

Refugee trauma worse than war trauma

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(Medical Xpress)—The trauma of being a refugee can be worse than the trauma of war, according to a new Victoria University study.

School of Social Sciences and Psychology PhD researcher Dr Anita Milicevic interviewed nearly 50 Croatian, Bosnian Muslim and Serbian parents and children who escaped the Balkans conflict 20 years ago to live in Melbourne.

Her study concluded the loss of dignity during the refugee experience had been more psychologically damaging than the horrors of war or persecution.

"Many of those interviewed said having managed to survive torture or the perils of living in a war zone, they then experienced much greater humiliation, degradation and rejection in every aspect of their emotional, social and professional lives as refugees," Dr Milicevic said.

Participants commonly reported shock, denial, fear and a sense of powerlessness in the initial stage of the refugee experience, she said.

"Being a refugee for them meant loss of control over their lives and gave rise to a profound feeling of uncertainty," she said.

Refugee camps and detention centres were a major source of anxiety, but by no means the end of it.

Dr Milicevic said the "open stigma" around refugee families in Australia

made it difficult to negotiate a dignified identity in the host country.

"After arriving in the host country participants experienced further disturbance when they found the label of refugee imposed on them by the host society carried a stigma," she said. "Comments or media portrayals of refugee families as drains on social resources, as intruders into neighbourhoods and of being unsuccessful at integrating are humiliating."

Another major hurdle to achieving dignity as a refugee family was the breakdown of traditional family roles, where a father could not provide for his family in a refugee camp or get a good job in Australia, or where parents became reliant on their children to act as interpreters.

"It's this loss of dignity and value systems that is being neglected in refugee settlement and that needs to be addressed," she said. "A starting point would be asking families what they need to maintain their dignity."

Dr Milicevic said refugee integration was a two-way responsibility: the community and policy-makers needed to understand and address the difficulties of being a refugee, not just the difficulty of what they had escaped.

"For many in the study the war did not end once they had escaped the fighting – it continued in the refugee camps, in the playgrounds of their new country and in their battle for identity in their new life here," she said.

"The best way to help is to listen to these stories and build support systems around that, rather than the other way around. The human story and people's dignity is the most important thing."

Dr. Anita Milicevic came to Australia with her young family as a

refugee from the Balkans war. She just graduated with her thesis titled From family damage to family challenge. Stories of rebuilding lives after war and refugee trauma: Australia after the Balkans conflicts.

Provided by Victoria University

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