSD flare-up, and a few panic attacks. So, I went to a walk-in clinic and asked for a referral to see a psychiatrist.

After a few months of waiting, I got to see a psychiatrist. However, my condition was not adequately diagnosed. I was told that I'm dealing with transient OCD and depression, which can be medically treated. I was recommended to try Prozac, which is a common medicine.

When I look back, I was constantly suffering from nightmares, flashbacks, isolation, anxiety disorders, panic attacks, insomnia, memory dysfunction, and depression.

But these symptoms had become a constant feature of my existence, and I was so used to them that I considered them normal. In addition, my love of science and my ability to comprehend advanced science had kept me blind to my mental ailments, like a curtain hiding the truth. And even my constant failures in social life and getting employed didn't quite wake me up to the fact that my existence wasn't a normal one, but a painful one.

After a few more years, I was still all alone with a great deal of vulnerabilities. After countless failures in my career and social life, being taken advantage of a few times, and living in poverty, I finally realized that I was dealing with a lot more than just OCD and depression; there were a lot more serious underlying issues that I had to uncover.

Decisive Measures

Subsequently, I planned to take a few measures to investigate the root cause of my mental health conditions, to prevent further damage, and to protect myself from my vulnerabilities.

The main measure was to learn a lot more about psychology and psychiatry. In the meantime, I had to find ways to control my symptoms till I got a clear picture of all the underlying issues. That included two more measures: consistently taking daily notes and following a rigorous exercise regime. I knew that daily long-distance running had served me as a great emotional stabilizer and painkiller in my high school and university years.

I was very successful in executing these measures. I learned a great deal about human psychology, physiology, and kinesiology. I reviewed and analyzed every event in my life from birth to the present, considered all the possible root causes for the traumas that I've endured, and came to terms with them. As a secondary benefit of these measures, I was able to participate in a few marathons and triathlon events and perform very well.

In 2020, I moved to the province of British Columbia, and by the end of 2021, I was convinced that I've been living with Severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), Severe Anxiety Disorder (SAD), and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), for many years.

So, I embarked on a systematic investigation of my physical and mental health conditions.

I broke my action plan down into the following phases:

- Thoroughly investigate my conditions.
- Get a professional diagnosis.
- Embrace medical treatment.
- Get counselling and adhere to professional recommendations.
- My investigations took nearly two years to conclude and involved asking my family doctor for referrals for various medical tests. Once I had the data that I needed (by mid-2023) I asked my family doctor for a referral to see a psychiatrist, to present my findings and get a final psychiatric assessment and a thorough diagnosis.
- During the Covid pandemic, I had kept in touch with my former psychiatrist in Alberta. Due to the circumstances, remote visits and prescriptions were permissible. However, by early 2023, my former psychiatrist could no longer continue the prescription (Prozac) because I didn't live in Alberta. So, I stopped taking Prozac.

- This was an opportunity for me to observe the full spectrum of my symptoms in the absence of Prozac. In the meantime, I kept on a rigorous and consistent exercise and training regimen. But in May of 2023, I sustained a sports injury that required me to completely stop my exercise and training activities. This acted as a catalyst for discovering the full range and depth of my mental health issues.
- In the second half of 2023, while waiting for my psychiatrist appointment, I continued my studies of psychology and my self-observations. Towards the end of 2023, I was convinced that I suffered from ADHD during my childhood and early teen years, and the daily abuse by my parents gradually turned my ADHD symptoms from mild to moderate and severe.
- In January of 2024, I was finally assessed by a psychiatrist and was diagnosed with severe PTSD, MDD, SAD, and OCD.
- After the diagnosis, I started medication under the supervision of my family doctor. Shortly after, I also started receiving counselling services from a registered clinical counsellor.
- In February and March of 2024, I was assessed for ADHD by another psychiatrist. The tests took place after I started medication and counselling, and the assessment indicated that by then, I had reached stable mental conditions. The test results were inconclusive, indicating that I do not exhibit severe ADHD symptoms as an adult.
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- Ever since I came to Canada, many people, including some medical professionals who have helped me, have asked me, “Do you go back to visit your family?”
- They would see my poor mental health and pose that question, thinking that visiting my family would help me, not knowing that I’d escaped from my parents.
- Their question reminds me of the question that kids in my street and my university classmates used to ask me: **Why don’t you go home?!**





ART & SCIENCE OF HEALING



Criminalizing Ecocide

Waiza Rafique

The link between environmental law and criminal law, especially international criminal law, is strengthening with the growing research on this subject.

As environmental damage due to climate change and institutional blindness forges on with building ferocity, innovative and pragmatic solutions of both adaptation and fixing responsibility are being thought of. Human, corporate and state actions such as deforestation, blanket bombing, large-scale pollution, and illegal wildlife trade not only cause severe environmental damage but also constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity under international criminal law in certain circumstances.

Furthermore, environmental degradation frequently results in human rights abuse, including community displacement, loss of livelihoods, and negative health consequences. The convergence of international criminal law and environmental law occurs when these abuses are severe and systematic, potentially leading to prosecutions under international human rights law. Issues such as air and water pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss often have effects that cross borders. However, since the Rome Statute does not specifically define ‘ecocide’, the International Criminal Court does not have the jurisdiction to prosecute these actions.

At present, ecocide is only considered a war crime under Article 8(2)(b)(iv) of the Rome Statute. However, no charges have ever been filed, possibly on account of the very high threshold of injury required under the article – there must be an intentional attack that causes ‘widespread, long-term and severe damage to the environment which would be clearly excessive.’ The Rome Statute does not include provisions for the criminal responsibility of corporations and states. Therefore, entities causing environmental harm, such as water or air pollution, illegal deforestation, or oil spills, cannot be held legally accountable for these actions in peacetime, even though they might be considered criminal during war.

Though Pakistan has been strongly advocating to establish corporate responsibility for environmental damage, it has not relied on using international criminal law.

The question, then, arises: Would criminalizing ‘ecocide’ solve the problem? And would it solve for Pakistan as well?

The concept of ‘ecocide’ pertains to the ‘severe damage and destruction of ecosystems to the detriment of life.’ However, an official definition recognized among

nations remains elusive. The notion of ecocide emerged in the 1970s, during the Vietnam War, from biologist Arthur W Galston, in opposition to the US military’s deployment of Agent Orange, an herbicide and defoliant aimed at eliminating vegetation cover and enemy crops. Since then, numerous civil society organizations and legal experts have advocated for the recognition of ecocide as a criminal offence under international law.

With the increasing urgency of the global climate crisis, a growing number of States and other stakeholders – including parliamentarians, corporate investors, and global youth, it is important that ecocide should also be defined as a crime under international law, alongside genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and the crime of aggression. Some countries that have been immensely impacted by climate change, such as the Maldives, have expressed their support for criminalizing ecocide while stating that the International Criminal Court “has the capacity to contribute to the drastic changes in behaviour that are needed to meet the Paris Agreement goals”.

Implementing ecocide as a criminal offence would serve as a method for deterring and addressing egregious environmental destruction through international legal action. Opponents of this idea contend that prosecuting ecocide could be exceptionally challenging, if not unfeasible, particularly in the cases the International Criminal Court should address – namely, the most severe global environmental catastrophes, such as those related to climate change on a planetary scale. They argue that environmental degradation is frequently an unintended consequence of activities motivated by economic, social, or political objectives.

As such, the absence of a direct correlation between intent, action, and adverse outcomes complicates its classification as a criminal act. Some also argue that international criminal law might be applied when states or individuals ‘knowingly’ engage in activities that harm the environment, impacting neighboring nations or the global community.

The dialogue on criminalizing environmental damage is building and spreading across the world. Though Pakistan has been strongly advocating for establishing corporate responsibility for environmental damage, with demands for legal frameworks to hold corporations accountable for their environmental impacts, the country has not relied on using international criminal law as a tool to achieve that by specifically criminalizing ecocide.

This has a direct nexus with the fact that Pakistan has not ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. Though the country initially cast a favourable vote for the Statute, it subsequently retracted from proceeding with ratification.

The ratification of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court itself remains one of the most contentious issues in the realm of public international law. Many nations perceive it as an impediment to their national interests due to its stringent human rights obligations. Despite this, 124 countries have ratified the statute, with a notable exception being Pakistan.

Since Pakistan is not a signatory to the Rome Statute, an amendment in the Rome Statute to include ecocide as a crime may not sound as relevant for Pakistan now. However, Pakistan is one of the countries most affected by climate change and environmental damage despite being one of the lowest contributors to climate change.

At the same time, the overall status of human rights, particularly rights on disability, sexual orientation,

gender identity, freedom of expression and religion, is unremarkable.

In this context, it is high time for Pakistan to think of innovative legal resources to prevent and efficiently manage the impacts of climate change. Signing the Rome Statute and advocating for the incorporation of ecocide as a crime to be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court could be one such legal recourse.

The writer is a lawyer, writer and human rights advocate in Pakistan.

Criminalizing Ecocide

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TORTURE TODAY



Death Penalty as a Form of Torture

Ezat Mossallanejad

The whole process of the implementation of the death penalty has always been torturous – from the pronouncement of the penalty to the waiting period for the execution of punishment to the very act of killing.

The psychological torture starts on the very first day of arrest. Interrogators and torturers use the threat of capital punishment as a technique for extracting information and confession from their prisoners. The trauma remains with the prisoners as well as their family members throughout the trial. In the cases of human rights activists or recognized public figures whose fates rest at the mercy of arbitrary judges, the entire society may suffer traumatization. Receiving the official verdict of the death penalty has never been easy for even the strongest individuals who may be notorious for their lack of compassion. Let me share the example of Mr. Ajmal Amir Kasab, who endured seventeen months of trial in Mumbai, India, for causing “death and destruction on the financial capital of the country on November 26, 2008.” He broke down on hearing his death sentence and “sat with his head in his palms” and “asked for a glass of water”. (1)

The agonizing limbo of being on death row begins at the time when victims have their death sentence announced and ends with the implementation of it. This waiting period may take from a few days to a few years. During this time, executioners may use different tactics to maximize their victims’ fear. In an attempt to demoralize other prisoners, the torturers may choose to keep their targets in public cells among other prisoners. Or they may lock them in solitary confinement to make each and every minute of their lives miserable. (2)

One of the most cruel and inhuman conditions of the limbo of death row belongs to female pregnant political prisoners. They must wait until after delivery and sometimes beyond that, until the nursing of their babies is completed. The Iranian writer and ex-political prisoner, M. Raha, shares a tragic story. The following is an excerpt from her testimony:

“She had been given the news about the execution of her husband in jail. She was in love with her husband and was tolerating her tormenting pain by paying a heavy price. One could see the shadow of a deep sadness in her eyes and her young face. She was sentenced to execution, but they had postponed the implementation of the sentence possibly because of her child.... She preferred to be alone, perhaps

because of her concern for others; she did not want to transfer her tensions to them.” (3)

To keep their victims in a condition of permanent limbo, some tyrannical governments, including Iran, have invented the sentence of ‘conditional execution.’ They sentence their victims to death, but instead, they are kept in jail for life. A slight change in the behaviour of the prisoner or the policy of the government may persuade prison authorities to implement the sentence. Conditional execution is like a shadow of death haunting the minds of political prisoners at every moment of their lives.

As was seen from the above examples, the psychological and emotional torment of death row is beyond the normal capacity of anyone to endure. The prolonged suffering of a prisoner under this cruel and inhuman condition is nothing less than severe torture. The agony of being on death row may drag the victims to the point of becoming “chronically psychotic” and make them irreversibly incompetent to face the death sentence. On the same token, the execution of “an incompetent condemned person” is also an act of cruelty:

“...execution of an incompetent condemned person constituted “cruel and unusual” punishment. In Justice Powell’s words, the inmate must be “aware of the punishment and why he is to suffer it”. A commonly discussed corollary is that a condemned person should be competent also so that he can face his own death sentence, hopefully to the point of remorse and repentance”. (4)

Death penalties took place in the ancient and medieval era in extremely sordid manners: crashing bones in a breaking wheel, boiling to death, flaying, slow slicing, disembowelment (removing organs one by one, the last ones being lungs and heart), crucifixion, impalement (driving of objects through the body), crushing, burning, dismemberment, sawing, scaphism (slow killing of a victim by confining him in a trough, with his naked body smeared with honey, and exposed to the sun and to insects) and necklacing (forcing a gasoline-soaked tire around a victim’s neck and setting it on fire), the Brazen Bull (forcing the victim inside a large hollow brass bull and burning him by a fire lit beneath), Killing by the use of animals (tearing apart by horses, crushing by elephants, being thrown to the lions or snakes,), etc.

The above techniques are rare today. However, there are other gruesome methods still in use including stoning, beheading, shooting, hanging, electrocution, lethal gas,

and lethal injection. All these techniques, old or new, ancient or modern, are highly torturous, cruel, inhuman and degrading. Let us look at some examples.

Today, stoning remains a legal punishment against alleged adulterers and adulteresses in countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Sudan, Nigeria, and Mauritania. They use a barbarous and primitive method: for a man, a hole is dug, and he is buried in it up to his belly, while a woman is buried up to her armpits. Then, a group of people throw stones at the victims from all sides. Stones should be neither big nor small in an attempt to maximize the victim's agony. Sometimes, it takes 3 to 4 hours for the victim to die. In many cases, the enforcement officials force the victim's close relatives, including children, to watch the process. Stoning is perpetrated in public, involving the whole community and converting ordinary people into torturers. To escape suspicion, everyone must throw something, even a small pebble. A terrible psychological torture is inflicted upon victims even before stoning by threatening that Godly tortures await them in hell after death. In some cases, the victims are informed that their bodies are burned, and the ashes are then thrown away. (5)

Beheading or decapitation is a sinister method of execution that is being used mainly in Saudi Arabia for apostasy, murder, adultery, drug trafficking, sodomy, and armed robbery. The victim is carried blindfolded in a police van to a public square. The executioner spread a large plastic sheet on the ground. An officer brings the prisoner to the centre of the sheet in a humiliating way: barefoot, with hands and feet shackled. They make him kneel facing the holy city of Mecca, where the Moslems' House of God, *Ka'abeh*, is located. The beheading takes place before a huge crowd. The executioner raises his gleaming traditional Arab scimitar (a curved single-edged sword), swinging it in the air to warm up his muscles. He then approaches the victim from behind and pokes his back abruptly with the tip of the blade, causing him to raise their head. Then, he decapitates him with a single swing of the sword. A doctor stitches the head back on, and the body is carried away and buried in an unmarked grave in the prison graveyard. Beheadings take place for men and women alike. Forty-seven women have been publicly beheaded since 1990, when the practice of beheading women began. The job of executioner is a prestigious one in Saudi Arabia, inherited through generations. (6)

Hanging is used in many countries as a method of execution. It is a practice that violates the right of every human person to be free from torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. In August 1983, the then Attorney-General of India described hanging as the best method of execution: "based on the theory that

the vascular, nervous and respiratory systems are extinguished in a single moment." This theory is, however, far from reality. More often than not, hanging turned out to be a technique of atrocious and prolonged torture. A classic example is Nathuram Godse, the man who was hanged on November 15, 1949, for murdering the Indian leader, Mahatma Gandhi. He was suspended for fifteen minutes from the scaffold before finally dying. (7) The most recent example belongs to the Iraqi Awad Hamed al-Bandar, the chief judge under Saddam Hussein. He was brought to the execution site in a black hood and red jumpsuit on January 15, 2007. His lawyer had not been permitted to attend his hanging. Mr. Al-Bandar was decapitated on the gallows. His hooded head separated from his body in a cruel and inhuman manner as it plunged through the trapdoor in the execution chamber. (8)

Lethal injection is depicted as a "civilized" method of execution in the United States of America. Since 1976, some 788 people have been executed by lethal injections.

The process involves 3 steps:

- 1) making the convict unconscious by using an anesthetic injection.
- 2) relaxing muscles with another injection.
- 3) Stopping the heart from functioning by using the third injection.

By all intents and purposes, lethal injections are painful and cruel. As the Principles of Medical Ethics prohibit doctors and nurses from participating in executions, the technicians involved are unskilled, and the victims' agony may last up to ten minutes. They experience asphyxiation, severe burning sensations, massive muscle cramping and cardiac arrest. (9) The following remark is made by Dr. Leonidas Koniaris, a surgeon in Miami: "My impression is that lethal injection as practiced in the US now is no more humane than the gas chamber or electrocution, which have both been deemed inhumane." (10)

Capital punishment does remove the main witness to ghoulish tortures perpetrated against condemned persons before death. In cases of political prisoners, it is often preceded by such ghoulish tortures as rape, mutilations, extracting victims' blood, etc. Following is the testimony of a reputed Iranian political prisoner about the practice of holy rape before execution in Iran:

The guards and managers of the prison raped women who were sentenced to death on a systemic basis. In this way, they tried to make them sinful and deprive them of any chance to go to paradise. According to the multitudes of verdicts by the clerics, a virgin girl should not be executed. As a sign of their adherence

to these verdicts, the guards made sure that no girl in jail died a virgin. Without exception, they raped virgin girls before executing them. (11)

The rapist executioners consecrate their sordid practice by forcefully marrying their victims before execution. It has happened in many cases in Iran that following the implementation of capital punishment, the “bridegroom” has taken wedding sweets to the family of the victim as an announcement of their simultaneous marriage and execution. (12).

The implementation of the death penalty may result in collective trauma when it happens in public. This is extremely undignified practice that shocks the conscience of every decent human being everywhere. It spreads a culture of violence and revenge among the grassroots population or makes them feel intimidated and impotent.

The death penalty leads to philistinism at the social level by reducing the complexity of crimes to the elimination of their imaginary or real perpetrators. This creepy shortcut replaces cause with effect and obfuscates the eloquent ideal of justice. Besides, the actual implementation of the death penalty requires an administrative apparatus – hangman, firing squad, gallows, execution site, etc. – all reminiscent of our barbarous antiquity. It takes away human compassion and degrades enactors to the rank of death pawns. No decent human being wishes to be an executioner in any circumstances and for any cause whatsoever.

Under tyrannical regimes, the death penalty is used less against organized crimes and more as a tool of intimidation in suppressing political opposition. Under theocratic and totalitarian governments, the death penalty is used to remove enlightened and progressive people who oppose the state religion or official ideology. The death penalty is used frequently in armies, specifically during wartime, for espionage, cowardice, surrender, desertion, insubordination, and mutiny. In many cases, insubordination and personal grudges have acted against innocent people in armies accusing them as spies, traitors, deserters, etc. Unfortunately, there is hardly any effective mechanism, even in advanced industrial nations, to monitor summary trials of military tribunals.

Finally, it should be mentioned that it is impossible to remove the torture and degrading treatment attached to the death penalty without the total abolition of this barbarous practice. We may boast that today, only less

than 58 nations actively practice the death penalty. This is, however, misleading, as they include over 60 percent of the global population with the involvement of populous countries such as China, India, USA, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Egypt, Bangladesh, Japan, and Iran. We need to consolidate our solidarity and combine our efforts in struggling against the death penalty – an evil that violates international human rights standards and undermines the global standing against torture and our aspiration for the moral authority of nations.

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Legalization of Torture and Countries Without Counter-Torture Policies: Refugees' Perspective

Farooq Mehdi

The legalization of torture presents a deeply controversial issue, particularly when viewed through the lens of human rights and the stance of countries lacking counter-torture policies. The death penalty is one of the extreme forms of legal torture in the world.

Why are people tortured?

Torture is the deliberate infliction of severe pain or suffering on a person for reasons including punishment, extracting a confession, interrogation for information, or intimidating third parties.¹

The UN Convention Against Torture states that “No one shall be subjected to torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”²

“People are tortured for different reasons, Torture is used by oppressive governments and armed groups to silence, humiliate and persecute. It is illegal and never justified but more common than you might think. And it can happen to anyone ³, they may be political activists and engaged in lawful and peaceful activities. They may be targeted because of their ethnicity, race, community, gender, sexual orientation or other characteristics, or for personal reasons, or even at random. People of all ages are tortured, and we help them overcome it - from children and young people to the elderly.

“Torture takes place in many settings”⁴, place most commonly in police stations, military and security establishments, during and after conflicts, and in areas where institutions, including the rule of law, are fragile or nonexistent.

No matter where or why torture occurs it is always wrong. It is illegal and it tries to destroy lives. It is never justified.

Importance and Implications of Legalization of Torture

Violation of Fundamental Human Rights Torture is unequivocally prohibited under international human rights law, particularly through the **United Nations**.

Convention Against Torture (UNCAT), which many countries have ratified. Torture is considered a violation of core human rights, specifically the right to be free from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The legalization of torture would shatter this principle, enabling state-sanctioned violence that contradicts the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** and the

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Erosion of Human Dignity Legalizing torture fundamentally erodes the dignity of individuals, turning people into instruments for extracting information or punishment. Torture often has long-term psychological and physical impacts on victims and normalizing it within legal frameworks undermines the intrinsic value of human life. Such erosion paves the way for gross abuse of power by authorities.

Undermining Global Human Rights Efforts, the global human rights regime relies on shared values, one of which is the absolute prohibition of torture. Countries that legalize or tolerate torture erode the international consensus on human rights and undermine multilateral efforts to promote peace, security, and justice. This could weaken international coalitions that strive to hold perpetrators accountable and protect vulnerable populations.

The prohibition of torture is a fundamental principle of international law and applies to all countries, even those that have not specifically signed and ratified the United Nations Convention Against Torture.

Despite this, it is still happening in many countries and even in those that have signed and ratified the United Nations Convention Against Torture.

Countries signed the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (UNCAT) and ratified the convention to uphold its assurance to end torture and inhuman punishments in line with international human rights standards. However, to date, many governments have failed to domesticate the law via new legislation or a legal amendment in the existing law to specifically define and criminalize torture in the country. This is not only a serious question mark on those governments' pledge to end torture but is a huge hindrance in the protection of the human rights of the citizens as well.

A Few governments refuse to acknowledge their complicity in torture and fail to take responsibility for upholding human rights standards and holding states to account. This encourages a culture of impunity and allows torture to continue.

Countries Without Counter-Torture Policies

Some countries have **limited or weak counter-torture policies**. This absence signals a dangerous lack of commitment to human rights. In such countries, security forces, law enforcement, or other government actors may engage in torture without fear of reprisal or oversight, creating a culture of **impunity**.

Lack of Legal Safeguards: In some nations, anti-torture laws may be absent or poorly enforced. The failure to criminalize torture means victims have no recourse, and the perpetrators are rarely held accountable. In such environments, torture is often used to extract confessions, suppress dissent, or intimidate political opponents.

State of Emergency or National Security Arguments: Some governments argue that torture is necessary in extreme situations, such as during times of national security threats or war. However, these arguments are widely criticized for normalizing human rights abuses and providing a legal veneer for otherwise unlawful acts.

Impact on Democratic Governance: In countries without counter-torture policies, the state apparatus becomes unaccountable, leading to widespread corruption, oppression, and undermining the rule of law. This ultimately destabilizes governance, disrupts social order, and diminishes trust between citizens and the state.

Balancing Security and Human Rights

Governments often justify torture in the context of national security, particularly in counterterrorism. However, studies and human rights organizations argue that torture is both ineffective and counterproductive. It produces unreliable information, exacerbates hostility, and delegitimizes government actions.⁶

Rather than legalizing torture, the global community encourages countries to strengthen human rights protections, implement robust oversight mechanisms, and promote transparency in law enforcement and military operations.

The **legalization of torture** presents severe human rights concerns, with particularly profound implications for vulnerable populations like **refugees**. Torture, even if legalized in limited cases, can have disastrous effects on global human rights frameworks, especially for those fleeing persecution. Here's a deeper look at its implications.

1. Violation of Fundamental Human Rights

Torture violates basic human rights protected under international law, including the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)** and the **United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT)**. These treaties

establish the absolute prohibition of torture, which is regarded as a non-derogable right, meaning that it cannot be justified under any circumstances, including war, political instability, or national security concerns.

Legalizing torture erodes this fundamental human right, weakening the legal and moral stance against cruelty and inhumane treatment. Such legalization encourages practices that dehumanize individuals and legitimize the abuse of power by state actors, erasing decades of progress in human rights advocacy.

2. Refugees and the Legalization of Torture

Refugees, who often flee their countries due to persecution, conflict, and oppression, are particularly vulnerable in contexts where torture is legalized or tolerated. For many refugees, torture in their home country may be the very reason they sought asylum elsewhere. Legalizing torture anywhere can have catastrophic effects on this vulnerable group, creating a **global environment of fear and insecurity**.

- **Risk of Refoulement:** Refoulement refers to the forced return of refugees to a country where they are at risk of persecution, including torture. International law, particularly the 1951 Refugee Convention, prohibits refoulement. However, if torture becomes legalized or more widely accepted, the boundaries between legal protection and deportation may blur. Refugees may face a heightened risk of being forcibly sent back to places where they could endure state-sanctioned torture.
- **Lack of Safe Haven:** The global refugee protection system relies on countries maintaining high standards of human rights. The legalization of torture in any country risks undermining the integrity of this system. Refugees fleeing torture would face fewer safe havens, as the practice becomes more normalized and legitimized. This would leave millions stranded in perilous conditions with nowhere to escape.
- **Vulnerability in Detention Centers:** Refugees and asylum seekers often spend long periods in detention or migrant camps, especially in countries with weak asylum policies. In countries where torture is legalized or where there are no counter-torture safeguards, refugees could become targets for state violence. These individuals, already in precarious situations, would be at risk of additional abuse, including torture, while in custody.

3. The Global Erosion of Human Rights

The legalization of torture in one country could have a ripple effect globally, undermining international human

rights law and weakening efforts to promote justice and accountability. Countries that legalize torture risk breaking from the global human rights consensus, creating dangerous precedents that other states may follow. This erosion is particularly worrying for countries without strong counter-torture policies, where abuse and impunity are already rampant.

- **Lack of Accountability:** In many countries without strict anti-torture policies, torture is often used as a tool of repression, and perpetrators are rarely held accountable. If torture were legalized, it would send a signal to these states that such abuses are acceptable, further entrenching practices that silence dissent, suppress freedom of speech and harm marginalized groups.
- **Weakening the International Human Rights Regime:** International bodies like the **International Criminal Court (ICC)** and the **United Nations Human Rights Council** are essential in holding states accountable for human rights abuses. However, if torture becomes legalized, it risks weakening the influence and authority of these institutions, making it harder to enforce global human rights standards and protect those fleeing persecution.

4. Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Countries Without Counter-Torture Policies

Many refugees seek asylum in countries where counter-torture laws are weak or non-existent. These countries often lack strong legal frameworks to protect individuals from state-sanctioned violence, including torture. This leaves refugees highly vulnerable in two ways:

- **Risk of Further Torture:** Refugees who flee to countries with poor human rights records may face continued violence and torture, particularly if they are detained or suspected of crimes. The absence of robust counter-torture policies allows state actors to act with impunity, putting refugees in grave danger, sometimes comparable to the conditions they fled.
- **Compromised Legal Protections:** Refugees often rely on the international legal system to protect them from harm, but in countries without counter-torture measures, these legal protections can be weak or absent. As a result, refugees might face arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, or even forced repatriation to places where they could be tortured.

5. Balancing Security and Human Rights

Governments that contemplate legalizing torture often justify it as a **national security measure**. The argument typically revolves around using torture to extract critical information from suspected terrorists or criminal offenders. However, such arguments undermine the global consensus that human rights, particularly the prohibition against torture, must be upheld at all times, even during emergencies or security threats.

Legalizing torture does not just harm the individuals who experience it. It also undermines the credibility of states, damages their international standing, and threatens **global stability**. Moreover, torture has been proven ineffective in many cases, often yielding unreliable information. Balancing security with the rights of individuals requires robust systems of **law enforcement, intelligence, and judicial oversight, not legalized cruelty**.

Conclusion

The legalization of torture would represent a grave setback for global human rights, particularly for vulnerable groups like refugees. It would not only violate fundamental human rights but also jeopardize the safety of those fleeing persecution. Countries lacking counter-torture policies already put refugees at risk, and the legalization of torture in any country could further destabilize international efforts to protect the rights and dignity of all people, regardless of their status or origin. Instead of considering torture as a policy tool, governments must commit to strengthening human rights protections and ensuring that no one, especially refugees, faces the terror of state-sanctioned violence.

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BOOK REVIEW



Human Security and Natural Disasters

Human Security and Natural Disasters

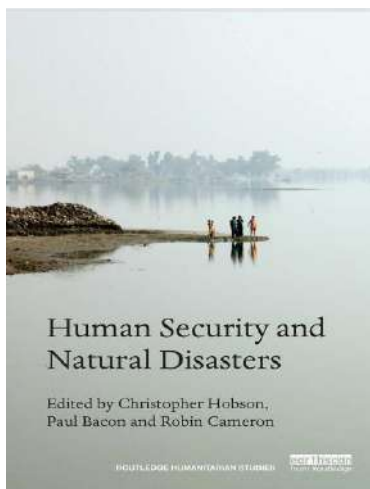
Editors: Christopher Hobson, Paul Bacon, and Robin Cameron

Publisher: Routledge

Year of Publication: 2014

Pages: 211

Reviewer: Patrick Swanzy



The current instability in the world caused by human action and natural disasters demands the need to acknowledge the efforts of writers who had earlier on through their works unpacked the concept and projected how these phenomena impact the well-being of humans. In a book titled “Human Security and Natural Disasters” edited by renowned scholars namely Christopher Hobson, Paul Bacon and Robin Cameron and spanning eleven (11) chapters contributed by authors (Elaine Enarson, Naomi Zack, Emily Ying Yang Chan, Rosamund, J. Southgate, Vesselin Popovski, Jennifer Hyndman, Paul Zeccola, Mathew Bolton), from different academic tribes, professional backgrounds and geographical locations, the scholarly piece divulges human security and natural disasters and demonstrate how a human security approach can help us better understand and prepare for natural disasters.

In the first chapter, the authors disclose the motivation for their book project as the “triple disaster” that befell Japan in 2011. They highlight that Japan, which had hitherto gained recognition from her peers as a global advocate of human security approach, seemed to have been overwhelmed by the ramifications of the triple

disaster, an indication that Japan had not walked the talk when it comes to human security approach domestically. They claim that the ramifications of the ‘triple disaster’ portrayed developed nations as not immune from this phenomenon. In chapter two, a different dimension to the discussion is brought to bear. The author laments that even though war and conflict and natural disasters trigger similar ramifications, in the human security discourse, war and conflict have taken centre stage whilst natural disasters have been relegated to the background. They caution that in this era, human security structures that ignore natural disasters may lack the capacity to deal with the threats posed to humans. The author concludes that embedding pro-natural disaster features in human security structures enhances the potential to respond and mitigate the impacts of this phenomenon.

Elaine Enarson introduced the gender dimension to the discussion in chapter three. The author highlights the lack of consensus amongst scholars on the definition of human security by portraying that this is similar to the controversy surrounding the definitions of sustainability and quality in literature. The author argues that gender is critical in disaster prevention, response, and recovery. It is argued in the chapter by the author that shockingly, human security discourse downplays gender-based violence, reproductive health, and other concerns that threaten human relationships. The chapter concludes with reflections on how to move gender from the margins to the centre of our thinking about human security.

Ethics of disaster is the theme discussed in chapter four of the book. Naomi Zack in the chapter shows how the human security paradigm differs from the paradigm desired by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and focuses on vulnerability using Hurricane Katrina as a case. The author argues that the suggestion that disaster mitigation and preparation for vulnerable populations should be tied to development was mooted by the United Nations in their policy document titled ‘International Strategy for Disaster Reduction’. The author cautions that this does not suggest that, the United Nations has not in some instances addressed disaster from the standpoint of human security. Chapter five discusses responses to chronic disease needs following disasters and is written by Emily Ying Yang and Rosamund Southgate. The key argument of the chapter is that survival, restoration of well-being, and protection from ill health are major concerns for victims and responders following a natural disaster. The authors caution that failing to address chronic disease needs post-disaster will contribute to

death and illness, which humanitarian relief operations aim to minimize. Chapter Six of the book is written by Vesselin Popovski. Vesselin perceives negligence before and after natural disasters as human rights violations which further worsens human security. In the chapter, Vesselin excellently details legal actions that can be pursued by victims in domestic and international courts following human security breaches. Chapter seven of the book focuses on the concept of “dual disasters,” specifically in instances where crises of conflict intersect with environmental disasters. Using Sri Lanka and Somalia as case studies, the author details how, in three decades, armed conflict, displacement, and human insecurity in Sri Lanka produced unique conditions for acute insecurity in the face of a subsequent environmental disaster, like the tsunami. In the case of Somalia, the author claims war and drought created a humanitarian crisis and widespread human displacement in the 1990s and 2011. Some questions are posed by the author in the chapter to trigger reflections and generate insights into dual disasters, making the chapter one of the most interesting to read.

Chapter eight written by Paul Zeccola, focused on Aceh, a province in Indonesia which had experienced conflict and a Tsunami in 2004. What is intriguing about this chapter is what the author brings to bear. The author argues that even though disasters are associated with negative consequences, the conflict and Tsunami that plagued Aceh provided an opportunity to address those threats through humanitarian, development and peace-building programs.

Chapter nine of the book, dubbed “Exit Strategy,” focuses on Haiti. The author in the chapter discloses that the venue of Haiti’s post-earthquake reconstruction was the cabin of an airplane which was flying over 35,000 feet above sea level. This highlight suggests how disasters

demand urgent responses. By being part of this endeavour and documenting this experience, the author needs to be commended. What seems to partly mar the beauty of the story is the racial dimension the author brings to the discussion. The author indicates that the post-earthquake support initiated for Haiti was spearheaded by white foreigners. It is not clear what the author seeks to achieve by explicitly mentioning white foreigners as the key architects of the support for Haitians because the response to disaster knows no race.

In chapter ten, Robin Cameron provides a revised framework for preparing for, responding to, and recovering from natural disasters. Specifically, he advocated for an “existential” account of human security grounded in an understanding of patterns of social relations and forms of community resilience. Thus, the author emphasizes human security.

In the last chapter, the author reiterates that even though human security issues are very critical and little attention has been paid to them, the phenomenon is now receiving attention on the global stage and that gives hope for the future.

Human Security and Natural Disasters, published by Routledge, is a must-read book for scholars and practitioners. I perceive it as one of the most outstanding works in the field.

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VAST



**Torture Prevention and Anti-Racism:
The Fragility of International Human
Safety and Security**

**Annual Symposium
2025**

Summary

VAST's Annual Symposium 2025

Torture Prevention and Anti-Racism: The Fragility of International Human Safety and Security

Opening	Wendall Williams, Indian Residential School Survivors Society (IRSSS)
Keynote Fragility of Global Human Security & Safety	 Dr. Wajid Pirzada <i>CEO at Roots Pakistan Senior Editor, VAT Journal</i> Dr. Pirzada's professional journey is fuelled by the conviction that food security is a cornerstone of human dignity. With a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and advanced studies in international trade and food safety, he has focused on advocating for vulnerable populations affected by food insecurity and climate change. His extensive work with international organizations stems from a desire to bridge local needs with global solutions.
Panel Discussion - Moderator VAST Research and Knowledge Center & Voices Against Torture (VAT) Journal	 Dr. Farooq Mehdi <i>Editor-in-Chief at Voices Against Torture International (VAT) Journal on Human Rights for VAST</i> Farooq Mehdi is a medical doctor with over 35 years of clinical experience and more than 40 years dedicated to human rights advocacy. His work focuses on crisis intervention, mental health, and rehabilitation for refugees and vulnerable communities. He led initiatives supporting torture survivors in Pakistan. At VAST, he founded the Research & Documentation Centre and serves as Editor-in-Chief of the Voices Against Torture International Journal on Human Rights.
Panel Discussion - Panellist Resilience through Human Security or Human Peace?	 Dr. Malik Hammad <i>Director, Human Rights Editorial Board Member, VAT Journal, PhD in Peace and Civil Resistance</i> Malik Hammad's work is grounded in the belief that sustainable peace is achieved through education and dialogue. His two decades of experience across continents reveal a dedication to empowering communities to challenge systemic oppression and envision more equitable futures. Hammad's international recognition reflects his ability to blend academic insight with practical solutions for human rights and peacebuilding.

Panel Discussion – Panellist Insecurity and Inequality: Addressing the Needs of Refugees and Survivors in Fragile States	Basir Bitra <i>(MA Counselling Psychology; PhD Candidate, Transpersonal Psychology), Community Engagement Team (Farsi - Dari) and Research Worker at VAST.</i>  Basir Bitra's advocacy is deeply personal, rooted in lived experiences of displacement and a lifelong commitment to uplifting marginalized voices. With a master's in counselling psychology and ongoing doctoral studies in Transpersonal Psychology, Basir integrates academic knowledge with community activism. His work bridges counselling, poetry, and civic engagement, emphasizing resilience and collective healing. Basir has been working at VAST since early 2024 on the Community Engagement Team in Farsi, Dari, Pashto, and English.
Panel Discussion - Panellist The Challenge of Migrant Influx in Canada amidst Global Security Fragility: Way Forward	Dr. Hammad Hashmi <i>DVM, HR & Marketing Expert, Pharma Sales Manager. Editorial Board Member, VAT Journal</i>  With a Doctorate in Veterinary Medicine and expertise in human resources and marketing, Dr. Hammad Hashmi views well-being through an interconnected lens. His work spans health systems and environmental advocacy. Dr. Hashmi's leadership is grounded in service, and his contributions to public health have been acknowledged by both professional peers and international humanitarian organizations.
Panel Discussion – Panellist Resilience Amidst Fragility: A Case Study of Trauma Recovery and Support for Refugees and New Immigrants in Canada	Mugaruka Maimona Gabriel <i>(MA Security Studies) Human Rights Advocate and Community Leader</i>  With a master's degree in security studies and extensive training in leadership and community development, Mugaruka Maimona Gabriel is dedicated to social justice and the empowerment of marginalized communities. His work focuses on refugee rights, gender-based violence, and inclusive community initiatives. As a leader in the Human Rights Defenders Solidarity Network, Gabriel's advocacy spans both local and international platforms, championing the rights of vulnerable populations.
Healing Through Arts	Issa Nyaphaga <i>Visual Artist</i>  I am an artist, an activist and a human rights activist. My "Humanist" endeavour is, above all, a proclamation of peace and against intolerance. My soul is in a body that has suffered a lot because of the political cartoons in the satirical newspaper in Cameroon. I live outside a world in which I am undesirable, and I've found in my art a refuge where I can protect myself against all aggression. I came into contact with Human Rights issues at a very early age, and defending the Rights of the oppressed gives me this force of conviction, this feeling of invincibility and the inner peace I seek. I'm like the pages of an open book blown by the winds of liberty. I use Art to heal myself and others Because Art cures and can transform a broken Human Being into a reborn, soulful individual.

The Mental Health of Post-Summer 2021 Afghan Refugees in North America and Western Europe	Spozhmay Oriya & Ali Kaveh <i>(MA Education; PhD Candidate, Educational Psychology)</i> <i>Research and Knowledge Center Member at VAST</i> Spozhmay Oriya's journey is driven by her dedication to understanding how collective trauma shapes communities. Her academic work, including a master's in education and a PhD candidacy in Educational Psychology, focuses on creating trauma-informed learning spaces. Her years of teaching in Afghanistan, combined with international research collaborations, reflect her belief in the power of education to foster resilience.	
Keynotes- Torture Prevention and Anti-Racism: The Fragility of International Human Safety and Security -	Dr. Joan Simalchik <i>(PhD History)</i> Guided by a lifelong commitment to justice and human dignity, Dr. Joan Simalchik has dedicated her career to amplifying marginalized voices. Holding a PhD in History, she has used her academic journey to challenge structural injustices while fostering spaces for critical dialogue. As Professor Emerita at the University of Toronto, she has encouraged students and communities to rethink narratives around gender and historical trauma. Her role in founding the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture speaks to her belief in community-driven healing. Dr. Simalchik's accolades, including the Jus Human Rights Award, the Amina Malko Award, and the President of the Republic of Chile Award, reflect the depth of her dedication to addressing global human rights violations.	

Interconnectedness Initiative: 3 years of collaboration for the service of survivors of torture and their families	 Ana Maria Pavon Marin (MA Counselling Psychology) <i>Quintero, Victoria Coalition for Survivors of Torture</i> Guided by a belief in the transformative power of healing, Ana Maria Pavon Marin holds a master's degree in counselling psychology and brings extensive experience in trauma recovery and human rights advocacy. Her work emphasizes client-centred care, promoting resilience through culturally sensitive counselling and community engagement.  Melinda Quintero (MA Tourism and Hospitality Management) Melinda Quintero's advocacy is shaped by her academic exploration of social justice within the tourism industry and her community-based work with torture survivors. Holding a master's in Tourism and Hospitality Management, she bridges research and frontline service, ensuring that marginalized voices are centred in conversations about equity and community well-being.
Breaking the Silence: Challenges in Behaviour Support for Women Refugees in Australia	 Shazia Munir (MA Special Education) <i>Member Editorial Board, VAT Journal</i> Shazia Munir has devoted her career to creating inclusive spaces for individuals with diverse needs. Her work spans educational programming, community development, and behavioural support, driven by a belief that everyone deserves opportunities to thrive. Her leadership in disability rights has been recognized both locally and internationally.
Move and Relax	 Vicky Kenny <i>Trauma-Informed Yoga Facilitator</i> Vicky Kenny is a trauma-informed yoga teacher with over 10 years of experience creating safe spaces for diverse communities, including refugees, immigrants, women survivors of violence, older adults, and newcomers. Her journey with movement began as a ballet dancer and evolved into practicing yoga over 25 years ago in Buenos Aires. Vicky's training includes Traditional Hatha, trauma-sensitive, Restorative, Prenatal, and Chair Yoga, alongside Yoga Therapy and Ayurveda studies in India. Her gentle, breath-centred teaching approach fosters body awareness, balance, and inner peace, enriched by her experience with energy healing practices like Reiki and Qi Gong. As an immigrant and survivor, Vicky is passionate about helping others reconnect with their bodies, cultivate resilience, and find a sense of belonging through yoga and mindfulness.

Participatory Drumming	Maurice Earle Maurice Earle's journey as a cultural drummer is grounded in the conviction that rhythm can bridge divides and heal wounds. His work is more than a performance, it's an invitation to connect, reflect, and celebrate resilience through music. Maurice's contributions to community wellness through the arts have left an enduring imprint on audiences both locally and abroad.
Offer Community-Centred Healing And Cultural Teachings	Wendall Williams Wendall Williams draws upon his Mohawk and Anishinaabe heritage to offer community-centred healing and cultural teachings. His decades-long work with Residential School survivors is rooted in a profound sense of responsibility to honour Indigenous knowledge and foster intergenerational resilience. Wendall's dedication to cultural preservation is widely recognized and deeply valued within his community.
Graphic Designer and Creative Artist at VAST	Yaimel López Zaldívar (Graphic Designer and Creative Artist at VAST) Yaimel López Zaldívar is a Cuban multimedia artist based in Canada. His work encompasses experimental animation, print media, graphic design, and illustration. He has been based in Vancouver since 2019, where he has worked as an artist, graphic designer, and educator.
Closing	Heba Dakhlallah VAST

Fragility of Global Human Security- Keynote

Syed Wajid H. Pirzada

The development of the United Nations Human Security Framework was a landmark in understanding the human security paradigm in the international arena. The revisited paradigm of human security, articulated by the United Nations Human Development Report-HRD, shifted its focus from protecting the state and its borders, primarily through military means, to national and international policies aiming at human respect as the basis of human security (HDR,1994. This could be translated as a paradigm shift from the ‘Instrument/Maslow’s Law’ - if the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail. This implies that all policies need to be hammered, as all problems are not nails.

The HDR 1994 added new dimensions to the definition of human security, including inter alia ‘.... safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease, and repression, and protection from sudden and harmful disruptions in the pattern of daily lives, whether homes, jobs or communities. The human security spectrum has since expanded to hitherto virgin dimensions like protection from climate change (CC), environmental degradation, food insecurity, and denial of access to the opportunities embedded in basic human rights, as enshrined in the UN Charter on Human Rights (1945).

It is, however, very disappointing to witness that despite growing awareness around basic human rights and the fact that respect for these rights underpins human security, global human safety and security have become even more fragile. This situation is tantamount to an ineffective response, or rather at times callousness, to the human security asks at national and international levels, albeit a growing mantra around these policies at international and national levels.

Equity and equality ask for non-discriminatory and equal opportunities. We, however, witness growing inequality in the ranks of communities and nation-states, stemming from exclusive, discriminatory, and racial policies and distributive injustice, such as around just trade or climate justice. This outcome is, unfortunately, contrary to what the UN General Assembly has reiterated: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and have the potential to contribute constructively to the development and well-being of societies.

In the context, the UN Special Rapporteur’s Report 2024 on Torture and Other Cruel and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment is revealing. It reports ‘The year 2024 has seen devastating levels of torture and other

outrages on human dignity in armed conflict, including Evidence demonstrates that torture and other inhuman cruelty is Russian state policy in its war in Ukraine to intimidate, instill fear, punish, or extract information and confessions Sudan warring parties are engaged in systematic campaigns involving arbitrary arrest, detention, and the torture and ill-treatment of civilians, evidence from the Hamas-led attacks in Israel on 7 October 2023 convincingly indicates that grave violations of international law took place including killings, hostage-taking, torture and sexual torture. Credible allegations of torture, including sexual torture, and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment against detained Palestinians by Israeli forces were received and acted upon by the Special Rapporteur, despite the welcome, binding, and urgent provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice on Syria in November 2023, the Special Rapporteur continues to receive current and large-scale allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in the country.’

The prevailing situation in other spheres of policy dispensation and its outcomes are no different, such as access to food, climate justice, and multilateral trade.

The current state of fragility of human safety and security thus demands evidence-based, informed, and just policies, and reinforced collective actions at international and national levels to arrest the prevailing unfortunate situation of human rights erosion.

Global peace is at evolving risk because of multiple global security risk factors like terrorism and, more so, because of state-led terrorism, inter-state conflicts, economic downturns, cyber insecurity, AI warfare, climate change, heightened environmental damage, and last but not least, erosion of human rights.

With the dawn of the new year 2025, the World Economic Forum’s Global Risks Report 2025 painted a gloomy picture of human security. It depicts the ‘Current Risks Landscape’, outlining ten major risks the international community is threatened to face. The state-led armed conflicts constitute the key risks measured at 23%, followed by extreme weather events stemming from climate change(cc) at 14%, geo-economic confrontation at 8%, information, and disinformation at 7%, social polarization at 6%, economic downturns at 5%, critical changes to earth ecosystem at 45, lack of access to financial/job opportunities at 3%, erosion of human rights and civil liberties at 2% and inequality at

2%. The latter could be clubbed with the second last as inequality itself stems from the denial of equal rights.

The UN Special Rapporteur's Annual Report 2024 'Torture and other Cruel and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment' was further revealed in this regard, which observed 'year 2024 has seen devastating levels of torture and other outrages on human dignity in armed conflict, including Evidence demonstrates that torture and other inhuman cruelty is Russian state policy in its war in Ukraine to intimidate, instill fear, punish, or extract information and confessions. Sudan warring parties are engaged in systematic campaigns involving arbitrary arrest, detention, and the torture and ill-treatment of

civilians. Evidence from the Hamas-led attacks in Israel on 7 October 2023 convincingly indicates that grave violations of international law took place, including killings, hostage-taking, torture, and sexual torture. Credible allegations of torture, including sexual torture, and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment against detained Palestinians by Israeli forces were received and acted upon by the Special Rapporteur. Despite the welcome, binding, and urgent provisional measures issued by the International Court of Justice on Syria in November 2023, the Special Rapporteur continues to receive current and large-scale allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in the country.'

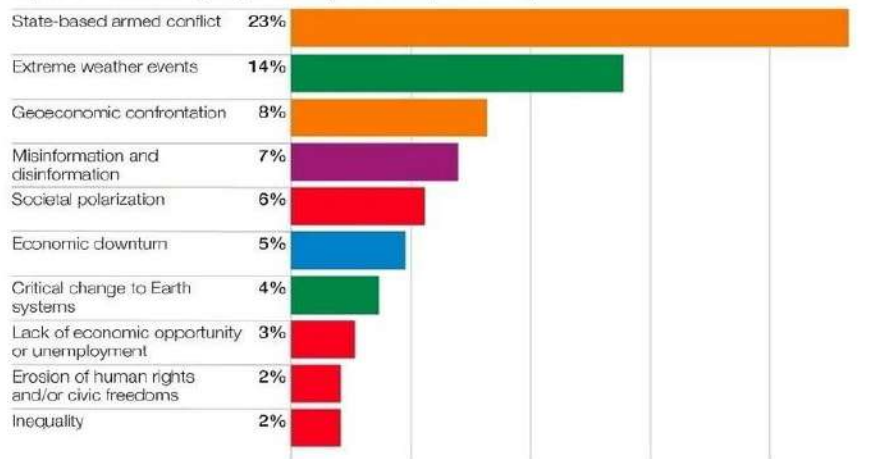
Global Risks Report 2025

Current Risk Landscape



Please select one risk that you believe is most likely to present a material crisis on a global scale in 2025.

Top 10 risks selected by respondents (Share of respondents %)



Risk categories: Economic (blue), Environmental (green), Geopolitical (orange), Societal (red), Technological (purple)

Source: World Economic Forum, Global Risks Perception Survey 2024-2025

It is, therefore, very disappointing to witness that despite growing awareness of basic human rights and the fact that respect for these rights underpins human security, global human safety and security have become even more fragile. This situation is tantamount to an ineffective response rather, at times, callousness to the human security asks at national and international levels, albeit a growing mantra around these global policies. At the face of things, it appears that conflicting geo-political and geo-economic interests, of the global economic and political actors, are the key drivers of the unfortunate

situation of outrage and disrespect to human rights, being witnessed in Ukraine, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Gaza, and elsewhere, which has taken precedence, instead of human needs, dignity, and rights.

The following evidence, from around the world and across different policy spheres, confirms the aforementioned thesis.

COP 29 Agreement was referred to as the 'COP of Finance' and 'Catastrophic Agreement for Human Rights' by Amnesty International which maintained that 'rather

The ceasefire between Hamas and Israel took 15 months, whereas the UN Assistant Secretary-General warned on 18th December 2024, briefing the UN Security Council

Genocide was first recognized as a crime under international law in 1946 by the United Nations General Assembly (A/RES/96-I). It was codified as an independent crime in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (the Genocide Convention). The Convention has been ratified by 153 States (as of April 2022). The International Court of Justice (ICJ) has repeatedly stated that the Convention embodies principles that are part of general customary international law. This means that whether or not States have ratified the Genocide Convention, they are all bound as a matter of law by the principle that genocide is a crime prohibited under international law. The ICJ has also stated that the prohibition of genocide is a peremptory norm of international law (or ius cogens), and consequently, no derogation from it is allowed. <https://www.un.org/en/genocide-prevention/definition>

than moving towards a world where human rights of all are protected from the harms of climate change, it will perpetuate the ongoing harms stemming from colonialism and exacerbate the suffering caused by the climate change (Amnesty International, 2024)'.

The then President of the International Court of Justice Joan Donoghue in an interview with the BBC, observed in the context of the ICJ ruling on genocide in Gaza that Palestinians had a plausible right to protection from genocide (BBC, 2024).

Equity and equality ask for non-discriminatory and equal opportunities. We, however, witness growing inequality in the ranks of communities and nation-states, stemming from exclusive, discriminatory, and racial policies, resulting in global policies and distributive injustice, such as just trade or climate justice. This outcome is, unfortunately, contrary to what the UN General Assembly has reiterated: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and have the potential to contribute constructively to the development and well-being of the societies'

The development of the United Nations Human Security Framework was a landmark in understanding the human security paradigm in the international arena. The revisited paradigm of human security, while adding further value to it, articulated by the United Nations Human Development Report (HDR 1994) shifted its focus from protecting the state and its borders, primarily through military means to national and international policies aiming at human respect as the basis of human security.

Traditionally, risks related to environmental damage, changes in ecosystems, and erosion of human rights are not factored into risks surrounding the fragility of global security. It is worth noting that respect for human rights at national and international levels is the basis for human security. For example, food, nutrition, and water insecurity can lead to social disruptions and breed conflicts.

The Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC, 2024) confirms the enormity of the challenge of achieving the

and noting that 45,000 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza 'Ceasefire is overdue' and further adding that prolonged occupation would only breed hatred, antagonism, sowing instability in the Middle East (UN Security Council, 2024). Thousands of children, the elderly, and women- including pregnant and lactating mothers succumbed to this genocide, and the world was a mere spectator.

goal of ending hunger by 2023. In 2023, nearly 282 million people or 21.5 percent of the analyzed population in the 59 countries/ territories faced high levels of food insecurity requiring urgent food and livelihood assistance. Whereas hunger is a big stigma on the human face, FIAN (2025) reported that 'The situation of hunger and malnutrition in the world continues to worsen. It is estimated that between 713 and 757 million people, or 8.9 and 9.4 percent of the global population, experienced hunger in 2023. With war, climate chaos, and the cost-of-living crisis combined with inadequate action, almost 300 million people faced a food crisis in 2023.

In this context, UNEP (2025) maintains that 'care for the environment is no less essential to global security in the long term, both as a challenge and as an emerging tool for peace. When coupled with economic challenges and weak coping mechanisms, environmental damage can be a threat multiplier.' This argument was ably rounded by the UN environmental Head Erik Solheim in her opening remarks at a conference on 'Before the Flood: Environment and Security in the Modern World' by saying 'environmental spending would not only build trust among countries affected by conflicts but also provide a powerful impetus to the economy while improving peoples 'health and quality of life. He further added that spending at least part of the military spending on environmental needs could radically change the countries engaged in military conflicts (UNEP, 2018).

USA President Trump's Gaza, and for that matter annexation of Canada to the USA, Plan received a reaction from the global community, and from the

regional governments and people (CEIP, 2025). Despite this, President Trump keeps insisting on this plan, which is the worst-case scenario of today's recolonization era and grave disrespect, rather than a stampede, better to

coin as - 'Trumpede', on to the rights of the people, as under the principle of territorial integrity, foreign imposition of a border change is an act of aggression.

At the end of 2023, an estimated 117.3 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, and events seriously disturbing the public order. Based on operational data, UNHCR estimates that forced displacement has continued to increase in the first four months of 2024 and by the end of April 2024 is likely to have exceeded 120 million.

The increase to 117.3 million at the end of 2023 constitutes a rise of 8 per cent or 8.8 million people compared to the end of 2022 and continues a series of year-on-year increases over the last 12 years.

One in every 69 people, or 1.5 percent of the entire world's population, is now forcibly displaced. This is nearly double the 1 in 125 people who were displaced a decade ago.

<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>

Conclusion: The current state of fragility of human safety and security thus demands evidence-based, informed, and just policies, and reinforced collective

actions at international and national levels to arrest the prevailing unfortunate situation of human rights erosion

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Torture Prevention and Anti-Racism

Joan Simalchik, Yaya de Andrade

We are very pleased to be with you today and have the opportunity to reflect on our experience, share perspectives and values, and learn from your work. This presentation discusses the Canadian government's past record on migration and human rights and how Canadian civil society reacted. It speaks to both advocacy for refugees and the creation of specialized support services for people who have experienced torture and other forms of organized violence. It references these experiences in an effort to confront contemporary challenges to torture prevention and appropriate survivor-centred service. It explores possibilities to ameliorate new forms of racism, xenophobia and human rights crimes.

In the late 1970s, torture was not recognized as the widely practiced phenomenon we know it to be today. Amnesty International, founded in 1961, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1977 for its strong research and credible evidence on human rights crimes. Their book, *Torture in the Eighties*, put this practice more into public consciousness (1984). It named torture “the twentieth-century epidemic,” and this was reinforced by the growth of refugee populations in countries of asylum, including Canada.

It is worth recalling Canada's immigration history. As a settler society, Canada set out to be a white country. Prime Minister John A. MacDonald named Chinese labourers “sojourners”, temporary workers without a claim to stay in the country. He racialized immigration policy from the start of Confederation with racial designations. People of colour were legally forbidden to come to Canada, although people did manage to resist and find a way. In law, there was a colour bar for all immigrants until 1962. A multitude of Asian Exclusion Acts imposed head taxes on potential immigrants. Asian women were entirely excluded. (Walker, Barrington. *The History of Immigration and Racism in Canada*. 2008). This ban also applied to those seeking a safe haven. When asked how many Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazi regime Canada would admit, the answer from Immigration was “None is Too Many” (Abella, I. and H. Troper, *None is Too Many*, 1982). Canada determined to keep its doors tightly closed to designated racialized groups.

But following the devastation of the Second World War, in the wake of the revelation of the Holocaust, the United Nations was created in 1945. It attempted to build a global regime that would ensure peace, security and human rights through diplomatic agreement. A series of conventions and declarations were promulgated to enable this objective. Although Canada was a UN founding member and the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights 1948 draft was written by Canadian John Humphries, the country was often slow to engage the obligations. The 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees was only signed by Canada in 1969.

Even though it took eighteen years to sign onto the Convention, “refugee” was not included in Canadian immigration law, nor was a process in place to admit them. It took a large coalition of faith and civil society groups to press for a refugee policy. Finally, the 1976 Immigration Law described refugees as a distinct group of immigrants and established a policy to allow them to find safety.

This was not the only example of Canada needing a push to sign and implement international conventions. After decades of advocacy by First Nations, the Parliament of Canada passed the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)* Act in 2021. The UN first adopted this Declaration in 2007 with 144 votes in favour, 11 abstentions and four countries opposed (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America).

Canada has yet to sign the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families.

Once Canada had a process in place so that refugees could enter and remain in the country, there was recognition that many had survived torture and other forms of organized violence.

Treatment was necessary, and it has been helpful and relevant alongside the emergence of PTSD. Scholars and researchers (Bessel van der Kolk) showed that individuals who have lived in a context filled with violence and violations and especially those brutalized by officials, such as those tortured, likely would feel the long-lasting impact of those experiences. It was relevant to emphasize the importance of the psychosocial context in which social polarization, institutional lies, violence and violations generated in pervasive psychosocial trauma of individuals, families and communities (Martin Baro).

The Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture had its origins in a working group of immigration lawyers and health professionals who sought to meet the emergent needs of survivors.

At the same time, in Canada, organizations were formed in Vancouver, Montreal, and Winnipeg to meet the needs of survivors in their communities. What emerged was the Canadian Model of Care that sought to appreciate the short and long-term needs of survivors.

All these organizations chose a community-based, not a clinical model, of care. There was an understanding that torture is a political and social phenomenon. The practice may have medical consequences, but while “the target was the body politic, the entry wound was through the individual”. (Simalchik, Joan. *Disrupting Legacies of Trauma: Interdisciplinary Interventions for Health and Human Rights in Harvard University Health and Human Rights Journal*. Volume 23/1, June 2021, pp. 11-25).

What emerged was the Canadian Model of Care that sought to appreciate the short and long-term needs of survivors. With this understanding, Canadian organizations took the perspective that working with existing community organizations, conducting training and public education, expanding understanding of the particular needs of survivors and offering specialized health and counselling services, all within a survivor-centred approach would create conditions to alleviate the aftermath of torture.

Dr. Ana Maria Barrenechea, herself a refugee from Chile’s Pinochet dictatorship, wrote about the multiple and long-term obstacles, “the many fires”, refugee survivors face when beginning to come to terms with the past ordeal while simultaneously undertaking the many tasks of settlement in a new culture. (Barrenechea, Ana Maria. *Under Many Fires: The Lives of Refugee Women. Canadian Woman Studies*. □ Vol 15, No 2-3 1995). Racism and the potential for retraumatization are described as a major problem for survivors.

The international order is under fire in today’s context. As the global situation deteriorates into prolonged war and conflict, even while at the same time more people warrant asylum, challenges to prevention and protection emerge. Governments that are withdrawing commitments to human rights create conditions that negatively affect survivors’ health and well-being.

Solidarity, not charity, is needed. The proliferation of repression, genocide, and war makes the work against torture and its impact ever more essential. Organizations like VAST, CCVT and the Victoria Coalition for Survivors of Torture are critical for both the prevention and protection of survivors. The entanglements existing

within and outside of global atrocity charge us to recognize how we all bear the responsibility to engage. Beyond the media images of contemporary war and militarism exist people who require refuge and care. The Canadian model of care confirms that it has the capacity to address and alleviate both.

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Dr. Morton Beiser

“After the door has been opened, it is the warmth of the welcome that will make all the difference.”

From Strangers at the Gate: the “Boat Peoples’ first ten years in Canada. 1999.



Challenges and Solutions for Behaviour Support Practitioners

Shazia Munir

Behaviour support professionals in Australia play a vital role in helping refugees, but their effectiveness is often prevented by a plethora of challenges rooted in cultural, linguistic and trauma-related factors. These obstacles require a different understanding of the complexities confronted by this vulnerable demography.

Cultural differences represent a fundamental challenge, as professionals should navigate the various cultural landscapes that shape the experiences and expectations of refugees. Cabeza Pereiro et al. (2023) emphasize that service providers should be particularly sensitive to the intersection of disability and cultural identity, highlighting the specific challenges faced by deaf refugees who have undergone gender violence. Such individuals can experience composed marginalization and understand that the cultural context is fundamental. Traditional approaches to behaviour support may not resonate with individuals of cultures where social norms differ significantly.

In addition, the influence of sociocultural norms around gender roles complicates the dynamics of trauma expression and the willingness to engage with support systems. Segrave et al. (2024) and Papoutsi et al. (2022) illustrate that these norms usually dictate how women should behave in response to their trauma and victimization experiences. In some cultures, women can be socialized to remain stoic or not disclose their trauma due to fears of shame or stigma. This cultural conditioning can make it difficult to establish confidence between professionals and refugees, thus complicating the evaluation and intervention processes. Consequently, professionals can find resistance or reluctance that complicates their ability to provide effective support.

Linguistic barriers further exacerbate these challenges, as many refugee women may not speak English fluently or do not have access to interpreters who may navigate the complexities of emotional dialogue. Limited language proficiency can obstruct effective communication, preventing professionals from accurately evaluating their clients' needs and experiences. As reported by Papoutsi et al. (2022), a bad or outstanding rooted in linguistic differences can lead to diagnostic errors or inadequate interventions, potentially compromising the health of the women involved. The inability to effectively communicate not only promotes feelings of isolation but can also trigger additional trauma, reinforcing the vulnerabilities between refugee populations.

In addition, the historical and social contexts of violence by an intimate partner must be considered with the utmost seriousness. According to Damra and Akour (2024), many women refugees come from origins where violence by intimate partners was predominant, either due to armed conflicts, socio-political instability or patriarchal cultural structures. Anterior trauma baggage can significantly affect a woman's self-perception and her ability to get involved with support systems. Professionals have the task of recognizing not only this story but also ensuring that their interventions are informed by trauma and culturally competent. Treating symptoms without addressing underlying historical trauma can lead to surface solutions that do not facilitate a real cure.

By navigating these multifaceted challenges, behavioural support professionals must adopt a culturally responsive structure that appreciates the intersectionality of culture, trauma and language in their practice. This approach not only enhances the relationship between refugee professionals and women but also increases the overall effectiveness of support strategies. In addition, continuous education and training focused on cultural competence can enable professionals to better interpret the various expressions and cultural practices, thus promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment for refugees in Australia. Linguistic barriers have an important challenge for behaviour support practitioners working with women who are refugees in Australia, which has an impact on the effectiveness of their interventions and the global therapeutic relationship. Effective communication is fundamental to the assessment of needs and the provision of appropriate support services. However, practitioners are often faced with obstacles associated with the limited mastery of customers' English or, in some cases, with a complete unknown of the language. This disconnection can lead to erroneous interpretations and false declarations of emotional states and psychosocial requirements of customers, complicating the ability of practitioners to provide adequate support.

KeBSI (2023) Glossary: Linguistic difficulties specific to Iraqi refugee women, illustrating that these individuals frequently encounter a complex interaction of cultural nuances that language alone cannot transmit. The incapacity of practitioners to engage significantly in dialogue with their customers means that essential information can be neglected or poorly understood.

Consequently, assessments of mental health needs and the provision of services can be altered, leaving customers without the necessary support which is proportionate to their unique experiences and horizons. In addition, the implications of these linguistic misunderstandings extend beyond immediate communication challenges. Mathisen (2024) maintains that linguistic barriers can exacerbate feelings of isolation and alienation in refugee women. When practitioners cannot communicate effectively, customers may feel unknown or undervalued, which can lead to a negative impact on their mental health and well-being. The emotional distress resulting from this disconnection highlights the need for practitioners to engage in the development of solutions that deal with linguistic challenges.

A promising avenue to fill the linguistic gap is the involvement of trained interpreters who are not only competent in the languages spoken by refugee women but also trained in cultural competence and trauma-oriented care. As suggested by Featherstone et al. (2023), interpreters should understand the cultural contexts and trauma that these women have known to ensure precise and sensitive communication. This could involve specialized training programs focused on nuances of intercultural communication and the subtleties of the language of trauma, which could considerably improve the interpretation process.

In addition, practitioners can adopt strategies such as the use of visual aids, simplified language or culturally relevant metaphors during customer interactions to facilitate understanding. The creation of a welcoming environment that encourages spontaneous conversations in several languages, including dialects that prevail among local refugee populations, can also offer paths for more efficient communication and relationship creation. The integration of technology, such as translation applications or platforms that give access to multilingual online support, can also serve as a precious resource to overcome linguistic limitations. However, practitioners should remain vigilant about the precision and cultural contextualization of these tools, ensuring that they complete rather than supplant human interaction.

In summary, noting linguistic challenges is crucial for practitioners to help refugee women in Australia, as it directly influences the ability to provide effective support. Thanks to targeted training for performers, the use of inclusive communication strategies and the incorporation of technology, practitioners can promote an environment that promotes understanding, ultimately improving the therapeutic efficiency of their interventions. To meet the challenges with multiple facets faced by behaviour support practitioners to help refugee women, in particular in the context of cultural, linguistic and trauma problems, several exploitable

solutions can be proposed. Continuous training in cultural skills is essential for practitioners to improve their understanding of cultural shades that influence responses to violence and sex-specific trauma. This training should include complete modules that reflect the various horizons of refugee women, allowing practitioners to engage with them with sensitivity and effectively. Dixon and Dixon (2022) highlight the importance of such training in the promotion of empathetic relationships, which can lead to an improvement in the results of behavioural support interventions for this demography.

In addition, the creation of a systemic journal which examines the socio-cultural foundations affecting the sexual and reproductive health of women could serve as a pivotal resource for practitioners. Such a review would synthesize existing research, including the ideas of El Ansari et al. (2025), to shed light on behaviour support approaches adapted to specific cultural contexts. By acquiring an in-depth understanding of beliefs and practices surrounding health and well-being within different cultural groups, practitioners are better equipped to provide services that resonate with the lived experiences of refugee women. This culturally enlightened approach can improve the relevance and efficiency of interventions, thus potentially attenuating the impact of trauma on the provision of services.

Effective community commitment strategies are crucial to cultivating relationships and confidence between practitioners and the communities they serve. As Kasherwa (2024) points out, these strategies include participatory awareness initiatives that involve refugee women in the co-design of services and resources. Such efforts not only empower women by validating their voices and experiences but also facilitate a more accessible service model. The integration of community leaders and cultural brokers in the awareness process can further improve efficiency, which allows refugees to sail more easily in the complexities of available support systems.

In addition, advocacy for the protection of denunciators in the context of exploitation is necessary to establish a safe and confident environment for practitioners and the women they support. As discussed by Berg et al. (2023), the creation of a framework that encourages reports without fear of reprisals can help to mitigate power imbalances which often permeate the contexts for the provision of services. The empowerment of practitioners to denounce systemic injustices allows them to effectively plead for the rights and well-being of refugee women, promoting an atmosphere where the two parties can engage honestly and transparently.

In addition, the use of interpreters or cultural bonds can considerably mitigate linguistic barriers which hinder communication between practitioners and refugee

women. Ensure access to professional interpreters who are not only competent in the necessary languages but also culturally can alleviate misunderstandings and promote more fruitful interactions. The training of performers in trauma-oriented practices can further improve the quality of communication, allowing a more nuanced understanding of trauma stories than many refugee women carry.

Finally, the technology update can provide innovative solutions to fill cultural and linguistic gaps. Digital platforms offering multilingual resources and remote services can facilitate accessibility for refugee women who can deal with mobility or transport barriers. Thus, the integration of technology into the provision of services can not only rationalize access to support but also empower women, thanks to platforms rich in information that respect their cultural contexts.

By implementing these exploitable solutions, behavioural support practitioners can improve the quality of their services, which has a positive impact on the well-being and empowerment of refugee women in Australia.

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VCST Interconnectedness Initiative: A Local Model of Collaboration

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Abstract

Wars, armed conflicts, and climate change are major contributors to the rising number of migrants and refugees around the world. The United Nations estimates that a significant proportion of all refugees are survivors of torture and violence. Acknowledging the growing community of survivors on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland as a subset of the immigrant and refugee population, the Victoria Coalition for Survivors of Torture (VCST) develops capacity for service organizations that work with survivors and their families. Through participatory action research (PAR), VCST's Interconnectedness Initiative (I.I.) collaborates with stakeholders across the region to articulate sector strengths and opportunities to improve service delivery. This research combines stakeholder round-table discussions, case studies, qualitative interviews, and basic quantitative data sorting to inform sector growth and advocacy. By elevating the voices of survivors and their advocates and supporting cooperation between the settlement and mental health sectors, the I.I. seeks to improve long-term results for refugee communities.

Introduction

The Victoria Coalition for Survivors of Torture (VCST) is a consortium of agencies and individuals responding to the needs of survivors of torture and their families by working to increase public awareness of survivors in our communities. Surviving torture can undermine a person's social, psychological, and physical well-being; the traumatizing journey of migration can also compound these challenges (Hodges-Wu & Zajicek-Farber, 2017). We hold the vision that survivors of torture and political violence and their families will overcome this legacy of violent oppression. Our Interconnectedness Initiative (the I.I.) brings together a growing roster of community stakeholders that survivors may encounter in Canada, such as settlement, counselling, and crisis support agencies. We offer training, capacity-building, and networking opportunities to foster a more collaborative service sector, promoting the well-being of survivors. Our stakeholder group started with eight organizations in 2022; by 2025, our list of stakeholders had grown to more than a dozen community partners, including organizations outside the immigrant and settlement service sector. Furthermore, our research about the service sector informs our training, advocacy, and network building. VCST's I.I. translates a duty of care

from a global perspective to a local community-based intervention.

Together, the Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture (VAST), Vancouver Island Counselling Centre for Immigrants and Refugees (VICCIR), and VCST are the only organizations in British Columbia dedicated to working with survivors of torture, their families, and their communities. VAST is the principal torture treatment organization in BC, offering a range of legal support and group and counselling services directly to survivors. At the same time, VICCIR is the only counselling agency with a mandate to work with survivors of torture and trauma on Vancouver Island. VCST plays a coordination, facilitation, and advocacy role across the settlement and health/wellness sector to improve services for survivors. Our organization works to enhance the capacity of settlement agencies and stakeholder organizations by developing specialized training and resources focused on supporting survivors.

Participatory action research (PAR) informs how VCST and the I.I. develop strategies for improving services for torture survivors. This research methodology positions participants as co-researchers sharing their experiences to create knowledge for their benefit (Fals-Borda, 1987; O'Mahoney et al., 2023). Using this methodology, in 2023, we conducted two round-table discussions with our stakeholders to identify sector strengths and opportunities. These consultations revealed the stakeholders' priorities for the growth and development of a collective support network for torture survivors (Zaidalkilani, 2023). In 2024, we conducted qualitative interviews and completed data analysis of stakeholder websites as an environmental scan of standard practices, therapeutic approaches, and common programs available for survivors. This research affirmed many of the gaps identified in the 2023 research while also demonstrating how the sector uses trauma-informed methods for working with survivors (Quintero et al., 2025).

VCST is grateful to the Victoria Foundation for funding the I.I.

From Global to Local: The Interconnectedness Initiative & Participatory Action Research

In our current global context, torture is, unfortunately, a significant factor in the lives of immigrants and refugees

around the world. Recognizing its existence is essential for understanding the harmful physical, psychological, moral, and social effects torture has on survivors and their families living in Canada. A review of the current global situation underscores the vital need to confront this issue and promote programs like the I.I. at the local level as a plausible intervention model.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that by the end of 2023, there were around 43.4 million refugees globally. Reflecting a 7% growth from the year before, this disturbing rise is principally driven by growing violence worldwide (UNHCR, 2024). The rising frequency and intensity of wars and conflicts have compounded existing vulnerabilities, with armed confrontations across the planet having increased dramatically since 2017. According to recent reports, 59 state-based conflicts, the largest number recorded since 1946—occurred in 2023 (PRIO, 2024). Conflicts and human rights violations are happening in regions of Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Ukraine, and Gaza, to name only a few. Additionally, climate change-induced disasters have contributed to world migration, further compromising the safety of refugees and particularly vulnerable populations (Berchin et al., 2017; Carper, 2019; Uddin, 2024).

Global human rights abuses have significant consequences for Canada and its political obligations on the international scale. In 2019, the UNHCR estimated that 30% of refugees in Canada were survivors of torture (Refugee Resettlement to Canada, 2019). Despite these figures demonstrating the existence of torture survivors in Canadian society, many survivors outside and within Canada continue to be undetected and underserved. This data stress the need to understand the effects of torture and emphasizes why we need policies that guarantee adequate support on the national and international scale. One action that will show Canada's commitment to the prevention of torture would be signing the U.N. Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, which establishes national and international systems for inspecting detention centers (Murray et al., 2011).

The I.I., which started with two roundtable community consultations in 2023, represents VCST's dedication to understanding the needs of torture survivors. We address this gap through community-based PAR and advocacy for systemic change. Eight mental health and settlement organizations across the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island responded to the invitation to participate in the initial I.I. participatory action research. The collaborative nature of the PAR community model reinforces our shared goal of expanding the support network for torture survivors and amplifying survivors' voices. These dialogues were instrumental in guiding the I.I. since the

participant stakeholders knew firsthand the difficulties immigrants and refugees experience in many variations. Ultimately, this inclusive participatory methodology ensured that the results were pertinent and valuable for people working with survivors and their families, promoted project ownership, and enabled more extensive participation.

This evaluation brought up critical issues and gaps. For example, the need to:

- better and more clearly define a safe referral process that avoids stigma and re-traumatization;
- fulfill training needs and community capacity building; and
- implement community research to make survivors' voices heard in advocacy.

These insights have led our efforts and influenced the stages of the project.

Particular attention has been paid to conducting confidential case conferences to fulfill training needs and build community capacity. At these events, one stakeholder presents an anonymized client case that involves a history of torture; attendees sign a non-disclosure agreement as a prerequisite for participating. The presenter discusses how their organization has worked with the person, challenges, lessons learned, best practices, and recommendations for working with similar cases. Group discussion allows for exchanging ideas, experiences, and procedures in a safe, collaborative learning environment. Case conferences provide our stakeholder community opportunities to share resources and knowledge, promoting collaborative problem-solving. Our initial phase of three case conferences made clear that:

- The stressors of migration and resettlement can be significant trauma triggers for survivors;
- Barriers to recovery include lack of access to healthcare, language interpretation, specialized mental health services, legal aid, security, housing, and other basic needs;
- Trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, accessible mental health services are essential for torture survivors; and
- All professionals and staff working with survivors, including translators, are susceptible to vicarious trauma, re-traumatization, and burnout (Fernandes et al., 2023).

In summary, case studies have proven pivotal in refining the sector's understanding of survivors' needs and defining how the sector works with and for them.

Further learning from our case conferences includes the need to co-create and disseminate knowledge on the long-term effects of torture on individuals, as well as developing training curricula for service organizations to promote understanding about torture. Conferencing also underlined the need to establish a thorough services resource list, spot obstacles to service access, and have specialist trauma and culturally sensitive wellness modalities. Moreover, advocacy opportunities emerged through an expanding national and international network of organizations. Through the I.I., we have also identified a pressing need to extend the operational definition of torture, for instance, viewing gender-related crimes through the lens of torture (Richards & Kapell, 2025). Many of these opportunities guided the third phase of the I.I.

2024 Research

The third phase of the I.I. research aimed to identify stakeholder strengths and opportunities and common practices and therapeutic approaches for working with survivors of torture. This information then informs VCST's strategies for promoting the accessibility of services to survivors of torture and their families in our community. To reach these goals, we used a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative data analysis of stakeholder website content.

Tool: Qualitative Interviews

We conducted 10 interviews with eight organizations (5 settlement agencies and 3 counselling agencies). Participants' roles ranged from executive directors to frontline settlement staff and case managers. The organizations were from Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland. Nine of the 10 respondents stated that their organization works with survivors of torture, though none of these organizations have specific mechanisms to identify survivors of torture among their client bases. Most of our research respondents describe two pathways toward identifying survivors within their client base.

Data Analysis & Discussion

This some stakeholders highlighted in Survivors often show reluctance to disclose their experiences of torture due to fear, mistrust, or cultural stigmas. Concerns about confidentiality, fear of retaliation, or being judged can hinder their willingness to share their stories (Duffy & Kelly, 2015). Furthermore, uncertainty and fear of authority figures may exacerbate this reluctance and increase hesitation toward self-disclosure in seeking asylum or navigating legal systems (Duffy & Kelly, 2015). The majority of our research respondents describe

two pathways toward identifying survivors within their client base:

- 1: **The client self-identifies** at any point in the process of working with the organization. This could be at the intake interview, during settlement work, during counselling, etc.
- 2: **The organization watches for indicators** of a history of torture while working with the client and adjusts their work with the person accordingly. Staff are trained in recognizing these indicators. This could be noted during intake, settlement work, counselling, etc.

This approach is a sector **strength** that aligns with the principles of trauma-informed care (TIC). TIC is an organizational framework that prioritizes the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of anyone who comes into contact with a TIC organization. TIC's emphasis on safety, trustworthiness, and cultural responsiveness is crucial for working with torture survivors (Aroche & Coello, 2022). Observing a client over an extended relationship and fostering trust for torture disclosure would be an example of TIC; asking a client outright in an intake interview or putting a box on a checklist for torture disclosure would not be TIC. Our research shows that all the organizations interviewed implement TIC into their work.

Torture disclosure is more likely in environments where survivors feel safe and supported in a trusting and non-judgmental atmosphere (Duffy & Kelly, 2015). Examples of trauma-informed methods for identifying survivors of torture shared in our participants' interviews include:

- Creating a supportive, empathetic, and culturally sensitive environment for all clients (as described in Duffy & Kelly, 2015);
- Building trust with clients to foster an environment for self-disclosure (as described in Duffy & Kelly, 2015); and
- Staff awareness of the emotional toll of recounting traumatic events and the potential for re-traumatization (as described in Duffy & Kelly, 2015).

Only one respondent mentioned that staff is specifically trained and informed about how to work with survivors of torture. This is an **opportunity** to develop training for staff to better understand this unique subgroup of immigrants and refugees.

Broadly, the settlement agencies report pride in how their services fill gaps and needs for immigrants and refugees. Respondents emphasized the social aspect of settlement,

touting their programs that build connections among clients and the larger community, which contributes to greater social cohesion and reduced isolation for newcomers (Mitchell & Correa-Velez, 2009). Social growth programs and community opportunities, such as peer support and leadership training programs, are a sector **strength** that aligns with TIC as essential components of a holistic/wraparound approach to wellness.

We asked our respondents how they define and track success for their clients. Six respondents took a client-focused approach to the question, describing “success” as an individual that varies from person to person. This is a sector **strength**. As one respondent said, “Client success is measured individually.” Some respondents mention that client engagement with their services and resources is also an indicator of success.

Other methods for defining and tracking success include feedback forms and exit interviews for programs, tracking clients' ability to access services independently, client progress check-ins, and counselling recalibration. More research is needed into how stakeholders collect and integrate this feedback into programming. Further tracking client progress in quantifiable means could be an opportunity.

The respondent organizations with counselling services offer a range of therapies and modalities. Five respondents mentioned how their organization tailors the counselling to the client's needs, adjusting the service plan throughout the client's journey, and that there is no “one-size-fits-all solution.” Therapies mentioned include eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), emotionally focused therapy (EFT), cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), narrative exposure therapy (NET), trauma release therapy, art/play/dance therapy, somatic work, crisis counselling, group therapy, and talking circles.

This finding is in lockstep with the Mental Health Commission of Canada's (MHCC) document *Supporting the Mental Health of Refugees to Canada* (Agić, et al., 2016, p 10) which says “Promising models for working with refugees include narrative exposure therapy (NET), cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) separately and in combination with medication, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing exposure therapy (EMDR).”

When asked about operational resources which contribute most to their organizations' success, nine of 10 respondents cited staff cohesion and training as a key **strength**. Some of the staff strengths noted by

respondents include:

- creating a welcoming environment where clients can have a cup of tea;
- fostering a family-like bond between themselves and clients; and
- having lived experience of the immigration/refugee process.

When we asked the respondents what their organization does best, they all thought about their organization's client-focused culture. Similarly, when asked what each person was most proud of within their organization, nine of 10 people said their team. One response said simply: “Our people. Absolutely.” It is clear that the people working within the sector and the working culture are two of the sector's greatest **strengths**.

Six respondents cited funding as a major growth **opportunity** in the sector. Lack of reliable funding created a sense among respondents that if only there was more funding, the organization would be able to work with more people. After funding, staff training and capacity building were other important **opportunities** mentioned by four respondents.

Staff burnout is also a concern among these stakeholders and could represent an **opportunity** to develop resources to support staff who may experience vicarious trauma through their work with survivors. One respondent expressed frustration that a settlement worker cannot change systemic barriers, while another mentioned “compassion fatigue” or burnout. Furthermore, many settlement workers and interpreters who support refugees and newcomers also have the added challenge of being survivors of similar stressors themselves. As a result, their clients' experiences can sometimes retraumatize them, compounding the emotional toll of their work.

We closed our survey by asking respondents what they thought about working with survivors of torture. Their self-reflective answers were inspiring. Respondents shared their personal stories of immigration, family history, and passion for helping people on their settlement and wellness journeys. One respondent told us that working with survivors of torture aligns with his personal core values, while another cited her intention to use her privilege of being born in Canada to navigate the Canadian system with and for her clients. There was a sense among respondents that it is an honour to be trusted with people's stories and to accompany newcomers on their journey.

Tool: Website Content Analysis

We collected content about programs and services from the websites of the organizations we interviewed. This information populates a catalogue of the respondents' offerings. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as a framework, we sorted the data into the hierarchy, giving us an integral perspective on how the services available for survivors of torture and their families meet their universal human needs.

Methodology

Abraham Maslow published his psychological theory of the Hierarchy of Needs in 1943 with the intention of understanding human happiness and fulfillment. His framework has six levels (physiological, safety, love/belonging, self-esteem, self-actualization, and self-transcendence), often depicted as a pyramid with lower levels supporting the levels above. O'Brien and Charura (2024, p 1,613) emphasize that Maslow's hierarchy speaks to the multifaceted nature of human needs. A person may have simultaneous needs across categories and flow between the levels, demonstrating the systemic and interconnected nature of these needs. A systemic, biopsychosocial framework is essential to address these interconnected issues effectively (Aroche & Coello, 2022; Mitchell & Correa-Velez, 2009). Lonn and Dantzler propose that the hierarchy is a robust framework to work with "the multiplicity of refugee needs" (2017, p. 5), which range from basic housing and food security to psychological trauma recovery. As the lower levels of the pyramid become more established, the upper levels develop through stability.

As one of our interview respondents put it, refugees living in an uncertain world are mostly concerned with their own and their families' survival. Only once stability comes to the survival level can people slowly start to reconnect to and meet their needs for social connection and personal fulfillment. In meeting these needs, survivors of torture face unique challenges stemming from trauma, exile, and systemic barriers.

Using basic data sorting analysis, we sorted the interview participants' website content about programming into Maslow's Hierarchy. This demonstrates how stakeholders' programs are working within the hierarchy to meet a variety of needs of survivors of torture, a subset of immigrant and refugee clientele. Many programs fit into multiple levels, while others fulfill specific needs; the findings illuminate where offerings overlap and where gaps exist.

Data Analysis & Discussion

First Level: Physiological Needs

This level addresses physical needs, such as food, water, and shelter. All five settlement agencies have programs which address these needs. This is generally included in the bundle of settlement and case management services, such as the BC Newcomers Services Program (BCNSP) or Immigrant Welcome Centre (IWC). Elements of these programs which meet physiological needs include support in finding and accessing medical care and housing.

Second Level: Safety Needs

This category concerns the human need to feel safe in one's environment. Again, all five settlement agencies offer services to meet safety needs. LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) is a prime example of a program which can fulfill safety needs: Being able to speak English is a significant skill for someone to navigate life safely and confidently in Canada. All the settlement agencies provide language classes. Other offerings in the safety category include Settlement Works in Schools (SWIS), which tracks children moving through the school system, and employment services, which helps people secure work for a stable income.

Third Level: Love & Belonging Needs

This category, which is the start of building networks of personal and familial connections, has the greatest overlap across all the organizations. This suggests that the sector's **strength** is in fostering love and belonging. Research by Rojas, Méndez, and Watkins-Fassler (2023) demonstrates that love, belonging, and esteem play a crucial role in well-being and can have a greater impact on long-term well-being than material stability alone. For survivors of torture, social disconnection, loss of identity, and diminished self-worth often exacerbate trauma, making community and psychological support critical for their well-being. This is where the settlement agencies' social connection programs reflect some of the counselling agencies' group services. Volunteer programming, social groups, youth programming, and peer-to-peer support, all combine to build on security and safety gained in LINC and IWC/BCNSP. This is also where the organizations begin to build stronger connections with the community beyond the agency.

Fourth Level: Esteem Needs

All agencies offer multiple programs that fit into this category, which encompasses self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Carrying through from the previous levels are employment services, language classes, IWC/BCNSP, and counselling. The community programs under "love and belonging" also apply here.

Fifth Level: Self-Actualization Needs

This category refers to someone reaching their full potential. We categorized employment services for developing job skills and networks here; counselling and group programming are also key offerings that support self-actualization.

Sixth Level: Self-Transcendence Needs

This final category refers to a level beyond self-actualization in which a person can begin to understand the world holistically. In posthumous writings, Maslow describes this as “the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos” (Maslow, 1969, p. 66).

In our data sorting, it appears the counselling agencies’ services are best aligned with this category. However, a case could be made that group circles, community connections, and volunteering programs offered by all agencies could also contribute to a sense of self-transcendence and interconnectedness.

Conclusions

Our qualitative interview research revealed many sector strengths and opportunities. The service and counselling sector is implementing TIC and exercising ethical precautions when working with survivors of torture. Strong, dedicated teams of people are guiding their organizations to work with immigrants and refugees to grow their new lives in Canada. However, it remains difficult to define and even identify survivors of torture among the clientele. Organizations need more staff training and support for working with survivors, as well as sustainable funding to provide reliable programming for this growing community.

Our website data analysis demonstrates how services offered build on each other to support people as they move up and down Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. Sorting these agencies’ programs into the hierarchy shows that programs for Newcomers fill the hierarchy from the bottom up. The settlement sector has a strong overlap with the counselling agencies in the love/belonging and esteem categories. Referring clients to counselling and connecting them with community-based and social programming helps send newcomers further up the pyramid, as they access services that are more focused on mental well-being.

Next Steps: Strategies to Promote Service Accessibility for Survivors and Their Families

By looking at the opportunities, strengths, and gaps identified in the I.I. research, VCST outlined some strategies that can help promote the accessibility of services for survivors of torture and their families. What follows are highlights from our full I.I. Research Report (Quintero et al., 2025).

Opportunity: Identifying Survivors among Clientele

- Research which stakeholders are flagging survivors within their internal databases for separate tracking. Survey stakeholders for estimates of the number of survivor clients for a clearer picture of how many survivors these organizations serve.
- Develop a confidential system of disclosure about the number of torture survivors working with settlement agencies that can be shared across the sector. This anonymized and confidential data could also support advocacy campaigns.

Opportunity: Secure Sustainable Funding for All Aspects of Settlement Work

- Initiate a collective, whole-sector strategy for more generous and long-term funding policies of the government and private foundations.
- Conduct exploratory research about advocacy for mental health counselling to be covered by B.C. provincial healthcare (MSP).

Opportunity: Expanding VCST’s Model

Much of VCST’s work, in close collaboration with stakeholders VAST, VICCIR, and others, could serve as a strong Canadian example of a functional support framework for survivors of torture worldwide.

VCST, with VAST coordinating the Canadian Network for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (CNSTT), could expand stakeholder connections to include organizations in Toronto, Montreal, and Calgary (for example). These connections would map where and how other immigration centres are already working with collaborative models similar to VCST. This mapping could demonstrate a Canadian approach to supporting survivors and the start of a more unified, national framework. The development of a Canadian framework supports the exploration of sustainable federal funding, upscaling models to reach more clients, and more effective advocacy on the national scale.

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Resilience Amidst Fragility: Trauma Recovery and Support for Refugees and Immigrants

Maimona Gabriel Mugaruka

Introduction

Forced migration, systemic inequities, and trauma pose significant challenges to the well-being of refugees and new immigrants in Canada. These individuals often face multiple barriers, from discrimination in employment, education, and healthcare to the psychological distress of forced displacement (Beiser, 2009). The fragility of international security has exacerbated vulnerabilities, exposing migrants to human rights violations and long-term trauma (Kirmayer et al., 2011). This review explores the urgent need for trauma-informed crisis preparedness, community-based support systems, and systemic policy reforms to empower marginalized communities.

Challenges Faced by Refugees and New Immigrants in Canada

1. Systemic Inequities and Racism

Refugees and new immigrants frequently encounter discrimination in various spheres of life. Systemic inequities in employment, education, and healthcare create significant hurdles to integration. The absence of inclusive policies addressing the specific needs of refugees further compounds these challenges (Hynie, 2018).

2. Coping with Trauma from Forced Migration

The journey of forced migration is often marked by violence, loss, and extreme hardship. Many refugees arrive in Canada with profound psychological distress due to experiences of torture and displacement. However, access to culturally appropriate mental health services remains limited, making it difficult for individuals to seek help (Gagnon et al., 2013).

3. Limited Access to Mental Health Resources

There is a critical shortage of trauma-informed therapists who can address the unique experiences of refugees. Language barriers, high costs, and long wait times further restrict access to mental health support, leaving many without the care they need to heal (Fazel et al., 2012).

4. Socioeconomic Barriers to Integration

Language and cultural differences present significant challenges in professional and social settings, limiting economic mobility. Additionally, many refugees struggle to secure stable housing and employment, further delaying their successful integration into Canadian society (Picot & Hou, 2011).

Strategies for Fostering Resilience and Trauma Recovery

1. Providing Trauma-Informed Support

Expanding access to culturally competent mental health services is essential for refugees and new immigrants. Community-based support networks can also provide safe spaces for healing, reducing the isolation experienced by many displaced individuals (Guruge & Collins, 2008).

2. Empowering Communities through Advocacy

Mentorship programs can help refugees navigate new environments, providing guidance and support in their transition. Refugee-led initiatives play a crucial role in addressing community-specific challenges and fostering self-reliance and resilience (Stewart et al., 2015).

3. Fostering Inclusion and Addressing Systemic Inequities

Policymakers must implement measures that remove barriers to employment and education for refugees. Training service providers on culturally sensitive approaches will improve interactions between newcomers and public institutions, fostering a more inclusive society (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2020).

4. Policy Recommendations for Systemic Change

Establishing Community-Based Support Networks

Strengthening partnerships between non-profits, government agencies, and local communities will ensure better support for refugees. Creating safe spaces where individuals can share experiences and access resources is vital for their recovery (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003).

5. Promoting Access to Trauma-Informed Mental Health Care

Increased funding for culturally competent counseling services will help bridge the gap in mental health support. Additionally, training programs for professionals working with trauma survivors should be expanded (Silove et al., 2017).

6. Encouraging Cultural Preservation and Integration Initiatives

Recognizing the importance of cultural identity in trauma recovery can aid in the healing process. Supporting multilingual education and language accessibility programs will further facilitate integration (Berry, 1997).

7. Developing Mentorship Programs for Refugees and Immigrants

Peer mentorship programs can ease the transition for newcomers by offering guidance from individuals who have successfully navigated similar experiences. Connecting refugees with professionals in their fields can also enhance career advancement opportunities (Wilkinson & Ponka, 2018).

8. Advocating for Anti-Racism and Policy Reforms Strengthening Anti-Discrimination Laws and Policies

Stronger enforcement mechanisms are needed to address systemic racism and discrimination. National strategies for equity and inclusion must be developed to ensure equal opportunities for all (Reitz, 2007).

9. Educating Communities on Racism and Bias

Public awareness campaigns on implicit biases and systemic discrimination can promote greater understanding and social cohesion. Schools, workplaces, and public institutions should incorporate anti-racism training to challenge discriminatory practices (Esses et al., 2013).

10. Fostering Intercultural Understanding and Collaboration

Promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives at all levels of society will help bridge cultural divides. Refugees should be given a platform to contribute to policy discussions that affect their communities (Bloemraad, 2006).

11. Call to Action: Global Responsibility

Governments, organizations, and individuals must work collectively to support trauma-informed crisis preparedness initiatives and advocate for systemic changes that promote equity and inclusion. Collaborating with organizations like the Canada House of Resilience Society can help create lasting and meaningful change for refugee communities.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by refugees and new immigrants are systemic and require collective action. By fostering trauma recovery, inclusion, and policy advocacy, we can build an equitable society where all individuals have the opportunity to heal and thrive. Resilience, dignity, and human rights must take precedence over displacement, torture, and racism. Through systemic reform and community engagement, we can ensure that survivors of

forced migration and trauma not only survive but flourish.

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The Challenge of Migrant Influx in Canada amidst Global Security Fragility: Way Forward

Hammad Ahmed Hashmi

Abstract

In recent years, global security conditions have become increasingly unstable due to political conflicts, climate change, and economic disparities, resulting in a significant influx of migrants seeking safety and stability. As a result, Canada has witnessed a substantial influx of migrants seeking stability and refuge. However, due to the current situation in the Middle East, more refugees are predicted to arrive. As a progressive nation with a strong commitment to humanitarian values, Canada, particularly British Columbia (BC), plays a crucial role in addressing and accommodating this challenge. This paper examines the preparedness of the Canadian government and the provincial government of British Columbia (BC) to address this challenge and tackle this situation. It outlines current policies, identifies gaps in the existing framework, and proposes strategic recommendations for improving migrant integration and support systems. While emphasizing a collaborative approach involving local communities, non-governmental organizations, and international partners, the paper aims to provide a comprehensive roadmap for enhancing the resilience of Canadian society in the face of increasing migration pressures.

Key Words. Global Security, Canada, British Columbia, Migrants, Preparedness, Policies

Introduction

Global wars and humanitarian emergencies have propelled record levels of migration, transforming societies and the international landscape. Over the past few years, there has been a surge in the number of people fleeing violence, persecution, and natural disasters. Canada has emerged as a haven of hope, guaranteeing a refuge for asylum seekers. As one of Canada's most ethnically diverse provinces, British Columbia faces unique challenges and opportunities in addressing this influx. As international security circumstances continue to spiral out of control as a result of several issues, such as political instability, armed conflict, climate change, and economic woes, migration has become real

Challenge for many nations. Canada, which prides itself on its open-arm policy towards immigrants and refugees, is faced with a growing tide of migrants fleeing danger and insecurity. This paper aims to assess the readiness of the Canadian government and the British Columbia provincial government (BC) to address this ongoing issue and provide strategic recommendations to enhance their response mechanisms in light of existing global realities. This paper outlines the current situation of migrants, the preparedness of the Canadian government alongside the province of British Columbia, and the collaborative measures necessary to sustain successful integration.

Global Migration Trends

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that there were more than 26 million refugees worldwide as of 2021, a figure that continues to rise due to ongoing global instability (UNHCR, 2021). Armed conflicts, climate change, and socioeconomic unrest are some of the contributing factors (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, these factors are leading to forced immigration.

Canada's Migration Framework

Over the past few years, Canada has witnessed a significant increase in the number of refugees and asylum seekers. Canada has a long tradition of welcoming refugees and immigrants, which is deeply rooted in its immigration policies (Government of Canada, 2022). Canada's immigration policy is based on the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA), which was passed in 2001. The structure outlines how refugees are to be processed, enabling the country to meet its humanitarian commitments (Government of Canada, 2021). Provincial governments, such as those in BC, have also developed their approaches to integrating newcomers. Statistics Canada (2023) reports that in 2021 alone, Canada admitted more than 401,000 new permanent residents, of which refugees made up a considerable number (IRCC, 2021). This influx is in line with rising global crises, including political instability in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal, protracted conflicts in Syria, and

desperate humanitarian crises in Central America and Sub-Saharan Africa (UNHCR, 2023).

British Columbia's Diversity and Demographics

British Columbia has numerous immigrant groups, making it an interesting place to look at migration patterns. It has been a draw for immigrants due to its mixed economy, lifestyle, and excellent social services. The province has implemented several programs and initiatives that cater to migrants, such as language training, job services, and mental health services. However, the rise in new entrants has strained these services, necessitating a comprehensive analysis of the system and recommendations for modification. According to Statistics Canada (2022), nearly 30% of the population in BC is foreign-born, presenting both challenges and opportunities in managing the influx of new migrants. The government of British Columbia has implemented numerous initiatives to support the integration of migrants. Initiatives like the BC Settlement and Integration Program (BCSIP) help newcomers tap into essential services (BC Government, 2021). Data sharing and technology allow for more effective agency coordination (BC Government, 2022).

- a. **Support Programs:** Organizations like MOSAIC in British Columbia offer programs to assist migrant workers. These initiatives provide education on workplace rights and access to essential services, ensuring migrants are informed and supported in their new environment. <https://mosaicbc.org/our-programs/support-for-migrant-workers-and-employers/>

Canadian Government Strategies and Preparedness

- a. **Federal Policies and Programs.** The Canadian government's migration policies encompass integrated frameworks that include settlement services, access to healthcare, and community support programs. Federal committees continually evaluate the effectiveness of programs in responding to the evolving needs of migrants (Government of Canada, 2023). <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/departmental-plan-2023-2024/departmental-plan.html>

- b. **Intergovernmental Collaboration.** Federal-provincial cooperation is vital to efficient resource management and program delivery. One outstanding project supported by both levels of government is the British Columbia Refugee Resettlement Strategy, which provides an adequate safety net for newcomers (BC Government, 2021). <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/departmental-plan-2023-2024/departmental-plan.html>
- c. **Immigration Levels Plan:** The 2025–2027 Immigration Levels Plan has established permanent resident ranges of 395,000 for 2025, which will decline over the following years. The plan prioritizes economic immigration, family sponsorship, and refugees, focusing on sustainable growth and financial success. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/supplementary-immigration-levels-2025-2027.html>
- d. **Enhanced Border Security:** The Canadian government has unveiled a \$1.3 billion plan to upgrade border security and fortify immigration systems. It involves sending drones, Black Hawk helicopters, and high-tech detection equipment to block illegal crossings and boost border patrol efforts. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2024/12/government-of-canada-announces-its-plan-to-strengthen-border-security-and-our-immigration-system.html>
- e. **Study Permit Cap:** To control the number of international students, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has imposed a limit of 505,162 study permit applications for the 2025 calendar year. Applications over this limit will not be accepted. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/notices/2025-provincial-territorial-allocations-under-international-student-cap.html>

Community Engagement Strategies

- a. **Involvement of NGOs and the Private Sector.** Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in BC play a pivotal role in delivering migrant services. Community organizations, such as the

Immigrant Services Society of BC, collaborate with the government to serve newcomers through various programs (ISS of BC, 2022). Engaging the private sector through employment fairs and mentorship programs can also increase job placement. <https://issbc.org/>

b. Public Awareness Campaigns: Building awareness within local communities about the struggles of migrants can create a more inclusive atmosphere. Public service advertisements on multiculturalism and diversity, such as "We All Belong," encourage people to unite and understand one another (Council of BC, 2022). <https://inclusionbc.org/everybody-belongs-may-2022/>

c. Building Resilience: Building resilience among migrants and host communities requires capacity-building programs. Training service providers and community members in cultural competency promote a tolerant environment, facilitating mutual adaptation and integration (BC Government, 2023). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376888740_Migration_and_community_resilience_A_scoping_review

Challenges Faced by the Canadian Government and BC

- a) **Capacity and Resource Constraints:** Urban communities such as Vancouver, as well as local communities in general, are facing capacity in terms of housing, schools, and health services. Sudden arrival in large numbers puts pressure on already existing resources, thus failing to meet the migrants' needs when they are most needed (British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2022). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380302916_Settlement_and_Rental_Housing_Experiences_Among_Recent_Immigrants_in_the_Suburbs_of_Vancouver_Burnaby_Richmond_and_Surrey
- b) **Social Integration and Cohesion:** Migrants' integration into Canadian society presents

opportunities and challenges. Rising anti-immigrant sentiments, fueled by economic anxieties and misinformation, can strain social cohesion. Public perception plays a crucial role in shaping the integration experience for newcomers (CIC, 2022).

<https://www.iom.int/resources/integration-and-social-cohesion-key-elements-reaping-benefits-migration>

- c) **Mental Health and Trauma:** Most migrants come with severe mental health issues stemming from trauma, displacement, and loss. Inadequate access to mental health services, however, continues to be a challenge, especially for non-English or French-speaking migrants (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2023). <https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/> <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-and-forced-displacement>
- d) **Legal and Procedural Delays:** Processing delays for refugee claims can negatively affect newcomers' emotional well-being and economic stability, leading to precarious living conditions and uncertainty about their future (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2022) <https://ccrweb.ca/en/resolutions>
- e) **Navigating Resource Limitations:** Identifying resource gaps in support is, therefore, critical. Funding shortages and overstretched services can hinder migrants' successful integration. Service needs should be regularly assessed, and funds allocated fairly (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2022). <https://ehab-badwi.medium.com/integration-and-participation-of-refugees-and-migrants-building-inclusive-societies-9b806ef772c0>
- f) **Addressing Mental Health Needs:** Migrants usually grapple with psychological scars from trauma and barriers to adjusting to a new climate. Hence, mental health services should be prioritized to consider the needs of this population (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2022). <https://cmha.ca/> <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/373279/9789240081840-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

- g) **Long-term Integration Strategies:** Emphasizing long-term integration over temporary solutions will lead to sustainable outcomes. Investing in language training, vocational programs, and housing services will enhance migrants' prospects for success (CIC, 2023). https://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu/special-feature/what-measures-are-place-ensure-long-term-integration-migrants-and-refugees-europe_en

Conclusion:

Global insecurity has led to mass migration, with the possibility of forced displacement. Canadian government authorities and the British Columbia province face a crossroads in addressing the needs of newcomers. Through strategic collaboration, community engagement, and unwavering dedication to holistic assistance, both government tiers can satisfactorily manage migrants' challenges. The policies developed should be visionary, flexible, inclusive, and sustainable, ultimately improving the lives of migrants and the host communities that welcome them.

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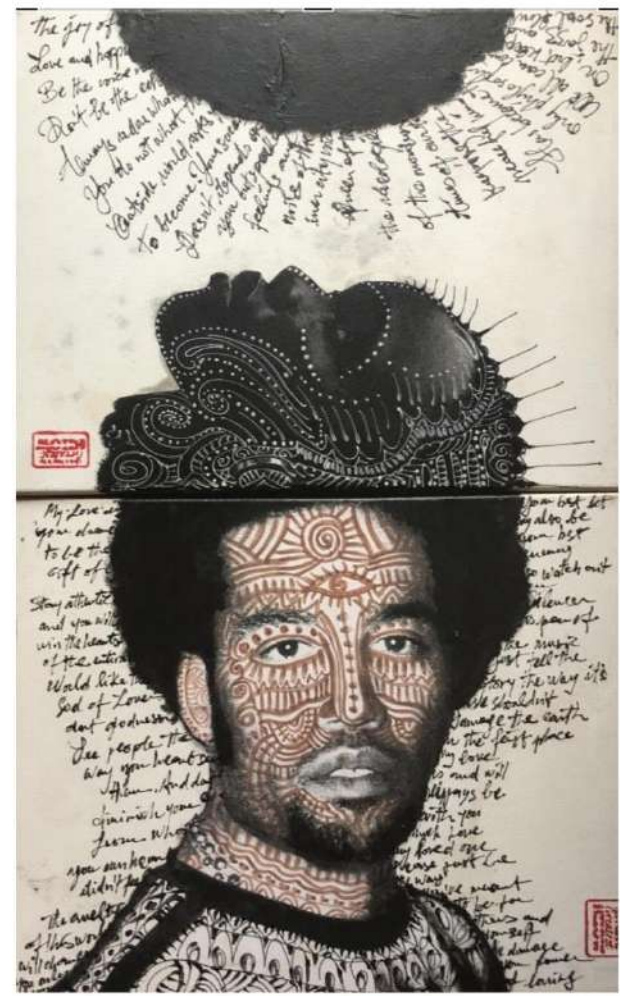
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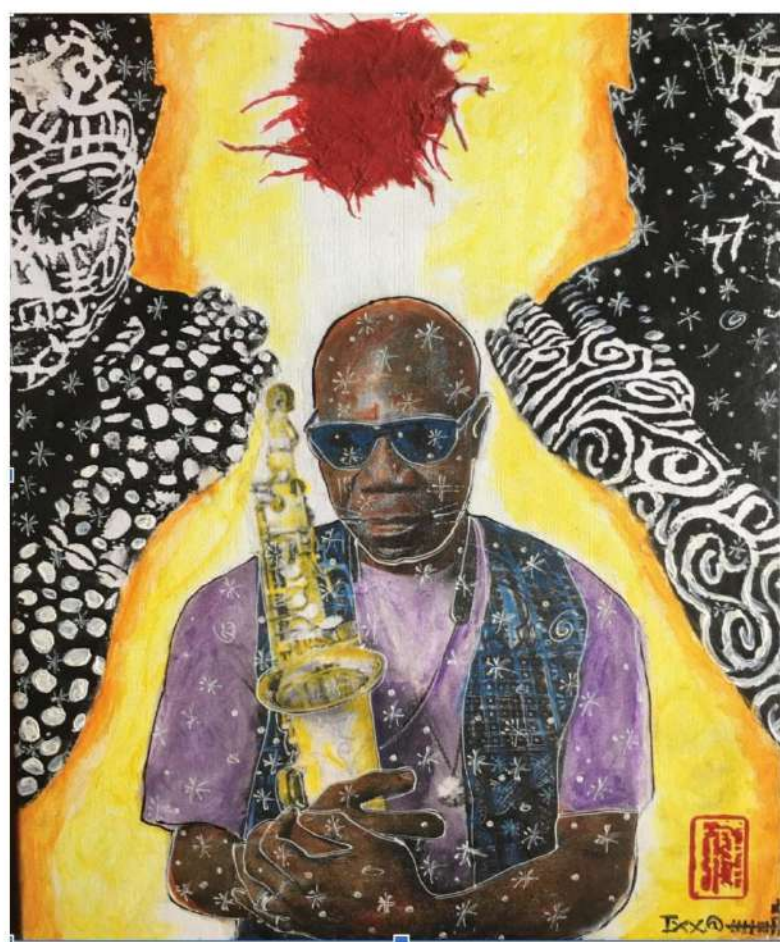


Issa Nyphaga, Visual Artist Healing Through Arts

I am an artist, an activist and a human rights activist. My "Humanist" endeavour is, above all, a proclamation of peace and against intolerance. My soul is in a body that has suffered a lot because of the political cartoons in the satirical newspaper in Cameroon. I live outside a world in which I am undesirable, and I've found in my art a refuge where I can protect myself against all aggression. I came into contact with Human Rights issues at a very early age, and defending the Rights of the oppressed gives me this force of conviction, this feeling of invincibility and the inner peace I seek. I'm like the pages of an open book blown by the winds of liberty.

I use Art to heal myself and others Because Art really cures and can transform a broken Human Being into a reborn, soulful individual.





Call for Contributions and Peer Reviewers

Voices Against Torture (VAT) is a semi-annual journal launched in 2020 as an organic extension of the education, advocacy, and community-building mandate of the Vancouver Association for the Survivors of Torture (VAST). VAT aligns with the values and vision of the VAST community and hopes to lift the voices of torture survivors further to support resilience and dignity.

VAT aims to provide a platform for discussing torture prevention, improving awareness of and support for refugee and immigrant mental health, and highlighting global human rights concerns.

As an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary journal, VAT invites submissions from various academic disciplines and actively seeks collaboration and conversation across disciplines. This approach intends to link theory and lived experience to social change, bringing together academics, activists, educators, therapists, healers, and those directly and indirectly affected by torture.

The Journal will consist of the following sections:

- Research Articles (6,000 – 8,000 words)
- Review Essays (<6,000 words)
- Notes from the Field (<4,000 words)
- Policy Review (<3,000 words)
- Creative Interventions and embodiment practices (1,000-3,000 words)

- Book Reviews (1,000-2,000 words)
- Letters to the editor(s)

Submission Requirements

- Typed in the English language and double-spaced
- Font style: Times New Roman and Font Size: 12
- Text submissions should be 500-700 words
- Manuscript only in MS-Word (*.doc or *.docx) format
- Image files (if any) in .jpg format, 300 dpi.
- References/bibliography need to be numbered if provided with the article
- Authors are encouraged to follow APA 7th referencing and citation style
- Tables and figures should be inserted within the body of the text

Expression of Interest for Peer-Review

Voices Against Torture journal invites experienced human rights and torture peer reviewers to join the journal's peer review panel. Since promoting the cause of human rights is a public good, we encourage volunteers to join the panel. Their contribution in this regard shall be formally acknowledged.

To register your interest, kindly send your detailed CV along with your expression of interest to farooq@vastbc.ca. The editor, however, retains the right to suggest any change in style if required.

Date of Publishing:

Biannual: April and October

Submission:

Open

Submission Deadlines:

31st December and 30th June

Please send your submissions and feedback to the Editor-in-Chief at farooq@vastbc.ca

Letter to the Editor

From: Sediqa Sarwari

To: Editor-in-Chief, Board April 14, 2025

Great work VAT Team,

I can see a lot of improvements, especially in the visuals and design area, as well as in the content.

All the best,

Sediqa

Peer Reviewers

Dr. Gilberto Algar-Faria
Dr. Nazia Hussain
Dr. Rastin Mehri
Dr. Nelofar Kiran Rauf
Dr. Mustanir Ahmad

EOI: Peer-Review

Voices Against Torture journal invites experienced peer reviewers in the area of human rights and torture to join the journal peer review panel. Since the promotion of the cause of human rights is a public good, we encourage volunteers to join the panel. Their contribution in this regard shall be formally acknowledged.

To register your interest, kindly send your detailed CV along with your expression of interest to vrdc@vast-vancouver.ca

Help Eliminate Torture: S.O.S. Appeal

Dear Patrons and Friends,

We, the Members of the Editorial Board of the Journal on VAT (Voices Against Torture- a newly incepted policy research communication organ of Vancouver Association of Torture Survivors (VAST), are gravely concerned over the worsening and deepening state of Torture in many parts of the world- Prohibition of Torture Index 2019-20 (Statista- <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1131048/prohibition-of-torture-index-in-cis-by-country/>)

As rightly maintained by the World Organization against Torture, "Nothing can justify torture under any circumstances (OMCT- <https://www.omct.org/>), for it is tantamount to imprisoning both mind and soul. Not only that Torture leave a lasting scar on the bodies and the minds of its victim(s), but as its psycho-social sequel, it also becomes a weeping wound for generations. In the recent past, an exodus of refugees (UNHCR - <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>), from many countries; and violence perpetrated against women (BBC- <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-53014211>) and neglect and abuse of the elderly during the Contagion COVID pandemic (AGE Platform Europe- <https://www.age-platform.eu/press-releases/elder-abuse-has-been-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic-it-high-time-take-it-seriously>) signifies the emergent need to help arrest torture becoming endemic, as stipulated in humanitarian and human rights law, which has unfortunately taken a contagious proportion. In this backdrop, the emergent need for evidence-based/ informed policymaking & advocacy around human rights; and rehabilitation & mainstreaming of torture victims needs hardly any emphasis. VAST, being mindful of this emergent need to cultivate respect for human rights as an underpinning factor for human security and containment of Torture worldwide, has chosen to reach out to the global stakeholders through VAT Journal.

Alongside VAT Journal, we plan to hold international & regional workshop(s) via both in-person and online platforms. With this initiative, we aim to help spread awareness in trauma recovery and further educate civil society, academia, and the public sector to help develop Human Rights advocates and empower practitioners to help lead from the front lines of eradicating Torture from our world.

We at VAT Journal Editorial Board, through these lines, seek the support of the international community to join their heads and hands in this noble and emergent cause for the public good.

Sincerely yours,

VAT Editorial Board Members:

Dr. Farooq Mehdi, Dr. Fizza Sabir, Dr. Wajid Pirzada, Leila Johnson, Dr. Patrick Swanzy, Dr. Rubina Hanif, Dr. Hammad Ahmed Hashmi, Shazia Munir, Dr. Malik Hammad Ahmad, Dr. Richard Burchill, Dr. Lailla B M.

**Vancouver Association for the Survivors of Torture, 2610 Victoria Dr, Vancouver, BC V5N 4L2,
[VAST \(vastbc.ca\)](http://VAST(vastbc.ca)) [vat-home \(vastbc.ca\)](http://vat-home (vastbc.ca))**

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