

Brief Report

Stress in Humanitarian Workers: Case of the UNHCR Office in Senegal

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INTRODUCTION

In emerging countries, the consequences of stress remain undervalued. Stress in workplace is increasingly recognized as one of the most serious occupational health hazards reducing workers' satisfaction and productivity, as well as increasing absenteeism and turnover.¹⁻³ At the beginning, a heavy workload, a lack of recognition of the work done and communication difficulties.⁴ There is also the need to deal with situations where people feel disarmed (suffering of beneficiaries, war) or, on the contrary, situations of waiting without the possibility of acting for security reasons.⁵ The aim of our study was to assess the prevalence of stress among the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and its local partner (OFADEC) staff in Dakar, Senegal, and to determine the main stress factors.

METHODS

We conducted a descriptive cross-sectional study from May 30 to December 30, 2012. Sixty individuals were selected through random sampling. Using a self-administered questionnaire, we recorded the sociodemographic characteristics, the lifestyle, the working conditions, the career plan and the proposals for improvement, the assessment of the stress and the relational problems. Data was entered and processed by Epi-Info 3.5.4 and Microsoft Excel software.

RESULTS

Fifty-two employees participated in the study: 30 from OFADEC and 22 from UNHCR with a male predominance (sex ratio = 1.73). It was a young population, between 20 and 39 years in 53.84% of the cases (table 1), smoking in 11.53% of the cases and having sleep disorders in 15.38% of the cases. Two-thirds of respondents had a fixed-term contract (78.8%). The prevalence of stress was estimated to be 40.38% (n = 21) predominantly within the male population (sex ratio = 2). Almost all Stressed people (92.9%) worked as a team and 66.7% had been working continuously during the last 12 months. The majority (42.9%, n = 25) felt exhausted, worried (23.8%, n = 12), ill-being (19%, n = 10) and had gone through other several feelings in 14.3% (n = 7) of the cases. Two-thirds (71.4%, n = 37) of stressed individuals took an aggressive approach to stress and slightly more than half (56.7%, n = 29) reported being verbally abused.

Table 1: Distribution of workers by age group

Age group (years old)	OFADEC		UNHCR		Total	
	Effective	Frequency (%)	Effective	Frequency (%)	Effective	Frequency (%)
20 – 39	16	53.33	12	54.55	28	53.84
40 – 59	14	46.67	9	40.90	23	44.23
>60	0	0.0	1	4.55	1	1.93
Total	30	100	22	100	52	100

DISCUSSION

The prevalence of stress was higher compared to certain series reported in the literature.^{6,7} The type of contract in

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organizations and NGOs (renewable one-year contract) creates a job insecurity especially at the end of the contract and therefore a source of stress among its employees. The average age of 39 in our series, shows the youthfulness of our study population. The stressed people of our series encountered not only multiple relational problems with refugees, but also with colleagues and hierarchy. Effective management of stress at work requires organizational arrangements that are conducive to the physical and mental health of workers.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interest.

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