

A MANIFESTO FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL
SUPPORT IN TIMES OF COLLAPSE



RESIST,

CONNECT

AND

STAND UP!

WHO WE ARE

Since 2020, we met as a group of more than 30 individuals out of 12 organizations from four continents that provide psychosocial support to people affected by sociopolitical violence and grew into a network called “The Transnational Exchange on Staff Care and Psychosocial Accompaniment Practices in Contexts of Violence”*. Through regular – mostly digital – exchanges we have learned, that despite the differences in contexts, approaches and languages, we share similar concerns and visions of psychosocial work. With this paper we try to express these concerns and visions to open up discussions and further networking.

Want to connect with the Transnational Exchange on Staff Care and Psychosocial Accompaniment Practices in Contexts of Violence? Please contact medico international: manifesto@medico.de

* During the pandemic, Aluna Psychosocial Accompaniment, Haukari – Association for International Cooperation and medico international launched the exchange in the digital space.

RESIST, CONNECT AND STAND UP!

A MANIFESTO FOR PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT IN TIMES OF COLLAPSE

In a world of extreme inequalities, growing authoritarian politics of disruptive violence and a loss of rights to the power of the strongest, the suffering of billions of people escalates. As psychosocial support workers from different parts of the world we have intimate knowledge of these devastating impacts. We observe unbearable conditions as we walk in the company of people, organizations and communities who defend human rights. And we experience a psychosocial sector that allows itself to be part of the problem. With this statement we are objecting to the abuse of psychological approaches. Instead, we want to reclaim the political and emancipatory perspectives of psychosocial work and call for networking and solidarity among like-minded colleagues.

RESIST

OUR CONCERNS



1. DEPOLITICIZED PSYCHOSOCIAL WORK HAS CONTRIBUTED TO DISEMPOWERMENT: OUR CRITICISM OF CONCEPTS OF TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE.

Psychological frameworks like trauma have become dominant ways of describing social suffering. Even if once historically useful, their use has discouraged and silenced large parts of the psychosocial community from explicitly naming a systems of power and injustice. Especially with the concept of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD], the term trauma has been so much used, abused and attached to completely different experiences, that it has lost its meaningfulness in the context of political and social violence. It risks to individualise and pathologize brutal experiences of individuals, families, communities, whole societies and social struggles. In a similar way, the concept of resilience has been coopted by neoliberal ideology as a justification for promoting the “survival of the fittest”. It tends to delegate the dealing with social violence and exclusion to marginalized individuals and social groups themselves. Instead of defending public protection and social care, they are expected to “strengthen their resilience” to survive under the most inhuman conditions.

2. THE PSYCHOSOCIAL APPROACH TO JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION HAS BEEN INSTRUMENTALIZED.

Serious human rights crimes committed by states and corporations like torture, massacres, genocides or colonial crimes are seldomly met with justice and accountability. Instead, token psychosocial programs and superficial psychosocial efforts replace genuine legal redress. To address injustice done to survivors, it needs more than counselling. It requires legal justice, reparations, redistribution of resources, memorials and a strong framework and culture of human rights.

3. CARING IS SYSTEMATICALLY EXPLOITED.

The exhaustion and burn out of psychosocial carers continue to escalate. Not only is violence and oppression increasing. More tasks and expectations are shifted to the psychosocial sector, while public support and protection, funding resources and caring working conditions are reduced. Frequently, measures implemented for “self-care” and “staff care” are individualizing the exploitative impact and are shifting responsibility to individual coping strategies.

CONNECT

HOW WE UNDERSTAND
PSYCHOSOCIAL ACCOM-
PANIMENT



1. THE IMPACTS OF VIOLENCE ARE SOCIOPOLITICAL.

Human beings are fundamentally social, mental health is always political and social. Various “mental health crises” by people and communities affected by sociopolitical violence are “normal reactions to an abnormal situation.” Mental health is not only an individual process but a collective construction, psycho-social trauma caused by political violence and war impact at personal, family, community and social levels. We address the collective because the impacts are collective. If we name and shame the “abnormal”, the “sick” character of structural and oppressive violence, we move away from the stigma of the individual of being “sick”. While violence can have psycho-emotional and psychiatric effects, we call for a broader understanding of the impacts on economic conditions, on political projects and visions, on social ties and networks.

2. WE FOCUS NOT ONLY ON THE SYMPTOMS OF SUFFERING BUT ALSO ON ITS ROOT CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES.

Psychosocial work takes into account the contexts in which people live and work including the psychosocial support workers who are part of that context. This implies continuous analysis of the power relations that are expressed in the context at different levels: local, national and international: Who are the actors? What are their interests? What are the mechanisms of repression and oppression and the intentionality behind them? We also analyze the impacts of these power relationships on individuals, groups and communities and likewise, the mechanisms how people deal with them. This comprehensive analysis allows to raise awareness of the dynamics of violence and contextualize and politicize the experience.

3. WE TRANSCEND THE INDIVIDUAL, TAKE AGENCY AND FIGHT INJUSTICE.

Psychosocial support can and should contribute to the empowerment of people affected by sociopolitical violence and foster agency. Beyond addressing individual psycho-emotional needs, it works to rebuild the social fabric, collective visions, and the capacity to organize for justice. This includes the support for victims and survivors to name injustices, [re]define harm, and challenge impunity and stigma. Psychosocial work can also address “divide and rule” conflicts, explore psychosocial trauma that shape organizations, families and generations, and create safe spaces to fight internalized oppression. By doing so, it supports communities in critical thinking, recognizing their resources and confronting causes and long-term impacts of violence.

4. WE BUILD RELATIONSHIPS OF RELIABLE AND CRITICAL SOLIDARITY.

Many colleagues and organizations doing psychosocial work, including some of this network, live themselves in vulnerable and complex conditions, with a lack of human and economic resources and face risks because of their work.

There is power in the solidarity from people who have faced violence, in providing support to other people who have faced violence. The relationships we build with the people we provide support to, comes with a political critical stance:

- We promote autonomy and not dependency and acknowledge everyone's agency and self-determination. We critically reflect the different roles in relationships and the power dynamic between us.
- We recognize the importance of creating safe spaces in building trust and bonds. Even if these spaces are time limited, they should be spaces of respect, dignity and trust, free of abuse of power.
- We promote strategic and critical thinking and reflection to understand experiences and power relations in a context.
- We exercise solidarity as a practice and not as a lip service. And we develop emancipatory care relationships.

STAND UP

OUR CALLS FOR ACTION



1. PSYCHOSOCIAL WORK NEEDS TO BE POLITICAL.

In the face of global injustice and indignity – psychosocial support work means struggle to prevent harm and protect human rights for all. We need to be loud in collectively challenging inequality, demanding justice and working to prevent violence themselves, rather than accepting mainly to address the consequences of harm.

We need to scrutinize government health policies – do they promote wellbeing; do they create a conducive environment to promote wellness, do they enable dignifying human conditions?

We need to get involved in policy and legal spaces and contribute to its transformation. We need to challenge international institutions in their complicity and demand to include a psychosocial approach into their analyses, declarations and actions so that they not only name human rights violations but also their impacts on human beings.

We need to find collective ways to address these impacts, together with those affected. We need to reframe dominant understandings of what it means to be well and healthy. Contextual and indigenous healing practices need be considered as part of wellness and collective healing practices.

2. PROTECT PSYCHOSOCIAL CARE GIVERS THROUGH COLLECTIVE CARE.

Rejecting the exploitation of care workers does not mean to manage burnout by optimizing self care strategies. It starts with recognizing that we are “wounded” carers. We are not heroes, we live under the same burdening and unhealthy conditions, although we might be less affected than the people we accompany. Recognizing this woundedness, is what probably distinguishes political psychosocial work from “conventional” approaches of presenting yourself as “professionals” and “experts”.

Woundedness means: We all live in the “capitalist-colonial-patriarchal-neoliberal matrix”, we are all affected by structural powers one way or another, we are not outside the system that we hear about from those who we accompany in our psychosocial work. If we take “collective care” as a central term, this would mean caring about ourselves and caring for others, survivors and other psychosocial workers, as we fight for dignified care relationships and working conditions.

3. FOSTER INTERCONNECTEDNESS AND BUILD TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS.

The world is increasingly polarized. In opposition to this our practices should foster interconnectedness. The premise is: “What affects you should affect me”. We need to reclaim the emancipatory perspective and transformative potential of psychosocial work against hegemonic approaches.

Changing humanity requires connection, empathy, and commitment. Collectively we can develop agency and power to intervene and change. “We don’t rest until we are all well”.

There is power in solidarity and exchange across geographical and professional boundaries. Now is the time to build powerful, political, transnational networks! In this historic moment of massive global shifts, we must connect psychosocial support workers across borders and raise our voices louder than ever against injustice. Global shifts need global voices! Psychosocial workers — unite across borders and speak out for justice!



THE TRANSNATIONAL EXCHANGE ON STAFF CARE AND PSYCHOSOCIAL ACCOMPANIMENT PRACTICES IN CONTEXTS OF VIOLENCE

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