American Arab, Middle Eastern, and North African Psychological Association

The Advocacy Committee of the American Arab, Middle Eastern and North African Psychology Association AMENA-Psy joins with other organizations and institutions to condemn the unwarranted and unsolicited Russian Military attacks against Ukraine and its people. We echo the condemnation of military aggression on a sovereign nation, a nation with pride in its language, people, and customs. This Russian leadership offensive, initiated by Putin without clear support from Russian people, only continues to escalate global tensions, as the humanitarian crises mount, and nations brace for expansion of Russian aggression, growing numbers of refugees, effects of sanctions, and resistance against the Russian government.

Recent attacks on Ukraine, and the resulting media narratives, have shed light on disparities in news coverage, foreign policy, and global empathy concerning refugees, victims of war, and those fleeing political persecution and other forms of oppression. News outlets have framed current events in Ukraine as “unprecedented,” despite decades of imperialism and invasion in sovereign nations within the Middle East, Asia, Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean and Pacific Islands, not to mention the centuries-long history of Western colonialism across these regions, the Americas, Australia and New Zealand. Furthermore, prevailing journalistic and political rhetoric paints one group of refugees as “just like us,” “deserving” and “civilized.” Whereas refugees of color from non-European and predominantly nonwhite nations are considered “other,” or “uncivilized.” Hence, the suffering of people of color is dismissed, justifying mistreatment and rejection by Western countries. Comments have been so egregious, that the Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA) has released a statement detailing the extent of racism and prejudice in media coverage of the assault on Ukraine, available here. Statements of support for Ukrainian civilians have made use of the phrase “protecting Western values,” inherently establishing the idea that ‘non-western’ values are reprehensible and should be rejected at all cost. These sentiments are embedded in imperialist ideas still very much present in social narratives. They have become so normalized that many find no issue in perceiving and treating whole sections of the world as corrupt and uncivilized threats to “Western” society.

Additionally, NPR reviewed how the global response to the refugee crisis demonstrates a disparity in whom countries accept as worthy refugees. Reporters and news outlets have been hailing Ukrainian refugees as “heroic” and “brave,” while refugees from Middle Eastern, Asian, Pacific, Caribbean, Latin American, or African regions are often depicted as delinquents; responsible for stealing the jobs and livelihoods of those ‘native’ to the country. Discrepancies also have been noted specifically with the approach to sanctions. For example, sanctions against Russia have been applauded by organizations and leadership within the United States. Yet, lawmakers supporting these sanctions have proposed legislation to prevent the Boycott Divestment and Sanction (BDS) movement, which seeks to pressure Israel to comply with international law and address Israel’s ongoing occupation of Palestine, discrimination toward
Palestinian citizens of Israel, and Palestinian refugees’ right to return to their homes. The media’s portrayal of children’s responses to the military aggression is also markedly inconsistent. News reports portray children and youth in Ukraine as courageous when engaging in rebellion against Russian occupation – rightfully so. However, this same sentiment is not extended to children and youth combating oppression in other parts of the world. Rather, in regions like Palestine, children and youth who are struggling to defend their homes and families are instead labeled as “terrorists” or “extremists.”

Discrepancies in the media coverage also extend to situations such as the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. While war has been waged there for several years, the Yemeni crisis has received scant Western media coverage despite the ongoing refugee crisis and extreme suffering it has produced. Yemeni civilians, including children, have been displaced and killed at the hands of many governing bodies, including the U.S. government. Famine and public health emergencies, reflective of inadequate medical care and the destruction of public infrastructure, have ensued. While the complexities of this crisis are beyond the scope of this statement, more details on the humanitarian crisis can be found here. Again, we emphasize the difference between coverage of situations like that in Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Syria, and Palestine, and the current coverage of the military aggression in Ukraine. All of these situations are important to monitor, but the variations in coverage, language, and approach are astounding.

This disparity extends to how refugees are treated at the Ukrainian border. Verified videos have demonstrated the additional barriers Africans and Black Ukrainians face when attempting to seek asylum, as they are being systematically discriminated against and ignored as they try to flee to safety. Especially during these times of political upheaval, we must not allow anti-Black sentiments to go unaddressed. Now more than ever, we need to protect those who are vulnerable to systematic racism, as these behaviors and attitudes carry deep repercussions for the livelihoods of ethnic minority populations in Ukraine. As Western journalistic and political narratives on both sides of this crisis invoke Hitler and Nazi atrocities, we implore the U.S. and its European allies to stand against Putin to make good on lessons learned from the violent racism in that era and reject racist exclusion toward those fleeing violence and oppression today.

AMENA-Psy urges that we all reflect on our own biases, and ask critical anti-racist questions of the news outlets we view, and the policies we promote. Our collective exclusionary past does not have to be a prologue. We also implore those in our community and beyond to familiarize themselves with the crises occurring globally, outside of the Western view.

Please consider taking these steps to support marginalized refugees fleeing Ukraine.

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/02/civilised-european-look-like-us-racist-coverage-ukraine