

MEDIA RELEASE
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Sudanese refugee statements hurt community

Psychologists are concerned that recent public statements relating to the integration of Sudanese refugees in Australia have had a significant impact upon the local African community.

Since these statements were made, psychologists working within the community have observed distress, outrage, and a sense of rejection amongst Sudanese and other African community members.

"When influential public figures such as Government ministers make unsupported statements, they can provide encouragement to racist perceptions among a minority of the mainstream population. We are particularly concerned that a senior member of the Government would make statements based upon anecdotal impressions and hearsay. The assertions were not supported by credible evidence," said Australian Psychological Society President, Amanda Gordon.

The Australian Psychological Society urges all political parties and their spokespeople to avoid using any fear-related tactics that marginalize the most vulnerable groups in Australian society.

Research has shown that humanitarian refugees have higher levels of distress than within the general population. Research conducted by Schweitzer, Greenslade and Kagee in 2007 shows that the Sudanese population in Australia have been highly exposed to traumatic events, such as war, torture and famine. These are the very reasons members of this community have fled to Australia.

The Sudanese community is relatively new to Australia and requires time to heal, survive and then thrive in the Australian context. There is evidence that Sudanese refugees, like other refugee groups, can benefit from social support particularly from within their own community, to assist with adjusting to the Australian culture and recovering from trauma (Schweitzer et al 2005).

"The demonization of newly arrived migrant groups does not promote social cohesion nor encourage community building," says Gordon. "We should be fostering an environment in which these groups can become part of the larger Australian community. The successful integration of Italian, Greek and Vietnamese communities indicates that time, accommodation and acceptance is required, not victim blaming."

The Australian Psychological Society sees value in supporting research into the continual needs of newly arrived migrant groups, and in developing interventions to assist recently arrived refugees from Africa. Nothing is to be gained by denigrating a whole community.

The APS is the largest professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 15,700 members. The APS is committed to advancing psychology as a discipline and profession. It spreads the message that psychologists make a difference to peoples' lives, through improving psychological knowledge and community wellbeing.

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