

## CHAPTER 2



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# TORTURE SURVIVORS

FAMILY AND  
COMMUNITY  
ISSUES

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FAMILY AND  
COMMUNITY ISSUES

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**T**orture affects not only individuals but also the families and communities in which they live. Indeed, a primary goal of torture is to terrorize entire communities into silence and submission by making examples of individuals and their families. The message sent to communities is: “If you dare to challenge us in any way, this could happen to you, too.”

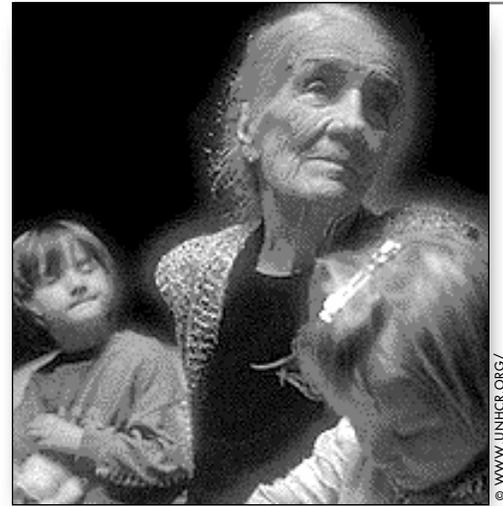
Survivors, who are valued members of communities and extensive family systems in their home countries, face many obstacles as they work to rebuild these structures and substitutes in the United States.

### IMMIGRATION STATUSES FOR SURVIVORS

Many people have little understanding of why torture survivors around the world come to the United States. Most survivors left home in order to save their lives or those of loved ones. They left their countries due to unsafe conditions and are unwilling or unable to return.

Torture survivors arrive in the United States with various immigration statuses. Some are political asylees or asylum seekers; others come to the United States as refugees, visitors, students, or employees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, an asylum seeker or refugee is someone who:

... owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race,



religion, nationality, membership in a particular group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country (1951, p.16).

The difference between refugees and asylum seekers relates to when and where their applications to resettle in the United States take place. Refugees apply for processing in other countries before reaching the United States; asylum seekers apply for processing in the United States after they have entered the country or are at the border.

If asylum seekers are granted political asylum, they become asylees.

Torture survivors might arrive under forms of immigration status that were necessary to get out of the country (e.g., visitor’s visa) and then apply for political asylum once they are safely on U.S. soil.

Statistics on the actual numbers of torture survivors are difficult to obtain, while figures are readily available on refugees and immigrants. In the next two sections, the text uses statistics from studies or reports on immigrants and refugees.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF SURVIVORS

**CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE COMMUNITY**

Torture survivors strongly value the concepts of community and mutual assistance, as many come from cultures that value service to one's people over individual or material gain. That degree of commitment to community service explains why they are targets for torture and persecution by repressive governments.

Before the political upheavals that forced them into exile, many survivors' families lived in the same village or city for generations, even centuries. In these environments, people depended on each other for support, fostering strong social bonds and collective identity.

In their new country, torture survivors strive to rebuild relationships and a sense of community. Many are eager to know their neighbors and contribute to neighborhood celebrations, events, and activities.

In addition to cultural enrichment, newcomers to the United States bring fresh ideas, energy, excitement about the American dream, and motivation — often to blighted and depressed metropolitan areas. Immigrants and refugees revitalize neighborhoods, providing demands for goods and services as well as contributing to the economic base by building businesses and purchasing homes. They “largely employ neighborhood residents, serve as leaders in their communities, and offer locations where groups and associations can meet.” (Greater Twin Cities United Way, 2002).

**CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ECONOMY AND WORKFORCE**

There is a widespread perception that refugees and immigrants are a drain on the

economy and take away jobs desired by American workers. Yet evidence overwhelmingly indicates the opposite.

In the most comprehensive study ever conducted on immigration, the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences found that immigration has a positive economic impact at the national level, with immigrants adding \$1 billion to \$10 billion directly to the national economy each year (Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 1997).

The typical refugee or immigrant and his or her descendants pay an estimated \$80,000 more in taxes than they will receive in local, state and federal benefits over their lifetimes (Moore, 1998).

Most, including torture survivors, arrive in the United States in the prime of their working years, making them a fiscal bargain for our country, saving \$1.43 trillion in educational costs (National Immigration Forum, 2000).

Torture survivors are, by definition, resilient people who possess great strength of character. Many are highly educated and were professionals in their home countries. Others were small business owners, farmers, and traders. As a group, they bring strengths to the workforce in the United States, which include the following:

- Work training and experience
- Adaptability and resourcefulness
- Strong survival skills
- Strong desire to work
- Problem-solving expertise
- Community-building skills
- International perspective



**CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE COMMUNITY**

Berhonu, a torture survivor from Ethiopia, was shocked to see hundreds of cars passing someone whose car had broken down on a U.S. highway. It was unthinkable to him that he could drive by without stopping to help, even though he had just arrived in the country and had fears of encountering strangers because he had heard that many Americans have guns. He stopped and drove the man to a nearby gas station.



### CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ECONOMY, WORKPLACE

William, a journalist and student from a West African country, spent three years working two full-time jobs as a parking lot attendant and security guard. While seeking political asylum, he supported his wife and two children, who remained in hiding back home due to the risk of persecution. Once he obtained asylum, he was able to bring his family to safety. He then returned to school to finish his university education. He went on to obtain a master's degree in public administration and became the executive director of a nonprofit organization that helps African immigrants start small businesses.

Regardless of their level of education and previous job or leadership status back home, language barriers and other obstacles often restrict newcomers. As a result, they enter the workforce in the United States by taking low-paying, low-skill jobs not wanted by others. As such, they fill a critical niche in the labor market, particularly in service-industry jobs not sought by other workers. According to Andrew Sum, the director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University:

The American economy absolutely needs immigrants. Our economy has become more dependent on immigrant labor than at any time in the last 100 years. (Cohn, 2002)

As those in the current workforce begin to retire at a rate higher than the rate of citizens joining the workforce, this dependency is likely to increase.

Refugees and immigrants, and the torture survivors among them, are thus essential to the economy and society of the United States. The civic and economic benefits of community revitalization, increased revenue and job creation from refugee/immigrant businesses, increased demand for goods and services, and a resilient and newly energized workforce are profound.

Throughout the history of the United States, and still today, American society has profited greatly from the ideas, inventions, labor, industry, and social and cultural enrichment brought by those in search of safety and freedom.

Torture survivors are among the most highly determined, skilled, and resourceful newcomers received.

### MANY PATHS TO HEALING

For many torture survivors, obtaining official permission to work and to resettle themselves and their families safely in a new country aids them in recovery from the effects of torture. Not all torture survivors need rehabilitative services that specifically address the effects of the torture.

However, most will need some form of initial assistance in one or more service domains: legal, social, medical, nursing, and mental health. Others will need longer-term services.

Beyond the issue of demonstrable needs is the issue of human rights in the aftermath of "hell on earth," as many survivors describe their experiences. The position of the torture-rehabilitation movement is that society has a moral obligation to work toward the prevention of torture and to provide as complete rehabilitation as possible for its survivors.

To understand what this means, it is necessary to understand the effects of torture. The remainder of this chapter introduces the effects of torture on targeted communities and families.

### EFFECTS ON COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES

#### EFFECTS ON COMMUNITIES

Torture is one of many weapons of repression in political arsenals designed to monopolize power and to reign through terror. The media often portrays the use of torture to extract information or the "truth" from individuals. Yet the primary purpose of most torture

#### FOR MORE INFORMATION

For information on the effects of trauma on individuals, see **CHAPTER 3**.



practiced systematically against a citizenry is to gain or maintain power and control by silencing any opposition.

Furthermore, information obtained under torture is notoriously unreliable. *The United States Army Field Manual on Intelligence Interrogation* states:

Use of torture and other illegal methods is a poor technique that yields unreliable results, may damage subsequent collection efforts, and can induce the source to say what he thinks the interrogator wants to hear. (1992, pp. 1-8)

Many survivors report that they made up information under torture — anything to make the pain stop.

Others report that when they did talk, they were told the authorities already knew everything they had to say but wanted them to suffer the defeat of betraying their friends and families. The terror, shame, and sense of betrayal generated by torture create a culture, climate, or community ethos of pervasive fear, distrust, and silence.

Basic trust in others is essential to hold together the social fabric of any human society. Torture is in continual use worldwide because it is so destructive in this regard. Members of targeted communities know someone or have heard of someone who was punished, tortured, or disappeared for speaking out against those in power.

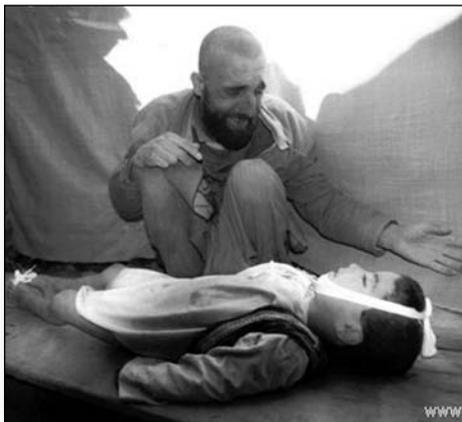
Reports among torture survivors include experiences of betrayal (being turned in to authorities) by friends, colleagues, or even relatives. Feelings of distrust permeate various levels of a repressed society, which pave the way for widespread distrust of all people and

institutions. Chronic fear becomes a way of life and paralyzes the community as a whole.

Torture gives rise to discord and conflict within families, ethnic groups, and community support structures. Lifelong neighbors, friends, and sometimes relatives, lose their trust in one another as group is set against group. Former friends and confidants become bitter rivals and enemies. In a very short amount of time, entire communities become polarized and fragmented.

Fear, distrust, loss, and traumatic experiences force a constriction of families' social networks, resulting in social isolation and community-wide censorship. Ricardo, a Uruguayan citizen living in a community where government-sponsored torture was rampant, poignantly describes these effects in the following quote:

“...our own lives became increasingly constricted. The process of self-censorship was incredibly insidious: It wasn't just that you stopped talking about certain things with other people; you stopped thinking them yourself. Your internal dialogue just dried up. And meanwhile your circle of relationships narrowed... One was simply too scared. You kept to yourself, you stayed home,



## EFFECTS ON THE COMMUNITY

“All their lives my parents, along with a nation of Dominicans, had learned the habits of repression, censorship, terror. ... And so, long after we had left, my parents were still living in the dictatorship inside their heads. Even on American soil, they were afraid of the awful consequences if they spoke out or disagreed with authorities. The First Amendment right to free speech meant nothing to them. Silence about anything “political” was the rule in our house... . To our many questions about what was going on, my mother always had the ready answer, “En boca cerrada no entran moscas.” No flies fly into a closed mouth. Later, I found out that this very saying had been scratched on the lintel of the entrance of the SIM's torture center at La Cuarenta.”

— JULIA ALVAREZ  
*SOMETHING TO DECLARE*,  
1998, pp. 107-109

you kept your work contacts to a minimum. The suspicion of everyone else, the sense that they were monitoring everything — or else just that reflex of self-protection, how it was better not to extend one's affections to people who might at any moment be picked up and taken away: all of that served further to famish the social fabric.” (Wechsler, 1990, pp. 88-89)

For communities under prolonged political repression and torture, feelings of community hopelessness and resignation can develop as an adaptive response to the daily reality of having little or no control over one's life. It is adaptive to “look the other way” when faced with overwhelming despair and unspeakable, incomprehensible atrocities day after day, year after year.

Elizabeth Lira is a pioneer in the torture-rehabilitation movement who worked as a psychologist under conditions of state-sponsored terror in Argentina. She has written extensively about the community effects of a chronic situation in which “people had to get accustomed to torture, exile, disappearance, rape, execution, the naked corpses of one's neighbors lying in the street, i.e., to atrocities that nobody would have imagined” (Lira, 1997).

People need to find ways to continue functioning in environments of extreme and chronic fear. They can resist community effects of torture such as collective denial, apparent apathy or indiffer-

ence, and the widespread lack of hope that things can ever change for the better.

When communities affected by torture resettle to a new country, they usually have not had an opportunity to repair or even address the effects of fractured social networks and ties. Social isolation and a collective desire to forget the past often become the norm in resettled communities.

The practical need to focus considerable effort and attention on learning a new way of life reinforces these norms. That new life includes the American cultural norm of working longer hours and spending less time in social or family relationships, in contrast to the more communal orientation of many survivors' original cultures.

The larger society in the United States is often unaware of meaningful intra-group differences among newcomers from the same country, such as education, social class, tribe, clan, religion, ethnicity, political affiliation, gender, and age, as well as rural vs. urban dwellers. Longtime residents tend to expect group unity or identity based on a single factor, such as national origin or language.

They often make mistaken assumptions about intra-group cohesion, including, for example, that within a given national group, there will be little conflict and much commonality. Issues of conflict and strife, continued discrimination, and marginalization can occur within these communities.

In fact, providers working with tor-

ture survivors must consider that in most affected communities, tensions and conflicts among groups will arise. These conflicts relate to the historical, social, and political conditions in their countries of origin.

Some people may be from the persecuted group in their home country, while others may be from the group that perpetrated the torture. Torture survivors often live with the fear of encountering their torturers or unknowingly befriending current informants in their new communities. This fear may be realistic; it is common for the “eyes and ears” of a terror-based regime to extend into communities of exile.

To summarize, some of the common effects of torture trauma on resettled communities include the following:

- Collective silence and/or denial about what really happened
- Chronic fear and distrust
- Constriction of social networks and social isolation
- Apathy and hopelessness following prolonged political oppression
- Conflict, politicization of community issues, and polarization among various elements or subgroups within communities

## EFFECTS ON FAMILIES

Torture survivors rarely flee as intact families. Many survivors are forced to leave family members behind due to the dangerous and often unplanned circum-

**COMMON EFFECTS OF TORTURE ON FAMILIES**

- LOSS OF CULTURAL and social supports due to fear, distrust, sense of betrayal, etc.
- SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL or isolation
- MARITAL AND/OR intergenerational conflict
- PARENTAL FUNCTIONING IS affected by parents' symptoms (e.g., parents are often less emotionally attuned and attentive to children than they otherwise would be, due to being exhausted and distracted by symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder)
- LOW TOLERANCE for negative emotions (e.g., a parent can't stand to hear a baby cry because it reminds the survivor of memories of other prisoners' screams)
- SILENCE WITHIN the family regarding the torture and other trauma (i.e., what happened to whom and why), sometimes leading to confusion, misunderstanding, multiple versions of what happened, and unaddressed blame, shame, anger, disappointment, and sadness
- PARENT-CHILD ROLE REVERSAL (parents experience disempowerment due to both trauma-related symptoms and loss of their traditional role in the new culture; children prematurely assume adult roles due to more rapid language acquisition and acculturation)
- PRESSURE ON CHILDREN to be immune to effects of the family's ordeals and to succeed (often to make up for what the family lost)

stances surrounding their departure.

Due to ongoing danger to family members in the country of origin, asylum seekers go through a grueling period of lengthy separation from their families in which communication and support are hampered. Survivors fear their mail is opened or phone calls are traced, leading to increased danger of family members being harassed or even tortured into revealing their loved one's whereabouts.

Sometimes authorities come to family members' homes or workplaces and threaten them with death or imprisonment if they do not produce the person who has fled.

Asylum seekers generally must wait a minimum of one year, and often much longer, before their family members are legally able to join them. Family members living in danger or hardship abroad have limited understanding of the legal system in the United States and the barriers torture survivors face in bringing family to safety.

Since the United States is seen as a world leader in democracy, human rights, and economic opportunity, many family members find it difficult to believe or understand the delays in joining their loved one, which is a source of anger, resentment, and blame within families.

Reunification takes many forms, depending on factors such as the family's ability to locate one another

and obtain means of travel. Cultural differences in definitions of family and documentation practices create additional barriers. For example, certificates of adoption are unheard of in many countries. Often reunification is a piecemeal process that causes considerable emotional distress and bureaucratic headaches for survivors.

Once a family is reunited, there is a honeymoon period. Family members are overjoyed with the sheer miracle of reunification and their survival as a family against incredible odds.

Families that shared traumatic experiences and relied on one another for survival show particularly close bonds and continue to do everything together.

As the family's resettlement proceeds, the effects of torture trauma begins to surface in a complex manner. Such effects interact with the stresses of cultural adjustment, loss of economic and/or social status, events back home (e.g., war, destruction of property, deaths and torture of friends or extended family), and other ongoing trauma the family may be experiencing in their new community (such as racism, neighborhood violence, etc.).

Cultural differences may create conflict and upheaval for families coming from different cultural contexts. For example, compared to more traditional societies, culture in the United States places relatively greater emphasis on individualism, competi-

tion, mobility and fast pace, materialism, youth culture, technological innovation and change, and the nuclear family as the basic family unit. Resolving conflicts between traditional and newer values is difficult without trauma. When one or more family members is coping with effects of torture, these issues become even more daunting.

### IMPACT ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The issues faced by families of torture survivors, especially the youth, are often overlooked. Along with their parents, young people endure many of the stresses inherent in the pre-flight, flight, and post-flight stages (see Chapter 3 for more on the Triple Trauma Paradigm) for refugees and asylees.

Children and adolescents may be torture survivors themselves. In other cases, they are affected indirectly by the torture of another family member or members, such as parents, siblings, grandparents, and cousins.

As parents, many torture survivors fear that the intensity of their own feelings could overwhelm them. Coping with the expressed or unexpressed feelings of their children is even more frightening. Parents feel guilty about the circumstances their children endured and continue to endure.

For parents of children who were tortured or traumatized, guilt over their inability to keep their children safe and feelings of helplessness affect their parenting. Parents may underreport or overlook both past trauma and current problems suffered by their children.

As another example, children are affected when they witness how a parent or caregiver acts when confronted with memories of the past or traumatic reminders, such as violence

on television.

This response can take many forms in a parent, ranging from withdrawal to one's bedroom for prolonged periods to acute trauma reactions, such as flashbacks. These reactions can be confusing and frightening to children.

Torture survivors are afraid of family members dismissing them as "crazy." Family members are alarmed and saddened to discover that the survivor is no longer who she or he was before the torture.

Living in families and communities affected by torture conveys profound messages to youth. The lessons of torture, as identified by youth, are embedded in the following messages:

"The world is not a safe place."

"You should not trust anyone."

"Death can happen at any time."

"Nobody will believe you."

"Stay away from all politics."

"Parents and adults can't protect you."

"Your problems are not as serious  
or difficult as mine were."

These messages affect how young people behave in school and in the broader community. Without corrective experiences or appropriate intervention, they experience social isolation, adjustment difficulties, and marginalization.

For various reasons, children of torture survivors may not have access to religious, community, or school supports. This is unfortunate, given that social support and understanding from others is very helpful. Sometimes, young people in highly traumatized and isolated families view attempts to reach out to others as a betrayal of their



**SAHR, 18, LEFT:** "If I refused, they would kill me . . . I was instructed how to cock the gun and fire. It was an AK47. I cannot remember exactly how many times I fired. . . . It was the young boys who destroyed Sierra Leone."

**SAHR, 19:** "I was encouraged to join the rebels. I saw a rebel kill a man, a young man, and drink his blood."

Last names and hometowns withheld.

parents, or they have internalized the fears of their parents. They fear getting their parents into trouble with authorities by bringing attention to the family. They fear a reoccurrence of what happened back home.

Young people may also experience symptoms related to their trauma or the torture trauma of their family, as well as symptoms related to the catastrophic losses they have endured.

Children of torture survivors endure many unsafe transitional living arrangements while their families attempt to find safe neighborhoods in the United States. This disrupts their educations as well as the development of stable attachments and normative peer relationships.

Affected youth, like their parents, are highly resilient and develop strong survival skills to adapt to these abnormal environments. If a young person is behav-

ing in ways that seem strange or inappropriate, it is crucial for professionals to investigate the history and meaning of that behavior in previous environments he or she managed to survive.

Again, it is important to know that not all torture survivors, primary or secondary, will need specialized services to address the effects of their torture. As with any trauma, how a person deals with torture is contingent upon individual, family, cultural, and environmental factors.

## CONCLUSION

Attending to the needs of communities and families affected by torture is instrumental in fostering a healing environment. The thoughtful provider considers the individual torture survivor not in isolation but as a part of a larger support system of family and community.

As a group, torture survivors are hardworking, principled individuals who have sacrificed themselves to address the political and social problems in their home countries.

They are leaders with abilities, talents, intelligence, and survival skills that made them a threat to those who rule through fear. As newcomers to this country, they make invaluable contributions to our economy, neighborhoods, and social, religious, and civic institutions.

They deserve welcoming and healing communities. The rest of this manual addresses the role of health care, social services, and legal services in creating such communities. ■

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## CASE STORY

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** The following is a story of a family affected by torture. Unfortunately, this family's experiences are common among torture survivors.

**M**ohamed, the father of the family, spoke out against a repressive leader. Soon the family began to receive threatening phone calls and notes left on their door. One day, Mohamed disappeared on his way to work. No one has heard from him since and the family presumes he is dead.

The mother of the family, Sarah, and her four children were subsequently imprisoned together for 12 months. During that time, the children witnessed Sarah taken away for daily interrogation and torture sessions. Following each session, she returned to them bloody and injured. She was severely beaten and burned as part of her torture. The children and Sarah also witnessed many atrocities in the prison and lived under deplorable conditions.

After their release, they escaped on foot through the mountainous region of their country and came to the United States as refugees several years ago.

Sarah suffers from chronic pain in areas of her body that were tortured, as well as severe post traumatic stress disorder and major depression. Despite this, she attempts to make a life for herself and her children. This is difficult.

In her home country, before she



was tortured, Sarah and her family owned several homes and enjoyed relative safety and a comfortable lifestyle. Here, the family lives in a rodent-infested apartment that Sarah will not leave or complain about because she fears the landlord and police.

Sarah works full-time in house-keeping for a hotel chain. The family is completely isolated from other families from their country. Sarah does not permit relationships with those in her cultural/ethnic community due to distrust and shame. Following her release from prison, others shunned, shamed, and betrayed her, mostly out of their own fear that they would also be targeted if they extended themselves to help her. She says she cannot forgive this. She allows the family to have relationships with people from other countries who share the family's religion, as well as health-care and social service providers.

The family continues to live with worry and anxiety that relatives back home will be persecuted because they escaped. Shortly after they arrived in the United

States, relatives phoned the family and informed them that Sarah's father was executed because of their escape.

The children worry constantly about their mother's physical and psychological condition, sometimes leading one or more of them to stay home from school to do the cooking or cleaning so that Sarah will not have to after she gets home from work. Other students ridicule them at school because of their accents and limited financial resources for clothing, field trips, etc.

For both Sarah's medical appointments and interactions with the school system, the children are in the roles of interpreter and cultural broker. They have learned to take care of the bills and the outside appointments for the household.

Both Sarah and teachers describe two of the girls, Eleni and Martha, as depressed. The son, Ahmed, struggles to assume his culture's traditional role of head of the household at age 11. He suffers from insomnia, traumatic nightmares, flashbacks of the prison experiences, and other symptoms of post traumatic stress.

The children do not know or understand what happened to their father, Mohamed, but they know that their mother cannot tolerate discussion of this topic and they have stopped raising it.

His fate hangs over the families' interactions with one another like a heavy, ever-present cloud. ■