

Flourishing among activists in Iraq

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mental health was defined in 1999¹ then 2004². The complete mental health was recently called flourishing³ (low perceived control in life, highest level of functioning goals, resilience, and intimacy). Activism is using vigorous campaigning to bring about political and social change.⁴ In Iraq, antigovernmental rallies surged ramping up their sit-ins to pressure authorities for long waited reforms. They were chanting their poignant trademark slogan “Nureed watan” i.e., we want a homeland. Activists (protesters) were facing intensifying campaign of kidnapping and killing.⁵ Protests prove the power of collective activity. It is similar to collective actions occurred in the world e.g., riots in London 2011 and 2017⁶ in Spain (Indignados) as a reaction to global economic crisis.⁷ A little research was focusing on mental health of adolescents. Publishing data on the new phenomenon of protesting are scares, which was the impetus to carry out this study to comment on the mental health of activist’s changes.

A total of 460 protesters from Al-Tahrir square (center of Baghdad, Iraq) was included in this study. Their age ranged 20 to 40 years giving male to female ratio of 2.28:1. They were recruited from the field in the Tahrir square by walking and stationary sampling. Interview was on spot first, then a questionnaire was filled in a tent in the field. The interview was carried out by trained personnel to gather the information. A verbal consent of each protester selected to participate in the research. The variables of interest were emotional well-being (positive affect and avowed quality of life), psychological well-being (self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others), and social well-being (social acceptance, social actualization, social contribution, social coherence, and contribution). The three scales served as indicators of mental health.⁸ Demographic variables were of interest.

Out of the total, 98 (21.3%) were flourished.

This study showed that the rate of flourishing among activists (protesters) was 21.3%. It is much higher than that reported in Iraq previously (5.6%).⁸ This difference might be explained by involvement in protesting. Participation in protesting and social movements are collective activities. Literature reported

that participation in collective activity lead to psychological changes and improve mental health.⁹ A growing body of research suggested that engaging in activism promotes well-being and many psychologists and sociologists stated that working toward something bigger than self is a basic motive promotes well-being.⁴ Recently, it was found that actions directed toward the welfare of one’s community facilitate personal well-being.¹⁰ It was mentioned that within-group processes and appraisal of collective actions might induce psychological changes toward empowerment of new efficacy perception. The collective action offers participants a place to reassess their perception. The changes might affect relationships, work-life, extended involvement, consumer behavior, radicalization / politicization, legitimacy, self-assessment / self-confidence, well-being, knowledge, level of activity ...etc., which in turn affect positively mental health. In Iraq a high rate of youth was recruited as paid-for hire insurgents.¹¹ They were adding to the perpetual mayhem and violence i.e., enhancing languishing. Then an observed figure of flourishing (21.3%) is a miracle!

The observed figure of flourishing (21.3%) is much lower than that in United States (40%).⁸ The difference demonstrated the gap between developed and the developing countries. Al-Diwan et al⁸ explained in detail the determinants of this gap e.g., exposure to national trauma, malnutrition, maternal and fetal perinatal risks ...etc. In developed world, collective actions among students are promoted e.g., climate change protest, bullying prevention, dress code policies ...etc., which in turn reflect a positive effect on mental health. In developing countries, the collective actions are inhibited unless supporting a political or religious leader.

Literature shows that participation in collective actions is creating positive change in mental health. Recently, it was referred that riot in case of George Floyd in US reshaped the moral leader in country.¹²

Protesting as a collective action enhanced flourishing (complete mental health) among Iraqi youths.

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