

# PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES FACED BY SYRIAN STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA: A CASE STUDY OF UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA (USM)

<sup>1</sup>\*Uzma Rani, <sup>2</sup>Azlinda Binti Azman

<sup>1,2</sup>School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)

\*Corresponding Author's Email: uzma\_rajaahmed@hotmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** Syria war 2011 forced millions of people to move towards the peaceful zones of the world. This evacuation disturbed almost every aspect of life and education is among one of those affected aspects. A large number of Syrian youth became separated from education due to war. Syrians arriving in Malaysia after 2011, focused to get into tertiary education and decently supported themselves. This study intended to capture the experiences of Syrian students while in University Sains Malaysia and explored their psychosocial issues due to war in their country. This study has followed the qualitative method, interviews were taken from 20 students from different schools of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). A self-constructed interview guide based on previous literature was used to collect the data and then the data was analyzed manually because of the small sample size. Many important themes were generated regarding psychosocial issues including, anxiety, depression, insecurity, hopelessness, stress, lack of confidence, emotional blockage, desire to return to homeland, separation anxiety and poor quality of life. It is suggested that individuals coming from the disputed territories are shackled badly by the stressed events of war so they were taken into health care just to ensure a better quality of life for them. They came with hopes for a better life, and they should be treated well in this manner. Every country should have some important policies regarding unexpected guests, so they can live life at least with basic needs of life.

**Keywords:** Psychological Issues, Refugee Education, Depression, Migrants Rights.

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is making a difference by becoming an international education hub. A report by UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education mentioned that more than 2.5 million students are studying outside their home countries [1]. Malaysia has been placed at the 11th position in the list of countries with the most numbers of international students, where about 2% of international students in universities around the world chose Malaysia as their destination for higher education. But at the same time, International students came across many different problems while studying abroad. A study in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia [2] categorized problems of international students into many aspects including Health, Finances, Lifestyle and Career, Social and Recreational, Psychological Social Relation, Personal relationships and Emotional, Marriage and Sexual, Family, Moral and Religious. One of the study [3] in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) on Afghan students suggested that the experience of international students from unfamiliar settings can create anxiety, confusion, and depression, because, for the newcomers, they faced language problems, difficulties in finding accommodation, economic stress, loneliness, and these conditions can lead to further problems such as anxiety, depression and various forms of illness. This study also suggested that the students went through the culture shock stage due to some differences between the cultures and when homesickness seems to sink in.

By streaming through literature it has been observed that there is some gap in the studies related to international students coming from conflicted zones of the world, to address this gap, this study explores the representation of Syrian students in Malaysia through personal narratives by the Syrian student community. University-aged Syrian refugees were estimated at 150,000 in 2016. At best, six percent of these will have the opportunity to study at universities in the host countries or so-called 'third countries' [4], while the majorities are barred from access to further

educational pathways. There are currently more than 150,000 refugees and undocumented immigrants in Malaysia, the vast majority of who have very limited access to higher education. Reasons are several: the cost of registration, admissions criteria, legal and technical issues as well as the personal and environmental factors affecting potential students [5].

According to research [6], all international students go through the process of adjusting to a new educational system and social environment. Adjustment to these new environments can be a stressful process [7, 8] for international students who have the added strain of adjusting to new cultural values, language, and study habits. One study [9] found that majority of the international students reported academic, cultural, social differences, and serious health problems at the university in the U.S. In one of the studies [10] found that international students faced with the academic stress, facing the strain of language and academic problems, challenges with interaction with the faculty members, and culture differences.

## METHODOLOGY

This study follows a qualitative research methodology involving interviews of the participants to collect the desired data on psychological issues faced by Syrian students. Syrian students who are 20 in number were chosen through purposive sampling from the School of Pharmacy, School of Computer Sciences and School of Social Sciences from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. They were on the third semester of their study. Only those students were recruited for the study who came after 2011 in Malaysia due to war in Syria. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants.

A semi-structured, face-to-face interview was applied to collect specific data. Based on a review of the literature, a set of questions were developed in advance. Each interview took maximum of 60 mins.

The data obtained were classified into various themes. Due to the small sample size, the data was analyzed manually.

## RESULTS

This section will present the main findings of the research, including 1) Anxiety, 2) Depression, 3) Insecurity, 4) Hopelessness, 5) Stress, 6) Lack of Confidence, 7) Emotional Blockage, 8) Desire to return to homeland, 9) Separation Anxiety, 10) Poor Quality of Life.

All of the above 10 main themes were derived from the interviews of Syrian students. These themes are explained further as follows.

### 1. Anxiety

In the interview, most of the students were of the opinion that they become anxious most of the times on the things other people don't. Even in the classroom, they become anxious about the questions asked from the teacher. As they reported, *"Teachers' questions make me anxious about myself that he/she is evaluating me being from Syria."*

*"I always find myself anxious that what is happening in my country and what will be the next, whenever I think about my country my body shiver with anxiousness."*

### 2. Depression

Individuals coming from a war zone have depression symptoms due to the situations they have encountered. Depression is the main element in their life. Many students while giving interview showed depression symptoms. They reported,

*"I feel I am always depressed. And I feel I need some assistance to get over this depression of war."*

*"My life is full of depression only."*

*"This war gives me depression for my whole life."*

*"What is in my life? There is nothing but depression."*

### 3. Insecurity

Individuals coming from war zone depict a strong sense of being insecure. The reason behind this is the events of the war, they encountered while living in some refugee camps. And while leaving their home towns to save their lives.

*"I feel insecure as a Syrian; I believe that if I told someone that I am Syrian, someone will take advantage out of it."*

*"The war in our country makes us insecure. People talk about us that we are terrorist and we have no safe place to live on this planet."*

*"Our leaders make us insecure internationally. People around the world recognize us as extremists and killers."*

*"We avoid revealing the identity as it is something not acceptable in the outer world."*

### 4. Hopelessness

Any event of tension in any part of the world can induce feelings of hopelessness in individuals. Here in this study, interviews with the Syrian students also revealed symptoms of hopelessness and the reason is war. They reported,

*"When I was in Syria, the situation was so dangerous that I had no hope of getting out alive from the firing and shelling. When we were in the refugee camp, there was very bad everything, we have little food and no proper place to rest and we have no hope to get a better life after the war."*

*"War has wiped away all our hopes for a better future. We have been living a good life before the war but now we are not hoping to get a good future."*

*"I have no hopes of anything good for myself while I am in Malaysia, still I do not hope anything good to happen here."*

*"We get no rights, we cannot open bank accounts here or buy any car here. There is no hope to spend the rest of life here."*

### 5. Stress

Everyday stress is the most common factor seen in the students of Syrian origin I stressed out a lot. Almost all of the respondents reported strong levels of stress in their everyday life. Some of the verbatims are as follows:

*"I stressed out to a point where I think I would be going into psychological care someday."*

*"Yeah sure definitely. A lot of stress is now a vital part of my life."*

### 6. Lack of Confidence

During the time of studies in any student's life, one of the most requiring things is being confident while studying and behaving in certain situations of academics. During the pace of interviews, it was observed that the tensed background have shacked the confidence levels of the students as well. This was also a source of depression for them for not be so confident in academics.

*"I do not consider myself a confident person. And I am not always like this."*

*"Whenever any teacher ask any question in the class, even though I know the answer, but I did not feel confident enough to answer the question."*

*"I have feared to be evaluated in the classroom. It is lack of confidence that I could not participate in discussions."*

### 7. Emotional Blockage

Most of the Syrian students reflected some levels of emotional blockage. They do not like to take parts in discussions and they use to remain silent where they should speak up for their rights and to understand the certain situations around them.

*"I often chose not to speak, in many situations. I feel like to be silent, otherwise, people will judge you."*

*"On the airport in Kuala Lumpur, the immigration officer was making fuss out of nothing and I know that I can defend myself on this note but I remained silent, because I believe that people will judge me as an extremist because our country is at war and we have no rights to speak even for our rights."*

*"I often took a lot of time to decide whether I would be addressing someone on some issue or it's better to be silent. Before the war, I was not like that. I was a different person entirely."*

### 8. Desire to Return to Homeland

This study generated many interesting results. Despite of all the tensions, fears and depressive situations almost all the respondents were of the view to return to their country as soon as the situations got better there. They reported on this as.

*"Definitely I will return to my country, I love my homeland and after becoming more educated I can create a difference in my country people."*

*"I have no intentions to be here for long. I love Syria and I would love to be back to Syria."*

*"I think even I got immigration I stay foreigners to this country. Because I am a stranger to this land so I think it's better for someone to go back to his/her homeland. It's better to be in your own country. So I will definitely be going back."*

## 9. Separation Anxiety

One of the basic elements while witnessing a war event in any place around the world is separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is not a result to be separated from your loved ones but also it can be a result to leave your home, your educational institute, etc. Students while giving an interview, revealed separation anxiety for almost everything back in their country. They reported.

*"We have been living on rent since we came here, every morning when I leave my siblings and my mother behind, I feel anxious half the day at university."*

*"Sometimes when flashbacks hit me in daily routine, while in university I keep on thinking about my family, that whether I could see them again or not, or when I will get back to my place and meet my mother. I cannot name this feeling but it makes me anxious for the whole day."*

*"We have been separated from our loved ones so badly that now I do not make friends here because I believe that I cannot leave them when I have to move from here. Or I will become a patient of depression when I leave this University and my teachers and my class fellows."*

## 10. Poor Quality of Life

Many students reported their life quality has affected by the war very badly. They reported.

*"We have been living so nice in our country. We have everything in our homes and our life was perfect."*

*"We are fulfilling our basic needs with difficulty. We could not find a good house to live in. We do not have enough finances to lead a better life. I am living in a state of poor quality of life."*

*"My family has a poor quality of life and here it bothers no one. We have no normal status here. To get a better life we have to wait long."*

*"Life becomes miserable here, in hostel no one makes me friend, I have no social life. I remain alone most of the time."*

## CONCLUSION

In this present research, it is identified that an urgent need for humanitarian organizations and social workers are needed to work with people coming from disturbed zones of the world to improve their lives while in a peaceful environment. It is also concluded that the use of rigorous qualitative research and ethical best practice guidelines to ensure that the perspectives of potential aid recipients are more clearly represented and should be used in an effective way. The collective findings of this research indicated that many displaced Syrians living in Malaysia identify the interacting impact of displacement stressors and mental health impairment and indicate a willingness to participate in

programs aimed at addressing such mental health and psychosocial issues. Psychosocial impacts, such as depression, separation anxiety, emotional blockage, lack of confidence, hopelessness, are key areas for which humanitarian organizations can employ participatory engagement strategies to improve relevance and sustainability. It would be helpful in making this unexpected influx into the population a useful induction and avoid the youth to be involved in any radical activities in the future. These unheard voices should be heard and taken into serious account just to make this world a better place to live and cherish.

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