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OF THE NEW YORK CITY CHAPTER

National Association of Social Workers



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Reflecting on the Fifth Anniversary of September 11th, 2001

As We Continue To Move Forward

Madelyn Miller, LCSW, Chair, NASW-NYC Disaster Trauma Working Group; Psychotherapist

At the fifth anniversary of September 11, 2001 we're shaken by a world context of pronounced suffering and loss, reverberating catastrophe and humanitarian crisis in the Middle East, escalating loss of life in Iraq, current devastation across the Gulf Coast region one year after the Katrina and Rita hurricanes, reignited civil war in Sri



Madelyn Miller

Lanka compounding tsunami survivors' struggles, the AIDS pandemic across sub-

Saharan Africa and genocide in Western Sudan.

At this time of reflection and remembrance, we're more deeply connected to realities across our globe than ever before, and more affected. Past London, Madrid, Bali, and Mumbai explosions echo familiar experience; recent thwarted terrorism intensifies pervasive uncertainty, anticipated threat.

Our understanding of human suffering and resourcefulness is punctuated by fuller

awareness of accumulating human-caused and natural disaster. We more broadly comprehend complex dimensions of trauma and loss, and the dynamic social processes of individual and collective survival.

What Have We Learned ?

At this five year marker of time, never far from the still unfolding grief of September 11, we have an opportunity to consider our experience within a historical and global perspective, to ensure an informed approach to the future. As social workers, like those across a rich diversity of disciplines, there's much to

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Realities on the Ground for Muslim New Yorkers

Five Years After 9/11

Robina Niaz, MS, MSW; Founder & Executive Director, Turning Point for Women and Families, New York

Turning Point for Women and Families was started in December 2004 as an organization to address the unique needs of Muslim women trapped in abusive homes and wary of seeking help in the community even when their safety is in danger. Apart from fear and distrust in the post-9/11 era, many women are afraid of being judged



Robina Niaz

as Muslims or simply not being understood. Language and cultural barriers are strong deterrents to seeking help.

An important component of *Turning Point's* work focuses on providing a safe space and support for young women born in the United States to immigrant parents. In a culturally sensitive group setting, girls and young women learn to navigate their

way while facing societal, parental and peer pressures.

First Agency of its Kind

Based in Queens, it is the first agency of its kind in New York, a city that has the second largest Muslim population in the United States. Although exact numbers are hard to get, some estimates state that there are 600,000-800,000 Muslims living in New York City. The enormous diversity in ethnic backgrounds and languages is a

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strength to the community but a challenge to service providers.

Muslim Need for Services Increased after 9/11

After 9/11 the need for social services increased manifold as fear mounted, especially among undocumented immigrants after the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Service of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services announced its special registration program. Almost 13,000 Muslim men were detained under special registration and hundreds were deported, leaving their wives and families behind without any financial resources. A large number of Muslims lost their homes and businesses while faced with evictions and deportation. Because of the rounding up of undocumented immigrant Muslims, the rest of the community became fearful of asking for help. Consequently, crimes such as domestic violence, child abuse, bias attacks, and theft went unreported, putting many Muslims in danger.

Five years have passed since the 9/11 attacks that have had an enormous impact

on the lives of all New Yorkers. While life has returned to normal for most people, little has changed for Muslim New Yorkers. If anything, the issues facing this community have become even more complicated by the continued stereotyping, racial profiling and negative media attention. Of course, none of this is new to the American society. Native Americans, African Americans, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Hispanics, Jews, and many other groups have faced similar attitudes in the past, as well as harsh consequences.

One hopes that such situations will pass with time. However, the current geopolitical realities do not seem to promise a decrease in negative consequences. Roundups and detentions of immigrant Muslims go unabated, leaving families and loved ones emotionally devastated and with little assistance or support. Under

attack and constant scrutiny, the Muslim community struggles to dilute the anti-Muslim rhetoric and the general public's perception of Muslims as un-American, unpatriotic and "the other".

"Under attack and constant scrutiny, the Muslim community struggles to dilute the anti-Muslim rhetoric and the general public's perception that views them as un-American"

As Muslims continue to be "objects of concern" to the general public, many among them have become silent, invisible victims – unnoticed and unacknowledged. The strain on women, youth and vulnerable individuals is very clear. Needless to say, this will have far-reaching consequences for the Muslim community in particular, and our society in general.

Traumatic Effects of Immigration

Most immigrant Muslims in New York have arrived over the last 2-3 decades and are still dealing with the trauma of migration, including separation from culture and community, assuming second class status in the U.S..

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According to demographics, it is likely that all social work caseloads will involve work with older adults. In addition, there is a shortage of social workers in gerontology. Prepare now for the future! Consider becoming a gerontology social worker and distinguish yourself with a NASW credential in Aging. Credentials are available for social workers with a bachelor's and master's degree and for post-master's clinical practitioners. Each credential must be renewed every two years, which requires 20 hours of continuing education relevant to practice with older adults. The credential indicates to employers and clients your dedication to gerontology social work practice, because you are required to stay current in the field and to uphold the NASW Code of Ethics. Distinguish yourself! Apply for the credential today.

A very large number came from South Asian and South-East Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Indonesia) as well as the Middle East (Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia). Other regions include North Africa (Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) and Africa (Sudan, Senegal, Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda), and Europe (Bosnia, Albania, and Turkey).

Most Muslims have migrated for the same reasons that other immigrants have – to reunite with family members; to escape wars, famines, political persecution and economic instability; and to seek education or job opportunities.

Educated middle class professionals have adapted to American culture quite well. While initially most of them go through “culture shock,” those with little or no education have a much harder time as they face language barriers and lack of employment opportunities. A great number have had to share their minimal resources with family members left behind in their home countries. Many Muslim immigrants have maintained strong ties with their countries of birth and have not paid much attention to social welfare issues. Traditionally, they turn to immediate family and friends for help. However, a huge vacuum exists for those who do not have a network of family and friends to turn to. In the absence of culturally competent social work services, a large number of people in the Muslim community are isolated. This isolation has been exacerbated by the effects of 9/11, which underscores the need for social workers and social service agencies.

As in other communities, Muslim New Yorkers also have problems such as intergenerational issues, domestic violence, acculturation, language and educational barriers, economic and social pressures and class/ethnic divisions. Most of these problems were not even recognized or acknowledged until 9/11. Since then, many issues that simmered for years have surfaced, challenging the community’s resources which are ill-

equipped to handle problems compounded by the aftermath of 9/11.

Underserved and Under-resourced

Currently the Muslim community is extremely underserved and under-resourced. The lack of resources and a severe shortage of Muslim social work professionals are causing many issues to go unaddressed. Unlike churches and synagogues, very few mosques have any social services beyond small charitable services/donations; yet imams and other leaders are often forced to deal with family and individual crises. There are very few social service agencies equipped to deal with the unique needs of the Muslim community. Mainstream and non-Muslim social work professionals are not adequately trained and do not understand the complexity of the needs of Muslim New Yorkers.

My experience with social work professionals has revealed to me that there is little or no knowledge of Islamic holidays and prayers and their importance to the Muslim community. I often find myself reminding colleagues to avoid scheduling events that coincide with the most important days and times of Muslim prayers or to be mindful of the sanctity of the month of Ramadan. I have met with very little success in this area.

In order to become a resource to Muslims in New York, social work professionals will need to be trained to understand the Muslim faith, culture, and diversity. They also need to put in extra work to develop a relationship of trust so that Muslim organizations feel comfortable referring clients to them. In short, they need to become culturally sensitive, understand the needs and challenges of Muslims, build trusting relationships, and find partners in the Muslim community. It is essential that social work professionals reach out to the Muslim communities to gain first-hand

NASW-NYC Disaster Trauma Working Group Members Invited

The Disaster Trauma Working Group, chaired by Madelyn Miller, (DTWG) was created after the 1996 TWA airline crash to offer social workers an on-going context for learning and support on various aspects of disaster trauma work. In bi-monthly meetings, the DTWG supports social workers’ interest and experience as service providers. Many committee members are trained American Red Cross Disaster Mental Health Services volunteers who provide assistance after events such as fires, building collapses, aviation disasters, and even memorials. In the wake of international events, including civil wars and terrorist attacks, DTWG has co-sponsored forums on immigrant and refugee trauma. After September 11, 2001, DTWG organized a five-week seminar that provided support to NYC social workers.

DTWG meetings include presentations on worldwide disaster experiences, trauma and loss issues, disaster preparedness, and the impact on social workers of trauma work. DTWG continues to examine disaster and response considerations, most recently in events surrounding the Indian Ocean region tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. Pauline Boss, author of the book, *Ambiguous Loss*, presented on unresolved loss issues of survivors. Barbara Preitler spoke on psychosocial care in Sri Lanka after the tsunami. The Committee chair also presented on the following topics: “Working in the Immediate Aftermath of Disaster within a Long-term Context: Looking at Psychological First Aid” and “Ongoing Work after Disaster: A Local and Global Perspective.”

For More Information about The Disaster Trauma Working Group, email naswnyc@naswnyc.org or call (212) 668-0050. □

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experience to counter what the media presents.

Shortage of Social Work Professionals Serving the Muslim Community

Why is there a serious shortage of social work professionals in the Muslim community? Very few of our students go to social work schools. Parents eager to “do well” in their adopted country encourage and even push their children to become lawyers, doctors, bankers and business professionals. Those Muslims who might have the desire to enter the social work profession often do not have adequate educational preparation.

Even with the awareness of the gap in services needed, it will be several years, perhaps a decade, before Muslim social workers are trained and ready to take on the challenge of serving their community. In the mean-time, non-Muslim social workers need to be brought up to speed through education and special training. This is a task that *Turning Point* for

Women and Families seeks to accomplish through its mentoring and internship programs.

Bridging the Gap in Providing Social Services to Muslims

As city agencies refer urgent cases to *Turning Point*, we have found that Muslim immigrants respond to social services depending on their level of education, ability to communicate in English, and ability to network with people from their own ethnic backgrounds. They are likely to develop a trusting relationship with people who understand their faith and culture. They are often deeply relieved to be heard and understood in a safe and non-judgmental space.

Since most mainstream social workers seriously lack understanding of the needs and challenges of the Muslim community

in the post-9/11 era, they will need intensive training to become sensitized to the diversity and culture of Muslims. Social workers also need to challenge their own stereotypes and put extra effort into building relationships of trust with Muslim community organizations.

Not only do mainstream social work professionals need training to become sensitized to Muslim culture, but such social workers also need to challenge their own stereotypes about Muslim culture.

“Increased sensitivity will also help us promote the profession of social work as a service of human compassion that cares for Muslims and all others alike.”

In short, social work professionals need to find partners in the diverse Muslim community and

gain first hand knowledge about Muslims. Increased sensitivity will also help us promote the profession of social work as a service of human compassion that cares for Muslims and all others alike. □

Madelyn Miller

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regulation, and shared meaning, and attending to vicarious trauma can ensure integrity and balance, and address self-care. Accompanying this, ongoing learning with a broad perspective on trauma, loss, and human resourcefulness is important to develop skills for responding in disaster’s immediate and emerging aftermath, in particular through “Psychological First Aid”. And we need to consider the breadth and complexity of longer term or later engagements with individuals and communities across the extended life span of disaster.

Social Work’s Obligation

And finally, as a profession, we’re distinctly poised to engage proactively

across our diverse roles, settings, and practice perspectives, to support individuals and communities after disaster, in restoring connections, a sense of community, and continuity toward the future.

We have an obligation to integrate these issues into our clinical practice, community work, program planning, and policy decisions. We need to support resiliency, active participation, and community building, conscientiously adding a community approach to our work after disaster, considering community well-being.

We must actively support new priorities to plan for future disaster, collaboratively

engaging colleagues in planning, working, and learning together. And we must support inclusive community initiatives that offer purpose and enhance a restorative process through communality. As anniversaries continue across our world, our times of sad reflection will always be balanced by the remarkable human capacities to persevere, in connection with others, to face the future. □

For a description of the Disaster Trauma Working Group, which is chaired by Ms. Miller, see page 7.