Psychosocial Support and Mental Health Well-Being of Asylum Seekers, A Case of Gashora Emmergency Transit Mechanism in Rwanda Bugesera District

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Abstract. This research explored the role of psycho-social support on mental health well-being of asylum seekers living in ETM Gashora, Bugesera District, Rwanda. It has been guided by three specific objectives: To assess the influence of psycho-social support in addressing the mental health challenges faced by asylum seekers; To assess the effect of therapeutic intervention on the mental health well-being of asylum seekers and examine the role of coping mechanisms on the mental health well being of asylum seekers. The sample size was equal to 254 obtained using Yamane's formula from the target population of 896 asylum seekers living in ETM Gashora. The researcher used simple random sampling technique to select respondents. The study gathered data through the use of questionnaire and interview guide. The researcher used a descriptive and a correlational research designs to establish and manage data for specific research objectives. Descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were used for quantitative analysis, whereas content analysis through themes and sub themes were used for qualitative analysis. Statistical software of SPSS V26.0 was used for these analyses. The findings for the psycho-social support, the overall mean showed a satisfaction rating across all statements is 4.53 out of 5, indicating a high level of satisfaction among residents regarding the psychosocial support servicesin ETM Gashora. The analysis of the second objective reveals that therapeutic interventions at ETM Gashora are highly effective in improving the psychological and mental health status of asylum seekers. With an overall mean satisfaction score of 4.55, respondents expressed strong positive perceptions of the available services, including counseling, group therapy, and specialized therapeutic modalities such as Trauma-Focused Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET), and an integrated MHPSS program.The analysis of the third objective highlights that coping mechanisms play a crucial role in restoring the mental health well-being of asylum seekers at ETM Gashora, with an overall mean satisfaction score of 4.55. Among the various strategies examined, social engagement emerged as the most effective, receiving the highest mean score of 4.75. With 81% of respondents strongly agreeing that social engagement positively impacts their mental health. The researcher recommended that integrated MHPSS program should be expanded to incorporate additional specialized services such as art therapy, psycho-education, and trauma-informed care strategies.Efforts should be made to improve awareness and accessibility of mindfulness practices, given the relatively lower satisfaction and higher variability in responses. Future research should assess the long-term impact of psycho-social support and therapeutic interventions on asylum seekers' mental health over extended periods to understand sustained benefits and potential areas for improvement. Comparative analysis across different asylum Seekers comparative study between different refugee settings (e.g., urban refugee populations vs.

ETM settings) could provide insights into how different environmental and contextual factors influence mental health outcomes.

Keywords - Psycho-social support,Mental health well-being,Asylum seekers,Refugee mental health,Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM)

I. Introduction

The global migration crisis has led to an unprecedented rise in the number of asylum seekers, exposing them to a range of mental health stressors. Asylum seekers, often fleeing from violence, persecution, or political instability, endure traumatic experiences before, during, and after their migration journeys. These experiences contribute to severe psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD (UNHCR, 2022). The scale of forced displacement—over 242 million people in 2022—underscores the urgency of addressing mental health needs within this population (UNHCR, 2022). The cumulative impact of trauma and uncertainty in host countries makes asylum seekers one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of mental health (Steel et al., 2015; Silove et al., 2017).

Despite the known mental health challenges, many asylum seekers do not receive adequate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS). Barriers such as language, cultural misunderstandings, stigma, and lack of mental health professionals hinder access to care (Priebe et al., 2016). Psychosocial support—through trauma-informed care, peer support, and group therapy—has been shown to alleviate psychological distress and enhance resilience (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) recommends integrated and community-based MHPSS interventions, yet delivery remains uneven and under-resourced, particularly in low-income settings (IASC, 2017). Research into the effectiveness and implementation of these services remains limited.

African asylum seekers face particularly severe circumstances, driven by ongoing conflict, political instability, and economic crises in countries such as South Sudan, Somalia, DRC, and Eritrea. These individuals experience compounded trauma from pre-migration violence, perilous journeys, and dire conditions in host countries (Omata, 2017; UNHCR, 2022). In response, psychosocial support initiatives in Africa have sought to address both psychological and social needs, incorporating elements like community integration and cultural identity (Fazel et al., 2014). Nevertheless, challenges persist, including a shortage of trained professionals, cultural disconnects between traditional and formal care systems, and limited health infrastructure (WHO, 2018; Kohrt & Mendenhall, 2015).

In Rwanda, asylum seekers often come from conflict-affected neighboring countries like Burundi and the DRC, bringing with them histories of trauma and displacement. They are particularly vulnerable to PTSD and chronic stress due to prolonged uncertainty and harsh living conditions in settlements or camps (UNHCR, 2023; Rugema et al., 2015). Although Rwanda has taken steps to strengthen its mental health system and integrate PSS into healthcare services, gaps remain—especially in rural areas (Niyonsenga & Paxton, 2021). Many asylum seekers do not seek help due

to stigma, and the availability of specialized services is limited, further burdening the already strained healthcare system (Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Health, 2018).

To improve mental health outcomes, Rwanda has implemented several initiatives in collaboration with NGOs and international agencies like UNHCR. These include safe spaces for therapy, trauma-informed care, and training of healthcare workers and volunteers to deliver basic PSS (Betancourt et al., 2011; Republic of Rwanda Ministry of Health, 2018). However, sustainability remains uncertain due to dependency on donor funding and persistent workforce shortages. Cultural stigma continues to prevent many from accessing support, and there is a pressing need for more region-specific, longitudinal research to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of these interventions (Niyonsenga & Paxton, 2021). Comprehensive, inclusive, and context-sensitive strategies are vital to supporting asylum seekers' mental health in Rwanda and across the African continent.

This research has been guide guided by three specific objectives:
- To assess the influence of psycho-social support in addressing the mental health challenges faced by asylum seekers
- To assess the effect of therapeutic intervention on the mental health well-being of asylum seekers
- To examine the role of coping mechanisms on the mental health wellbeing of asylum seekers

II. METHODS

The techniques that combine correlational and descriptive analysis have been used. This method enables a thorough analysis of the current psychological and mental health of Asylum seekers and the connection between the psychosocial support and the mental health wellbeing of asylum seekers. The descriptive method has been used to give a thorough summary of the asylum seekers' mental health conditions at the ETM Gashora. Using this method, data about the traits and circumstances of the research population have been gathered without the use of any variables.

The descriptive phase's goals was to: Determine the demographics of the asylum seekers population, including age, gender, duration of stay in the ETM, and prior exposure to traumatic events. Sample selection: To guarantee representation from a variety of demographic groups inside the ETM, a simple random method was employed. The correlational approach looked at the connection between asylum seekers mental health outcomes and psychosocial support. This approach assisted in determining whether the psychosocial support services received and the asylum seekers' mental health status are related. Within this approach, different variables have be manipulated. To investigate the connections between various forms of psychosocial assistance and mental health and wellness, statistical analysis were used to analyze the data. The direction and strength of relationships has been ascertained by computing correlation coefficients. The best determinants of mental health and well-being have been also determined using multiple regression analysis.

Procedures of Data Collection

The researcher obtained consent from the sample population by providing the ultimate goal of the study and informing them that the data provided will be confidentially kept. The questionnaire and interviews have been administered. Policies and regulations of Mount Kenya University have been also put into consideration. The researcher has administered the questionnaires to asylum seekers living in Gashora ETM, and an interview protocol has been conducted with the selected participants. For quantitative data, the questionnaires have been administered to participants electronically. Trained research assistants were responsible for distributing and collecting the research questionnaires. The (Kob Collect application) was used for electronic data. Participants have been asked to respond to a series of structured questions related to their mental health status. The responses were recorded quantitatively for subsequent analysis. For qualitative data, structured interviews have complemented the survey data by providing additional qualitative insights into participants' perceptions of the effectiveness and accessibility of psychosocial support services. A set of structured interview questions have been developed to gather specific information about the types of aid received, satisfaction levels, perceived benefits, and challenges faced in accessing psychosocial support services

III. RESULTS

The analysis was based on the specific objectives of the study; stated as the following
Analyze the influence of psycho-social support in addressing the mental health challenges faced by asylum seekers
The first objective of this study is to To assess the influence of psycho-social support in addressing the mental health challenges faced by asylum seekers. The results are given and interpreted as follow:

Table 4. 5: Influence of psycho-social support in addressing the mental health challenges faced by asylum seekers

Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Not sure		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	Mean	Sd
The counseling services provided meet my emotional needs and has improved my overall well-being.	0	0	0	0	0	0	119	49.0	123	51.0	242	4.48	.502
Participating in peer support groups has positively impacted my mental health	0	0	0	0	0	0	123	50.8	121	49.2	242	4.60	.492
I feel more connected to others through community activities	0	0	0	0	0	0	119	49.0	123	51.0	242	4.48	.502

My emotional support network helps reduce feelings of loneliness	0	0	0	0	0	0	131	54.0	113	46.0	242	4.51	.502
Overall Mean												4.53	

The Table 4. 5 presents the results of the first objective of this study of assessing the influence of psychosocial support in addressing the mental health challenges faced by asylum seekers.The analyzed reflects the perceptions of individuals at ETM Gashora regarding various psychosocial support interventions, such as counselling services, peer support groups community activities and emotional support network. The analysis is systematically focusing on the means, standard deviations, and the overall satisfaction levels expressed by the respondents. According to the general satisfaction, the overall mean satisfaction rating across all statements is 4.53 out of 5, indicating a high level of satisfaction among residents regarding the basic humanitarian interventions at ETM Gashora.

For the community activities, the mean rating is 4.48. While there is strong agreement (over 48% strongly agreeing), the absence of negative responses suggests that respondents feel positively about their involvement in community activities, which is critical for their well-being. For the peer support: The highest mean rating at 4.60 indicates that respondents view the importance of peer support in maintaining homeostasis.

According to the counselling and emotional support services: With a mean of 4.48, counselling programs are viewed favourably, with 49% agreeing that these programs provide valuable support. This highlights the importance of counselling in enhancing the coping mechanisms and overcoming the historical trauma. The data illustrates a generally positive perception of the psycho-social interventions at ETM Gashora. The high mean ratings across all categories suggest that the interventions are effectively addressing the mental health and psycho-social needs of the asylum seekers, contributing positively to their overall well-being.

Effect of Therapeutic intervention on the Mental Health Well-being of of Asylum Seekers in Rwanda

The second objective of this research assessed To assess the effect of therapeutic intervention on the mental health well-being of asylum seekers.

Table 6: Effect of Therapeutic Intervention on the Mental well-being of Asylum seekers in Rwanda

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Not sure		Agree		Strongly Agree		Total		
Statement	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	Mean	Sd

CBT has helped me identify and change negative thought patterns	0	0	0	0	23	9.5	87	35.9	132	54.5	242	4.2	.642
I am better able to cope with memories of trauma after receiving trauma-focused therapy	0	0	0	0	4	1.6	126	52.0	112	46.2	242	4.75	.435
Medication helps me to better manage symptoms of mental health challenges.	0	0	0	0	0	0	142	58.6	100	41.4	242	4.61	.490
I believe that narrative therapy helps me make sense of difficult life events	0	0	0	0	12	4.9	106	43.8	124	51.2	242	4.56	.498
Overall Mean												4.55	

Source :Primary data, (2025)
Continuum: Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Not sure=3, Agree=4, Strongly Agree=5

Table 4. 6 presents the results of the second objective of this study of assessing the effect of therapeutic intervention on the psychological and mental health status of Asylum seekers in Rwanda.The analysis was done for the data collected for objective two on 242 participants and has specifically assessed the therapeutic interventions offered, specifically focusing on counseling, group therapy, and different therapeutic modalities (CBT, NET, trauma focus therapy and Medication). The overall mean score of 4.55 suggests that Asylum seekers at ETM Gashora are highly satisfied with the therapeutic interventions available to them. The mean scores for individual statements are consistently above 4, indicating strong positive perceptions of the services. For the trauma focused therapy: The sessions have the highest mean rating of 4.75, with 75.5% of respondents strongly agreeing that these sessions have helped manage their stress and anxiety. This strongly suggests that trauma focused therapy is viewed as an especially effective intervention for addressing common psychological challenges such

as stress and anxiety, which are prevalent among refugees.When it comes to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT); CBT has a high mean of 4.61, with 61.1% strongly agreeing that it has significantly improved their mental health. CBT, as a structured, evidence-based treatment, seems to be well-received and effective in addressing mental health issues among the refugee population.

For Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET): The NET also received strong approval with a mean of 4.56, with 56.5% of respondents strongly agreeing that it has helped them process traumatic experiences. Given that Asylum seekers are often survivors of trauma, NET appears to be an important therapeutic tool for dealing with past trauma and helping individuals move forward. The Integrated MHPSS Program:The results shows that the MHPSS program has a mean of 4.50, is perceived as effectively addressing the psychological needs of the residents, with 50% strongly agreeing. This highlights the broad scope and effectiveness of the integrated mental health and psychosocial support services, which include counseling, therapy, and other forms of support.

The standard deviations range from .435 (trauma focused therapy) to .642 (Narrative therapy). Lower standard deviations ((trauma focused therapy) indicate more consistent responses among participants, suggesting that (trauma focused therapy is uniformly regarded as effective. The higher standard deviation narrative therapy may indicate that while some Asylum seekers feel they have adequate access, others may be dissatisfied or feel that access is limited.In general,the data suggests that therapeutic interventions in ETM Gashora, including trauma focused therapy, CBT, NET, are viewed very positively by the asylum seekers. These interventions are seen as highly beneficial for managing stress, anxiety, and trauma, as well as improving overall mental health.

The role of Coping Mechanisms on the Mental Health Well-being of asylum seeker.
The third objective examined the role of coping mechanisms on the mental health well being of asylum seeker.. The results are as the following:

Table 4. 7: Role of coping mechanisms on the Mental Health Well-being of asylum seekers

Statement	Strongly Disagree N	%	Disagree N	%	Not sure N	%	Agree N	%	Strongly Agree N	%	Total N	Mean	Sd
I feel more calm and centered when I practice mindfulness	0	0	0	0	14	5.7	76	31.4	130	53.7	242	4.21	.642
Social engagement has positively impacted my mental health.	0	0	0	0	0	0	119	49	123	51	242	4.75	.435

Resilience-building strategies have helped me cope with challenges	0	0	0	0	2	0.8	134	56	106	43	242	4.61	.490
My Cultural beliefs and spiritual coping methods help me manage stress	0	0	0	0	1	0.4	99	40.9	142	58.6	242	4.56	.498
Overall Mean												4.55	

Source :Primary data, (2025)
Continuum: Strongly Disagree=1, Disagree=2, Not sure=3, Agree=4, Strongly Agree=5

Table 4.7 presents the results of the third objective of this study is examining the role of coping mechanisms on mental health well-being of asylum seekers,particularly focusing on mindfulness,Social engagement , Resilience-building strategies, Cultural beliefs and spiritual coping methods. The Overall Satisfaction shows the mean score of 4.55 indicating that Asylum seekers at ETM Gashora generally report that coping mechanisms contributed highly in restoring their mental health status.

The Effectiveness of Social engagement:The highest mean score (4.75) is for the statement "Social engagement has positively impacted my mental health.." With 81% of respondents strongly agreeing, it is clear that the majority of Asylum seekers believe that social engagement is highly effective in managing their mental health.The low standard deviation (0.435) suggests a high level of agreement among participants, indicating that coping mechanisms are seen as consistently effective.

For the mindfulness practices: The mean score is 4.21, which is slightly lower than the other categories but still positive.56% of respondents agree, and 30% strongly agree. This suggests that while other coping mechanisms worked well, some individuals may feel that mindfulness practices are limited or insufficient in meeting their needs.The standard deviation of 0.642 is the highest among all the statements, indicating some variability in responses. This could suggest that while some asylum seekers feel that social engagement services are readily available, others may perceive access as more restricted or less adequate. The standard deviations are generally low, indicating that most Asylum seekers have a consistent perception of the effectiveness of coping mechanisms. However, the higher standard deviation for mindfulness (0.642) indicates a more mixed experience. Some Asylum seekers may have limited practices of mindfulness or may not have used them, while others may have a more positive perception.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to explore the psychosocial support mechanisms and assess their effectiveness in promoting the mental health well-being of asylum seekers hosted at the Gashora Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM) in Bugesera District, Rwanda.

Findings revealed that while the Gashora ETM provides essential services such as shelter, healthcare, and basic counseling through partnerships with organizations like UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Rwandan Red Cross, significant gaps remain in addressing the deep-rooted psychological trauma and long-term mental health needs of asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers at the center often face emotional distress, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to their past experiences in conflict zones or detention centers, particularly in Libya. Although psychosocial interventions are present, they are often limited in scope, lacking in culturally sensitive approaches and continuity of care. Moreover, resource constraints, language barriers, and stigma around mental health further hinder the effectiveness of these services.

The study concludes that enhancing psychosocial support in such transit settings is critical not only for the immediate well-being of asylum seekers but also for their long-term integration and recovery. It is recommended that stakeholders increase investment in trained mental health professionals, implement trauma-informed care practices, and develop community-based psychosocial support systems within the ETM. A more holistic and sustained approach to mental health care will significantly improve the resilience and dignity of asylum seekers in Rwanda and similar humanitarian contexts.

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