



FAMILY SERVICE ASSOCIATION  
OF TORONTO

For People. For Change.

**The Wellesley Institute Urban Health Research Program  
Enabling Grant Final Report**

April 10, 2007

## 1. Abstract

A literature review focused on war-trauma and displacement affecting newcomer families, children and youth identified that little work has been documented on interventions that focus on mental health promotion and well-being, and building resiliency, capacity and strength of children and youth affected by war. In partnership with the University of Toronto, FSA developed a study proposal that will provide a unique approach to exploring the relationship between youth affected by war, and their strengths in coping, mental health promotion and resilience. The findings will contribute to the enhancement of a strength-based model implemented by a community driven project supporting immigrant and refugee youth, and will be shared with various ethno-cultural communities and agencies to foster insight and practical strategies towards mental health promotion and resilience.

## 2. Project Update

The project included the following activities:

### a) Literature Review:

More than 200 articles published since 2003 on the impact of war on children and youth were reviewed. A qualitative analytical approach was used to determine the themes and to code the articles reviewed. Four broad thematic categories emerged:

- **Atrocities and reactions** A number of articles examine the atrocities of war and reactions experienced by children, youth and their families. Such atrocities included ethnic cleansing; witnessing casualties; living in extreme life-threatening circumstances; facing daily combat and gunfire; burned homes, villages and cities; living in bomb shelters, and surviving sexual abuse. According to the literature, girls were found to suffer greater post-traumatic stress reactions than boys due to experiences of sexual victimization, which was very common. Reactions to war included: fear, panic, feelings of loss, confusion, nightmares, grief, worry and withdrawal.
  - *There is less research that examines the needs and coping strategies of these children/youth.*

- **Impact of war on children and youth**

The body of research measuring the impact of war on children and youth indicates a correlation between exposure to war and a range of short-lived and chronic conditions. Common consequences experienced across cultures include Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety and psychosomatic complaints that may affect developmental processes. Age, developmental level, family and socio-cultural factors are important mediators of the effects of war on traumatized youth. Some studies have also indicated youth maintain optimism and positive visions for their future.

- *There is little research using qualitative methods to understand how these symptoms affect their lives, how their traumatic experiences have been mediated by various factors and how youth develop optimism and resilience.*

- **Resettlement experience**

Both adults and children/youth who have experienced war in their countries of origin show a wide range of reactions in their post-migration settings. Strong relationships between earlier war experience, resettlement strain, and symptoms (e.g., PTSD) were found to affect the adaptation and integration process. Some studies indicated that the stronger the war trauma experience, the higher the PTSD and level of adhesion to their culture of origin, and the lower adaptation and integration. A number of studies indicated that newcomer/refugee families feel like marginal members of their mainstream/host societies and continue to suffer from the effects of war, trauma and displacement yet there is limited interest in psychosocial services of any kind. Research also referred to individual coping strategies such as sleeping, dreaming, changing ones cognitive framework, tolerating ambiguity and working long hours.

- *Few studies expanded on what refugee youth found useful from their war-related experiences or the skills and supports they have used to cope with them; what has fostered their adaptation and integration; and why newcomers may not be interested in obtaining psychosocial services, or what types of services were helpful to them.*

### ➤ **Intervention related challenges**

The literature review indicated the need for multicultural refugee-receiving societies to provide appropriate supports for war traumatized newcomers/refugees. However, there are many intervention-related challenges. Interventions focus is on reducing the prevalence of PTSD and other war-related psychopathologies, raising awareness and counteracting denial of war-related symptoms and increasing knowledge of the complexity of the trauma response.

- *Less work has been documented on children and youth interventions that focus on mental health promotion and well-being and building resiliency, capacity and strength of children and youth affected by war.*

This literature review identifies gaps in existing research and supports the development of our research proposal.

## **b) Consultation with Service Providers**

FSA staff continued their active involvement in the Children and Youth Affected by War and Displacement Coalition which includes a range of mainstream and ethno-cultural, ethno-racial organizations which provide direct service and/or community development with and in newcomer communities. Staff were leaders in the planning and implementation of two main activities of the Coalition to raise awareness about the needs of newcomer children/youth and families affected by war and migration. Playing with Rainbows (PWR), a series of play-based educational sessions for children 5-13 years and their parents was implemented in the Somali, Serbian, Iranian/Farsi speaking, Afghan, Tamil and Kosovo communities. The project staff also worked in conjunction with the Society for the Aid of Sri Lankan Minorities in Canada, Midaynta, Dejinta Beja, Kosovo Community Services and the Settlement and Education Program (located in the public schools). The other large consultation activity was the Community Consultation Forum held on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2005. More than 90 participants from across the Greater Toronto area including community leaders, service providers from the education, settlement services, recreation, child welfare organizations, ethno-specific organizations, the justice sector and representatives from the municipal, provincial and federal governments, contributed to a lively dialogue and discussion about the framework for interventions to address the impact of war and migration on children/youth and identification of actions required to create a comprehensive service model.

## **c) Partnership building**

The partnership with the Children and Youth Affected by War and Displacement Coalition was strengthened, and a new collaboration with an academic/research group at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Nursing was established.

## **d) Research Proposal Writing**

In partnership with a research team at the University of Toronto (led by Dr. Nazilla Khanlou in the Faculty of Nursing) we developed a research proposal to address the gaps in research about youth and war by: 1) exploring the positive mental health promotion, coping skills and resilience of youth; 2) utilizing qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of their needs and resilience; and 3) developing capacity-building approaches for youth, involving them in the research. We hope to build a strengths-based model/manual to share with various communities to improve acculturation, resettlement and social integration of youth within multicultural settings.

FSA's Community and Neighbourhood Development Unit has been supporting a community-driven program called the Iranian-Canadian Youth Development Project, an initiative intended to improve the academic and social success of Iranian-Canadian newcomers between the ages of 16 and 19. The initial evaluation of this pilot project indicated resounding success by the close to 60 people who participated.

We intend to build on the positive framework of this strength-based model, and on our learning thus far combining the research with some very practical, community-based approaches to dealing with the issue of war and trauma and its impact for children and youth.

*The study will involve:*

- 1) **Evaluating** the existing Iranian-Canadian Youth Development Project (identifying the strengths, limitations and improvements for the program) through questionnaires, focus groups and/or interviews.
- 2) **Exploring** the unique needs and strengths of newcomer/refugee youth and their families related to their experiences of war, trauma and displacement to better understand the skills/supports that have been useful in promoting and maintaining their mental health. Incorporate these findings/recommendations into the existing program.
- 3) **Developing** a strengths-based intervention manual with youth to outline this program's findings to share with other newcomer communities.
- 4) **Coordinating** communication and dissemination activities with youth, parents, policy makers and service providers

Please see attached copy of the research proposal.

### **3. Reflection**

The study will provide a unique approach to exploring the relationship between youth affected by war, and their strengths in coping, mental health promotion and resilience. The findings will contribute to our understanding of the specific dimension of strength and resilience and will lead to enhancement of a community development and a service model. The policy and practice recommendations will be shared with various ethno-cultural communities and agencies to foster insight and practical strategies towards mental health promotion and resilience of immigrant and refugee youth.

### **4. Next steps**

We are now exploring opportunities for funding with the Laidlaw Foundation and other possible funders to move the proposal to full research stage.

We're very excited about the possibilities this enabling grant has afforded us and look forward to seeing where the next phase will take the work.