



**CIPRIANI COLLEGE**  
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES



# **WORK MATTERS**

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# Perceived Discrimination, Fear Perceptions, and Migrant Psychological Vulnerability

The mass influx of Venezuelan migrants to Trinidad and Tobago due to the economic, political, and humanitarian breakdown of their home country has evoked strong yet discrepant feelings in the Trinidadian public. While some sources have highlighted acceptance among citizens, other researchers note instances of rejection regionally, suggesting this migratory pattern has polarized the population, prodding strong positive feelings, advocacy, and empathetic responses in some, while triggering condemnation and non-acceptance of the asylum seekers in others.

Non-acceptance among a portion of citizens further precipitates the spread of harmful stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes throughout the masses, which often evolve into discriminatory behaviors against this already debilitated group, consequently resulting in far-reaching palpable implications for migrant health and wellbeing amid their transition and integration into Trinidadian society.

These discriminatory acts occur not only at the individual-level, but as macro-level atrocities committed on a national scale as well, such as the deportation of 165 Venezuelan asylum seekers which violated international law and evoked global criticism and disapprobation from the United Nations. Regardless of the level at which it occurs, perceived discrimination within varying realms of life remains predictive of migrant mental health and wellbeing and has been unambiguously linked to varied internalizing psychological symptomology such as depression, and anxiety.

Perceived discrimination also undermines migrant trust in authorities further reinforcing their already diminished perceptions of social support as they traverse new terrain and acclimatize to an unfamiliar society marked by specific cultural elements and vernacular uncharacteristic of their home country. While these negative migrant experiences has been recorded globally across myriad territories, Venezuelan refugees in Trinidad and Tobago have explicitly reported perceived xenophobia and non-acceptance of their hispanophone

roots, self-reporting enduring instances of discrimination and micro-aggressions, and attributing the perpetration of these acts of injustice to their light skin complexion, cultural dissimilarities, nationality, and language barrier. Discrimination and its often foundational attitudes and stereotypes therefore emerge as a serious issue with the potential to substantially disrupt migrant integration to an already rigid society underdeveloped in the domain of migration policy.

The development of prejudices and discrimination is not siloed, but is instead shaped by complex internal and environmental factors, thus, precursory assessments and deconstruction of their psychological underpinnings elucidates the mechanisms behind these harmful phenomena and can be useful to governments and policy makers regionally in the quest to reduce negative migrant experiences. Non-acceptance towards refugees stem from and manifest along affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions, suggesting this is a multi-faceted issue perpetuated by the interplay of various psychological components. Stereotypes and ensuing prejudices are often stimulated and fortified by cognitive threat perceptions and appraisals. These threat perceptions encompass realistic threats, denoting migrant infringement on the welfare of nationals through competition for already scarce resources, and symbolic threats which signal an unraveling of the social fabric of a nation, and erosion of the moral ground, identity, and value system of the host country.

Cognitively, both realistic and symbolic threats are exacerbated by beliefs in erroneous stereotypes, and accompanying perceptions of value differences between the minority group and host community nationals. For Venezuelan migrants, common negative stereotypes such as their propensity to engage in criminal activity and prostitution further reinforces realistic and symbolic threats respectively and solidifies negative attitudes towards the vulnerable group. These primarily cognitive components are reflected in affective reactions, as appraised threats often manifest as feelings of fear and anx-

iety throughout host communities, culminating in hostility and intergroup conflict. The relationship between cognitive and affective dimensions can be conceptualized as bi-directional as these feelings of anxiety both stems from and further augments existing stereotypes and threat perceptions. It should be noted that implicit prejudicial attitudes, formed and held automatically and often subconsciously upon evaluation of a stimulus, and explicit attitudes which occur in conscious awareness and are actively endorsed, operate along distinct psychological mechanisms and thus can be incongruent.

This suggests the possibility for Trinidadian locals to harbor harmful attitudes towards Venezuelan migrants even in the absence of public and conspicuous endorsement. While negative beliefs and attitudes across cognitions and affect are harmful in themselves, their translation to behavior towards migrants is arguably more deleterious. However, though research initiatives have attempted to dissect and understand the processes by which these inflexible and illogical attitudes and beliefs evolve into behavior, the predictive path between negative attitudes and overt behavior remains ambiguous.

Threat perceptions by Trinidadian nationals are also internalized by Venezuelan migrants who have become attuned to the concerns and fears surrounding their encroachment on local employment opportunities. This attribution of refugees as an economic threat to Trinidadian welfare may be aggravated and magnified throughout the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic due to the concomitant spikes in unemployment, financial burden, closure of various labour markets and the newfound salience on economic conservation. Already prevalent concerns about the economic limitations and infeasibility of Trinidad and Tobago to support its own expansive population, let alone the absorption of persons displaced by forced migration, may therefore be intensified during health and economic crises in which resource scarcity poses a significant threat.

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