The Torture Treatment Movement as a Human Rights Strategy

My name is Patricia Shannon and I am a Clinical Psychologist at the Center for Victims of Torture in Minneapolis, MN where I provide treatment for torture survivors and conduct training.

(slide) The Center is an old Victorian house located on the campus of the University of Minnesota. It was designed to be a welcoming place for survivors of torture who have often been confined to cells with no windows. The Center has four missions: clinical care or treatment of survivors of governmental torture, training of other health professionals, research on the effects of torture and effective treatment, and public policy and education.

(slide) The movement for the treatment of torture survivors or rehabilitation movement began first in Copenhagen, Denmark. The Center for Victims of Torture was the third center in the world when it was established in 1985 and the first center in the US. Now there are over 200 treatment centers around the world and over 25 in the United States.

(slide) An important advance in the torture rehabilitation movement was the passage by the US Congress of the Torture Victims Relief Act in 1998. It provides $25 million for domestic and international programs and the UN Voluntary Fund for the treatment of torture survivors.
The United Nations has played a role in defining torture and human rights more broadly. In 1948, after the two World Wars and the Holocaust atrocities, the United Nations Passed the Declaration of Human Rights. In 1984, the UN passed the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Finally, in 1989, the UN passed the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which extended the prohibition on torture to children.

The United Nations defines torture as follows: “any act in which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.”

Political Torture is designed to break down the individual will and the will of the community.

This page from the Khmer Rouge manual spells out how it is systematically taught as part of military training: (read slide).

At the community level such tactics create a culture of fear. The bonds of trust, which are the key ingredients that hold the social fabric together, have been broken. This paves the way for widespread distrust of all persons and institutions. Chronic fear becomes a way of life, paralyzing the community as a whole. Conflict arises within
families, ethnic groups, community structures and apathy develops as communities feel hopeless that things will ever change. Individuals become isolated and silenced making it difficult for them to think freely and express themselves.

(slide) Over the past 50 years, the use of the law to protect and enhance human rights combined with an approach of documenting and exposing human rights abuses has become the predominant mode of operation for the human rights community. These activities along with the implementation of international mechanisms have created significant improvements, however human rights problems remain endemic in many societies. According to Amnesty International’s Report for 2000, Torture is practiced in 132 countries, a 23% increase since 1989. The US Committee on Refugees reports that in the year 2000, between 5 and 35% of the world’s 14.1 million external refugees were torture survivors.

(slide) Using these numbers, the Center for Victims of Torture estimates that there are 500,000 torture survivors in the US alone, and (slide) at least 16,000 in Minnesota.

(slide) Among our client population, most survivors have come from Africa and South East Asian. (slide) Our survivors are highly educated democracy leaders who often held professional jobs in their countries of origin.

(slide) Given these staggering statistics, the Center for Victims of Torture, the Helsinki Citizen’s Assembly and the Turkish and Middle Eastern Institute of Public Administration are promoting strategic thinking within the international human rights community by developing an awareness of newly developed tactics. We assert that advancing human rights requires the creation of more comprehensive strategic
approaches that can only be accomplished by using a far broader array of tactics than are currently in use.

(slide) We are reminded of the old saying: “When your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail.” These groups co-sponsored a meeting with international human rights leaders this past fall in Istanbul, Turkey. The purpose of the meeting was to engage advocates in a discussion on innovative approaches to advancing human rights and to outline ways to stimulate learning.

(slide) The meeting was a forum for disseminating information compiled in the New Tactics Workbook which I have with me here today and which outlines tactics in use around the world in the areas of business, civil society, government, police and military, health care, coalitions and partnerships, education and training, international law and institutions, monitoring, sanctions, and technology. One of the goals of this working group is to identify leaders in each region of the world and to organize regional workshops to strengthen practitioners’ training skills and to assist them in learning and using new tactics. You are all invited to learn more and become involved in this project.
One tactic within the health care sector is the treatment of survivors. The existence of a treatment center serves to strengthen societies around the world through rebuilding communities and changing the societies’ view of torture and treatment. The international rehabilitation center in Denmark used the treatment center to reeducate the community about torture and to develop a national commitment against torture. They have also worked with us to establish international standards for the assessment and treatment of torture survivors. Providing treatment restores the leadership capacity of torture survivors and disrupts the community effects that silence and intimidate whole communities, as many survivors go on to write and speak about their persecution. This was certainly the case in South Africa as the survivors of Apartheid were instrumental in the establishment of a new government and an innovative commission on truth and reconciliation.

When we first see them, most torture survivors are struggling with severe Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Major Depression.

Physical torture techniques commonly include beatings to the back, legs, head and soles of the feet. Some victims are hung by their hands with their hands tied behind their backs. Electrical probes have been attached to any and every sensitive body part. Some are suffocated with bags over their heads and others are submerged in water. Men as well as women are sexually assaulted.

While the physical pain is intense, many survivors report that it was the psychological effects of the torture that were most damaging. Psychological torture includes threats to the individual, family and friends, false accusations, mock executions and some have been forced to watch others tortured and killed. They may be forced to harm others. They are imprisoned in conditions that are degrading including poor
sanitation, forced nakedness, constant interrogation, and sensory overstimulation in the form of constant lights or total darkness.

(slide) Trauma affects the individual physically, psychologically, spiritually, socially as well as affecting their families and communities at large. Common physical symptoms include headaches, stomach pain, musculo-skeletal and back pain, hearing loss, vision problems, dental problems, scars, burns, wounds, loss of limbs, disease.

(slide) The psychological effects of torture include a damaged sense of trust, feelings of helplessness in the world due to the unpredictability of torture, feelings of shame and humiliation, shock, denial and disbelief as survivors are often told that no one will believe their story, disorientation and confusion produced by many hours of sensory deprivation in captivity, and rage and fear in response to pain and violation.

(slide) Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is a psychological condition that develops as an adaptive response in a life-threatening situation. PTSD includes three types of symptoms: (slide) the reexperiencing symptoms, (slide) symptoms of numbing and avoidance (slide) and symptoms of hyperarousal.

(slide) Also common in torture survivors are symptoms of major depression.
Treatment for survivors at the Center typically involves a combination of psychotherapy and medication along with appropriate medical care, social services and alternative therapies. Survivors face a long process of applying for asylum and working to resettle in the United States however some survivors do decide to continue with their political activities upon completion of treatment.

(gandhi quote)