



“Systemic change needs to be driven by the owners of the system themselves”: Cristal Palacios Yumar of Amna on working to support refugee and displaced communities

Holly Wise
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Holly Wise: Could you start by introducing yourself and telling me what is distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: My name is Cristal Palacios. I work at Amna, which is a UK-based organization that works globally in creating safer spaces for refugee and displaced communities and strengthening their ability to feel joy and belonging in times of adversity.

We center our work around providing tools for healing that are based on the principles of joy and belonging. We use creative, collective healing, arts-based approach methodologies that draw on cultural wisdoms, but are also asking people to remember those cultural traditions as safe spaces for their emotional well-being, their mental health, self-regulation, and co-regulation.

Holly Wise: What is something you think others might find surprising about your work?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: That the core of my particular role is to hold spaces of facilitation of knowledge, of learning, of acquiring new tools, because so much of what is in people's mind when they think about mental health is the classic individual model of one-on-one therapy. The core of our work is focused on collective healing and collective care.

The majority of what I do is to teach, but also remind people of the resources that they already have and that perhaps are forgotten in times of adversity or lost in time due to displacement.

Holly Wise: The Youth Mental Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas, building young people's resilience, giving young people agency, and helping young people build a sense of community and belonging. Of those three areas, what would you say your work focuses on?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: Amna's work focuses on all three areas. We have a track record of working in developing the skills of young displaced people to become facilitators of well-being in their own communities and in their host communities. Through that, we support their agency, their resilience, and their sense of belonging.

We work in a field that sees a lot of young people entering as mental health and psychosocial support practitioners. The majority of my peers are young people aged 18 to 30 who have just entered the job market and are testing their skills.

We're not only thinking about supporting the young people in situations of displacement, but also of the young people who work with them and for them. We are supporting their projects as professionals and developing their skills as mental health providers or psychosocial support providers.

Holly Wise: How do you collaborate with organizations that are working in the same space?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: Amna works through a model of community partnerships, which is one of the pillars that exists within the organization. In that model, we collaborate and fund local organizations that already have programs implemented in different communities. Those partnerships are usually a year or two years long, but we tend to stay and work in long-term relationships with these organizations.

In the case of Ukraine, we've been working with organizations based in Ukraine and the surrounding countries since the onset of the war in 2022. We stay there and continue to deepen the relationships with these organizations.

We want to drive systemic change in the education system in Ukraine. To do that, we are continuing our partnerships with organizations that we've already worked with, and we're collaborating with them to create transformation plans for the schools to support systemic change within the different school settings.

Holly Wise: You mentioned transformation plans in the education system. Can you talk a little bit more about those?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: They're about understanding that systemic change needs to be driven by the owners of the system themselves — the school staff, teachers, students, family, and caregivers who inhabit that system. We are creating plans that support transformation of those educational settings to become more trauma and

identity-informed spaces and therefore safer spaces for people's emotional expression and well-being.

We're starting to do this in some countries in Eastern Europe by supporting our partners to collaborate with the schools to identify the needs of the school in terms of trauma and identity informed needs, map those needs and then come up with ideas as to what a transformation plan would look like for that particular school.

The transformation plan can be anything from, we need a coffee machine because we need a third space within the school where teachers can come and center themselves. We understand that even the smaller practices, like a cup of a hot beverage, is a way of centering yourself, of reminding your nervous system that you're safe.

The transformation plans can start as something that small all the way to bigger ambitious plans, like we want to train the whole school staff on what it means to be trauma and identity-informed. It's about creating tailor-made plans for particular environments that drive systemic change at a longer term.

That is one of the reasons why the support of ICONIQ is so important to us, because it's that absolute trust in the work that we do to go and do things of value for the community.

Holly Wise: What emerging work in this space are you excited about?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: We have a project kicking off soon in Eastern Europe. We're partnering up with an organization in Kosovo, KRCT, which has been one of our partners for the last three years, and another one in Poland, Foundation for Good. They are going to work with higher-level education institutions because in that particular program, we are supporting young emerging adults from 18 to 30, who are starting to develop as professionals and are trying to figure out adulthood in a context where there's been conflict.

There's a lot of programming and solutions and innovations for children and adolescents, and then that gap where you become an adult, you're on your own. In the best of chances and under great amounts of privileges, you're lost. If you have experienced displacement or conflict or you come from a family that survived the legacies of that, you have additional layers to work through in that process.

We have another project kicking off in Ukraine, which I'm very excited about. Instead of working with young adults, we're going to work with the full continuum of 0 to 18.

Holly Wise: What is an example of impact that best illustrates the scope of your work, especially around the systems of care?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: Systems of care is a pillar that is under a piloting process, so the two projects that I just mentioned are pilots that we're sending out into the world.

I can speak about the work that we've done with these partners that we're continuing to collaborate in with. For example, we are working with Pavlograd, an organization based

in Ukraine in the city of Pavlograd. It's an organization that provides mental health and social support to the whole city and the schools.

Through their collaboration with Amna since 2022, they've been able to expand their group of psychosocial support providers. I had the opportunity last year to meet these practitioners at a convening in Warsaw. I met one of those volunteers. She was very, very scared. It was her first time engaging professionally in this type of environment.

By the end of it, she was the queen of the convening. You saw her flourish. She gained confidence in her skills. It's a moving process to see someone develop as a professional before your eyes.

Many of the organizations that we collaborate with start to adapt their own internal functioning and adopt new policies and mechanisms that support well-being within the organization. That's the place where we start doing systemic change.

We've seen organizations who've created well-being policies for their staff or implemented safeguarding policies that didn't exist in their context. When we engage with organizations, alongside with training, we provide two spaces for them. We provide reflective spaces, which are about reflecting on practice.

Then we also provide well-being spaces, which are spaces focused on the practices of emotional self-regulation, and co-regulation. They're led by creative arts therapists from different areas and they provide a space of refuge and also a model for this organization.

Holly Wise: Can you describe something that your organization has tried that didn't work, but that you learned from?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: One of the challenges that we face at Amna is fitting our models to the context. Although we are quite an agile and adaptive organization, there are particular contexts like Palestine that are incredibly challenging.

The lived experience goes beyond any model that you can predict and the needs change constantly from one day to the other, one week to the other. As a nonprofit organization that wants to support creating safer spaces for Palestinians, in Gaza, Palestine, or even in exile and refuge, you wonder what's the priority?

At the beginning of the year, we began a model of training to providers in Palestine, and we quickly realized that it needed to shift into something else. For one, the connectivity challenges are massive. Most training sessions are three and a half hours, sometimes even five hours online, so that was impossible. It required changing our model of thinking, actually. Is training needed, and if not, what is needed, and what can we provide?

We quickly changed our training model to provide support via text messages or WhatsApp groups, creating bite-size information pieces that people could quickly read and process through chat.

Holly Wise: What are some teachable lessons that can be taken from your work and applied to others that others could use?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: This is key — the importance of supporting local agency and putting the weight of the decision-making on local actors, rather than coming from the outside and saying, “This is what needs to be done.”

The other thing that's been key for us is co-creation. Rather than assuming needs, we map and identify needs from the organizations, from the context.

Holly Wise: How would you define current attitudes toward youth mental health? Have you seen attitudes shift r toward youth mental health?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: There's been a slight shift over the last 10 years towards acknowledging young people's agency in their own well-being. We've seen more youth-led processes, where young people are taking ownership. But our sector does not have a strong way of responding to young people. I think there is some ambivalent attitude towards that.

There is also a shift in providing solutions and support to the caregiver in their caregiving role. That not only includes the mom, but has expanded to the caregiver as other roles. Part of the work that we do in systems of care is acknowledging educators as caregivers.

Holly Wise: What do you think is needed to shift the mindset that you were talking about earlier?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: It has to become a structural request and it has to become part of the funding. I haven't seen many applications or calls for proposals that stipulate this participation of young people in mental health. I've seen it in education, governance, policy, leadership, disability and diversity. In mental health? Not so much.

Holly Wise: Yes. Are there any resources or guides, or tools that have been useful to you in advancing your work?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: I'm a researcher and a PDF hoarder. This bedside book, *Involuntary Dislocation* by Renos Papadopoulos provides an exceptional framework of understanding the complexities of dislocation, as he calls it. It's not displacement. It's about everything that's dislocated in your life.

Holly Wise: How do you create spaces of belonging for communities that have been displaced and dislocated?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: Amna was founded in a tent in a refugee camp in Greece almost 10 years ago. Our founder is an Afghan woman who started creating a safer space where there were toys and people could commune.

One of the first things we bring to our work is this idea of safer spaces — enhancing safety however we can, from a physical, emotional, and even organizational perspective, with the acknowledgment that we cannot promise safety anywhere. The other thing we practice is the possibility of regaining regulation within yourself and within your community.

We acknowledge that one of the things that happens when you're displaced or going through adverse situations is that there's a massive sense of loss of control over your life and your own circumstances. Perhaps the only thing in the moment you can control is how you're feeling and how your nervous system is reacting to what's happening to you. We focus on that as a second layer of supporting belonging.

We ask, what did your community do back home to feel that sense of belonging? For example, there are some organizations that we work with that started cooking spaces for Ukrainian refugees, to create a sense of community and belonging in the place. It's in those small details of belonging to a small group of people who are doing something that is relevant to your identity.

So much of the work that we do at Amna is to remind people that you cannot be trauma-informed if you're not identity-informed. Trauma is shaped around your identities. How our nervous systems, our body, our soul reacts to adversity is shaped by who we are, where we come from, our culture, and the meanings that we unknowingly assign to things.

Holly Wise: How do you incorporate youth voices in shaping your work?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: Since the beginning of Amna, we've worked with young people. They were leading the spaces that the organization grew from. From that, we developed two core programs that were the cornerstone of our work. One is Baytna, which is our program to promote children and caregivers' well-being. The other one is Dinami — a program that supported young people in refugee camps to become facilitators of psychosocial support work in their communities.

We provided free training to groups of young refugees in Greece and they pitched their ideas to Amna and to the group that was working for them. We would support them in creating their own projects. We ended up having a football club under the Dinami program. We also ended up having arts and graffiti classes.

An organization absorbed our football club, and it is now running it full-time. The coaches are young people in refugee camps. Some other organizations continue to do all the graffiti and artistic development of work.

Holly Wise: What do you think is the most important question or one of the most important questions that the Co-Lab should be asking right now in this space?

Cristal Palacios Yumar: How do you ensure that cross-pollination of ideas and support happens at all levels of organizations in the cohort so that everyone from the CEO to the program officer has the opportunity to be exposed to this level of work?

For example, my program officer is a young person. I would love for her to have the opportunity to have this experience as well, to be interviewed or to be participating in a program that is specifically for her level to upskill, to get in touch with young people who are interested in the field.

Holly Wise: It was a pleasure of mine to sit here with you and learn about your work and your organization's work, so I thank you for your time and for sharing so openly.

Holly Wise is a two-time Fulbright-Nehru Teaching Scholar with extensive experience in solutions journalism and academia. She has held multiple roles at the Solutions Journalism Network, including its first director of journalism school engagement and later its first program director. She is a certified leadership and cross-cultural coach, based in Bengaluru, India. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and a master's in mass communication from Murray State University.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*