

Submission to The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the new national strategy for migrant integration

St Patrick's Mental Health Services (SPMHS) is Ireland's largest independent, not-for-profit mental health service provider. SPMHS' vision is for a society where all citizens are empowered and given the opportunity to live mentally healthy lives. SPMHS works to provide the highest quality mental healthcare; to promote mental wellbeing and mental health awareness; and to advocate for the rights of those experiencing mental health difficulties. SPMHS achieves this through a human rights-based approach; through the enhancement of evidence-based knowledge; and by striving to be at the forefront of new initiatives and advances in the field. SPMHS is also committed to furthering the development of the competencies of those choosing to work in mental health and of the organisations providing mental healthcare services, and to enhancing partnership with service users.

As part of its advocacy remit, SPMHS advocates for the needs of marginalised groups, and the 2023 Founder's Day conference provided a timely opportunity to explore and highlight services and resources that can support mental healthcare professionals to be inclusive of the experiences of migrants and refugees in their practice. The conference recording, which accompanies this submission provides evidence and information from experts, some with lived experience on the challenges they have faced. Information is also provided on the mental health needs of migrants and refugees and support interventions that have been successful in low resource countries.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that there are 1 billion migrants globally, of which 281 million are international migrants and 26.4 million are refugees, with the experience of migration being noted as a key determinant of health and wellbeing.¹ Refugees, asylum-seekers and irregular migrants are highlighted as being in need of special protection and support. Evidence also shows that migrants and refugees can be exposed to various stress factors which affect their mental health and wellbeing before and during their migration journey, and during their subsequent settlement and integration.²

Migration is a growing global phenomenon and impacts many people and societies. In 2020, 280 million people worldwide were classified as immigrants, of these 36 million were refugees and asylum seekers. Many of the people who seek refuge and asylum are young people with children. Some 20% of the population of Ireland are classified as migrants. Large scale migrations underlines increasing migration and tends to be clustered in cities.

With migrants and refugees living in Ireland facing a number of challenges, particularly over the last number of weeks, St Patrick's Mental Health Services' annual Founder's Day conference, which took place on 1st December, focused on identifying and responding to the mental health needs of migrants and refugees.

The half-day online conference heard from a range of experts, including those with lived experiences, who explored how migrants' and refugees' mental health may be affected by migration, highlighting relevant research and discussing appropriate responses.

Many migrants and refugees will experience mental health difficulties, with research showing that the prevalence of a range of mental health difficulties, tends to be higher among migrants and refugees than their host populations.³

As many parts of the world, including Ireland, continue to see increased numbers of migrants and refugees arriving against the backdrop of ongoing wars, conflict and persecution, it is imperative that we acknowledge and address the specialised mental health requirements of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, many of whom will have complex psychological needs.

The migration of people across international boundaries, whether in search of more prosperous lives, or fleeing war and persecution, has accelerated in recent years. Multiple studies have found high rates of mental distress and ill-health among many migrant and ethnic groups.

Changing trends in migration, such as the increasing rates of migration and the increased diversity and origins of migrants moving to single countries, present an ongoing challenge for mental health policy and for the provision of services.

Challenges

Many migrants and refugees have fled their countries and homes and have been subjected to significant trauma on these journeys. This trauma can have a significant impact on the future mental health of migrants and refugees as they struggle to integrate in a new culture where language, access to services, stigma, past traumas and lack of awareness can all be factors impacting on their mental health, and consequently, may impede a successful integration for them. Many migrants and refugees arrive in Ireland leaving behind other family members and extended family, friends, colleagues and all of their possessions in the country they have left behind. It is widely acknowledged that migrant and refugee populations have a higher prevalence of mental health difficulties, and *Sharing the Vision*, Ireland's National mental health policy document highlights migrants as a priority group for mental health.⁴ Prof Craig Morgan, Professor of Social Epidemiology at King's College London in his keynote speech discussed the prevalence of mental health difficulties among migrant populations, highlighting key research in relation to mental health presentations in the migrant population.³

Cultural barriers

Many migrants and refugees have a deep distrust of authority by virtue of their experiences and may often be reluctant to seek support. Appropriate information should be provided about accessing mental health services to migrants in an accessible format. There has been some progress on producing documents in multiple languages, but this should become a requirement for the publication of all information. Issues around stigma may arise, depending on the individual's home nation and attitudes to mental illness in their country of origin. Appropriate information and a clear pathway to accessing services should be part of the new strategy to encourage those experiencing difficulties to feel able to access the interventions that they require. Dr Caroline Munyi, Migrant Women's Health Coordinator at AkiDWA outlined some of these issues in her presentation to the Founder's Day Conference.³

Access to services

There is a high demand for access to mental health services in Ireland and consequently it may be difficult for migrants and refugees to access timely

interventions. There should be a clear clinical pathway for migrants and refugees to access mental health services with culturally diverse, person-centred and trauma-centred teams available to respond to the difficulties service users who are migrants or refugees face. There is a need for training for all in relation to cultural sensitivity and trauma informed-care which will best meet the needs of the migrant and refugee population. These issues were highlighted by several speakers at the conference including Nick Henderson, Chief Executive Officer of the Irish Refugee Council and Jennifer Chipa, a mental health peer advocate who came from Zimbabwe to Ireland to seek asylum.³

Language barriers

For many individuals seeking asylum and international protection, English is not their first language and therefore they will struggle to engage with mental health services without appropriate translation and interpretation services made available. Whilst some services do exist, timely access to same is very important for intervention and ideally these should be face-to-face. The new strategy should encourage the training, and development, of peer support mental health workers who can work with and support migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and those seeking international protection.

Staff who work with migrants and refugees need to have access to timely interpreting services to ensure that the rights, will and preferences of migrants and refugees engaging in mental health services are known and fully understood. Safa Kharita whose family fled from Syria to Lebanon and ended up settling in Ireland explained that while she and her siblings had good English, her parents had found it very difficult and still had limited English despite living in Ireland for a number of years. This was further highlighted by Jennifer Chipa, a peer advocate in mental health and by Nick Henderson, Chief Executive of the Irish Refugee Council.³

Psychosocial interventions

Dr Pieter Ventevogel, Senior Mental Health Expert with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in his talk spoke about lessons learned about the mental health of refugees from low resource settings. Dr Ventevogel spoke about a peer-driven psychosocial intervention to assist refugees understand their mental health needs should be developed. This does not necessarily have to be clinical lead but

would need to be robust in content. Consideration should be given to the development of such models to allow migrants to be trained and empowered to support each other through these difficult transitions. Peer support can be a very powerful mechanism as it fosters a relationship of trust and is non- authoritarian and provide migrants and refugees with agency to support each other and build resilience. Jennifer Chipa a mental health peer advocate who came from Zimbabwe to Ireland to seek asylum provided significant insights into her experiences of working in this area.³

Staff working with migrants

Many staff working directly with migrants and refugees may face additional difficulties in trying to engage this population and may also be much more exposed to disclosures of significant trauma by virtue of the population group that they are working with. Staff need to have training in how to manage this, as well as clear pathways to guide and direct migrants and refugees to appropriate services.

The wellbeing of staff who are working directly with migrants and refugees should also be considered. There may be a requirement for additional appropriate clinical supervision and training for these workers who are involved both clinically and non-clinically as they themselves are hearing the narratives of migrants and refugees and seeing first-hand the mental health impacts of migration and seeking international protection.³

Providing ongoing supports to migrants

Ireland may become their country of habitation for many migrants and refugees but for many they will always consider their country of origin as home. Many migrants have left behind extended family members, friends and colleagues who they may never see again. During the conference proceedings, this was reiterated by those with lived experience of migration. For many migrants and refugees, there is loneliness at the loss of one's place in society, the loss of family, friends and colleagues. In addition, many experience guilt that they had managed to escape and there were many left behind. These feelings are often enduring and may require ongoing and long-term support for individuals. For many, the inability to source appropriate housing and work can have a significant negative impact on their mental health and may impede their ability to integrate fully into their new country.

Recent events in Ireland were described as being extremely distressing for Safa Kharita's parents who fled from Syria in 2013, leaving them feeling vulnerable and in fear of a reoccurrence of previous experiences and traumas that they had experienced.³

There should be a network of supports for all migrants and refugees, be they educational or social, where these needs can be addressed on an ongoing basis.

Submission Ends.

References:

1. [World Health Organization, Refugee and migrant health](#)
2. [World Health Organization, Mental health and forced displacement.](#)
3. [gov.ie - Sharing the Vision: A Mental Health Policy for Everyone \(www.gov.ie\)](#)
4. The Mental Health of Migrants and Refugees: Conference Proceedings of Founders Day Conference, St Patrick's Mental Health Services: Accessed 1st December 2023.

Appendix 1 - **Link to Founder's Day Conference recording:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EsnpSOKwzJg>