«I prefer dying fast than dying slowly»

How institutional abuse worsens the mental health of stranded Syrian, Afghan and Congolese migrants on Lesbos Island

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MSF OCB Operational Research Day
Brussels, 2018
• Approximately 800,000 migrants arrived on the Greek islands in 2015
• Following the EU-Turkey deal implementation on the 18th March 2016 migrants became stranded on Lesbos
• MSF have been provided health and mental health services on Lesbos since 2015
• Highest arrivals are from Syria, Afghanistan and Democratic republic of Congo (DRC)
Studies have shown that long term displacement and inadequate living conditions have negative consequences on mental health of migrants.

Most studies focus on destination countries.

**Study objectives:** Factors impacting MH of Syrian, Afghan, Congolese migrants on Lesbos island following EU-Turkey deal.
Methodology

• Qualitative study conducted in July and August 2017 on Lesbos island
• 11 focus group discussions with Afghan, Syrian, DRC male and female migrants
• 9 key informant interviews
  ✓ MSF cultural mediators
  ✓ MSF psychologists
  ✓ MSF social workers
• Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis
Results

Three main themes were generated

- Systemic or institutional abuse
- Continuous traumatic stress
- Mental health service provision
Systemic or Institutional Abuse

- **Definition**: Systematically insulting, humiliating and de-personalizing through power imbalance in a relationship
- **Occurring mostly in** elderly and psychiatric facilities
- **Stranded migrants**: Subjected to wide range of psychological abuses and violations by authorities

*Photo: Athens press office*
Systemic or Institutional Abuse

**Depriving migrants of information**

“First of all there is no clarity about the process (asylum), how did this happen, how did I reach here for the rejection of the second time, there is no clarity, the interpretation and the translation that is happening during the interviews its very bad, it’s a bad quality” (Syrian Man, 52 y.o)

**Insults and depersonalization**

“...when I see people on the barbed wire waiting for food what is the difference with me and sheep? When I see the police beating people in order to wait in line....” (Afghan man 25 y.o)

**Living Conditions**

“...and they put me in a tent with other 200 people to register me, now for more than 8 months...”(Syrian man, 46 y.o)
Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS)

- Describes the consequences of current conditions in which there is an ongoing danger in the present or future instead of the past
  - A state of permanent emergency
  - Preoccupation with threats to the present and future
  - Absence of protective measures

Photo: REUTERS/Giorgos Moutafis
Photo: Michael Schwarz
Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS)

Preoccupation with present and future

“I cannot stand it, there are times that I get disappointed that I will never see my children [in Germany] I will never manage to hug my daughter” (Afghan woman, 48 y.o).

Permanent emergency

“Every night fires broke out in Moria and we were running in the woods with our packs to save ourselves. We didn’t have a single day of calmness. My clothes, they are still in the bags since 1 year” (Syrian woman, 32 y.o).

Absence of protective measures

“When I went to police and told them that this guy threatened us with a knife they told me that when the drugs go off he will be ok again” (Syrian man, 43 y.o).
Mental health provision

Characteristics:
✓ Delays in appointments with professionals
✓ Lack of psychiatric care
✓ Cultural diversity and differences in perceptions about MH

“They give me an appointment 4 months later. I will become crazy after that long” (Afghan woman 26 y.o).

“...what they [Afghans] are facing is beyond a psychologist. If you use the standards of Europe, all Afghans will need a psychologist”. (Afghan man, 26 y.o)
Conclusion

- **Institutional abuse**: No control of their lives, rely on others for basic decisions (asylum decisions, cash and food provision, ones future)

- **CTS**: Continuity of stressors may increase the risk for other types of psychopathology

- **MH provision**: Valued as important, but overall inadequate
Implications

• EU-Turkey deal is having a very high cost for migrants MH
• Lesbos should be decongested to end institutional abuse
• Mental health services must take into consideration the context of Lesbos island
• Mental health provision and parallel focus on reducing current stressors (asylum procedures, security, living conditions)
• Understanding cultural diversity and beliefs about mental health
Acknowledgements

• Lesbos MSF team for the support, in particular to the health promoters and cultural mediators who made this research possible
• Liza Papadimitriou the MSF Humanitarian Affairs Officer for her valuable inputs
• Participants in the FGDs for their courage
• Co-students and researchers who participated in the qualitative SORT IT course, Johannesburg 2016-2017