

PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT
OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE
AND TIPS
FOR COMMUNITY ACTION



MARIE CARAJ

Illustrated by Diana Raznovich
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“

I grew up in multicultural environments. Learning languages and engaging in human rights has allowed me to travel and meet a large number of human rights defenders (HRDs) directly exposed to political violence. An experience, a collective memory that I had to systematise from a psychosocial and gender perspective, although only partially, in homage to all human rights defenders for their resilience, commitment, work and dedication towards a more just world.

Versatile, I have combined the activity of interpreter, counsellor, trainer, researcher and co-author in HRD protection (with Peace Brigades International and Protection International), trade union trainer (with the European Trade Union Institute) and researcher, from practice in volatile contexts and disasters, paying a special attention to the psychosocial impact (thanks in particular to a postgraduate course with the Grupo de Acción Comunitaria) and to the gender perspective (also through the contextualisation of a postgraduate course on gender issues with Asociación de Mujeres para la Salud). The gender perspective is often denied, postponed, treated as if it were a luxury or an option of better times when, in fact, it does not arise in terms of priority because it exists everywhere, it is the fabric of humanity itself, an indicator of equality (or inequality) and the paradigm of an inclusive and egalitarian, i.e. humanist world. It is not enough to be progressive, one must be feminist. ”

Marie Caraj

A tribute to Human Rights Defenders

“ *The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it.*

The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space. ”

Invisible Cities, Italo Calvino, 1972 ¹

“ *You cannot cover up the sun with a sieve.* ”

Moroccan proverb

“ *The inhumanity inflicted on another destroys the humanity in me.* ”

Immanuel Kant ²

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¹ Italo Calvino (1923-1985). Italian author.

² Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). German philosopher.

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I feel admiration, respect, solidarity, empathy and gratitude for all the human rights defenders – women, men and inter-gender³ – whom I have met, will meet and will never meet. They changed my life. The days spent together have, imperceptibly, forged a bond between us from which the spinning of shared experiences has contributed to this work. I will never forget their compassion, solidarity and passion. Thank you.

I should like to express my gratitude to my teachers from the Grupo de Acción Comunitaria (G.A.C) and Asociación de Mujeres para la Salud (A.M.S.).⁴ They have helped me to better understand the interdependence between psychosocial support, gender and human rights defence.

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³ In several countries such as India, Australia, Pakistan, Nepal and Germany, the existence of a third gender is acknowledged. <https://information.tv5monde.com/terriennes/choisir-son-genre-masculin-feminin-autre-3084>

⁴ The Grupo de Acción Comunitaria is a network of psychologists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, doctors, social workers who work with the victims of political violence and natural disasters www.psicosocial.net In its work, Asociación de Mujeres para la Salud uses the Psychotherapy of Feminist Equity www.mujeresparalasalud.org

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Foreword

Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) – men, women and intergenerations – as well as the victims, witnesses and vulnerable groups whom they accompany are targets of the political violence designed to silence them. They suffer from its physical, psychological and psychosocial impacts. Nevertheless, HRDs continue to fight against impunity and for justice, without which peace remains an illusion. Despite fear, they will not have themselves intimidated.

HRDs work directly with victims; they are constantly confronted with their own trauma and fear. They receive, listen, support, advise and accompany the victims whose accounts remind them of their own experiences that scarred them and that HRDs could not elaborate because, among other things, they had to get back on their feet quickly to support others, move forward and claim justice that themselves have not received.

I worked with them for decades. Time and time again, they stirred me to the depth of my soul. They offered me support while I listened to their stories, while I dwelled in sadness and despair, faced by the powerlessness which increased with the awareness of the surreal nature of the situation whereby our roles were inverted. It was their turn to cry, not mine; it was my role to support them, not theirs. I shall never forget these emotions, these feelings, their strength. It is they who uphold, nourish and cement mutual support.

In 2009 in Uganda, two Sudanese refugees with wounds of torture from the previous days were patting each other on the shoulder, declaring that torture would not stop them. Their smile, I felt, was meant to reassure me while I was watching them with a lump in my throat.

In 1987 in El Salvador, I visited political prisoners in the Mariona prison. They had transformed their cells into offices, places to hold meetings and to analyse political violence. I left. They stayed.

In 2004 in Guatemala, while working with some forty farmers, I felt suffocated by what they told me about the murders of their fellow farmers. I wondered what I was doing there while they insisted: *“We cannot give up”*.

In 1995 in Colombia, I listened to trade unionists reaffirming their demands for social justice despite what they called union genocide. I felt their fear and determination while facing the risk of being wiped out by political violence.

In 1986 in Palestine, my feeling of outrage gave way to admiration for the Palestinian and Israeli HRDs who together demanded that the most basic human rights be respected. This included Palestinians' access to water, which, in the past, they had used to irrigate their olive groves and was now being used, for watering roses in the settler's protected enclaves.

In 1999 in the Balkans, I felt the same admiration for the Women in Black from various, communities in conflict. They spoke of the solidarity they had build notwithstanding the war which should have divided them.

In 2002 in Mexico, I listened palely to the accounts of tortures endured by young HRDs, imprisoned for no valid reason other to put an end to their just struggle.

In 2010 in Nepal, I met Pakistani HRDs who dared to expose themselves to the hatred of religious extremists.

In 2004 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I asked myself whether I could have survived the tortures being described to me.

...

I will never forget the distress of that woman in Lebanon who explained to me how the rupture of the hymen during tortures affected more than the breaking of an arm in the same circumstances.

I will never forget anyone. I will never forget the forcibly conscripted children, boys and girls alike. I will never forget the little boy who clung to me. I had no idea what he had been through, but I did know he was looking for protection. I will never forget that little girl holding the child from the sexual torture she suffered. I was wondering if she would ever be able to love it. I will never forget the HRDs who defend these children's right to childhood.

I will never forget Human Rights Defenders, whatever their country of origin. These are the women, men and intergenders who tirelessly fight, denounce, and demand justice and respect for the Rule of Law.

How do they do it? What more can they do? How do they manage to live? Where do they draw their strength from to continue struggling against the oppressor, against injustice, against impunity?

The point is not only to work on security and protection but also, in addition, on the psychosocial impact of political violence so as to find avenues for community support and action.

Many HRDs have endured harassment, threats and other forms of intimidation, aggression and torture while imprisoned. Few HRDs have benefitted from post-

traumatic psychological support or the legal counsel leading to judicial proceedings against the torturers. Rarely have HRDs seen justice rendered.

Many national and international organisations support HRDs. This manual is meant as food for thought and suggests additional ways for HRDs to train themselves, train others and offer each other mutual support.

This book addresses the strategy of political violence against HRDs and its impacts beyond the impact on individual HRDs. It also describes some of the strategies and actions developed by HRDs to react to political violence.

This publication is accessible to all and does not require any particular knowledge of what is referred to as *'the invisible, internal energy, spirit, soul, the psyche, the unconscious...'* depending on the culture.

I hope it will help HRDs to mutually support each other and to protect the victims they defend.

Introduction

I was born in Europe where the study of phenomena such as the invisible, the spirit, the soul, the psyche, etc. have been classified by the discipline of psychology (the science of the mind). I shall, therefore, refer to psychological terminology without forgetting that synonyms from different origins exist in other cultures and in other parts of the world. In this book, I have included quotations and proverbs from across the globe to pay tribute to this multitude of synonyms and converging approaches which are used to refer to feelings and emotions, which are universal. What is also universal is the logic of the power of the oppressor.

Not having studied psychology, apart from making use of my experience and that of HRDs, I shall also draw upon the approach of the Grupo de Acción Comunitaria (G.A.C.), of Asociación de Mujeres para la Salud (A.M.S.) and to professional literature in the field.

It is with much caution and humility that I have written this manual. I could not have done so without the contributions of the men, women and intergender HRDs from different countries, ethnicities, continents, cultures and religions, who speak different languages. I wish I could have learned and written in each one of their languages and through the lens of their cultures.

The idea that feelings and emotions are universal and felt independent of language and culture comforts me in this task. Two enemies who have lost a loved one feel the same pain although they come from different countries, cultures and speak different languages, even though, they may describe that pain in a different manner or may rationally justify the death of their enemy's loved ones. Citizens across the globe have felt the momentum and joy of the Arab Spring's demonstrators.

I hope that you will find equivalents in your language for the concepts in this book and ways to adapt them within your own context. I have tried to express myself clearly, often by reformulating. I have included as many references as possible to encourage you to take further steps in your own personal training.

At least one in two humans is a woman and sometimes this person is neither one nor the other, but intergender. Therefore, the pronouns "he", "she" and "they" are used interchangeably in this text.

All three genders constitute the many facets of humankind. Sometimes I use only the masculine or feminine form but I am referring to all genders, regardless of sexual orientation.

Each part of this manual ends with a summary and exercises meant to help human rights defenders while working on themselves and with their victims. The first exercise consists in translating the key words into your own language, to express what they mean, to speak about them so as to grasp all of the different nuances and to understand possible differences in interpretation. When mentioned for the first time, these key words are in bold. In addition, some exercises are designed to analyse and contextualise tips to build support, psychosocial community action.

“ *If language does not name me, I do not exist.
But since I exist I will fight for language to name me.* ”

Diana Raznovich ⁵

“ *When injustice becomes law,
resistance becomes duty.* ”

Thomas Jefferson ⁶

⁵ Free translation of a vignette by Diana Raznovich, feminist playwright and author of graphic humour of Argentinian-Spanish origin.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826). Third President of the United States, from 1801 to 1809. This statesman was also a philosopher, agronomist, inventor and an architect. Wikipedia.

1 Psychosocial impact of political violence



- 1.1 Trauma
- 1.2 Stress, trauma and traumatism
- 1.3 Feelings and emotions
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1 Psychosocial impact of political violence

Any abusive action from the State against members of society and/or against any ideological opposition is called **political violence**.

Political violence has a collective impact. Not only does political violence have an impact on the **individual** and/or their **group**; **society** as a whole is affected by political violence. The impact is not only physical, economic and material, but also psychological.

The individual is part of a group, a **community**, a society. The impact of political violence has repercussions on the relationship between the individual and others, and on the way in which individuals (re-)organise and interact because of political violence. Political violence has a **psychological** impact on the social fabric. This is referred to as **psychosocial** impact. Those who wield the **power to oppress** exercise this form of violence by resorting to a number of tactics.

For example, those who hold the power to oppress know that HRDs need financial resources. Therefore the oppressors deny HRDs access to resources by denying them work, by imposing penalties on them, by passing laws on a maximum limit to foreign funding of national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), etc. These oppressors are aware that HRDs are part of a network of relationships, interwoven into a social fabric. Therefore, they use tactics such as exclusion, division, stigmatisation, isolation, eviction, displacement, repression, harassment, discrimination, criminalisation, attack on identity and dignity, threats, indirect or direct aggression which may lead to kidnapping, incarceration, torture and death.

Those who hold the power to oppress try to rip open the seams of that social fabric by isolating individuals from their group, by accusing them of being traitors or cowards. They also try to sever links between the individual/the group and the rest of society. They attempt to divide the group into sub-groups by placing those who have been qualified as *“traitors”* on one side and those who have not (yet) *“betrayed”* on the other. This is how they breed hostility among groups.

No one is immune to the idea that this could happen to them, their **families**, their friends or their colleagues. Moreover, HRDs operate within a context of impunity. Thus, the entire community is affected and it too may display **symptoms** similar to those experienced by individuals targeted directly by political violence. Political

violence is carried out by non-democratic governments and their armed opponents. Both attack civil society. Both hold the power to resort to the tactics mentioned above with impunity.

Nevertheless, HRDs, their groups and their communities hold the power **to react, to resist and to assert themselves**. This point is essential as no one holds absolute power. Power never belongs to a single actor though it is difficult for HRDs, their groups and communities to exercise their power.

Often, political violence is accepted fatalistically by the communities concerned. Political violence is justified by pseudo-arguments, such as: *“This is the way it has always been here”*. This increases HRDs’ isolation as they differ from this opinion and know that things can change.

“ This is the way things have always been ‘here’ ”

is a resistance mechanism based on a stereotype which conveys a feeling of powerlessness, of fatalism. It is based on the fallacy of seeing political contexts as static. However, history teaches us that political contexts are dynamic; thus political violence is dynamic as well. *“This”* can also change *“here”*. In the case of human rights violations, it is the fight against impunity and the struggle for the respect of the Rule of Law which contribute to this change.

1.1 Trauma

Political violence against HRDs, their groups and their communities can be of low-intensity over a protracted period of time, interspersed with peaks of high-intensity political violence. Low-intensity violence (for example, by depriving a community of water, transport, economic resources, etc.) causes **stress** for the victims. Abuses of power (accumulation of abuses of power) lead to the gradual attrition of the victim which in the long run causes exhaustion. In the short-term, taken separately, these abuses of power would not have the same impact. High-intensity violence breaks the victim down, inducing **trauma** (injury). Such forms of aggression can cause injury or even kill. This applies to shock suffered by the victim of aggression and shock undergone by the witness of aggression or death. Political violence, whether of low- or high-intensity, scars its victims. It wears out individuals, groups, the community and society.

Psychological scars may be expressed through physical disorders (headache, muscle pain, heart failure, etc.) and/or as psychological and behavioural disorders (insomnia, worry, anxiety, alcoholism, bulimia, anorexia, irritability, aggressiveness, depression, apathy, etc.). These disorders can also affect those surrounding the individual (fatalism, separation, family and community breakdown, increased fragility of identity and dignity, mistrust, fear, etc.).

Disorders are triggered by the **drama** (violent), which caused the trauma and affected directly **emotions, feelings**. We were attacked, tortured. We felt threatened by death which brushed past us, we saw our own death, emptiness, the unnameable, the inhumane and we were struck by fear, dread, horror, powerlessness. We lack words to describe the drama. Besides, who could understand? Who would be able to understand that we plunged into another world from which, even though we try, it is impossible to emerge? How can we return to the living? We have not been able to defend ourselves nor defend the other, we have been betrayed or, in order to survive, we have betrayed. We feel guilty, angry, we are ashamed, we feel alone, defiled. How can we explain sexual torture running the risk of being banned if we come from a community which merges sex with dignity? How can we admit what has happened? How can we **live with it** if we cannot forget the traumatic event? Nothing will be as it was before, as we are now in the time *"after"*. How can we articulate fear? How can we return to the world of the living?

Sometimes, in addition to the political violence suffered, the victim is subject to violence from the community because of belief systems and **patriarchal** structures. When the community perpetrates such violence it harms the victim even more profoundly as the community is supposed to be a source of support for the victim. The community is supposed to comfort, defend and protect the victim. The

community is not supposed to betray the victim by rejecting them. Why is breaking a hymen worse than breaking an arm? Why punish the victim by rejecting her, in the name of which belief, of which **culture**? Is the community not able to understand that the only beneficiary of this type of community violence is the oppressor? Is the oppressor not the oppressor of all?

1.2 Stress, trauma and traumatism

The emotional impact of political violence exercises pressure (stress) on the entire psychological system and can provoke disorders of variable intensity and duration, also having an impact on a person's physical wellbeing.

It is said that some HRD have been traumatised. Sometimes terms are used in an undifferentiated manner, sometimes they are trivialised. Being precise can assist us in acting adequately.

Drama provokes trauma. Trauma is the shock, the injury caused by the drama. Trauma causes suffering. Psychological suffering is also referred to as post-traumatic stress. This leads to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), either immediately or at a later stage. *"Later"* may mean *"years later"* when unexpectedly, the post-traumatic stress (re-)appears. The individual may suddenly find itself in a situation which brings back memories of the trauma undergone in the past. Memories remain buried in the unconscious and it is not known when they may resurface. The unconscious never forgets.⁷ The disorder manifests itself as the panoply of physiological and/or behavioural symptoms, indicating that the injury, the trauma is still present. The disorder is the reaction to the trauma and is linked to what the wound, the trauma represents for the individual. It can vary from one individual to another.

To understand, recognise and act appropriately, it is advisable to break up this sequence and not to confuse the different moments.

⁷ Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalyst. 1856-1939.

François Lebigot⁸ distinguishes between stress and trauma:

It is not a matter of vocabulary, but rather an essential issue because the damages to the psychological apparatus differ fundamentally in cases of stress or trauma. [...] Stress and trauma: The word '*traumatism*' appeared at the end of the XIX century from the Greek trauma ('*wound*') to refer to a psychological phenomenon which (until then) had not been recognised by doctors nor anyone else. "*Psychological traumatism*" is a profound emotional wound which could, sometimes, be observed in those who had narrowly escaped death. The word "*stress*", appeared in the language of neuropsychology at the beginning of the XX century and was used to define all of the physiological and subsequently psychological reactions of humans or animals faced by threats or unforeseen situations.

World wars and the problems experienced by soldiers returning from the front led to paying increased attention to the psychological impact of violence and war, PTSD. Violence is also a combat strategy within armed forces (official or not), to desensitise fighters when facing the enemy. This strategy is also employed by dictatorial regimes.⁹ I shall neither analyse nor discuss the psychological disorders of the perpetrators of political violence. Not because it is not fundamental, but because I have chosen the victim's perspective. I wish to treat the figure of the survivor as a source of inspiration, serving HRDs to rebuild their lives, builds resistance and struggle against impunity.

When differentiating between trauma, stress and traumatism, the following applies:

- Individuals who have not suffered from a direct drama (or have not been witness of the drama) do not experience trauma, they do not have post-traumatic stress or post-traumatic stress disorders.
- However, when caring for victims, they are exposed to **vicarious trauma**¹⁰ (secondary traumatic stress or victimisation by contact), caused by burn-out. Vicarious trauma is the result of being in contact with the direct victims of trauma and continuously listening to their experiences. This leads to compassion-fatigue which can disrupt physical, psychological and emotional balance. Even one's view of humanity and the meaning of life can be called into question. The risk of vicarious stress increases whenever the victims have high expectations of their caregivers, when resources are insufficient, etc.¹¹

⁸ François Lebigot is an army psychiatrist. *Traiter les traumatismes psychiques. Clinique et prise en charge*. Ed. Dunod. 2005.

⁹ J. Puget, R. Kaës, M. Vignar, L. Ricón, J. Braun de Dunayevich M., L.-L. Pelento, S. Amati, M. Ulriksen-Vignar, V. Galli. *Violence d'Etat et psychanalyse*. Ed. Dunod.

¹⁰ Vicarious trauma (VT) is also known as '*secondary stress disorder*', '*compassion fatigue*', '*secondary traumatic stress (STS)*', '*insidious trauma*', '*vicarious traumatization*' or '*secondary traumatization*'. The author would like to insist on the difference between the trauma and the stress suffered by the victim and the vicarious trauma (VT) which is not a trauma, rather the stress induced by working with victims.

¹¹ <http://energievie.ca/tag/stress-vicariant/>

Drawing this distinction enables us to support each individual according to their needs. A trauma sufferer requires complex support. First, if needed, we may accompany them to a medical consultation. Then, if they have no access to professional psychological help, we can help them to perceive that they are no longer in the traumatising situation and that they are now in a protected environment. The person is then able to break free from their direct link to the trauma, to the past, be aware that they are in a safe environment in the present where they will be able to regain control over their lives, rekindle ties with family and friends who are there to protect and support them. These are progressive steps which require working together with the individual so that they can regain a realistic, nuanced view of the world and the meaning of life. We must act with caution, not forcing the person. We accompany them, are with them. They may not immediately wish to speak of what has happened to them. They may perhaps do so later, much later or never at all – even if they know that their account as a witness is an important contribution to the struggle against impunity. Putting their experiences into words may be too painful. In no event should we force them. They must be the ones to take the initiative. Often, a traumatised person prefers speaking to someone who has gone through the same or a similar experience, someone he/she feels may understand better. Yet, together with them, we can still work through their automatic thoughts and behaviours induced by traumatism. Some examples of such automatic thoughts are: "*this could happen again, I have put my family in danger, there is nothing to be done, etc.*". We may assist them in analysing the political context and the hypotheses on which these assumptions are based, taking them apart rationally. A few examples of automatic behaviour are: closing doors and windows, distrusting others, etc. We may assist the person in understanding that at present these actions are no longer necessary as now, they are in a safe haven. These thoughts and behaviours will not disappear immediately, or perhaps ever. The individual can learn to live with them and then, progressively no longer suffer and feel threatened by them. We can help them by, together, analysing their present situation. We will accompany them when they go somewhere. Certain places and/or situations may bring back the trauma and trigger post-traumatic stress. We will remind them that we are now in the present, that we are here with them. We shall remind them of the steps taken to reduce the probability of the traumatic event reoccurring. We shall ask them whether they think anything else should be done. This will help them in regaining control over the situation. It is vital to keep in mind that the individual has undergone an abnormal experience which in no way makes them abnormal. A context of political violence and impunity is never totally free of risk, but HRDs are part of a network which has been activated because of the drama affecting the victim. The individual may decide to continue their activity as an HRD, to put it on hold or to abandon it altogether. We shall not force them. We shall help

them to rebuild their lives with the support of the community. It is clear that the work described here concerns victims without trauma requiring psychiatric support. If needed, we shall help the person access such support. Let us not forget that HRDs are part of national and international networks to which many humanitarian organisations belong.

Those who suffer from vicarious stress need to share their experience and recover. HRDs' organisations should ensure that there is adequate time for discussion, recognise vicarious stress as being part of the work, and include time for rest.

Guatemala, 1987: Under a death threat, a HRD decides to go into exile with her family. Given the context of impunity, the risk of her being killed is high. The evening before they leave, I accompany them to reduce the probability of an attack just before their departure. I am a member of P.B.I.¹² Relatives come to bid them goodbye. Everyone is crying including myself. I had never met this HRD before and I am never going to see her again. For security reasons, I have no idea where she is going. I have no emotional ties to anyone present at the scene. Yet, my emotions awaken as I feel hers and those of her family. We share the experience of being torn apart. Each one of us identifies with the other in their pain. It is a moment of symbiosis between the two of us, the one who accompanies and the one accompanied. This experience has enabled me to become acutely aware of **vicarious stress**.

Vicarious stress affects HRDs who work directly with the victims of political violence. The risk of suffering from such stress increases when HRDs work in situations where they themselves may become the targets of political violence. In essence, HRDs work in environments characterised by fanaticism, human rights infringements, lack of medical and social infrastructures (or the inaccessibility thereof), the absence of the rule of law and justice, thus operating in a context of impunity. They are always on the razor's edge.

¹² PBI – Peace Brigades International. Non governmental organisation which, upon request by HRDs, sends international observers into areas affected by political violence. <https://www.peacebrigades.org/>

HRDs, their group, their community, their society are constantly caught in a state of insecurity, precariousness, where everything is temporary, short-term, with a feeling of powerlessness. All of these cause stress and stress *'feeds'* on all of the above, growing imperceptibly up to the point when a crisis may erupt (disruption of the psychological balance of the individual, the group, the community and thus, society).

HRDs interact with each other and have families, sometimes people who depend on them, whatever their age. Children, family, friends, colleagues perceive the risk and may therefore also develop traumatic reactions (crises of anxiety, panic, tension, aggressiveness, tears, a feeling of powerlessness, fatigue, passivity, repetitive thoughts, nightmares, mystification, fatalism, psychological disorders such as lack of appetite, insomnia, enuresis in children, etc.).

1.3 Feelings and Emotions

Violence against HRDs – and violence against the victims they represent – is used by the authority holding the power of oppression to put an end to the struggle to defend human rights. As already mentioned, the authority tries to destabilise, discourage, discredit, deprive of resources, isolate, demobilise, destroy, criminalise and to strike HRDs as well as their groups and communities. The oppressor plans a precise strategy with short- and medium-term objectives, design suitable tactics and acquire the necessary resources to carry out its objectives. It knows that by working through intimidation, it will provoke a feeling of fear and discouragement amongst the ranks of the HRDs, thereby enabling it to reach its true objective: that HRDs and their groups give up their struggle.

The oppressor knows it can instil feelings of shame, guilt, humiliation, anger, etc. It plays upon its victim's most deeply-seated emotions, such as fear and panic which are electric shocks to the mind, body and soul. These are extremely rapid chemical reactions, triggered in our brains, which can occur at any moment.

It is difficult to distinguish between feelings and emotions. For the sake of distinction, I shall refer to feelings as linked to the awakening of consciousness, to the assessing of the situation, to the affective experience. Feelings develop at an early age when the human brain is formed when humans start reasoning and explaining. For example, when an individual is capable of explaining that he/she is angry because he/she feels powerless when faced with injustice. Emotions, in contrast, manifest themselves earlier, preceding birth. Emotions do not require reasoning, therefore, it is more difficult to speak about them, to express them and to work on them. Emotions are expressed by chemical bodily reactions, physiological responses which sometimes cannot be controlled. These emotional reactions are linked to feelings. Injustice, for

example, can simultaneously trigger feelings and emotions of anger. The feelings can be explained; the emotions expressed, for instance through tremors. Knowing that the brain triggers emotions via a chemical discharge of adrenaline does not suffice to inhibit them. It is *“easier”* to work on feelings than on emotions.

The impact of the oppressor’s strategy on HRDs depends on the victim’s lived experience. A person who has grown up in an environment where individual dignity does not depend on the judgement of others shall be better equipped to understand that it is the torturer and not the person tortured who has lost dignity. On the contrary, individuals who have grown up in an environment where individual dignity depends on the judgement of others will need to work on their own psychological liberation before being able to work on elaborating the facts.

1.3.1 Feelings

“ I will never again approach the other. ”

“ I had to dig my own grave while a gun was being pointed at my temples. And then they left. I don’t know why I am still here. ”

“ They did everything except that... I am still a “maiden” ...but I will never be able to marry because I do not want any man to come close to me... ”

“ We had to denounce, kill and bury members of our family...otherwise we would have been killed. We have been made co-responsible for the genocide. How can we ever live with this? ”

...

These testimonies exist across all continents and countries where there was/is war, political violence in all its cruelty. Each one of these accounts describes what happened on the surface. What they fail to reveal is which emotions would be triggered if, for example, the victim were to approach the other...

Let us examine some feelings HRDs may experience. This will enable us to improve our strategy for reacting to political violence and to resist the attempts to alienate the minds of HRDs, their groups and their communities. One of the oppressor’s aims is to oblige HRDs to think and feel what it wants them to think and feel.

Non-exhaustive list of feelings

Guilt

In retaliation for HRDs’ actions, those in power may inflict suffering on their relatives, colleagues and communities. Consequently, HRDs may feel guilty because of the suffering caused. HRDs feel guilty for not having been able to hinder this suffering and/or not having been able to protect their loved ones. Sometimes, HRDs feel guilty for not being able to care more for their families and for spending *“more”* time with the *“others”*. HRDs may also feel guilty for having *“betrayed”* their fellow HRDs under torture.

Guilt is linked to *“fault”*, responsibility, a lost opportunity. We feel guilty when we become aware of what we believe is our own fault, our own responsibility. However, HRDs are not at fault when dedicating their lives to defending human rights. HRDs are not responsible for what happens to their loved ones. They are taking action in the interest of all, including their families. They choose to react against oppression

and that entails risks. HRDs are aware of these risks; just as they are aware of the risks of not reacting and melting voicelessly into the silent masses. HRDs know that the number of people who suffer and die in silence anonymously is greater than the number of people who suffer and die while raising their voices against injustice.

HRDs may experience a conflict of loyalty both towards their families and relatives and towards their ideals and principles. They feel they may be betraying their loved ones even though they know that there is no such thing as choosing between their loved ones or their ideals because both are complementary. This *“forced betrayal”* increases HRDs feeling of guilt if they believe they are neglecting their loved ones for their ideals or vice-versa.

Viewing guilt from the angle of forced betrayal encourages HRDs to analyse the complementary nature of their actions and realise how they ultimately are promoting everyone’s rights.

The oppressor is aware that HRDs experience feelings of forced betrayal and therefore uses these feelings of guilt to manipulate HRDs. For example, HRDs may be forced to give the names of their colleagues even though these names are already known. HRDs work in the open, legally, not in hiding. HRD’s activities are legitimised by the community they represent and by the international community. HRDs are public figures who operate within the legal framework of national and international law. Oppressors have no need to obtain these names under torture by playing on the feeling of forced betrayal and guilt. They need to silence HRDs, to crush them, to draw them into their own perverted logic in which responsibility has been turned upside down. Oppressors make their victims carry the burden of their own errors. They do whatever is necessary to make victims believe it is their own fault. Torture, under the pretext of extracting information, is an instrument designed to oblige the victim to betray his/her colleagues. Victims no longer recognise themselves for they did not think themselves capable of such betrayal. Thus, victims feel partially responsible for what will be done to their colleagues. Victims will feel guilty of treachery, even if it is forced betrayal. HRDs are victims, not culprits. They will have to work through their feelings of guilt and become aware that betrayal is inherent to all of us; that under torture there is no betrayal because one is not in control of what one says and one is cut off from the rest of the world.

In genocides, members of a family may be forced to kill the others, to strip them, to throw them into mass graves which they had been forced to dig. Their only alternative is their own death. The aim of these actions is to make ordinary citizens feel partially responsible/guilty for genocide and even worse, for the death of their own families. This strategy is designed to subdue and crush a people, to silence them, to hinder them from demanding justice, to destroy them. This is a means of reducing HRDs to a sub-human state. Therein lies the worst of crimes against humanity.

Who is guilty? Why?

Does knowledge prevent suffering and traumatism? No. Knowledge contributes to gaining awareness of the perversion of the oppressor’s power and to demystifying power, which in itself, is neither good nor bad nor absolute. Everything depends upon how that power is used. Power can also be used to do good. Power changes according to socio-political context. The oppressing power feeds on the submission of the oppressed. It is sustained by their obedience. Let us remember that HRDs also possess the power to react, to resist, to assert themselves, to take action against the oppressing power. This contributes to inverting the statement *“It has always been this way ‘here’”*.

Being conscious of this is the first step towards reconstructing individuals, their families and communities. This awareness contributes to liberating oneself from the clutches of the other. They no longer have a hold on the individual, at least not through guilt. HRDs are not guilty. Victims of political violence –dead or alive– know this. They know it is not HRDs who owe them anything but rather, the oppressing power that owes them justice. HRDs fight against impunity.

HRDs suffer greatly. For them, it is important to recognise the feelings which have been unfairly inflicted upon them and to be able to overcome them. They will have to learn to live with the facts and the horrors which cannot be erased as well as with pain which comes and goes.

Shame

Shame is a feeling about oneself, irrespective of others and their judgement. Shame comes from violating a common code of values. Shame arises despite the violent circumstances which have led to the violation, despite the fact that the choice was between violating the values and one’s own life. For the victim, it is difficult to speak about her feelings of shame as she perceives a risk of being excluded by those who share that common code of values. Nevertheless, speaking of shame and working through the feeling of shame allows it to be transferred to the other camp, into the hands of the torturer.

Shame is the consequence of physical, psychological or symbolic violence experienced by an individual. Faced with this violence, the subject reacts according to their individual history and particular circumstances. Shame becomes rooted in the individual when they do not want to react by projecting the ‘evil’ onto the outside world. The individual is trapped in a contradiction which deactivates their regular psyche because the situation creates disorder, inhibits and sometimes even destroys their capacity to defend themselves.¹³ (...) Shame is internalised as it is an echo of a feeling of illegitimacy or inferiority. (...) The subject experiencing the shame must

¹³ Free translation of excerpts from Vincent de Gaujelac, *Les sources de la honte*, ed. Desclée de Brouwer.

be recognised by others as lovable. They must understand that they are not the cause of the invalidation and humiliations suffered. It is the situation in which they found themselves which is heinous and not their quintessential self.¹⁴ (...) To free oneself from shame is to externalise it by strengthening the imagination and developing forms of expression via creativity, writing, activism or humour. It is about freeing words of truth, about enabling reconciliation with one's own history, with those parts of the self which have been altered by the humiliating violence.¹⁵

HRDs may experience shame if they have felt humiliated, demeaned, stripped, exposed, robbed of their dignity. They were forced to endure barbaric acts which, a priori, are inconceivable for humans to commit. They were dehumanised. Some were forced to sleep in their own excrement, even to swallow it. They had to *"satisfy"* the torturers' sadistic urges. Their bodies were tormented, their private parts exposed, tortured, photographed. They were forced to *"satisfy"* torturers' sadistic sexual urges. They *'betrayed'* their colleagues, once again, to satisfy the torturers' sadistic urges in hopes of remaining alive.

How can they tell all this to those whose support is needed most? Particularly when they think that by telling them about these experiences, they might lose their support. How is it possible to overcome a physical feeling of shame triggered off against one's own will?

Shame, as other feelings and emotions listed in this manual, appears independent of reason. Actually, the shame is for the torturer because it is the one who lost its dignity through such acts of barbarism towards another human being. It is not easy to convince oneself that there is no shame in having been a victim who, to stay alive, endured all of these humiliating experiences.

Humiliation

Humiliation is the feeling born of contempt for others. *'Others'* can be the oppressing power but also the community or the victim's loved ones. When the victim of sexual torture is a woman, she is subjected to double humiliation, by the oppressing power and by her community, rejecting her as if she were responsible for the oppressor's violence. In some cases, the humiliation she experiences goes so far as having to deny her own suffering, to put *"her family's suffering"* first though the latter does not stem from empathy but rather, it is part of an illusory and humiliating representation of the woman as an object and to the false belief that the family's dignity and honour are linked to her rape.

...

¹⁴ Ibidem, page 221.

¹⁵ Ibidem, Page 271.

The feeling of being soiled

This is a feeling often experienced by victims of rape and sexual torture. Sexual violence is not only practiced with the penis but also with objects. Torture includes not only rape but also sexual violence and sexual abuse.

Statistically speaking, more women than men are exposed to sexual torture. These women, men or intergenders have been attacked in their most intimate sphere, they have been humiliated. Often, putting this type of torture into words is the most difficult, particularly when living in a society which confuses sex and dignity (as if sex were an element of dignity instead of a biological organ); a society where the value of a human being differs, depending on sex, male, female or other; a society where women are still seen as goods and where marriage remains reduced to the notion of life-economy (life cycle).

In this type of society, a woman who has experienced sexual torture cannot speak about it for she risks being ostracised by her own community, by her own family. She risks being rejected by her husband and losing her children. She will probably choose not to share her experience and humiliation. She will encounter difficulty obtaining medical care and even more difficulty in gaining access to legal procedures. This does not mean that a man who has been tortured sexually has not been humiliated and has not suffered from the torture. No. It simply means that probably the man will not be rejected and that he can find support among his relatives, access medical care and can also hope that justice is rendered. He will not have to suffer violence from his community unless it, homophobic, tries to convince him that the rape made him homosexual and that he believes it.

In most cases, the sexual torturer is a man. For some men, the idea that a man sexually tortures another man is unacceptable (unthinkable). To them, this seems to be more horrible, more inhumane than a man sexually torturing a woman or an intergender. Why? Human rights defenders should try to take this into consideration if they want to support women and intergenders in the same way as men. They must understand that an inclusive approach is based on defending the rights of women and intersexual individuals. Defending the rights of the most vulnerable means defending the rights of all.

Sexual torture, torture in short, affects physical and psychological integrity of men, intergenders and women alike, whatever their sexual orientation.

Feeling soiled pushes the victim to wash herself, to rid her body of the stains left by the torturer, hoping that in this way her soul can also be freed of those stains. She may isolate herself so that no one can guess what has happened. She does not feel *"clean"* enough to be in public. In a context where women are still sexual and economic objects, she would be rejected. She would be punished as if she had committed adultery, bringing shame upon her family towards whom she has a lifelong *"moral"* debt which she can only *"pay"* by *"accepting"* exclusion.

Paranoia

Paranoia is linked to the unknown, to the fact that one feels powerless and permanently exposed to the danger which might surface from anywhere, in any way and from anyone. It is a pathological psychological state which can be triggered by permanent fear of the unknown. It is based on a feeling of persecution that leads to a feeling of vulnerability. The oppressing power understands the mechanisms which lead to paranoia. It uses them to entrap society in a state of fear. Thus, it attempts to impose its will, its tyranny.

...

1.3.2 Emotions

Fear

Fear is an emotion and a physiological state: a perceived threat sets off the alarm, the body produces the hormone, adrenaline, which acts like an electrical discharge that paralyses, leads to running away, attacking, crying, shouting, shaking, becoming unconscious and provokes changes in heartbeat. When particularly acute, it can even cause white hair. This is referred to as terror: fear, terror of death, for example.

Fear has no sex. Men, women and intergenders all experience fear. It is not an issue of gender but of chemical biology. Men are often conditioned by culture and society not to admit to their fears, as this can be perceived as a sign of weakness. Fear is a natural warning system. It is a physiological emotion which has nothing to do with the strength or weakness of a human being.

What does change from one person to another is the way in which danger is perceived. For example, seeing the police may trigger a warning system for some people, but not at all for others. The warning system is triggered because the police represent danger, particularly in contexts of unpunished police violence, within the context of repression of human rights.

Reactions can vary from one person to another but this is not an indication of a person's courage, strength or weakness. It is practically impossible to predict one's own reaction when afraid or when experiencing fear in the wake of danger. Often, this danger is death, one's own death or the death of a loved one.

Anxiety

Anxiety is an emotion generated by the perception of a real or subjective danger. It induces stress triggered by the idea of danger, by the anticipation of danger, by the fear of danger.

Anxiety is comparable to **anguish** and causes profound unrest similar to physiological and psychological stress. Frequently, individuals unconsciously react to anxiety and stress by addiction to tobacco, alcoholism, self-medication, bulimia, etc.

Panic

Panic is an anxiety crisis when faced with danger. Often it prevents confronting danger and leads to a state of acute confusion. Panic brings about a physiological impact, such as an increased heartbeat, a drop or sudden increase in blood pressure, etc.

Fear is an emotion necessary for survival and acts as an alarm bell, sounded in case of potential danger and enables us to react. Panic, on the contrary, is harmful. It decreases our capacity to react to situations, thus preventing us from tackling the object of our fears efficiently. Panic stops us from *"thinking straight"*.

Anger

Anger is an emotion (as well as a feeling) experienced when, confronted by injustice, we feel powerless. This is a perfectly normal emotion in the abnormal context of injustice. Anger can cause bursts of adrenaline and thus physiological reactions including changes in heartbeat, redness, nervousness, outbursts of tears, screaming, etc.

A Belgian Amnesty International slogan for a campaign against impunity and injustice reads: *"Vous avez raison d'être en colère"*.¹⁶ We are indeed right to be angry at impunity and injustice.

All too often, we suppress our own anger as it is associated with violence, whereby it actually expresses our perception of injustice. It is not about choosing between anger or the absence of anger. It is mostly about what we do with that anger. How can we use it without having it destroy us or our friends and relatives?

How can it become a tool for creating constructive energy and not one bearing (self-) destructive energy?

It is because HRDs are outraged, angry at injustice that they fight for the application and respect of human rights and against impunity.

By being able to speak about their anger and examining their own reactions, HRDs can channel that energy and transform it into useful action.

...

¹⁶ "You are right to be angry"

1.4 What can be done?

HRDs often work in environments where organised facilities for psychological support are scarce or non-existent. Yet, community support structures do exist in these environments and can grant them access to help both within the country and abroad. HRDs' networks span the world. Together, we need to see what can be done within what given contexts allow.

We can understand trauma and describe what has happened but it will not help us get better. Trauma has triggered feelings which can be explained but explanations are not enough to truly get better because the trauma directly touched our most deeply-seated emotions. It is them we should be working on. But we cannot work on emotions knowing the extent of risk involved (remember we are not professional psychologists) and at the same time, we cannot speak about the experience while shutting out emotions. We must remain cautious and certainly be careful not to recreate the circumstances of the drama that might stir up emotions. If emotions are reawakened, we must reassure the victims by helping them to realise that they are not in danger, not in danger anymore. If necessary, a psychologist will be provided to the victim.

It is easier to work with feelings than with emotions. Let us not forget that lavishly handing out advice may simply serve as comfort in our powerlessness when confronted with the HRDs' wounds. And in their wish to reassure us, they may pretend that everything is in order.

That being said, HRDs have multiple resources and most of them stand on their own two feet again without specialised psychological support. This does not mean that they should not be able to access such support but rather, that they do not have access to it and tend to go back to their political projects very quickly despite symptoms of stress, somatisation of anxiety, overload of stressful activities (see Part 5).

Furthermore, we must pay attention to possible symptoms indicating further complications. By recognising these symptoms/signs, we should be able to help HRDs to gain access to professional psychological support. Remember that HRDs belong to networks; they are not alone.

We can primarily help HRDs who do not present further complications. Family and colleagues can be included in the process as a source of support and also as individuals exposed to the consequences of the political violence suffered by the HRDs.

1.5 Psychosocial support for HRDs

Psychosocial support should take the following factors into account:

- The individual
- The community he/she lives in (family, friends, neighbours)
- The organisation he/she works in (colleagues, affiliated organisations, etc.)
- The short-term (immediately)
- The mid-/long term
- The presence of a network
- ...

Based on first-hand experiences with HRDs in the field, I suggest that an organisation, a community or an individual in the habit of analysing contexts and facts and of exploring the dynamics which lead to political violence is well equipped to help HRDs who have suffered from one or more traumatic events. HRDs also have the habit of analysing facts. It is not about erasing the trauma but about situating it in its context and working with HRDs so as to assist them to move from the state of victim to survivors and then, to regain their role of protagonists.

Even if they do not feel understood, they need to know they are not alone. Making this clear from the start is important. It is vital to let the person know that we are there for them, even if we cannot really understand (particularly if we have never had such an experience). We should avoid saying: *"I understand, I see"*. Instead, we should use expressions such as: *"I know it is impossible for me to understand what you have been through but I am here for you; what can I do?"* We can develop *"active listening"* skills by paying attention to HRDs' words, gestures and attitudes. Hereby, doors will open to make us feel closer to HRDs lived experiences.

HRDs are overwhelmed by the impacts of political violence. It is fundamental to involve close relatives to build up psychosocial support.

By putting the facts, feelings and emotions into words, one can gradually take distance. Speaking is a part of the therapy. It also contributes to the testimony that one will be able to transmit because one has remained alive, despite everything. In discussion groups, the power of speech can guide HRDs to explore, analyse and understand the impact of what has occurred so as to progressively take one's distance. This will enable HRDs to overcome the conflict of loyalty which plague them. This process of analysis, exploration and understanding to overcome what has happened is referred to as **elaboration (working through process)**.

This process of working through facts, feelings and emotions is also important for the community. It will lead to an understanding of the perversion of the false hierarchies of colour and ethnicity, encompassing the false gender hierarchy. It still exists, even though, today we know that gender based differences do not imply a “natural” order of capacities and values. The order of capacities and values is an invention, a human convention based on power relations. It is not static. When schooling women, girls, others, men, boys of various ethnicities and colours, this becomes clear. The oppressing power tends to invest in the population’s ignorance rather than in fostering intelligence because it fears a possible change in power relations.

Mexico, 1999: A government representative affirmed that as long as experts had not decided whether learning capacity was an anthropological or a sociological issue, it would be useless to open up schools in far-away villages in Chiapas. She seemed to think that belonging to an ethnic group was an indicator of capacity and value. In any event, she used this to justify the oppression of a part of the Mexican population.

False hierarchies of colour and ethnicity justify false gender hierarchies. Vice-versa, false gender hierarchies justify false hierarchies of colours and ethnicities. Gender-based discrimination cuts across ethnic groups and colour-based discrimination. A black woman (or an intergender) is doubly discriminated against, by racists and both non-black and black sexists. A black man will only be discriminated against by non-black racists. In both cases, the objective is the same: to keep exercising power over others. If sexism can be justified on the basis of anatomical differences between men, women and intergenders, then why not justify racism on the same basis? If black men who are discriminated against could only understand this, then they would see that their freedom hinges on the freedom of women and intergenders. At least one in two human beings is a woman and sometimes, neither one nor the other. They are intergender. The strength of the power to react and to assert oneself against the oppressor could be multiplied by more than two.

When a baby is born, we see its colour, separate its legs to determine its sex – female, male or intersex – and project preconceptions onto this baby, conditioning its life.¹⁷ In some societies, when the baby is female, excision or infibulation is planned, then carried out at a very young age – thereby condemning her to a life of suffering, preventing her from the sexual pleasure allowed to a man. Yet, after all, both were conceived and born in the same way. This is done so as not to lose power over women. In some societies, power over (and control over) women is increased by continuing to affirm that children come from the father’s blood. But sperm and ova do not contain blood and the fertilised egg is nourished by the mother’s blood. The newly born infant is the fruit of two parents and carries its own blood.

In the 21st century, racism and sexism are considered crimes and not ideologies. They have no natural basis. The root cause is psychological: fear of the other. Racism and sexism are used to wield power over and to dominate the other.

Even today, some still confuse race and colour. Black, white, yellow, brown, etc. are the colours of one and the same race – the human race. To speak of the black, the white or the yellow race means nothing. There are many different shades of black, white, yellow, etc. What does exist are different ethnicities, cultures, nationalities, etc. Some cross, mix and give rise to crossbreeding. Mixing is not exclusive to different skin colours; different ethnicities and genders also mix. We are all the result of mixing.

Sexism, in some societies, transforms women into sexual or economic objects. A woman can be selected amongst other women, bought, married, possessed as if she were an interchangeable object. One woman can easily be replaced by another. They are interchangeable. She is humiliated, beaten, shunned and another interchangeable one is selected. When a woman is raped she becomes her family’s shame. Her family suffers from having lost their so-called dignity. It is not empathy for the victim which causes families to suffer. Sometimes, to justify their rejection of the victim, they confuse adultery with rape/torture. Although she is actually the victim, she is turned into the culprit because she is female. This situation begins to change when men, who have suffered from sexual torture, speak about their experiences. These men know that they were not committing adultery nor acting out of consent – they were victims. They identify with what the women have been forced to endure. They place all victims on an equal footing as human beings. They contribute towards this growing awareness through the power of speech.

It is not a matter comparing the physical pain of torture. Our nervous systems transmit the same pain for the same tortures whether we are children or adults, irrespective of gender. Rather, it is about analysing the consequences for each one of us and the rationale behind them.

¹⁷ If an ultrasound has been carried out, preconceptions already exist, even before birth.

In Lebanon, a woman told me about her detention, avoiding naming the sexual torture she had suffered. She used **metaphors**:¹⁸ *'that'* and *'I am still a maiden'*. *"That"* meant rape, penetration, rupture of the hymen, defloration and sexual tortures. *"Maiden"* meant virgin, hymen unbroken, unsoiled, without shame, suitable to be given in marriage. She said: *"They did everything to me, except that.... I am still a maiden... but I will never be able to marry because I don't want a man to get close to me..."*. However, when speaking about her brother's broken bones – also the result of torture – she did not use metaphors. During this painful exchange the extent of the community's violence became clear. The community should have offered her support and protection, just as it did for her brother. As we didn't have much time, I listened to her without asking questions. I wondered why she didn't want any man to come close to her, why she would never be able to marry although she wished to have a family. She lives in a country where the value of a woman is measured by her children-bearing ability and where remaining unmarried is suspicious. Admittedly, even now, I have my doubts about the possibility that *'they did everything but that'* was a statement to the contrary by negation as she looked the other way. I keep the memory of her suffering aware that she probably confided in me because I was a foreigner to whom she could speak without fear of reprisals. I vividly remember her distress and my indignation at the absurd violence her community directed at her. It is indeed absurd, violent. We were not able to discuss this. I could not add even more suffering to her suffering because of the simple fact that I live in a community where I need not fear rejection. Perhaps she knew this. I remember our strong parting embrace which instantaneously released, without distinction, both our feelings and emotions in that shortly-lived moment.

Breaking taboos is a further means of freeing ourselves from the torturer's clutches, working through the facts and rebuilding lives.

It is vital to analyse these elements, to break taboos, to speak and to work through feelings and emotions in order to gain freedom from the perversion of the oppressor's power. This must take place in a group and also with the community.

Obviously, not everything can be done at once. It is indispensable to act step by step. We can start out by making ourselves available to the victim and her needs. She may need medical assistance or someone's presence. Thereafter, in the medium- and long-term, we can encourage her to work through facts and feelings, bearing in mind, the risk of involving emotions. HRDs are aware of the importance of reconstructing and analysing the facts, defining a strategy designed to obtain justice to put an end to impunity via recognition, reparation, guarantee that it will not happen again. This process may fail to lead to **reconciliation** which requires the oppressor to ask for forgiveness and the victim to forgive. Reconciliation enables us to imagine a different common future but it is not essential for establishing justice. The victim can live without forgiving and still aspire to justice.

Apartheid did not come to an end because the dignity of black people was recognised overnight but rather, because suddenly a few whites realised that they had lost their dignity.

HRD who learn how to speak about their fear and to integrate it into their risk analysis will be better able to work on their weaknesses and capacities¹⁹ to resist. For example, they will then be able to learn not to give in to fear by rationalising what is happening to them. This can also be done through role-play in which the situation is recreated. Such role-play enables us to develop strategic reactions when faced with danger or fear.

¹⁸ Metaphor: a word, an image, an object, a gesture which is used to express an idea, an event, a feeling which cannot be referred to by its name.

¹⁹ Enrique Eguren and Marie Caraj *New Protection Manual for HRDs*. Ed. PI. 2009. <https://www.protectioninternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Protection-Manual-3rd-Edition.pdf>

In 1987, in Guatemala, P.B.I. accompanied a HRDs' organisation to guarantee their protection 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. We accompanied those who were most under threat and we were present in the organisation's premises to dissuade the authorities from illegally searching the office. As there weren't enough volunteers, sometimes we had to spend the night alone. We received silent phone calls at all hours of the night. We could hear breathing on the other end of the line. Once, a little after midnight, I told my silent interlocutor: *"You know, I'm going to be here all night. We could both go to sleep if you called in the morning"*. That worked for several nights and in the meanwhile, we organised it so that no one had to stay alone in the office, both during the daytime and at night. We took a fresh look at our security protocol and became aware that we would not be able to stop anyone from attacking us, particularly at night without witnesses, as the neighbours all huddled in their homes after sundown.

To work on fear, to analyse the situation and to consider possible paths for action all increase control over fear and also decrease the likelihood of developing paranoia. Analysis also enables us to better understand our own limits, to take these into consideration when organising activities and determining which capacities must be enhanced so as to act more efficiently.

This manual outlines the steps which can guide us to help HRDs to better recover, stand up on their own two feet again and continue striding forward. The fifth part of this manual draws upon and develops the idea of psychosocial support by discussing psychosocial community action.

There is no magic recipe. Yet, experience enables us to see that when HRDs share what they have lived through and can count on their group, they have greater chances of not sinking into the abyss of pain, suffering, anxiety and despair. The likelihood for them to come back to the world of the living is greater.

This also holds true for the families of HRDs. Support groups offer hope and greater opportunities for mutual understanding because one can meet other individuals who have gone through similar experiences. These groups are much more than mere crutches. They offer mutual support. Mutual support is a structure which upholds and protects, in the same way that a mother carries and protects her children.

Mutual support groups also contribute to the physical protection and safety of HRDs. Many have endured the intrusion of the oppressors into their houses. Thereby, home ceases to be a safe haven. Thus, the protection offered by the mutual support group is fundamental. This mutual support group also provides more opportunities to spot those who are collaborating, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

The support group is made up of HRDs who have a common mission: to defend human rights. HRDs are not passive victims of political violence. This is key to their resistance strategy. They always have a role to play, even when they are being held as prisoners. The mutual support group can become part of HRDs' strategy. It turns into an asset for HRDs, their organisations, their families and contributes to their safety. The psychosocial element is an integral part of HRDs' safety and security.²⁰

“ *It is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it.* ”

Aung San Suu Kyi.²¹

20 Enrique Eguren and Marie Caraj *New Protection Manual for HRDs*. Ed. PI. 2009. <https://www.protectioninternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Protection-Manual-3rd-Edition.pdf>

21 Aung San Suu Kyi. Burma. Nobel Peace Prize winner, 1991. Excerpt from *Freedom from Fear*. Penguin Books, 1991.

Summary

Any abusive action from the State against members of society and/or against any ideological opposition is called Political violence. Political violence has a collective impact. Not only are those individuals/groups targeted directly by it affected, but society as a whole. This is referred to as the psychosocial impact of political violence.

Social fabric stands for the interaction/relationship between an individual and a like-minded group.

Society refers to the whole, including the individual, his/her group, his/her community and the other individuals, their groups and their communities. Society is not homogenous. Each party can be independent. Society is also referred to as the *“social body”*.

The impact of political violence is not only physical, emotional, material, but also psychological. It cannot be dissociated from its cause, political violence. Support is not only medical, psychological and material but is also provided in the form of political actions to reduce the scope of the oppressor’s power in a violent political context.

Trauma is the immediate impact of a dramatic event. Stress is a protracted pressure which can be triggered by trauma, by evoking the idea of trauma, by seeing someone else’s trauma or by a repetition of the traumatic event.

In both cases, one feels threatened, anxious. One is afraid. Traumatism is the set of the disorders which appear after the trauma. It is referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Drawing a distinction between trauma, stress, vicarious stress and traumatism enables us to adapt help to each individual case.

The authority holding the power of oppression seeks to crush the struggle for defending human rights. The oppressor tries to destabilise, discourage, discredit, deprive of resources, isolate, demobilise, destroy, criminalise and crush both the HRDs and their groups and communities.

Oppressors draw up a precise and often progressive strategy. They do not hold absolute power of destruction in their hands. They are not guaranteed absolute impunity. HRDs can exercise their power of reaction to reduce the oppressing power’s sphere of influence.

To speak, to analyse and understand feelings and emotions triggered by political violence will help HRDs to increase their power to react against the oppressor’s strategy. This is also part of the psychosocial support for HRDs and the victims they accompany. The analysis has to take into account the society in which HRDs live as well as the violence of inter-community prejudices.

There is no magic recipe. Yet, experience enables us to see that when HRDs share what they have lived through and can count on their group, they have greater chances of not sinking into the abyss of pain, suffering, anxiety and despair. The likelihood for them to come back to the world of the living is greater. HRDs are part of networks; they are not alone.

Exercises

The exercises will be carried out in groups in order to address the multitude of individual experiences and reactions. This will make it possible, through analysis, to deepen all the elements, to distinguish individual and collective perceptions, to understand the origin of these perceptions, to give them a certain logic, to see if we can change them and under what circumstances. To see how we can live with the experiences and perceptions that we cannot change without being overwhelmed by them. Exercises can also be performed by HRDs and relatives exposed to vicarious stress.

These exercises require a commitment from everyone to express what they really feel and perceive. If the person does not wish to speak, they have the right to do so. They can speak or remain silent. Be careful not to force anyone to speak. Their right to silence must be respected. Give them time to talk later, if so they wish.

For the exercises and then the work with victims of political violence (HRDs and/or victims accompanied by HRDs) it is important to remember that peer listening is fundamental. Peers share similar experiences and are therefore able to understand each other from the outset.

Before conducting the exercises, those present must undertake to keep the exchanges confidential and the authors anonymous. Keeping confidentiality and anonymity does not mean not passing on the acquired knowledge of exercises that could be useful to other HRDs. It simply means reformulating the acquired knowledge in such a way that the authors cannot be identified.

The list of exercises is not exhaustive.

A. Psychosocial impact of political violence

Keywords

- Woman
- Man
- Intergender
- Individual – Human Rights Defender (man/woman/intergender) (HRD)
- Group – HRD Organisation
- Community – Family, Relatives, Neighbours, Ethnic Group
- Culture
- Social fabric
- Society
- Violence

- Political violence
- Values
- Power
- Those who hold the power
- Oppressing power
- Power to react, to resist, to assert oneself
- Psychology
- Drama
- Trauma
- Symptom
- Stress
- Traumatism
- Post-traumatic Stress
- Post-traumatic Stress Disorder
- Vicarious stress
- Network
- Reconciliation
- Metaphor
- Patriarchate
- ...

Exercises

- a. Translate each of the key words into your own native language or words.
- b. In your own mother tongue, describe as spontaneously as possible, what each word evokes.
- c. Note similarities and differences to establish what is common to the group or particular to each
- d. In the medium and long term, take these notes and check if the evocation has changed.
- e. Explain why.

B. Feelings and Emotions

Key words

- Feeling
- Emotion
- Dignity
- Organ (of the human body)
- Sexual organ
- Sex
- Shame
- Humiliation
- Being soiled
- Loyalty
- Betrayal
- Forced betrayal
- Cowardliness
- Impunity
- Fear
- Paranoia
- Anxiety-Anguish
- Panic
- Anger
- Elaboration
- ...

Exercises

- a. Translate each one of the key words into your mother tongue.
- b. In your mother tongue, spontaneously write down the immediate emotional experience associated with each of the key words
- c. Note similarities and differences to establish what is common to the group or particular to each.
- d. In the medium and long term, take these notes and check if the evocation has changed.
- e. Explain why

C. Analysis

- C.1. Speak about the political violence you have directly or indirectly experienced.
- C.2. Identify what caused the experience. The trigger can be an event or a person (or several persons).
- C.3. Analyse various experiences shared by the members of the group to understand the differences. We do not all have the same reactions when faced with the same experience. Why?
- C.4. Look at which other circumstances, before the experiences mentioned in point C.1., same feelings and emotions were brought about.
- C.5. Why was the experience either the same or different? Explain.
- C.6. Establish a link between political violence and your experiences.
- C.7. Look for the logic of your feelings and emotions which were induced by the perpetrators of political violence.
- C.8. At present, how does each one of you deal with their feelings and emotions?
- C.9. Discuss and highlight positive reactions.
- C.10. Discuss negative reactions.
- C.11. Can we change these negative reactions? How?
- C.12. What can we learn from lived experiences?
- C.13. Can we transformed lived experiences? Which ones? In which way? How?
- C.14. Which experiences cannot be transformed?
- C.15. How can we live with the experiences that cannot be changed in our everyday lives without being overwhelmed by feelings and emotions?
- C.16. Which emotions could underlie the following feelings expressed by victims?

"I will never again approach an other"

"I had to dig my own grave while a gun was being pointed at my head. And then they left. I don't know why I am still here."

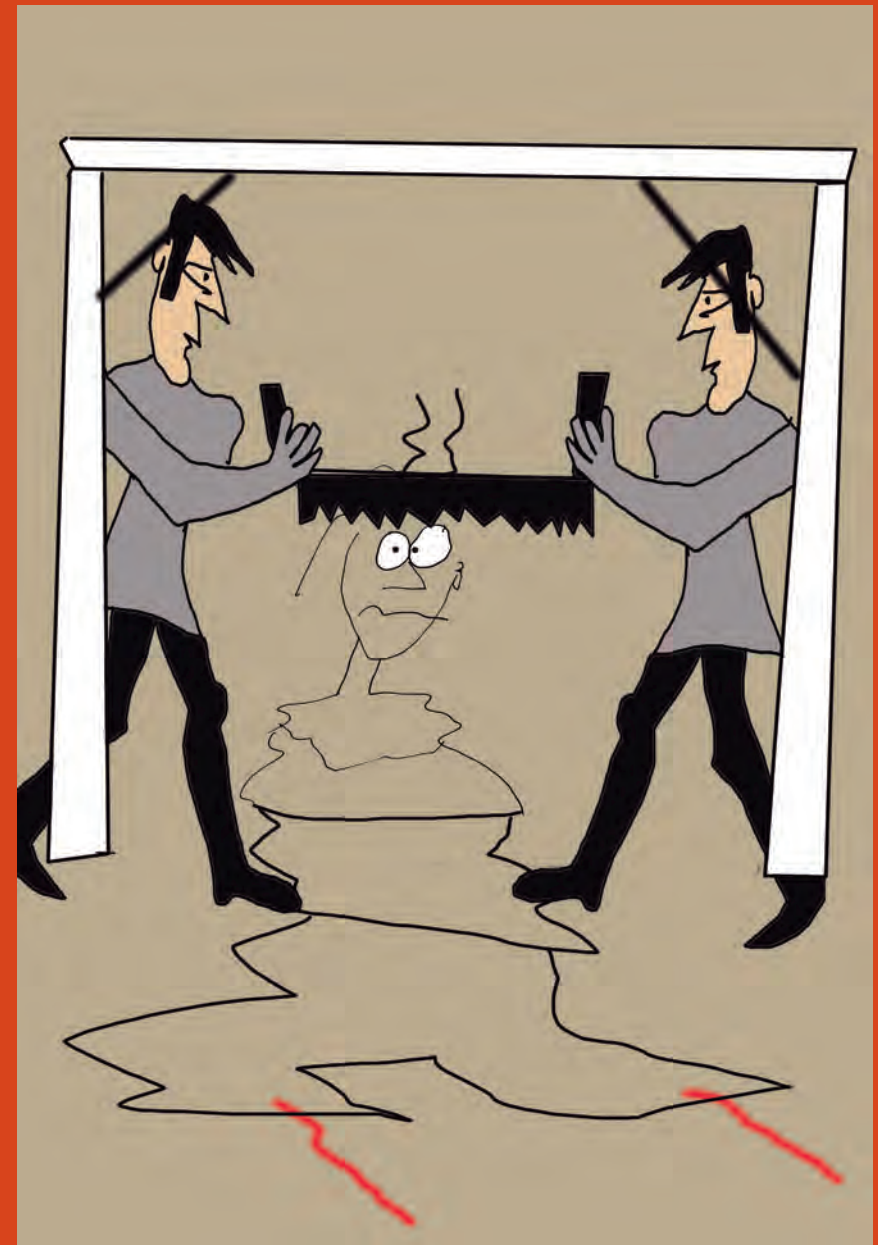
"They did everything except for that...I am still 'a maiden ...but I will never be able to marry because I don't want a man to come near to me."

"We had to tell on our own family members, kill them and bury them...otherwise we would have been killed. We have been made partially responsible for genocide. How can we live with this?"

- C.17. What can be done if these emotions were to resurface unexpectedly?
- C.18. How to analyse the accounts of witnesses mentioned in point C.16?
- C.19. Make a list of automatic thoughts induced by trauma.
- C.20. On which hypotheses are these thoughts based?
- C.21. Deconstruct these hypotheses and suggest reasonable conclusions. For example, thoughts like *'I have put my family at risk'* is a thought based on the assumptions that the context of political violence has no influence on family security, that family security depends on the HRD, that inaction guarantees family security. However, the context of political violence has an influence on the security of all, including the family, the HRD is not responsible for this violence, inaction perpetuates political violence.
- C.22. Draw up a list of automatic behaviours induced by trauma.
- C.23. Reflect on arguments to help the HRD understand that these behaviours are no longer relevant
- C.24. Speak of vicarious stress. Have you experienced vicarious stress? Under which circumstances?
- C.24. Give examples of the symptoms of vicarious stress.
- C.25. What can be done to tackle it at an individual level and in groups?
- C.26. Think about which strategies the organisation can create to reduce the likelihood of vicarious stress occurring and how to confront it when it occurs.

...

2 Experiences linked to political violence



- 2.1 Torture
- 2.2 Death and Mourning
- 2.3 Resilience
- Summary
- Exercises

2 Experiences linked to political violence

Political violence forces extreme experiences on HRDs and on the victims they accompany. These are experiences they cannot forget, leaving indelible marks on individuals and their groups.

2.1 Torture

Primo Levi's 1947²² testimony *'If This Is a Man'* puts the fundamental question of what it means to be human when confronted by the inhumanity of **torture**. If I am a human being,²³ how can it be possible to torture me? And if I am a human being, how can I torture another human being? And in both cases, how could we let it happen?

This fundamental question is raised on all continents, at all times throughout the history of **humanity**.

The tortured and the torturer are two sides of the same coin.

Animals do not inflict torture. Nonetheless, it is said that torturers behave like beasts or that they treat their victims like beasts. Why? Because torture is not considered to be a trait which defines a human being? Yet, humans are capable of inflicting torture. In order to be able to torture, torturers dehumanise their victims and at the same time desensitise themselves, thus dehumanising themselves. They allow themselves to break the link between themselves and another human being.

Torture is not the business of only two parties, the torturer and the tortured, but also of the society which permits, tolerates and accepts it as a practice. Does a society allow torture because it is carried out in the name of State reason, an end which would justify the means, or because nested within the society are the budding seeds of perversion?

This manual examines torture as a tactic of political violence towards HRDs and therefore as a means of control over society as a whole. Torturing a few leads, at the very least, to instilling fear in others.

²² Primo Levi, author and concentration camp survivor) *If This Is a Man* is one of his first books on the barbarity of the Nazi concentration camps.

²³ I refer to *'human being'*, rather than man as the words *'woman'* and *intergender* exist. *The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) did not put an end to discrimination against women despite the existence of the feminine in *'man'* and *'citizen'*, nor did it include the intergenders.

I shall not discuss the strategies used by oppressors on their acolytes so as to dehumanise them, to render them insensitive to the suffering they inflict upon their victims. These strategies convert people into torturers, having lost their dignity and freedom. However important it is to understand how political violence creates victims within the ranks of the power of oppression itself, I have chosen to focus on the perspective of the victims fighting against this system.

System: The torturer is a bureaucrat. The dictator is a bureaucrat.

They are armed bureaucrats who lose their jobs if they fail to execute their tasks efficiently. That and nothing more than that. They are not extraordinary monsters. We shall not grant them that grandeur.²⁴

Loss of freedom: *"I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else's freedom. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity."*²⁵

Human beings are capable of inhumanity. This is proper to the human being, it is tragically human. Human beings are also capable of the opposite. Humanity is a wonderfully human trait.

So long as torturers are not aware of their inhumanity, they are not likely to stop torturing unless the system puts an end to torture because society demands it. This is one of the aims of HRDs' work that so disturbs the system and its torturing officials.

²⁴ Free translation of a quotation of Eduardo Galeano, Uruguayan journalist, in Carlos M. Beristain, Francesc Riera *Afirmación y resistencia. La comunidad como apoyo*. Ed. Virus. Third edition. 1994.

²⁵ Nelson Mandela *Long walk to Freedom*. MacDonald Purnell. 1994.

Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Being Subjected to Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

Adopted by General Assembly resolution 3452 (XXX) of 9 December 1975

Article 1

1. For the purpose of this Declaration, torture means any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted by or at the instigation of a public official on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or confession, punishing him for an act he has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating him or other persons. It does not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions to the extent consistent with the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners.
2. Torture constitutes an aggravated and deliberate form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 2

Any act of torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment is an offence to human dignity and shall be condemned as a denial of the purposes of the Charter of the United Nations and as a violation of the human rights and fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
(...)

In spite of this UN Declaration, torture continues to exist and to be justified. Torturers claim: *"it was their only choice. State security was at stake, the prisoner had to learn from or to pay for what they did."* With HRDs, torturers may add: *"this is what happens to anyone who commits treason against their country."* This is the universal discourse of torturers, irrespective of continent or country – as if they all went to the same school. Those who wield the power of oppression always find a justification enabling them to torture or kill *'in peace'*.

The Torturer's Aim

The torturer seeks to dehumanise the victim. In the eyes of the torturer, the victim is/becomes sub-human. This too facilitates torture. And to be able to torture, torturers are dehumanised and desensitised. Their dignity is lost while trying to crush the dignity of their victim.²⁶

Torture has at least three immediate effects: physical, psychological and psychosocial. The victim is injured physically, weakened psychologically and society controlled. Torturing a few citizens instills fear in the minds of everyone else through the simple idea that they too could be tortured.

Victims lose their **identity**, their importance, their humanity, their dignity. They are forced to adopt the torturer's references. They are humiliated, degraded, crushed, made powerless. The torturer does not hesitate to transgress the (codes of) values of the victims, to ridicule their beliefs. The victims are at the torturer's mercy while it takes pleasure in inflicting its torture and reminding the victims of the pleasure it derives from it. The torturer drains the victim while keeping them alive to extend the agony, making the victims lose all sense of time and space. The prisoners are in the dark as to what will happen to them in the next second. Even whether they will still be alive. The torturer will stage the death of its victim who will see their own death repeated over and over while dying would put an end to their torment.

The torturer *'plays'* with the victims and subjects them to its perversion, to its endless questioning. It punishes them for their answers, whatever they may be. It declares the victims responsible/guilty for what is happening to them and their loved ones.

It blindfolds them, makes them hear other victim's screams, the sudden noise of a door slamming shut, of a metal object... the breathing of another possible torturer...

And every time the victims think they have reached the boundary of what is bearable, that boundary is pushed back even further. They survive although they thought and sometimes wished they were dead. They hear their relatives and colleagues scream under psychological or physical torture. They know what they can take but aren't aware of their relatives' pain threshold, causing additional suffering. Sometimes the torturer goes after the children, not to coerce the victims into surrendering but rather to force them to transgress the boundary of what they can bear by making them guilty of the suffering inflicted upon their children. In some cases, the victims are forced to make the impossible choice of *'saving'* either one of their children. In reality, however, instead of *'saving'* one of their children, they lose a child without any guarantee that other child will not die. In all cases the victims experiences the symbolic death.

²⁶ The chapter on *Liberation Psychology* will come back to this notion.

Sexual Torture

Even though all forms of torture are inhumane, sexual torture – by violating a person's intimacy – remains the most dreaded and unspeakable form. We cannot speak of "rape" when sexual torture is carried out by those in power. The term 'rape' may trivialise, reducing a State crime to a crime under common law. We must refer to it as 'torture', sexual torture. Sexual torture does not mean rape only but also any sexual violence or sexual abuse.

Victims are at the deepest point of unspeakable suffering. Not only do they not have the words to describe what they have been subjected to but also, talking about the suffering could mean losing all they have left. Often, in societies where there still is a confusion between dignity and sexuality, victims of sexual torture are exposed to an additional form of torture: the torturous eyes cast upon them by their community, bringing about humiliation, rejection, treason and abandonment. Whereby this is just when the community should be a source of support and protection. Given these conditions and knowing that speaking about the experience is fundamental, how can they speak? How can they put the feelings of shame and impurity experienced during detention into words? How to return to the living?

Men and intergenders are also targets of sexual torture but statistically speaking, most victims of sexual torture are female. Sometimes, sexual torture is inflicted upon women to go against a man; particularly in societies where women are seen as men's 'property'.

In some cultures, rape, thus sexual torture of women is a 'tactic' to 'weaken' men. Raping a woman is humiliating a man. It is used mainly to humiliate the man. For the woman, silence is often an option to protect herself by protecting the dignity of the man. As long as he doesn't know, he is not affected by it. As if rape never happened. Just as children who by closing their eyes think that danger has disappeared. But men are not to be fooled. Some prefer to pretend to be unaware of what has happened so as not to be forced to follow the communities' codes and repudiate their wives.

The following are some examples from workshops: **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**. *"What would you do if your wife were about to be raped in exchange for your life?"* This question was frequently answered by: *"I would rather die."* One of the participants stated that he would disown his wife because rape is a form of adultery. Another participant answered that it depended on what his wife represented for him. Another added: *"During the war, when our wives came back with fish we ate it in silence and we did not ask them how they had bought it. But we knew they had no money."*

In Uganda, Sudanese participants recalled how women who ventured outside camps for the internally displaced to find food, wood, etc..., often fell prey to men of different ethnic groups stationed around the camps. By raping the women, they were 'attacking the men who didn't dare show themselves'. Here again, the women choose to remain silent and the men asked no questions. As this phenomenon took on dramatic proportions in certain areas, UN agents accompanied women when leaving the camps. UN and NGO's reports describe similar situations in many other countries.

At least one human in two is a woman and sometimes they are neither one nor the other. They are intergender. Is a woman not a human being, thus equal to a man? Why throw her away, reject her, not offer her any kind of support? Why reduce her to the status of 'raped' as if this were a permanent state and not an event that she has been subjected to? When someone is injured, must he/she be stigmatised for life as 'injured'? Is a woman who has been attacked/tortured but not targeted for sexual violence rejected? Why should a woman who has been raped/sexually tortured be rejected? Has she lost her status as a human being, woman, citizen, daughter of, sister of, wife of, mother of, as an active professional or not, etc.?

The torturer is familiar with the cultural and religious context of his victim and uses it to his advantage. He is aware of the repercussions of his actions. He knows that sexual torture will injure, wound, humiliate, shatter, not only the woman as an individual but her entire community. When a person suffers, it is neither a question of culture or religion but of power relationship. In this case, of power relationship

between the torturer and the victim, the torturer and the community, the community and the victim. HRDs know this. Unfortunately, that does not absolve them from also becoming victims. What can be said when referring to LGBTI individuals (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, intersexual or intergender)? The torturer wants to prove to them they are perverted heterosexuals²⁷ or incomplete human beings.

In South Africa, 'corrective' rape of lesbians to 'cure' their sexual orientation is a widespread practice.

The torturer is afraid to recognise himself in the other man and cannot accept that a woman does without the man. Sexual violence (psychological and physical) is practiced especially against women. With regard to HRD women, sexual violence is a specific tactic that violates women's human rights so that they abandon their activism and thereby weaken global action. This is something that HRDs must analyse.

HRDs Confronting Torturers

In general, individuals with an ideology and political projects are more likely to offer stronger resistance to torture and repression. HRDs are aware that they risk being tortured because of their struggle against injustice and impunity. This helps them to give meaning to their suffering, to remain lucid while facing their torturers.

HRDs have a cause to defend, they represent victims, they have access to public support, both national and international. Despite their suffering, many of them do not lose sight of their role and are able to transform detention into a space for thinking, collective awareness raising and even promoting literacy. They share their humanity, their knowledge, their contacts and their support strategies. They remain determined.

HRD torture victims have many needs:²⁸ medical care, and legal assistance if they decide to and can file a complaint. They need to receive the support of their relatives and their community. They must return to the world of the living. And to be able to do so, they must recover their capacity to trust others.

Sometimes, family and friends grow weary of paying special attention to HRDs once the initial moment of reunification is over. They want to see HRDs immediately come back into the present, being glad they escaped something worse. They would

²⁷ Shaun Kirven, Enrique Eguen and Marie Caraj *Protection Manual for LGBTI Defenders*, ED. PI, 2009. https://protectioninternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/LGBTI_PMD_2nd_Ed_English.pdf

²⁸ Refer to pages 15 to 17 of this manual.

like to see it all come to an end. But unfortunately, this is not the end. HRDs must live with the horrors they have been subjected to. Their lives will not be what they were. And neither will the lives of those around them remain unchanged.

Rebuilding HRDs is an arduous process. Step by step, they need to learn to live with the experience of torture in the '*now*'. Therefore, it is important to be attentive, to help HRDs dismantle the wall of silence, speak about the facts, build themselves up again, turn themselves from victims into survivors and become protagonists of the choices they make in the future. The journey they have embarked upon is long, not a continuum, but one step forward and one step back. HRDs are aware that they risk becoming '*a burden/a hindrance*', someone who is extremely '*distrustful and paranoid*'. To avoid this, HRDs may refuse to speak of what has happened, in particular, to protect his/her family and friends or because '*no one is interested*'. Besides, who would understand? HRDs would like to return to '*normality*'. However, they are living in the '*aftermath*' and still bear the marks of the horrors they were subjected to images which come back to ceaselessly haunt them, startle them, keeping them in a state of constant alertness, sleeplessness. HRDs who have suffered from torture relive the horrors they had been subjected to and are overwhelmed by the intrusive images and memories which keep returning, haunting them during the day and at night in their dreams. They know that torture could happen again at any moment. They have difficulties to come close to others.

Reaching out to HRDs will not always be enough. Sometimes, you will have to take them by the hand and help them reconstitute themselves step by step. These steps include performing everyday actions, such as being able to close a door and stay in a closed space, come closer to others, wash oneself with water, under a shower, in a bathtub, etc. Even though these actions are ordinary, they are not trivial. And they indicate the progress being made by the individual.

What can we do?

After ensuring medical care and, providing that the case is without complications, we can arrange to support HRDs, without stifling them, yet remaining watchful. A person who has been tortured is a normal person who has gone through an abnormal experience. Therefore, we shall not decide for them but with them – with the exception of security and health constraints, or legal action which may demand immediate reporting of the facts – we should not force the individual to speak about their experiences before they take the initiative to do so themselves. We are present, in silence, in words, in gestures, sitting beside them, with compassion, receptive to their silences, their words, their state of mind, their tears, their feelings...whatever comes. We can organise a stable, lasting support network. Several people are needed to arrange this, bearing in mind the risk of

vicarious trauma, secondary stress experienced by the accompanying persons who feel the traumatic experiences of the victim. This is about helping the victims to return to the living. To speak, they must feel that trust has been established.

Speaking helps in rebuilding the individual. When a person tries not to speak, we can encourage them by reminding them that speaking is a way to bear witness and to build up collective memory. Collective memory contributes to the fight against impunity and subsequently reduces the possibility of history repeating itself. Sharing an account of the horrors experienced enables us to move away from the state of victim to that of the survivor and to once again become the protagonist of our own lives.

“ *Inhumanity is a human creation,
and yet it cannot be human* ”

Immanuel Kant

2.2 Death and Mourning

2.2.1 Death

Physical Death

Death is inherent to life, but death by political violence is not. It is a weapon used by the oppressor, remaining ever present in the daily lives of HRDs and the victims they defend.

Death is a risk and/or reality which they were confronted by. Later, as long as the political context remains unchanged, the risk of death continues to loom large.

Oppressor does not kill systematically; instead, he threatens to kill as he is conscious of not holding absolute power and that killing goes with the risk of being stripped of credibility, becoming destabilised, or even, overthrown. Thus, there is a political cost to attacking HRDs and impunity is never absolute. The higher the political cost, the less room there is for impunity.²⁹

There are examples of legal and political action taken against oppressors, sentencing them long after they have committed their crimes, because when the crimes were committed, no authority existed to receive or to pursue HRDs complaints and claims for justice.

29 Enrique Eguren and Marie Caraj *New Protection Manual for HRDs*. Ed. PI. 2009.

When a human being is murdered violently, seeking justice and compensation are part of the process of giving a meaning to that violent death: *“He/she died so that we struggle against the oppressive power and topple it.”*

Death is a weapon of repressive power. It targets an individual so as to destroy the social fabric and stifle all cries for justice and possibilities of change. The tactic of death or of death threats targets HRDs and their families and relatives.

The impact (or shock) of death can manifest itself immediately or later on, whereby it's length of time varies. In any event, it scars the living. The oppressive power is perfectly well aware of this.

Symbolic death

As per international legal texts,³⁰ there is no definition of HRD. It is the activities that define the HRD. However, the description of activities is not the absence of a definition of HRDs. It is a matter of perspectives. Whatever the perspective, according to international texts, one is no longer a HRD from the moment one ceases to exercise the activities that defined the HRD. Therefore, being a HRD is not a profession, although some HRDs may belong to a professional category: journalist, lawyer, trade unionist, trader, etc. The oppressive power will try to do everything so that the HRDs are forced to cease their activities. If he cannot inflict real death on them, he will inflict symbolic death on them.

Symbolic Death through Renunciation and Exile

– Renunciation

The repressive power constrains HRDs (compelling them to give up defending others), forcing them to defend themselves, making them choose between real or symbolic death. For example, an HRD may be released from prison subject to the condition that they stop working as an HRD. Giving up this work means losing their identity. They cannot continue their work defending human rights. They are HRDs no longer. At most, they can be *‘ex-HRDs’*.

– Exile

In their country, they were seen as playing a key role – both by those whom they gave support to and by those who repressed them. It is their identity as HRDs which had been their strength. They kept it in prison, even under torture. If they continued their work as HRDs after their release, they were former prisoners who had been tortured but still HRDs. They maintained that identity which was the cause of their imprisonment and torture.

30 UN Declaration on HRDs, 1998; EU Guidelines on HRDs, 2004.

Abandoning one's work and going into exile puts an end to a specific situation. HRDs must then rebuild their identities, give meaning to their lives, for they are no longer able to be in the best of the action. HRDs who are no longer able to pursue their work in defending human rights mourn the loss of that part of themselves and the projects which they had.

HRDs who become refugees abroad enter a different world, one that does not know/recognise them. They remain marked by what they have experienced. And sometimes they face a lack of understanding and impatience in the host country. For the persons they meet *"it is over now, the worst is over and now is the time to move on"*. As if the mere desire to move on were enough! Actually, it is *"now"*, after the worst has passed that another worst begins, namely that of symbolic death. *"I was a HRD in my country. I was imprisoned. I was tortured... and here, I am a nobody, I no longer have a role to play, I am no longer recognised."*

Whether they stay at home or whether they go into exile, as long as HRDs do not find a place for themselves, this problem will remain.

2.2.2 Mourning

The etymology of *'mourn'* goes back to Old English *murnan*, of Germanic origin *'to remember sorrowfully'*. Mourning is a complex word which describes deep sorrow for someone's death or for the loss of something such as a project. Mourning also describes the elaboration process of pain. It is not about forgetting but about going through the pain and making a reason of it.

Don't we say *'to be in mourning'* and *'to mourn'*?

To be in mourning after losing what we loved most, what we believed in: a loved one, a relative/colleague, a relationship, a project, an idea/an ideal, a possibility, recognition from others, a part of ourselves...

To mourn expresses a reaction/an action/ a process through the pain. For HRDs, reacting to loss and the pain of death means continuing to fight for human rights, justice and against impunity. Integrating the loss and pain of death into one's daily life means that HRDs do not deny them, but transform them into strength and power of action against the murderous power of the oppressor.

HRDs are often faced with the death of their peers and/or relatives. They are confronted with grief and mourning, their own or that of others. Every individual copes with this in a different way, according to gender, beliefs, culture, living standards, the social and political context.

HRDs receive the bad news, sustain its impact. Not allowing themselves to become distraught with grief, they must manage immediate needs such as the organisation of the funeral which bears witness to the person's death. The fundamental function of

funeral rites is to enable passing through the pain of death. Funeral ceremonies include actions, silences and words designed to make death tangible and to offer support to those remaining. Such collective funeral ceremonies serve as a source of strength and help the family and the group to feel closer, to chant their determination like a mantra to not allow the life, the actions, the death of the deceased to be forgotten, left without a trace and in vain. Such collective funeral ceremonies are also an affirmation of group identity. They differ according to ethnic groups, customs, and beliefs but they invariably include those close to the deceased. They are organised in memory of the deceased and help friends and relatives on their path of living through the pain of death and crossing over into their lives after their loss. Funeral preparations and ceremonies, although painful, are ways to gradually cross over into their changed lives.

Mourning in times of peace is different from mourning in times of war and political violence. Only very rarely can justice be done and this too has an impact on the process of **working through mourning**.

Working through mourning is a necessary process in order to live through the pain of the death of someone close and to be able to continue with the course of our lives. This process is both individual and collective. Intellectually, accepting death consists of working through the psychological state of suffering and the feelings which are the result of the loss of a loved one. This helps us to reconstruct ourselves in the absence of the deceased. Reconstructing ourselves in the absence of the deceased means integrating his/her absence into our lives without letting it paralyse us. Integrating the absence of the deceased means to integrate him/her into our lives, within the life of the group. The group's life and our own are now organised in a different way. The social body has changed. Working through mourning allows us to transform something which has no sense into something which has a meaning. We endow death with a purpose. This transformation is called **sublimation**. Sublimation is a *'successful'* process of mourning. Sublimation can bring those who were close to him/her to affirm: *"He/She is dead so that we can be free"*, meaning that they will continue to work for what the deceased HRD fought for. They continue to demand truth and justice so that the deadweight of silence not be an additional factor, adding to the injustice of the violent death.

Working through mourning is a slow process expressed through the funeral rites, the sharing of grief and the solidarity of relatives, the group, the community. Sometimes the body must be transferred and the family taken care of, particularly if the deceased had family members who depended on him/her. These are also ways to work through mourning. Once again, the group is a valuable source of cohesion.

HRDs cannot dissociate themselves from the context of the political violence which has caused the death of someone near. This context prevents them from going through mourning. Often, they simply continue their work as more lives are at stake. When emergency calls, they postpone their mourning to a later date

when they will be able to allow themselves the time to mourn. Thus, they do not allow themselves to live through their emotions. But emotions and feelings also help us in the process of mourning. By suppressing feelings today, we cannot stop them from resurfacing tomorrow, without control, sparked by a memory, an indirect experience of the grief from which we thought ourselves shielded, maintaining a position as '*observers*'. But all of a sudden, that experience no longer leaves us indifferent and hits us suddenly like a storm.

Sometimes, HRDs experience moments of loneliness when, despite all the good intentions of their friends and relatives, the support networks surrounding them begin fading away with time. HRDs must become survivors, overcome death, renounce hope that the deceased will return, accept the reality of losing what was fundamental and to put themselves back on track again.

HRDs must regain the ability to choose: will they continue their political activity in defending human rights? They must turn themselves into survivors, survivors of a loss, protagonists of their own lives. They must internalise this painful experience of loss and give it meaning. They will have to sublimate death.

There are many ways of looking at mourning. I have chosen a constructivist approach in working through the grieving process with HRDs. This approach is based on HRDs' experiences and their political context. It considers both the factors HRDs can mostly control (ex: their protection strategy against violence) and those that they cannot (ex.: death as a part of life). This approach relies on the HRD ability to analyse, understand the reality around them, react and build. Clearly, using such a constructivist approach is logical as this already corresponds to how HRDs operate in their everyday lives when working with the victims they represent, without necessarily always being aware of it. This is what makes them resilient.

I am referring to the process which allows us to mourn, to understand what is happening, to put it into words, to work through it and then to stand back up again and continue the fight to defend the rights of all. Mourning is seen here as a possibility to go on living while integrating the loss of loved ones and projects close to our hearts. In this process there is a mixture of shock, denial, anguish, abandonment, guilt, distress, fear, ... states of mind, feelings, emotions. The constructivist approach pays attention to each element.

Mourning releases a complex set of feelings and emotions which come and go. Just when we thought we '*were better*', suddenly, we feel sad, depressed, bad, angry – these are feelings which continue to come and go. To be in mourning, to go through a period of mourning can take a long time.

Even though they may overlap and overwhelm the individual, there are basically **4 emotional steps of mourning** and **4 steps for working through it** (tasks/ continuous individual and group work on one's self).

4 emotional stages of mourning

1. The impact of the death/ loss of what we loved
2. Denial
3. Despair
4. Hope

These are normal stages, even though at times, they may take the person to abnormal/pathological behaviours (manias, depression, apathy,...) which call for professional help. Generally, HRDs have direct or indirect access to a support network including professional psychological help.

Even if emotional stages of mourning are quite normal, they still call for much work to be done. These steps are not simply '*states*' to which an individual is subjected and that requires nothing else but waiting for them to fade away with time. Rather these stages must be worked through in order to get better.

These steps may occur in a different order than that mentioned above and they may also be experienced simultaneously. But identifying the steps is important as each step can be a door to working through mourning.

Working through Mourning: 4 Stages

1. Accepting the death/the loss of the loved one (person, idea, project,...)
2. Expressing, living through, recognising feelings of mourning
3. Rebuild oneself
4. Integrating loss without allowing it to become an obstacle to life

Let us discuss these stages and use them to get better. Here, we shall examine only '*normal*' mourning. In such cases, a network of friends and relatives is usually enough to offer support to the person in mourning, without necessarily having to seek professional help. As indicated above, the bereaved does not go through these various steps in an organised or systematic way. Their sequence is not linear. Emotions, which swing back and forth, mark the rhythm of these stages. It is important to take the necessary time, without rushing or pushing to make things go faster. The objective is to help the person pass through mourning.

1. Accepting the death/the loss of the loved one (person, idea, project,...)

The individual may refuse to accept the death of a loved one. Denial, a survival strategy, enables them to feel “*less pain*”. They deny death/loss and keep up contact with the deceased; they continue to do the same as when they were alive. They set the table for the deceased, believing that they will come back despite the evidence; despite having seen the body or having had witnesses confirm the facts.

How to help the individual to become aware of death and how to help them to accept it?

Take time for rituals. We can assist the bereaved by seeing to it that the rites/funeral take place smoothly, by taking care of administrative matters, helping prepare the wake, consulting and involving the bereaved in preparing the funeral and rituals. All that reminds of the deceased and their belongings should not be hidden. What to do with them is for the bereaved to see later on, when the right time has come. These gestures contribute to the awareness of death. Sometimes not everyone can go to the wake, or organise it at home or publish the invitations. However, everyone will need rituals (traditional or new) to say goodbye to their loved ones.

The funeral is a first step in becoming aware of the death that has occurred even if denial may persist beyond the actual rituals and ceremonies.

We can help the bereaved by having them speak about what happened, putting events into words, calling things by name so that the person can gradually integrate the death of the loved one.

In the absence of a corpse, working through grief is more difficult. This process cannot take place for as long as individuals nourish the hope of being reunited with their loved ones. Only once they have accepted the reality of death can a ceremony be considered. The corpse can then be replaced by a symbolic representation.

2. Express, live through, recognise feelings of grief

How to help the individual become aware of their feelings? How to enable them to express their despair? How to help them become conscious of the fact that the other has departed and to envisage a future without the deceased when this is a future which seems impossible?

There is no universal solution but we can be present, express our empathy, listen, fearlessly receive waves of emotions which are normal, share tears, remember that being able to cry brings about relief and feeds into the process of working through grief. Our presence serves to reassure the bereaved without imposing ourselves through our acts, words or silences.

Pain, fear and abandonment, the loss of that part which has been torn from us, anxiety, anger, despair – each one has their own way of expressing these feelings. Not always is grief made of tears. In some cultures, tears are associated with weakness. Some retreat into silence, lock their feelings away or use work to suffocate their pain. Our role is to help them to live through their emotions, to recognise them – however they may manifest themselves – to be there for them, by their side.

3. Rebuilding Oneself

How can we help them rebuild themselves?

By speaking about the relationship with the deceased, recalling the moments before their death. To speak of the ups and downs of the relationship, of common plans, of what the deceased would have wanted and how this may still be possible, even without their presence. It is not about replacing the deceased, it is about accepting that life goes on, even without them.

Helping the person in understanding that there is a period ‘*before*’ and a period ‘*after*’ death is important. Their lives will fall into place after death without the deceased. This is possible and certainly indispensable.

Helping the person to express their fear of living without the deceased. Letting them express what they may regret they didn’t have the time to say such as presenting excuses or possibly making amends for a mistake made. Let them express what they may have blamed the deceased for. In this way we can assist the individual in mourning to dedramatise the experience without reducing it to a commonplace. Without putting all of this into words, it will be more difficult to work through the process of mourning.

The aim is to help the person to look forward to the future while internalising the loss of their loved one. Together, see how, if desired, political activity can continue without the dear one. Also, see that tasks are redistributed so that the bereaved has the time to mourn.

In many cases, the person concerned has a family to care for and to which he/she can turn.

4. Hope

Hope rules over pain as does life over death; the hope to be able to get better, to go on. Having faith in that hope and trust in life is vital. Accepting that getting back on one’s feet and continuing without the loved one doesn’t mean to betray them. To continue to live, to live again is not to betray them.

How can we help a person to integrate loss without it becoming an obstacle to living?

Even when individuals are fully conscious of the death of their loved one and were able to receive support from family – sharing these times of mourning with them – the feeling of betraying the deceased is still present when *‘remaking’* their lives, perhaps even smiling and laughing while the other remains dead. We can help such persons put things into perspective. To become alive once again does not do away with the loss; rather, by finding a way back to life, the loss is integrated.

No one is ever ready for losing someone. It is not easy to stand by someone in mourning, for we fear adding even more pain to the already existing pain. The individual may feel misunderstood if we fail to have the right reaction or words at hand. The bereaved person might not dare to ask and we might not dare to suggest.

Discussing these matters within organisations as a preventive measure can lead to increased sensitivity, making it easier to face our own mourning and that of others. Every person is different and it is difficult to cover everything. In addition, a series of steps must be taken – at family and organisational levels – which are linked directly to the cause of death and thus to political violence: autopsy (in countries where it is possible), denunciation, filing a suit in court (if there is a structure to receive and process complaints), the press, etc. These are all actions which certainly contribute to becoming aware of the death and of beginning to recover, but not immediately. The immediate effect is only to rekindle the pain.

Families of deceased HRDs will also be going through the ordeal of mourning. They too need support. They too need to make sense of their loss. For them too, it is difficult to believe that the suffering will eventually pass and that they will be able to go on living without the deceased. They too will have to learn that regaining a *‘taste’* for life, catching themselves laughing is not synonymous with *“forgetting/betraying”* the deceased. They need time and action. Anniversaries of deaths will reopen wounds which will become even deeper if justice has not been done and there are no reparation

The abduction (disappearance) has a specific impact on the relatives because it plunges them into uncertainty, into the incessant and painful thought of the permanent suffering to which the abducted (disappeared) person is subjected. This is exactly the reason why the oppressor resorts to kidnapping, so that there is no end to the pain, no body during a possible trial, so that impunity continues. In the case of kidnapping, mourning is more complicated because mourning is the equivalent of considering that the disappeared person is dead, of ceasing to wait for him/her, of giving up hope, of betraying the loved

one who has disappeared. If there is no body, alive or dead, if no one trusted has seen the body, it is difficult to elaborate the facts and rebuild trust, resume living. And this, regardless of the number of years elapsed, rational and informed deductions that could have been drawn. There remains a tragically painful glimmer of hope maintained by the awareness of the likelihood that the missing person will continue to suffer. And yet, how can we think or prefer his/her death despite the fact that it would put an end to his/her suffering? Inevitably, the time will come when family and colleagues will have to consider mourning their loved ones, rely on rituals, go through the stages of mourning and give meaning to the loss of the loved ones.

2.3. Resilience

Resilience describes the elasticity of certain materials such as rubber: the capacity to bounce back to recover its original shape or take on an entirely new shape (depending on the material) after having been subjected to pressure, tension or shock. The term resilience is used in human sciences to refer not only to materials but also to human beings.

Boris Cyrulnik³¹ uses the term in psychology to describe the capacity of individuals to rebound after pressure, tension, shocks and to *“repair their injuries and turn their fragility into a life force [...] Resilience defines the capacity to grow even when in an environment which should have been damaging.” “Faced by loss, adversity and suffering that someday in our lives confronts us all, a number of strategies are possible: give in to suffering and make a career out of being a victim, or make something out of that suffering to transcend it.”*³²

In the case of HRDs, resilience is their capacity to use their experience to continue to defend human rights, their capacity to work on their most vulnerable points, their capacity to give meaning to their struggle, to continue to believe in and act for a more just future. These are all signs of resilience shown by HRDs in an environment of political violence and impunity which could have lead them to being silenced.

Commitment, idealism, emotional investment, altruism, imagination, creativity, humour, satire are psychological mechanisms of adaptation of the resilient.

³¹ Boris Cyrulnik, born in 1937, is an ethnologist, neuropsychiatrist and psychoanalyst. His parents of Russian origin were deported in the 1940s and he was left an orphan. Later, he studied in Paris and graduated as a neuropsychiatrist. *He has met many individuals who suffered from injuries inflicted by life in many different cultures (...)*

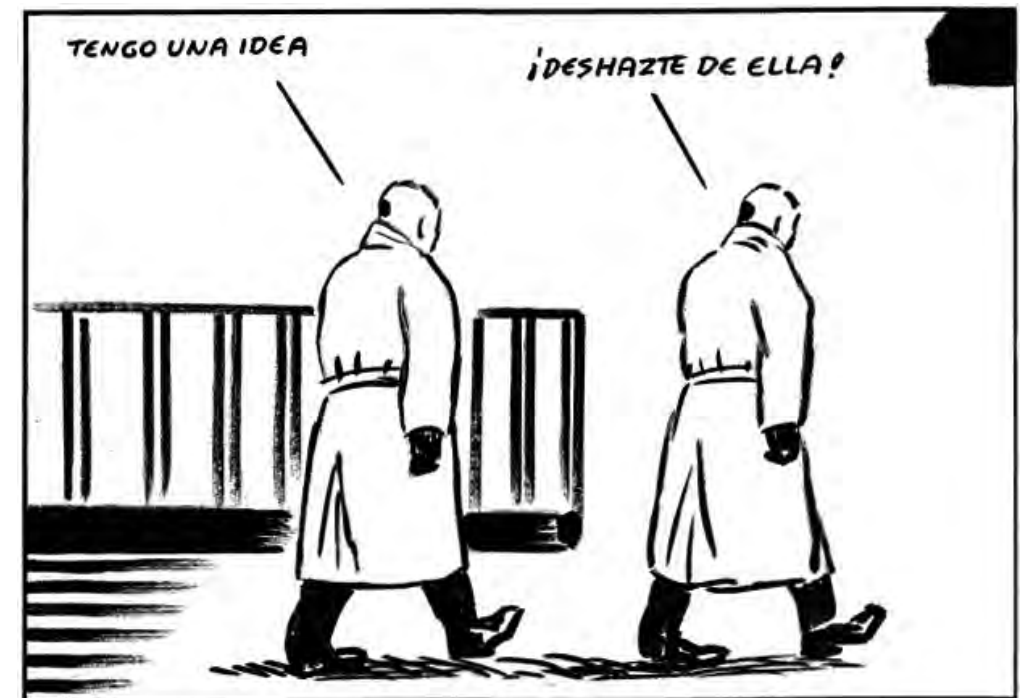
³² Boris Cyrulnik. *Autobiographie d'un épouvantail*. Ed. Le livre de Poche. 1996.

In his memoir, **Nelson Mandela remembers**: *'It is from these comrades in the struggle that I learned the meaning of courage. Time and again, I have seen men and women risk and give their lives for an idea. I have seen men stand up to attacks and torture without breaking, showing a strength and resilience that defies the imagination. I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. I felt fear myself more times than I can remember, but I hid it behind a mask of boldness. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.'*³³

In her speech at the UN General Assembly, **Malala Yousafzai declares**: *"These terrorists are misusing the name of Islam for their own personal benefit. Our books and pens are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world."*³⁴

In an interview in the *La Nación*, a newspaper, the dramatist and humorist **Diana Raznovich says**: *"I think that to believe that laughter is superficial and crying is serious is a preconceived idea. Humour can have an impact which 'serious' things do not have. It depends on the author intention and I think that humour is something very serious. It destabilises what has been established as eternal truth. And this is easier to do through satirical criticism than through tragedy. It aims at desacralisation and this is very interesting for me."*³⁵

In the case of HRDs, however, it should be remembered that these mechanisms entail the risk of reaction on the part of the oppressive power. It is no coincidence that the latter quickly tries to stifle them, especially if they question it. Intellectuals, artists, comedians and satirists are often the first victims of the dictatorship. Humour and satire, to name but a few, have an immediate impact and help demystify the aggressor power. It's dangerous but so liberating. Dictators don't really have a sense of humour and self-derision.



I have an idea. Get rid of it! – El Roto³⁶

³³ Nelson Mandela *Long walk to Freedom*. MacDonald Purnell. 1994.

³⁴ Excerpt from Malala Yousafzai's speech at the UN General Assembly on the 12th of July 2013. Malala Yousafzai, a teenager from Pakistan, survived a Taliban attack in October 2013. She is committed to the struggle for the right to education for girls in Pakistan. She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014.

³⁵ Diana Raznovich, Argentinian-Spanish dramatist and graphic humorist. Freely translated extract from an interview in the newspaper *La Nación*, Argentina, 08.08.2013. <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1608449-diana-raznovich-el-humor-es-una-cosa-seria-y-desestabilizadora>

³⁶ Cartoon by Spanish satirical graphic designer Andrés Rábago García. His pseudonyms include OPS and El Roto. This cartoon appeared in the Spanish newspaper, *El País*. www.elpais.com, elroto@inicia.es. Free translation from Spanish.

“ *It began from the womb
 You have no more rights
 No right to protest
 No right to freedom
 And no liberation
 Because you are a woman
 But ...*

*You could not tolerate all this pain
 So you built your idea and demanded your being
 And you yelled in objection
 You became fluent
 And you are present in my paintings
 Because you were human.*

*My colors and designs were transformed
 They turned into screams
 Against discrimination
 Against contradiction
 Against all limitations
 Because before being a woman, you were a human* ”

Zahra Maddha³⁷

“ (...) *I thought I had a serious, incurable illness,
 just as you told me. My best friend reassured me
 (yes, you know, her, the friend you thought I would end up
 being together with). She, her parents, were not like you;
 they were not homophobic. She was raised to respect others.
 She explained to me that I was far from being ill, that I
 was not unnatural and that it was precisely nature which
 had endowed me with my preference for men over women.
 I can't help it, Mum, this is who I am. So, that is what I
 wanted to tell you. I have been hiding my homosexuality
 from you for 5 years. I don't know how you will react.
 You told me that if you ever had a homosexual child, you
 would want to “bring your child back to reason”. But
 reason has nothing to do with it. I am as I am and that's it.
 Nobody can change me, least of all myself. (...)*³⁸ ”

Anonymous

³⁷ Iranian artist Zahra Maddha's description of one of her paintings.

³⁸ Excerpt, freely translated, from a letter written by a young homosexual man to his homophobic mother <http://www.stophomophobie.com/temoignage-la-lettre-dun-jeune-gay-a-sa-mere-homophobe/>

Summary

Political violence imposes extreme experiences (torture, death) on HRDs and on the victims they accompany. Such experiences create a demarcation line, a divide between *'before'* and *'after'*.

These experiences cannot be forgotten but they can be worked through and integrated into our lives.

The fundamental question of defining a human being arises when faced with the cruelty of torture.

While death is a part of life, death caused by political violence is not. It is a weapon in the hands of the oppressor.

The word *'mourning'* is a complex term that describes both the pain of someone's death or loss of something and the process of elaboration of pain. It is not about forgetting but about crossing through pain, of making it a reason for oneself or even of transforming it through resilience. Resilience is the ability that some people have to cope, to cope with individual abilities or by seizing opportunities they encounter.

Working through mourning is a slow and lengthy process which also involves funeral rites, sharing the pain, solidarity amongst those left behind, solidarity amongst the group and the community. Abduction (disappearance) makes mourning more difficult.

Emotions of Mourning: 4 Steps

1. The impact of death
2. Denial
3. Despair
4. Hope

Elaboration of Mourning: 4 Stages of working process through pain

1. Accepting death
2. Expressing, living through, recognising feelings of grief
3. Rebuilding oneself
4. Integrating loss without allowing it to become an obstacle to life

Sublimation is a *'successful'* mourning. Sublimation often leads those who were close to a deceased HRD to affirm that he/she died for us to be free so that we can continue with the actions that he/she lead and to claim truth and justice so that the injustice of the violent death not be engulfed by silence.

Exercises

The exercises will be carried out in groups in order to address the multitude of individual experiences and reactions. This will make it possible, through analysis, to deepen all the elements, to distinguish individual and collective perceptions, to understand the origin of these perceptions, to give them a certain logic, to see if we can change them and under what circumstances. To see how we can live with the experiences and perceptions that we cannot change without being overwhelmed by them. Exercises can also be performed by HRDs and relatives exposed to vicarious stress.

These exercises require a commitment from everyone to express what they really feel and perceive. If the person does not wish to speak, they have the right to do so. They can speak or remain silent. Be careful not to force anyone to speak. Their right to silence must be respected. Give them time to talk later, if so they wish.

For the exercises and then the work with victims of political violence (HRDs and/or victims accompanied by HRDs) it is important to remember that peer listening is fundamental. Peers share similar experiences and are therefore able to understand each other from the outset.

Before conducting the exercises, those present must undertake to keep the exchanges confidential and the authors anonymous. Keeping confidentiality and anonymity does not mean not passing on the acquired knowledge of exercises that could be useful to other HRDs. It simply means reformulating the acquired knowledge in such a way that the authors cannot be identified.

The list of exercises is not exhaustive.

A. Experiences of Political Violence

Keywords

- Torture
- Human being
- Man
- Woman
- Gender
- LGBTI
- Different sexual orientation
- Humanity
- Dignity
- Identity
- Compassion
- ...

Exercises:

- a. Translate each of the key words into your own native language or words.
- b. In your own mother tongue, describe as spontaneously as possible, what each word evokes.
- c. Note similarities and differences to establish what is common to the group or particular to each.
- d. In the medium and long term, take these notes and check if the evocation has changed.
- e. Explain why.

B. Death and Mourning

Keywords

- Life
- Death
- Symbolic death
- Renunciation
- Exile
- Loss
- Mourning
- The mourning process
- Funeral rites
- Rebuilding one's self
- Resilience
- Sublimation
- ...

Exercises:

- a. Translate each of the key words into your own native language or words.
- b. In your own mother tongue, describe as spontaneously as possible, what each word evokes.
- c. Note similarities and differences to establish what is common to the **group or particular** to each.
- d. In the medium and long term, take these notes and check if the evocation has changed.
- e. Explain why.

C. Analysis

- C.1. Describe your identity before the trauma.
- C.2. Describe your identity after the trauma.
- C.3. Explain the part of your identity you lost which was important before the trauma. And now, the important part of your identity that you haven't lost (that you have kept)
- C.4. Is it possible to recover part of what was important which was lost? And is this useful?
- C.5. If this is possible, how?
- C.6. If this is useful, why?
- C.7. What would the deceased have wanted us to do?
- C.8. How can we contribute to the deceased's funeral rite?
- C.9. Is it possible for us?
- C.10. If so, how?
- C.11. If it is not possible, why not?
- C.12. Bring up examples of symbolic death which you have experienced.
- C.13. What can we learn from lived experiences?
- C.14. Can we transform lived experiences? Which ones? In how far? How?
- C.15. Which experiences will we not be able to transform?
- C.16. How will we be able to integrate the experiences which we cannot transform into our everyday lives without becoming overwhelmed by feelings and emotions?

C.17. At the time of writing this manual, thousands of civilians are being killed in Syria, hundreds in Egypt and Israel still has not drawn back from the occupied territories...

Do you agree with the following statements:

'When a person is killed, it is called murder and the murderer is sentenced to prison.'

When dozens of people are killed, it is called psychopathy and the psychopath is committed to a psychiatric clinic.

When hundreds of people are killed, it is called State reason and the murderer remains free.'

C.18. Why?

...

3 Liberation Psychology



Summary
Exercises

3 Liberation Psychology

It was in Latin America, under the dictatorship of the 1970s and 1980s, that the concept of **liberation psychology** was born. A group of committed psychologists decided not to limit themselves to the role of observers but to reflect and analyse the causes of misery, dictatorship, the attitudes of oppressive power and the way people react to it, their capacity to survive and to organise themselves. This group also inherited the reflections carried out in Europe by colleagues, writers, victims and survivors of concentration camps.³⁹

Ignacio-Martin-Baró⁴⁰ belonged to this group and is considered the leading figure of liberation psychology.

The psychology of liberation is essentially based on a personal work of reflection and deep analysis of one's own human condition and that of others. Why, why and why again? Who, why, how do we decide that some deserve only to be crushed, mistreated, exploited, killed. How do we fall into this trap? How can we think that *'this is how it is'*? We, the two sides of the same horror: the executioners and victims? Where does this feeling of superiority and inferiority come from?

By being close to the people, Ignacio-Martin Baró was able to confirm the links between psychology, oppression, resistance, questioning, awareness,⁴¹ solidarity, the ability to escape the grip of the dominant thought and thus, to assert oneself against the oppressor. Ignacio-Martin Baró explored the capacity to think freely, to allow oneself to cross the ideological limits imposed by the regime, to allow oneself to question the dominant and perverse thinking of the regime, to allow oneself to go off the beaten track, to explore alternatives, to disappoint the expectations of those who would like us to remain in our *'place'*. These expectations may exist among the oppressors to protect themselves and among relatives of HRDs to protect the latter. Both invoke the risk of death as an excuse, while the deaths of silent submission are far more numerous than the deaths of the struggle for justice and against impunity.

³⁹ Primo Levi *If This a Man; The Drowned and the Saved*; Viktor E. Frankl *Man's Search for Meaning*; Jean Améry *At the Mind's Limits*; ...

⁴⁰ I. Martín-Baró, Jesuit and Spanish psychologist, emigrated to Latin America. He was murdered by the Salvadoran army in 1989.

⁴¹ Paulo Freire, a Brazilian teacher who pioneered adult literacy as a means of raising awareness and fighting oppression.

Liberation psychology has become a fundamental tool in the struggle for social-economic justice and against impunity. It should be pointed out that impunity is not due to a lack of means but to a precise will. Impunity is one of the means to continue to exercise oppressive power. Resources that are not invested in the justice system are invested in repression and control.

Liberation psychology goes further than medical/conventional-psychological intervention which focuses on the victim, the individual, without necessarily establishing the link with the political context and denouncing the perversion of the regime. The psychology of liberation marries the struggle of the oppressed. Through the psychology of liberation, Ignacio Martin-Baró and his colleagues also founded liberation theology. They acknowledged the weight and co-responsibility of the religious institution in political violence.⁴² They took a stand against religious institutions and called for a change of attitude consistent with the texts preached by these institutions. They opted for the poor and oppressed. So liberation theology has been possible thanks to liberation psychology, itself based on critical analysis (or systemic approach⁴³) that helps to call things by their name, which will help to choose the reactions and actions most appropriate to the situation. It is because Ignacio Martin-Baró and his colleagues first carried out a work on themselves of **liberation psychology** that liberation theology could be formulated as a doctrine of action. They sought coherence between the Gospels and the reality of **extreme poverty**. They have challenged social and economic structures as well as selfish and oppressive power. They denounced their impact on society, social and economic injustice. In other words, they acted. Liberation theology disturbed the Vatican because it could not silence the link between religious, political and economic institutions. All with the power to oppress or not to oppress. Liberation theology disturbed the Vatican by questioning its credibility and, therefore, its power because the Vatican did not practice the preferential option for the poor.⁴⁴ Liberation theology advocates proactive action.

'One should not judge a nation by the way it treats its richest citizens but by its attitude towards its poorest citizens'.⁴⁵

⁴² Among the HRDs I have met, many are believers and do not dare to question dogmas despite their awareness of the contradiction between manipulation by religious institutions (whatever the confession) and the defence of human rights. I therefore refer to liberation theology to illustrate that it is possible to question any dogma, as liberation psychology also does.

⁴³ Jorge Barudy (Chilean neuropsychiatrist exiled in Belgium) talks about *'systemic approach'*. He co-founded EXIL (medical-psychosocial centre for victims of human rights violations, torture and for exiled persons).

⁴⁴ Social Doctrine of the Church.

⁴⁵ Nelson Mandela *Long walk to Freedom*. MacDonald Purnell. 1994.

According to liberation theologians, the liberation of oppressed peoples is the manifestation of God's will. One of the central convictions of liberation theology is that, alongside personal sin, there is a collective and structural sin, that is, a structuring of society and economy that causes the suffering, misery and death of countless human brothers and sisters. The Christian is therefore obliged to commit himself/herself to fight injustice so that all may recover the human dignity willed by God as witnessed by the Gospels.

The Archbishop of Recife Dom Helder Camara⁴⁶ writes about the link between the Gospel and the denunciation of injustice: *'And because this hunger, this misery are consequences of injustice and structures of injustice, the Lord demands from us the denunciation of injustice. This is part of the proclamation of the Word. The denunciation of injustice is an absolutely necessary chapter in the proclamation of the gospel'*.

Helder Camara rose up against conservative Christians who reproached him for his commitment: *"When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist"*, he would say.⁴⁷

Since the 1970s, liberation theology has spread to Latin America, South Africa, the Philippines, South Korea and other countries under dictatorship through Catholic and Protestant theologians who, together with liberation psychology and the social sciences, explained how extreme poverty and oppression are not a fatality but the result of social and economic injustice willed and sustained by the ruling, selfish and oppressive power.

It is not by chance that the military shot down the Jesuit and psychologist Ignacio Martin-Baró and Archbishop Oscar A. Romero in El Salvador and Bishop Juan José Gerardi in Guatemala, all three practising liberation theology. All three called on the secular and religious authorities to opt for the poor and oppressed and to have the courage to denounce human rights violations and to fight for social and economic justice and against impunity. It is not by chance that HRDs are the target of oppressive power and that, in most cases, they are also abandoned by religious institutions. The latter forget that their mission of preaching *"universal love"* does not mean aligning themselves with the positions of the dominant power and, therefore, sharing with it the power to silence the faithful and citizens. In other words, to take power over and against the devotees and citizens and to keep the oppressed on their knees. They mistake the right to **religion** with human rights, especially when they prefer **charity** to the analysis of the causes of poverty and oppression that would allow the oppressed to rise up and question the power that oppresses them. They promise them heaven later.

⁴⁶ Helder Pessoa Camara. Brazilian Bishop. 1909-1999.

⁴⁷ Jean-Thierry Verhelst. Excerpt from text published in *Le Chemin* magazine, 73, 2006.

Similarly, in Islamism, Judaism, Animism, Hinduism, Buddhism etc., the divine entity continues to be instrumentalised, responsibilities continue to be reversed and most people are kept in ignorance. Religion is a useful instrument of dominant power. How else can we explain the determination of some to want to exclude from their structures the other human half, women and/or to exclude girls and the poor from knowledge, from school. They choose to invest in ignorance to maintain power, mortgaging the future of their communities. Many HRDs belong to a religion and are not used to questioning its dogmas, the relationship between religious institution and patriarchy, between patriarchy and human rights violations. Mentioning liberation theology here is a way of insisting on the need to cross the line of any dogma that wants to justify the violation of human rights as a act of faith Liberation psychology helps to become aware of relationships of domination, of the fact that political violence uses religion for its own ends. To denounce it does not mean to be a miscreant or to renounce one's own spirituality or religion.

It is not necessary to belong to a religious institution to be aware of social and economic injustice but it is necessary to analyse it and establish the link with the political context. It is the strength of liberation psychology.

The psychology of liberation goes further than just psychology because it helps HRDs to dissect what happens to them, to demystify the dominant thought, even that of religious authority. It helps the HRDs to build themselves, to stand up again because one is taller than when one is on one's knees. It gives back its value to the human being. It denounces the selfish **manipulation** that would want economics to be a human value: rich is equal to good, poor is equal to evil. It challenges the **ready-to-think**.⁴⁸ It is present in the reflection of some social movements today. HRDs who are used to analysing, linking actors and interests, raising community awareness, affirming and fighting for human rights, know that *'fighting poverty'* is nonsense. Fighting poverty as if it were a virus, an evil, as if it were the cause of injustice instead of its consequence. Poverty is a symptom of selfishness syndrome. Why does poverty exist? Why does it affect some and not others? Fighting poverty is a charitable intention and risks remaining so until we call things by their name and act accordingly: fight against the appropriation of common wealth by a tiny minority, fight for the legitimate and equitable distribution of common wealth among all, fight against the right of a minority to decide the fate of the majority. To fight against the use of arable land for biofuel production instead of cereal production for human consumption while famine is still rampant in the world. A minority gives itself the right to decide who can live and who must die for biofuel that will be used for the minority's machines: this is the return to the Middle Ages. Even the issue of climate change, which concerns the whole world, is trapped in the power struggle between a selfish minority and the majority of the planet. Social movements (including trade unions) are correct in linking social, ecological and economic justice.

⁴⁸ Mateo Alaluf. Sociologue. *Dictionnaire du prêt à penser*. Bruxelles-Charleroi. 2000.

Alice Miller⁴⁹ focused on violence against children and adults. She has exposed its origin, its vicious circle, especially when the suffering it causes is denied. The risk is then to reproduce violence by dissociating it from the suffering, by dehumanising the other. Alice Miller says that we must *break down the wall of silence*, put words on facts and suffering to respond.

Alice Miller does not belong to liberation psychology as such. Yet she makes the connection between the suffering suffered by individuals and the suffering inflicted on others, whether individuals or communities. Violence is not only a behaviour that concerns the individual and the family, but also social and political life.

*'In adulthood, one perpetuates spankings oneself as an effective educational means, apparently without realising that in truth one is avenging one's own suffering on the next generation. We refuse (or are not able) to understand the relationships between the violence suffered in the past and the one actively repeated today. This keeps society ignorant. We engage in activities that require violence. One is easily influenced by the speeches of politicians who designate scapegoats for the violence that one has stored up and which one can finally get rid of without being punished: "impure" races, ethnic groups to "cleanse", despised social minorities.'*⁵⁰

In the case of HRDs, putting words on facts also means extending reflection to the community, analysing and denouncing the causes of oppression, the perversion of the dominant discourse. Their psychosocial impact cannot be dissociated from the political cause that uses violence. The solution is therefore not only medical and psychological intervention for the victims but also and above all social action aimed at changing the political context that allows and supports violence and suffering. Analysis of the causes of violence helps to develop individual and collective strategies of **affirmation and resistance**.⁵¹

So how can we free ourselves from the grip of oppressive power? How to resist and fight against the perversion of power that criminalises⁵² and stigmatises HRDs? Through reflection, awareness raising, learning about the rights of HRDs, de-ideologisation because ideology justifies violations of human rights, a given established order, as if it were something '*natural*' rather than a choice claimed to be justified by context, history, culture, religion, etc. Yet one can always choose between violence and non-violence.

Do we not hear about economic laws as if they were natural, divine laws? As if they were inevitable when they are not?

⁴⁹ Alice Miller, PhD, heterodox psychoanalyst, researcher and author of several books on the causes and consequences of child abuse. Among her books, *Abattre le mur du silence* (Breaking down the wall of silence).

⁵⁰ Alice Miller. Extract from a leaflet she signed and distributed in 2003.

⁵¹ Carlos M. Beristain, Francesc Riera *Afirmación y resistencia. La comunidad como apoyo*. Ed. Virus. Third edition. 1994.

⁵² UDEFEGUA and PI *Guía para Defensoras y Defensores de Derechos Humanos ante la Criminalización*. <https://www.protectioninternational.org/es/node/1251>

De-ideologisation is about unmasking the machination of power and its interests in making people believe what it is saying. To unmask perversity, to demystify power in place is a step towards action that will put the environment and the human being at the centre and the economics at their service. This will help to support the social dimension, through the organisation of working groups, community support groups. Supporting the social dimension is not a neutral choice. Putting psychology at the service of the social cause is not a neutral choice. Nor is the understanding of the psychosocial impact of political violence. For political violence uses psychology to crush, dominate, oppress an entire society by targeting a few HRDs.

De-ideologisation also leads to refusing human rights violations, regardless of the identity of the perpetrator. HRDs denounce the perpetrators of violations regardless of their origin. HRDs are often caught between two fires. It is therefore fundamental that HRDs also gain ownership of liberation psychology as a tool in their struggle for social, ecological and economic justice and against impunity. Many psychologists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, social workers and doctors who have understood this and are supportive, make themselves available to HRDs. This is the case of the Community Action Group (GAC).

“ Those who do not move do not feel their chains. ”

Rosa Luxemburg⁵³

“ The strength of the chain is in the link. ”

South American Proverb

“ You cannot be taken to Paradise in chains. ”

Moshen Kadivar⁵⁴

⁵³ Rosa Luxemburg. Polish Social Democrat activist. 1871-1919.

⁵⁴ Moshen Kadivar. Progressive Iranian religious, exiled.

'Why denounce the murder of my neighbour? We are only farmers, we are not important'.

(HRD being part of a rural movement aiming at the recovery of land taken away from farmers).

During a workshop, we started from this statement by one of the HRDs present. We asked ourselves why this statement? Who decided how important a person was? Why a person would be taught to believe that they were not important, that they were ignorant? Ignorant about what? In relation to my, her, your, our culture, education? Because they didn't know this or that book? Who took advantage of it? Was it not rather a tactic of the oppressor to make the peasant believe that he/she was not important, that no one would have acted for him/her, that it was better to bow down and keep quiet? Wasn't it precisely because the peasant was important and therefore *'dangerous'* for the oppressor that the latter wanted him/her, and thus the whole community, to remain silent?

Over the days, the group began to decode, demystify the dominant discourse and learn its subtleties to neutralise it. The group reconstructed the facts to support the reflection on its importance denied by the oppressive power. This importance constituted a real margin of power of the peasants against the impunity of the oppressive power. The group reassembled its historical memory. It highlighted the importance of the group, the HRDs and their actions. It also highlighted the reasons why HRDs had believed the statement that they were not important and that no one cared about their fate. The group also explored the feelings and emotions related to this denial of their importance, to the feeling of inferiority that the oppressor had instilled in them.

During the joint assessment, the HRD stated that he had learned that he and his family were important. He understood the logic of the aggressor's strategy. He dared to consider the opposite.

The analysis also applies to the way HRD women are treated, notably by the oppressive power. They are treated as housewives, sexual objects, inferior beings and subjected to gender stereotypes *'it is not appropriate for a woman/it is not womanlike to express herself, to claim'*. Why is that? Is this not a strategy to deny the importance of women in the struggle for human rights in the same way as the strategy against oppressed peasants?

Why, when it comes to the Femen,⁵⁵ is one wondering whether it is indecent, shocking or not to protest bare-chested to claim women's rights? Should we not acknowledge that it is indecent and shocking that in the 21st century women still have to claim their rights? That's the real question. This is the question that one tries to stifle in the name of *'decency'* by sowing confusion. A woman's naked body is used everywhere, especially in marketing. So why can't the Femen use their bodies to claim women's rights, which are also men's rights? At least one man in two is a woman and sometimes neither. It's inter-gender.

HRDs must analyse the process of political violence from the gender perspective. The gender perspective must be applied in the analysis of the organisational decision-making process and its psychosocial impact on both the organisation and the community. To include the gender perspective means to include the social relationships between men and women based on the roles and status assigned to them in a society. Gender is not about sex. The appreciation of a man or a woman varies from one society to another.

The oppressive power takes the gender perspective into account in its strategy against HRDs. He takes roles and status into account when it wants to humiliate a man and a woman. In unequal societies, women are more vulnerable and the

⁵⁵ Femen, feminist group, HRD, which fights for women's rights, human rights, democracy, freedom of press against corruption, prostitution, influence of religions in society <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Femen>

oppressor knows it. Inequalitarian societies are based on the patriarchal system. The patriarchal system imposes a false hierarchy of values between men and women. The patriarchal system persists in basing this hierarchy of values on sex. Yet the biology of humankind is not a question of value. Value is a construction of the human being, of power relationships. This power relationship also applies to ethnic groups, minorities, differences and the most vulnerable ones.

HRDs must analyse violence against women on the account of their sex in order to also understand violence against more vulnerable groups because they belong to different groups, etc. Among the different groups, there are also HRDs – men, women and inter-genders.

Violence against women (gender violence) also exists within families and communities where women are not yet recognised as equal to men. Euphemistically, this violence is often called domestic violence. In fact, it is violence by men against women because women are women. In many countries, when gender violence kills in a widespread manner, it is called feminicide. Femicide is also called gynecide or gynocide. It is also used against newborns of the female sex.

78 | Liberation psychology must therefore also be approached from a gender perspective in order to help women, inter-genders and men understand the psychosocial impact of the structural inequality of the patriarchal system. Traditional psychology does not take into account the gender and social dimension that influences both men and women. In traditional psychology, women's psychological disorders are approached as if they were personality and individual disorders.⁵⁶ Yet many women suffer violence because they are female and live in patriarchal societies. Building psychosocial support for these women implies that the link with the cause is established. The question will be why, why and why again. Who, why, how do we decide that half of all human beings deserve only to be crushed, mistreated, exploited, killed. How do we fall into this trap? How can we think that *'it's like that'*? We, the two sides of the same horror: the victimisers and the victims? Where does this feeling of superiority and inferiority come from? In some communities violence against women is not recognised as such either by the perpetrators, by the victims themselves or by the language. For example, in Somali, there is no word/translation for violence against women and gender-based violence.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Soledad Muruaga Lopez de Guereñu, Pilar Pascual Pastor *La Psicoterapia de Equidad Feminista* Edición AMS, 2013.

⁵⁷ Suad Abdi. Researcher at the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) Network <http://sihanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/The-Other-War-Gangrape-in-Somaliland-SIHA-Network.pdf>

The causes of violence against women, both inside and outside the home, need to be thought through and analysed. Inequalities between women and men will not cease because women's dignity has suddenly been recognised, but because men suddenly realise that they have lost theirs.

HRDs must ask themselves why the oppressor uses sexual violence against women human rights defenders; why he sexually harasses them (as well as their daughters and other loved ones) through looks, words, sexual innuendo, comments about their appearance; why he threatens them with rape; why he rapes them, tortures them sexually; why he accuses them of being bad mothers, bad wives, bad girls; why he touches their breasts, buttocks, sex while talking to them, while questioning them; why he orders them to stay in the kitchen, etc. Why should women's dignity be trampled underfoot by the abuser's sexual violence? Why are the majority of women in the world, activists or not, exposed daily to more or less subtle harassment, discrimination and sexual violence (psychological and/or physical) at home, at work, in the street, etc.? Why is that? Why is that? Why is that? What does it mean to be a girl, a woman and grow up in patriarchy, in a world that allows this violence? Why are there men who fear they have become homosexual after being raped?

Gender violence and sexual violence do not fall from the sky, they are the continuum of patriarchal violence. Today, these are officially crimes. Thanks to feminist activism it was possible to complement the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), as well as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders (1998) with the UN Resolution on the Protection of Women Human Rights Defenders and Women Human Rights Defenders (2013). Children (girls and boys), LGBTI too, are protected by specific declarations and resolutions because the Universal Declaration of Human Rights seems insufficient in the eyes of some States. The texts exist, the related mechanisms and budgets are missing. Why is that? Why is that? Why is that?

This work of reflection must also include the third gender. The third gender has always existed. In most societies they are forced to choose between the female or male gender when they are neither and their sexual orientation does not concern us.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Mikael Quilliou-Rioua. *Identités de genre et intervention sociale*. Edition Dunod, 2014.

Summary

The psychology of liberation is based on reflection and analysis of the causes of violence on individuals, the community, society. It allows us to go as far as the structural causes of poverty and political violence. It analyses the attitudes of oppressive power and how people react to them, their ability to survive and to organise themselves.

Liberation psychology is an essential element of individual and community action to combat oppressive power and political violence.

Liberation psychology must be approached from the gender perspective to help HRDs better understand political violence and violence against women, the most vulnerable ones and the HRDs themselves.

The psychology of liberation requires the breaking down of silence by speech in order to call things by their very names. It then leads to action, affirmation and resistance to oppressive power.

Exercises

The exercises will be carried out in groups in order to address the multitude of individual experiences and reactions. This will make it possible, through analysis, to deepen all the elements, to distinguish individual and collective perceptions, to understand the origin of these perceptions, to give them a certain logic, to see if we can change them and under what circumstances. To see how we can live with the experiences and perceptions that we cannot change without being overwhelmed by them. Exercises can also be performed by HRDs and relatives exposed to vicarious stress.

These exercises require a commitment from everyone to express what they really feel and perceive. If the person does not wish to speak, they have the right to do so. They can speak or remain silent. Be careful not to force anyone to speak. Their right to silence must be respected. Give them time to talk later, if so they wish.

For the exercises and then the work with victims of political violence (HRDs and/or victims accompanied by HRDs) it is important to remember that peer listening is fundamental. Peers share similar experiences and are therefore able to understand each other from the outset.

Before conducting the exercises, those present must undertake to keep the exchanges confidential and the authors anonymous. Keeping confidentiality and anonymity does not mean not passing on the acquired knowledge of exercises that could be useful to other HRDs. It simply means reformulating the acquired knowledge in such a way that the authors cannot be identified.

The list of exercises is not exhaustive.

A. Liberation Psychology

Keywords

Liberation
Charity
Religion
Institution
Poverty
Extreme poverty
Manipulation

...

Exercises:

- Translate each of the key words into your own native language or words.
- In your own mother tongue, describe as spontaneously as possible, what each word evokes.
- Note similarities and differences to establish what is common to the group or particular to each.
- In the medium and long term, take these notes and check if the evocation has changed.
- Explain why.

B. Analysis

- Describe the context in which you live.
- Seek the link between this context and social and economic injustice.
- Describe the attitude of religious institutions in this context.
- Please provide examples of representatives of local and/or national religious institutions committed to social and economic justice.
- Explain how religious institutions react to them.

- B.6. Discuss the right to religion and the confusion between religious rights and human rights.
- B.7. Give examples of manipulation of oppressive power towards society, HRDs, members of the HRD family, members of the HRD community.
- B.8. Explain how to dismount the manipulation.
- B.9. Tell how women are treated by the oppressive power, the community, the family and explain why.
- B.10. Establish the similarity between the treatment reserved for women, for inter-gender people and that reserved for all the oppressed.
- B.11. Explain how fair treatment of men, women and inter-gender could help the work of HRDs.
- B.12. List risks specific to women HRDs.
- B.13. Reflect on protection mechanisms specific to women HRDs.

...

4 Collective memory, fighting against impunity, for truth and justice



4.1 What can be done?

Summary
Exercises

4 Collective memory, fighting against impunity, for truth and justice

The fight against impunity, for truth and justice, is a long-term and dangerous task. HRDs know this too well.

“ *Give a horse to the one who tells the truth.
He'll need it to run away.* ”

Arab proverb

HRDs also know that victims have the right to justice and that it is the State's obligation to ensure it regardless of antagonistic views on the desirable social project. These visions cannot justify the stigmatisation, discrimination, arrest, threat, death of HRDs. And this, whatever the political context of a country, be it dictatorship or war.

The fight against impunity and for justice is also part of psychosocial work because it aims at the recognition of facts, responsibilities, reparation, non-recidivism and, sometimes, it leads to reconciliation when the perpetrators ask for forgiveness, when victims can forgive and when a common project for the reconstruction of society is put in place. This is the work that truth and justice commissions have done, among others, in South Africa, Colombia, East Timor,...

When the fight against impunity leads to a trial against the perpetrators of violence, it also allows victims to regain narrative power. It is a margin of power against oppressors. This has a positive impact on victims, their communities and society. Narrative power contributes to truth and justice. In this way, it helps victims to recover their role as protagonists, which in itself is a psychosocial objective. Narrative power is a right. It is a form of respect for victims and other members of the group. It contributes to the recognition of the facts and takes into account their impact on the victim. It allows the victim to be recognised: *“I, the victim, have suffered all this. The ‘official’ versions narrated by the oppressive power are lies. I’m not guilty. I’m not guilty. I disobeyed the oppressive and unjust power. Civil disobedience is the power I had to fight injustice in the name of the oppressed”*.

On a bus from Montgomery, Alabama, **Rosa Parks**, a 42-year-old black woman, **refuses to give up her seat** to a white man as is the rule. Rosa Parks was arrested by police and fined \$15. A boycott campaign against the bus company is launched, led by a young black pastor, Martin Luther King. On November 13, 1956, the Supreme Court declared Montgomery's segregationist laws illegal.

Impunity is no accident. It exists because the oppressor has decided it and has put in place a whole series of measures preventing victims' complaints from being received and followed up by the **legal institution** (judiciary). Impunity can last for decades until a court receives and examines complaints, ensuring a fair trial and enforcement of the sentences that the court imposes on the perpetrators of human rights violations.

The fight against impunity requires painstaking and lengthy work in gathering facts and evidence that constitute not only the legal record but also the **collective memory** that traces the dynamics of political violence. It is important that memory remains vivid to react to the first signs of the risk of recurrence of political violence. Keeping the collective memory alive makes it possible not to forget where one comes from in order to know where one is going. Rebuilding collective memory is a painful but necessary and just process. It helps to build the future by integrating experience. This memory must be shared with society, so as not to forget the crimes and the victims. This can be done by organising exhibitions of photographs, paintings or any other form of artistic expression, such as concerts or the construction of a monument, statue or commemorative plaque. Or just plant a tree, etc.

HRDs are fundamental actors in the fight against impunity because they act directly with the victims of political violence and are often victims themselves. Few HRDs have received post-traumatic psychological support or legal support that has led to legal proceedings against the perpetrators of the violence of which they have been victims. Few HRDs have received justice. However, HRDs continue to support other victims in their efforts to denounce the truth, justice and an end to impunity.

When denouncing human rights violations and initiating legal proceedings, it is important to remember that you are not alone. It is important to remember this because every moment before, during and after involves risks.

Courts organise protection and security during the trial but rarely before and after the trial. It is not easy for a victim to gather her strength and denounce the perpetrators of human rights violations because, in addition to the psychological difficulties she must overcome, her own safety and that of her relatives are threatened. She therefore needs community psychosocial support, protection and security. This is why victims, including HRDs, will have to build their own protection and security by analysing the risks associated with their legal action. They will establish security plans. These security plans will include a protection strategy on the part of key actors such as other national and international HRD organisations, embassies, etc. In particular, they will form mutual support groups at the local level. The local level is fundamental, it is the first level of urgent intervention from which other urgent reactions (national and international) will be triggered.⁵⁹

During trials, international observers may be called upon to ensure that the trial is fair and to accompany victims, witnesses and HRDs. HRDs work for the implementation of the rule of law. For this, they also rely on the international community.

Women in Black from the Balkans⁶⁰ accompanied witnesses and victims of war crimes in the Balkans (1991-1999) to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia – ICTY. They belonged to different ethnic groups in the Balkans. They did so to assert that the war crimes had not been committed in their name and that the perpetrators had acted solely in their own name. They demanded justice. Women in Black Serbs accompanied witnesses and victims from Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo. Just as Bosnian, Croatian and Kosovar Women in Black accompanied Serbian witnesses and victims. They have formed mutual support groups between all ethnic groups in the Balkans and have protected each other.

Mutual support groups are essential not only for the support of victims and HRDs but also for the support of their families and for the safety of all. Mutual support groups enable HRDs to carry out their activities for all, while helping them to care for their families.

In countries where HRDs have formed a **network**, the fight against impunity is organised by pooling resources and legal action through the participation of local, national and international lawyers and advocates. HRDs are recognised by the international community, which can relay their demand for justice to regional and international human rights institutions and to the International Criminal Court.

⁵⁹ Enrique Eguen and Marie Caraj *New Protection Manual for HRDs*. Ed. PI. 2009. <https://www.protectioninternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Protection-Manual-3rd-Edition.pdf>

⁶⁰ The group Women in Black was born in a square in West Jerusalem in January 1988, at the beginning of the first intifada. They chose silence and black to protest against the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, decided by the Israeli government. They were joined by Palestinian women. Since then, the Women in Black have become an international movement. They were inspired by the practices of other women in other struggles around the world: South African women against Apartheid, Argentine mothers and grandmothers in the Plaza de Mayo.

Non-governmental organisations:

Many international human rights organisations offer HRDs legal monitoring, which may include international observation of trials. Several of them have published books on fair trial observation. These include Amnesty International (AI), the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), Protection International (PI), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH),⁶¹ Front Line Defenders (FL), the Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, the Committee of Human Rights Lawyers, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Association, etc. These organisations work with national and regional HRD organisations. Among the latter, many are those who already have a legal aid service for HRDs, notably East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders (EHAHRDP), Unidad de defensores y defensoras de derechos humanos (UDEFEQUA), Just Associates (JASS), Imparsial, etc.

Regional governmental organisations:

Latin America

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights⁶² (IACHR) is one of two human rights bodies of the Organization of American States (OAS), the other being the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Its headquarters are in Washington, D.C. Created in 1959, it is composed of seven members, elected in a personal capacity by the General Assembly of the OAS, and not as a representative of a particular State (Art. 36 of the American Convention on Human Rights). They are *“persons of high moral authority and recognized competence in the field of human rights.”* (Art. 34). The IACHR serves as a human rights advisory body to the OAS, but also collects petitions as a first step toward filing a

⁶¹ Many Francophone organisations (governmental and non governmental) continue to say Man's rights (Droits de l'homme) instead of human rights (Droits humains), refusing inclusive language while claiming equality.

⁶² Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/>; Inter-American Court of Human Rights, <http://www.corteidh.or.cr> and http://www.oas.org/dil/treaties_B-32_American_Convention_on_Human_Rights.htm

complaint with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and verifies each state's agreement with the Convention. The IACHR has the power to make recommendations to OAS States on human rights issues, as well as to request advisory opinions from the IACHR, including on the interpretation of the Convention. It can also take legal action before the latter. It may also require states to take precautionary measures to avoid specific human rights violations in emergencies. It has three specific rapporteurs, one on freedom of expression, one on migrant workers and their families, and one on women's rights.

Africa

The **African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights** (ACHPR, <http://www.achpr.org/>) is responsible for promoting human and peoples' rights and ensuring their protection in Africa. It may refer the matter to the **African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights**.⁶³ The Court is a regional court created by African countries to ensure the protection of human rights and peoples, freedoms and duties in Africa. It complements and reinforces the responsibilities of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

Asia

The **Asian Human Rights Commission** (AHRC, <http://www.humanrights.asia/>) aims to achieve a number of priority objectives, including the protection and promotion of human rights through monitoring, investigation, advice and solidarity measures.⁶⁴

Europe

The **European Court of Human Rights**⁶⁵ (ECHR) or Strasbourg Court : Its mission is to ensure respect for the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (official name, often called the European Convention on Human Rights). The

⁶³ <http://www.african-court.org/en/>

⁶⁴ <http://www.humanrights.com>

⁶⁵ <https://www.echr.coe.int/Pages/home.aspx?p=home> and Wikipedia

European Court of Human Rights has jurisdiction to deal with actions brought against a member State of the Council of Europe which, having ratified the Convention and its Additional Protocols (State Party), would not respect the rights and freedoms recognised therein.

The **Council of Europe** has adopted the Istanbul Convention which provides for very concrete protocols to combat all forms of violence against women <https://rm.coe.int/168046031c>

International

Since 2006, the **United Nations Human Rights Council** has been the main body of the UN intergovernmental body on all human rights issues. The secretariat of the Council is provided by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Its headquarters are in Geneva, Switzerland.

The **International Criminal Court** is a permanent court charged with trying persons accused of genocide, crimes against humanity, crimes of aggression and war crimes. Following the United Nations Diplomatic Conference of Plenipotentiaries, the Rome Statute providing for the establishment of the International Criminal Court was signed on 17 July 1998. The Court was formally established on 1 July 2002, the date on which the Rome Statute entered into force. The Court shall have jurisdiction to try crimes committed on or after that date. The official seat of the Court is in The Hague, the Netherlands, but trials can take place anywhere. As of April 2012, 121 of the 193 UN Member States have ratified the Rome Statute and accept the authority of the ICC. Thirty-two additional States, including Russia and the United States of America, have signed but not ratified the Rome Statute. Some, including China and India, are critical of the Court and have not signed the Statute.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Wikipedia.

4.1 What can be done?

Collect the facts, as objectively as possible, without interpreting them at this stage. Include descriptive details (place, time, physical appearance of the people involved, their behaviour, clothing, etc.). Also take the testimonies of those present at the time of the events. Next, order the facts chronologically.

Establish the modus operandi of the perpetrators of violence by cross-checking the facts with those described by other victims in order to verify whether or not this is an isolated case. This will be fundamental when analysing the risks.

Define the reason why the violence was committed in order to establish whether there is a link with the activities of the victim or their relatives, i.e. a link with the political context.

Identify the perpetrators on the basis of the above points, assess their likely margin of impunity.

Decide what follow up to give to the facts. If it is decided to denounce them, it is preferable to conduct a risk analysis aimed at establishing security and protection plans and protocols adapted to the context in which the victims live.⁶⁷

Contact national and/or international legal support organisations working with HRDs. They are familiar with the workings of the legal system.

The general amnesty is based on the assumption that victims will show good will and be willing to turn the page. It demands, in fact, that the victims turn the page, *'for the good of all'*. How is it possible if truth, recognition, reparation, justice are not obtained? How will victims be able to believe in the establishment of the rule of law? The general amnesty is unacceptable. That is impunity. Peace can only be based on truth and justice. Peace is not the absence of war. Peace is justice. Why can the perpetrators of political violence not show good will, unmask themselves and accept that justice be done 'for the good of all'? The responsibility of the State must be formalised and sanctioned to enable society as a whole to develop the facts so that a new social project and peace can then be built for the good of all. Justice is legal justice with regard to human rights violations and it is also the social and economic justice of the common project of society to be built next. When truth and justice commissions are established, they contribute significantly to this new beginning.

⁶⁷ Enrique Eguren and Marie Caraj *New Protection Manual for HRDs*. Ed. PI. 2009. <https://www.protectioninternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Protection-Manual-3rd-Edition.pdf>

HRDs are recognised as key actors for justice, peace and democracy. They contribute directly to the development and implementation of the Rule of Law.⁶⁸

The work of HRDs is a long-term task. Each of their actions contributes to all the actions that contribute to the modification of the system of oppression. The system of oppression can be compared to a pile of sand in a state of equilibrium as long as sand is not added. Each HRD action can be compared to a grain of sand. A grain of sand has an impact on the sand pile thanks to the other grains of sand that were deposited, even slowly, before it on the sand pile. At some point the equilibrium state of the sand pile will reach a critical state for its equilibrium thanks to the interactions of all the grains of sand. This critical state is self-organised because it results from interactions between all grains of sand. This is called self-organised criticality⁶⁹ to describe changes from within complex systems. Oppression is based on a complex system. One could also say that each action of the HRDs contributes to getting closer to the last straw that will break the camel's back.

“ *To think that you are a little grain of sand,
that's all, but by putting grains of sand in the machine,
one day it will squeak and it will stop.* ”

Jean Anouilh⁷⁰

⁶⁸ UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. 1998. UNHCHR. *Fact Sheet 29. Protect the Right to Defend Human Rights. EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders*. 2004. Revision 2008.

⁶⁹ Susan George *Whose Crisis? Whose Future?* Ed. Paper Back. 2010.

⁷⁰ Jean Anouilh. French writer and playwright. 1910-1987. *Becket or the honor of God*. Perigee Books. 1987.

Summary

HRDs are recognised as key actors in justice, peace and democracy.

The fight against impunity, for truth, justice, reparation and, possibly, reconciliation is an integral part of psychosocial work with victims of political violence. It allows victims and HRDs to regain narrative power and become protagonists of collective memory. It is a margin of power against oppressors.

It is not easy for a victim to gather their strength and denounce the perpetrators of human rights violations. They also need community psychosocial support, protection and security.

The establishment of mutual support groups allows victims and HRDs not to be alone in their risky legal proceedings.

Gathering the facts, establishing the *modus operandi* of the perpetrators of violence, defining the reason for the violence, unmasking the perpetrators and deciding on the follow-up to be given to the facts also requires risk analysis and the establishment of security and protection plans and protocols for victims, witnesses and organisations accompanying them in their legal proceedings.

HRDs are not alone. They can count on the support of national and/or international legal support organisations working with HRDs. They are familiar with the workings of the legal system.

The general amnesty is unacceptable. That is impunity.

Exercises

The exercises will be carried out in groups in order to address the multitude of individual experiences and reactions. This will make it possible, through analysis, to deepen all the elements, to distinguish individual and collective perceptions, to understand the origin of these perceptions, to give them a certain logic, to see if we can change them and under what circumstances. To see how we can live with the experiences and perceptions that we cannot change without being overwhelmed by them. Exercises can also be performed by HRDs and relatives exposed to vicarious stress.

These exercises require a commitment from everyone to express what they really feel and perceive. If the person does not wish to speak, they have the right to do so. They can speak or remain silent. Be careful not to force anyone to speak. Their right to silence must be respected. Give them time to talk later, if so they wish.

For the exercises and then the work with victims of political violence (HRDs and/or victims accompanied by HRDs) it is important to remember that peer listening is fundamental. Peers share similar experiences and are therefore able to understand each other from the outset.

Before conducting the exercises, those present must undertake to keep the exchanges confidential and the authors anonymous. Keeping confidentiality and anonymity does not mean not passing on the acquired knowledge of exercises that could be useful to other HRDs. It simply means reformulating the acquired knowledge in such a way that the authors cannot be identified.

The list of exercises is not exhaustive.

A. Collective memory, the struggle against impunity, for truth and justice

Keywords

- Impunity
- Truth
- Collective memory
- Justice
- Repair
- Legal institution
- Network
- Mutual Support Group
- ...

Exercises:

- a. Translate each of the key words into your own native language or words.
- b. In your own mother tongue, describe as spontaneously as possible, what each word evokes.
- c. Note similarities and differences to establish what is common to the group or particular to each.
- d. In the medium and long term, take these notes and check if the evocation has changed.
- e. Explain why.

B. Analysis

- B.1. Seek in the Constitution of the country all articles that justify, legitimise and legalise the action of HRDs.
- B.2. Seek international texts and mechanisms that legitimise and legalise the work of HRDs in the eyes of the international community.
- B.3. Search international texts and mechanisms that specifically refer to the field of your HRD action. There are, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the rights of women, children, LGBTI, HRDs, women HRDs, journalists, trade unionists, the protocol on civil and political rights, the protocol on cultural, economic and social rights. Not all of them have been ratified by all governments.
- B.4. Draw up a list of international legal institutions that HRDs could refer to.
- B.5. Draw up a list of national and international organisations of HRD lawyers and advocates.
- B.6. Cite some examples of national and international trials against perpetrators of political violence.
- B.7. Analyse the strategy that led to these trials in order to take them into account in any legal action.
- B.8. To highlight possible dysfunctions of the judicial system in one's own country in order to reflect on the strategy to be developed to change the situation.
- B.9. Cite some examples of civil disobedience and its consequences.
- B.10. Explain how it can help HRDs.
- B.11. Rebuild collective memory with the community (for example, compare official information about facts experienced by the community with information from the community itself. Propose several ways of telling the facts and indicate the one that best conveys the meaning the community wishes to give them or the meaning it feels. See how what happened relates to the country's Constitution, universal human rights, victims' rights, HRDs, etc.)

...

N.B. This research work contributes to the knowledge of one's own rights. Knowing your rights contributes to assertiveness. It is fundamental to transmit this knowledge to the victims whom the HRDs accompany and to the community in general. To know, to have knowledge helps to free oneself from the yoke of oppressive power which is also based on ignorance. Research and knowledge work contributes to community psychosocial work.

5 Psychosocial community action



5.1 When to start? And where? What are the next steps?

5.1.1 When to start? 5.1.2 Where to start?

5.1.3 What are the next steps to be taken?

5.2 Simple Stress

5.3 Post traumatic Stress

5.4 Vicarious Trauma

5.5 Children

5.6 HRD Victims of Torture

5.7 Realistic expectations

Summary

Exercises

5 Psychosocial community action

Experience confirms that the majority of victims of political violence don't falter. They survive even the worst events and take their lives into their own hands. The same goes for HRDs. Their motivation, their convictions, their commitment and the role they play contribute to their ability to survive. The capacity to address and cope with stress reinforces this ability.

Power is never absolute i.e. exclusively in the hands of a dominant group or dictator. One has to see it as a more or less narrow margin of power. It is necessary to reflect on the strategy that will increase the margin of power of HRDs and, as a result, the socio-political space they occupy. To achieve this the HRDs will have to use their margin of power to access support (local, national, international) in order to increase the political cost of any aggression against them. This will reduce the margin of impunity of the oppressor. In other words, HRDs can use their power margin to change the attitude of the opponent who'll understand that it risks reprisals that will discredit and weaken it. This is possible if HRDs raise the political cost of actions against them which will reduce the power margin of the oppressor. It will increase the **deterrence power** of HRDs while their opponent will be forced to tolerate their activities and change its attitude towards the HRDs. To tolerate their activities doesn't mean their acceptance. Accepting their activities would imply that the opponent would acknowledge that their actions are well founded. This, however, requires a change of mentality in the opponent.

*'Strengthening the process of support, rebuilding social, family and affective ties, historical memory, psychological support and the sense of belonging together is a complex, difficult and painful process.'*⁷¹

Psychosocial **action** enables members of a community to better protect themselves and fight more effectively against social and economic injustice and impunity. It reduces the likelihood of the drama repeating itself.

I've said it and shall repeat it again and again in this manual: This manual concerns the community too. Community involvement is fundamental for psychosocial reconstruction, for the fight against impunity, for the protection and

security of the HRDs as well as of the community itself. These different aspects are indivisible because they all have an impact on each other. They are all part of community action. The work of strengthening community action has to be done jointly, in groups, with all stakeholders.

Some tips to build community action

- Sensitise HRDs and the community to the psychosocial dimension;
- Improve the psychosocial knowledge of those who are most in contact with family and community members;
- Value personal and spontaneous mutual aid amongst families;
- Inform families and the community of their rights in order to enable them to assert them and to strengthen the fight against impunity;
- Ensure access to a network of lawyers responsible for legal follow-up, to whom HRDs, families and communities can pass on their witness statements and evidence and whom they can ask for protection;
- Determine when and how to contact trustworthy journalists in order to inform public opinion of what is happening;
- Ensure the support of community and religious leaders, elders and healers;
- Look for allies. HRDs are part of a global project for social and economic justice. They are not beggars, nor do they do charity. HRDs claim and defend universal human rights based on the universal recognition of human needs of individuals and peoples. There are at least four universal and non-negotiable rights: survival, wellbeing, freedom and identity. HRDs haven't invented anything. They only claim what is universally recognised and what is enshrined in the constitution of their countries;
- Build a mutual support group around a forward-looking community project for social and economic justice. This could be a kitchen, a vegetable garden, a kindergarten, a committee to assert the rights of all, etc. Anything that can contribute to mutual support;
- Deepen the analysis of the *modus operandi* of ruling power and its basis with the aim of strengthening community action. The power of the oppressor is also based on the obedience of a sufficient number of oppressed. Thus, learning to say "*no*" is less violent than to say "*yes*". But in order to be able to say "*no*" one needs objectives, support, community strategies. One needs to be aware of one's identity, of one's belonging to a community with which one fights against social injustice and against impunity. The community is essential for building and preserving the collective memory;
- ...

⁷¹ Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Quotation excerpt. 1992.

Throughout this fifth part I shall refer to concepts already mentioned in order to highlight the importance of integrating them in psychosocial community work. Each concept is a key to the reinforcement of community action. In other words: the reader should approach this fifth part keeping in mind all preceding chapters and share their content to all parties involved in psychosocial community action. I shall address psychosocial action from the perspective of the HRDs to be supported, from the perspective of the family and of the community. They all are both affected by and actors of psychosocial community support.

Elements of analysis for community empowerment⁷²

Observation

Obedience is essentially voluntary

Every government, every power is based on consent.

Analysis

Analyse consent, the reason why people obey. Bear in mind the political, economic and social context in which people find themselves and what conditions them.

Power and its sources

1. Authority
2. Human resources
3. Capacity and knowledge. Information and misinformation
4. Intangibility – psychology, ideology, faith, tradition
5. Material resources
6. Sanctions – imposition of obedience

These sources depend on obedience (reasons why people obey)

1. Habit and ignorance
 2. Fear of sanctions
 3. Moral obligation
 4. Self interest
 5. Psychological identification with the ruler
 6. Zones of indifference (avoidance of critical questioning)
 7. Lack of self-confidence
-

⁷² Gene Sharp, *The politics of Nonviolent Behavior, Part I*, Porter Sargent Publishers, Massachusetts 1973.

5.1 When to start? Where to start? What needs to be done?

5.1.1 When to start?

Psychosocial intervention is not an emergency intervention in medical terms, i.e. in the sense of “*first aid*” or a question of life or death. This goes also in case of natural disasters, of war, of political violence, etc. It is hence futile to even address this issue. Every point in time is fine. The crucial point isn’t the exact point in time but rather to be able to convince the HRDs to give themselves sufficient time for reflection and for analysing the mechanisms of psychosocial support.

HRDs work out of conviction, passion, empathy and compassion and are affected by stress. They have difficulties to take a break and some time for themselves even though this would help them in their work with and on behalf of the people they defend. They sometimes do take break and reflect after having come ‘*close to the worst*’ and when they realise that there are things they can react to and thus gain better control over, such as stress, especially if the stress has directly or indirectly contributed to the ‘*worst*’ they just faced. Nevertheless, they often resume their activities, without even having tried to get a clearer picture.

HRDs can find it difficult to address their lack of ability to accept their state of mind, i.e. fear, anxiety, etc. These feelings are often – and wrongly – seen as a weakness, even though they are in fact a useful ‘*alarm*’ not least in regard of the health and safety of their work.

HRDs who take these signals seriously can better address these issues which will help them develop the **capacity** to control them and reduce the risk of negative impacts on themselves as well as on their families, their organisation and the community.

It makes sense to analyse the link between political violence, stress and the problems they face in their day-to-day life in regard of their work, their security, their families, friends and relationships. In order to do so, they can also make use of the experience of other HRDs and organisations.

Psychosocial support of HRDs comprises at least 3 perspectives:

- The perspective of the individual (the HRD)
- The perspective of the community (family, close friends)
- The perspective of the organisation (colleagues, structure)

These elements consist of:

- Feminine, masculine, third gender, independent of sexual orientation
- Different age groups (children, adults, the elderly)
- Various educational levels comprising semi-illiterate or illiterate people
- Different cultural, social, economic backgrounds
- ...

All these elements are situated in a given political, social and economic context.

It is with all these elements in mind that we will approach the reading of what follows and that is not exhaustive. This is a partial reflection of what can be achieved in relation to stress, identity, support for tortured HRDs, children of HRDs, etc. Although the reflection presented often starts from the perspective of the HRD to be supported, it also applies to the perspective of all other individuals and groups concerned with community psychosocial support.

5.1.2 Where to start?

It is difficult to answer this question without a broader context. What is, however, for sure is that HRDs don't start from zero and that they didn't wait for this publication to address issues such as post-traumatic stress, psychosocial impact of political violence and to insure support in whatever form. The majority of HRDs have indeed a resilience without which they couldn't be human right defenders, survive physical and psychological torture, accept the risks and overcome fear.

We could perhaps start by asking why are considering looking at the psychosocial dimension in our work as HRDs. Basically address what happened and talk about the psychosocial impact of violence in order to react to it.

Thereafter, it is about exchanging experiences, draw up a list of facts and show what they have in common. We will realise that the accumulation of these facts leads to stress and that stress will also have contributed to the sequence of other facts.

Stress can be the entry point for community psychosocial work. It concerns everyone. Stress is our body's physical and mental response to environmental pressures. In the case of HRDs, this environment is one of political violence. And if in the immediate future we cannot act on violence, we can nevertheless act on stress. Stress is complex, consisting of multiple elements whose accumulation triggers stress. Distinguishing the triggers can act on stress, from the mildest to the most severe, post-traumatic stress.

The triggers of stress can be related to an **environment of political violence, to work, to personal situations, etc.**

Stress elements linked to political violence

- Awareness of the unbalanced balance of power
- Constant exposure to the risk of death
- Constant exposure to the threat of abduction, imprisonment and torture
- Being forced to give up one's demands
- Being exposed to exile
- Being exposed to harassment
- Living side-by-side with the aggressors
- Permanent confrontation with the impunity of the perpetrators
- Confrontation with the arbitrariness of the ruling power
- Being directly or indirectly exposed to possible armed conflict
- Being exposed to a reality which goes beyond imagination and which produces a feeling of **vulnerability**
- ...

Elements of stress linked to the activities of the HRDs

- The organisation consists of HRDs with their experience of suffering, of justice denied
- Vicarious traumas: the HRDs listen to the victims and their suffering with compassion and empathy and risk to relive their own suffering and traumas or to suffer from the pervasion of sufferance, trauma of the others by identifying and feeling with them.
- HRDs support the victims in their efforts of denouncing oppression even though they are aware of its impunity.
- Insufficient structures in terms of the mandate and the expectations of the victims they support, the plethora of tasks, the imponderables
- Difficulties in setting priorities
- Lack of time for fundraising. HRDs often have to face emergencies, questions of life or death that are priceless

- Lack of psychosocial training and of time needed to address the question, be it internally
- The organisation focuses mainly on the exterior rather than on the exterior and the interior (it takes care of *'others'* instead of the others and of its own)
- Lack of rest
- Lack of alternation between more stressful and less stressful tasks
- Lack of security rules
- ...

Elements of stress linked to the personal situation

- HRDs have families and friends which are often hostages of the potential aggressors
- Family, friends and relatives can exert pressure and request that the HRD reduces his/her activities and devotes more time to them *'instead of the others'*
- HRDs can feel discouraged and *'guilty'* in the light of what happens to them and forget that they are not responsible for the political violence
- HRDs are human beings who need affection, have their own wishes and aspirations which are often curtailed
- HRDs often live in precarious conditions
- ...

All these different reasons for stress can cause symptoms like strain, nervousness, anxiety, insomnia, lack of appetite, changes in their diet and/or hygiene, irritability, violence, impatience, obsessive thoughts, seeking refuge in work, incapability to relax, alcohol consumption, dependency on medicinal preparations or other drugs, etc.

Remember, this accumulated stress can lead HRDs to lower their guard, to expose themselves more to danger and thus, to increase stress and trigger a vicious circle.

The potential aggressor doesn't take any holidays and neither does the HRD. The aggressor looks for opportunities, which the HRDs don't want to offer. The aggressor knows just as much as the HRDs that stress offers such opportunities. To live with that stress and with the awareness of the stress is, per se, traumatising. To understand the mechanisms of repression is a step towards stress resistance.

When we are constantly *'on the alert'* it is difficult to set priorities, to withdraw, to relax, to spend time on awareness-raising and to **analyse** what happens to us. It is, however, crucial to hold on. *'To hold on'* requires relaxation, the capacity to

withdraw so as to come back stronger. *'To hold on'* also requires a decryption of the strategies of the repressive power and its mechanisms. To be aware of the strategies of the oppressive power and its mechanisms can help the HRDs to hold their ground, to develop survival and action strategies and to decode the manipulation by the oppressive power.

Manipulation is used by the oppressive power to create confusion, often by reversing responsibilities. Under stress and in extreme situations it is only too human to question one's own values and way of life. Under stress, in extreme situations, it is human to question one's own values and lifestyles. This also happens to HRDs, their families and communities. Through the confusion this creates, they may feel responsible for themselves and their loved ones. They sometimes feel that they should never have been part of the HRD movement and that they have not lived up to the expectations of those they defend.

This confusion makes it possible to reverse responsibilities. The ruling power goes as far as to force the families, neighbours and friends into checking and denouncing the HRDs. It confronts them with an impossible choice: to choose between their own lives and that of the other. It wants to make them, at least, co-responsible for the activities of the HRDs or their death. It traps them in confusion. And also afterwards, because it is likely that people will ask themselves: *'why me and not the other, why the other and not me?'* In any case, one of the two (*'the other or me'*) risks having to live with the consequences of this choice despite the awareness of the perversion of repressive power which imposes the very impossible choice.

5.1.3 What can be done to go further?

The idea here is to strengthen community support to deal with stress. It is important to remember the distinction between *'simple'* stress, *'post-traumatic'* stress and vicarious stress. This distinction has already been addressed in the first part of this manual. I repeat it here because all members of the community are concerned.

Remember

'Simple' stress is stress that is not the result of a trauma but rather of too much pressure accumulated by the HRD.

'Post-traumatic' stress is the stress that results from trauma.

Vicarious stress affects the people accompanying the victims and shows symptoms similar to those of *'post-traumatic'* stress.

Despite this distinction, some actions are common, e.g. critical analysis. Some of them are gradually repeated in this manual. When the group reflects on the actions to be undertaken, the group will need to explain, for each action:

- How the proposed action will enable them to achieve the intended objective;
- What each action implies;
- How the group will take into account the possible difficulties that the action implies;
- How the group will put in place the necessary elements to carry out the action.

5.2 Simple stress

Put things back where they belong

- Analyse what happens, identify the objectives and mechanisms of political violence
- Understand one's own position in all this together with the other community members and the organisations involved and see in which way it affects all sides involved
- Differentiate between different sources of stress so as to consider appropriate measures
- Identify the limits of the individual members and consider a redistribution of work and responsibilities
- See how members react and reorganise things. The HRDs are not alone. They are not the only ones who fight against impunity, for justice and human rights, despite the confusion that the oppressor wants to create.
- Take time to discuss all this, to speak about the environment in which the HRDs live and work. This is by no means a waste of time;
- Talk about symptoms of stress to get to its source in order to then identify useful and possible ways of reducing it. Stress is a normal reaction to anomalous circumstances. This helps to identify mechanisms that help to reduce the probability that such reactions affect the health, the security and the fundamental work of the HRDs.
- Use the opportunity to include the gender perspective in the analysis. The list of reasons for stress must comprise the gender dimension. Be it in regard of women, men or inter-gender, whatever their sexual orientation, the gender perspective is often neglected or not taken into consideration at all, especially

in mixed organisations. This doesn't mean that a discussion about gender-related issues is forbidden, but it may well be avoided and is rarely institutionalised (a matter to be given organisational time and attention). This is why it is important to raise the issue.

– ...

Decide on actions according to the context

Political context

- Inventory (mapping) of actors in the field at the local, national and international levels;
- Identify those who could support the HRDs in their work
- Define the area in which the HRDs work: high, medium, low risk. Don't forget that it also depends on the presence of armed or non-armed actors: authorities, revolutionary groups, criminal organisations;
- Work out protection and security strategies
- Draft the implementation protocol of the strategy
- ...

Organisational context

- Define and respect the priorities
- Develop internal capacities to deal with stress
- Build alliances to ensure support and turnover. This can also be done with the help of family and friends
- Institutionalise the time to be devoted to the well-being of HRDs
- Institutionalise rest periods and make sure they are respected. These are probably rules that the HRDs find hardest to comply with even though their security, and that of the others, depends on their respect. The shorter their rest periods – in order to help others – the greater the risk that they will be less able to help others.
- ...

Family and Community Context

- Recall the coherence between the attention given to relatives and that given to others;
- Establish an inventory of the needs of all people involved
- Think about what would be beneficial for all people involved
- Enjoy the time with family and friends and avoid distraction by work
- Consider the possibility of establishing mutual support groups between the families of HRDs and victims in order to enable them to recharge their batteries, rest, be together and do themselves good. While a walk can be an accessible leisure activity in a normal context, it requires great caution in an abnormal context of political violence. The walk will be done in group, if only to ensure the presence of possible witnesses. It may also not take place at the right moment but at the *'possible'* moment;
- ...

Anticipate difficulties

In all their activities the HRDs should anticipate potential difficulties and have possible solutions at hand. For the oppressor the HRDs are HRDs throughout the week and 24 hours a day. This is why HRDs need to be on their guard at anytime. One can take a rest, e.g. by working in shifts. This can also help to reduce stress. HRDs who discuss their shifts and agree on rest times in their work planning are less likely to fall victim to psychosocial risks (anxiety, stress, fatigue, burn-out, etc.)

Example:

To take some time out can reduce stress due to an excessive workload (the break, however, will not reduce the stress induced by the family demanding more care of its own children rather than of those of others). Taking a break can entail the need to go elsewhere. This is why security aspects should be considered, when choosing the time and place for a time out, as a holiday doesn't reduce the risk of repression and the stress that it entails. This is why it should be discussed together in order to find solutions together.

Clearly, security remains a transversal element when it comes to dealing with stress. (See *New Protection Manual for HRD*).⁷³

⁷³ Enrique Eguren and Marie Caraj *New Protection Manual for HRDs*. Ed. PI. 2009. <https://www.protectioninternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Protection-Manual-3rd-Edition.pdf>

Reduce the level of stress

To regain control of variables which depend on us helps to act on stress. These variables are basically our own capacities and vulnerabilities. This is why it seems appropriate to list them and to think of ways on how to reduce our vulnerabilities.

If stress is due to excessive activity, the HRDs need to examine whether they tend to want to be in control at all times. This vulnerability risks reinforcing the stress level related to work, lack of breaks, expectations of their families, etc.

What can be done? Analyse this tendency within the group to find the reasons. It may well be justified in a given moment, but certainly not always. A tendency that can save us in specific circumstances can be detrimental in others. This is why a thorough analysis is required in order to be able to adapt one's behaviour.

Which are the capacities we have to do something about it and which capacities need to be further developed? To learn to trust again others will help us delegate certain tasks and have more time to relax. In order to be able to delegate tasks, we need to take sufficient time to inform and train others.

5.3 Post-traumatic stress

The drama provokes the trauma. The trauma is the wound which is caused by the drama. The trauma entails suffering. Psychological suffering is also known as post-traumatic stress. It causes the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),⁷⁴ either immediately or later. The memory rests in the unconscious. One doesn't know when it will resurface. The unconscious doesn't forget anything.⁷⁵

The disorder is expressed as a set of physiological and/or behavioural symptoms. It indicates the presence of the wound, of the trauma. It is the reaction to it. In order to understand, recognise and react appropriately it is recommended to break down this sequence and not to confuse the moments.

Improving our capacity to support others

It isn't sufficient to be a HRD who has had certain traumatic experiences to be able to provide adequate support to someone who suffers from post-traumatic stress, which seems to be similar to one's own. To share one's experiences is only a starting point, which helps to build mutual trust, so that the person affected feels understood and encouraged to speak about the traumatising events. This is the prerequisite for being able to address the trauma. But this alone doesn't suffice. It is just one necessary step in a long process in which the two protagonists aren't alone.

⁷⁴ PTSD is also known as post-traumatic stress symptom – PTSS. The author uses PTSD because the term *'disorder'* is more explicit than *'symptom'*. In fact, it illustrates it in part.

⁷⁵ Sigmund Freud. Psychoanalyst. 1856-1939.

The stages to support the HRD victims of political violence

In the absence of mental health professionals it is for the friends and families to provide a securing environment for the HRD.

Above all, they must address their most immediate needs. These will appear as having nothing to do with addressing the trauma as such. They will require devoting time and respond to most urgent needs of the HRD. It is more about consecrating time to them and to respond to their most urgent needs. Yet, HRD will feel that someone listens to them, takes their needs into consideration and understands them, which gives them back a needed feeling of security that had been temporarily absent. These immediate needs such as sleep, going for a walk, a glass of water, etc. may seem trivial. In this context, they are, however, of the utmost importance even though we may consider them as secondary compared to the work that needs to be done. We need to bear in mind that for the person concerned they may well be the true emergency.

What people need most in such circumstances is the feeling that their needs are being taken seriously and that the others are willing to listen to them. It is only when this condition is fulfilled that word, narration can take place.

Peer-to-Peer Recognition

For the trauma victim, sharing with someone or people who have been through the same suffering is essential. Movements such as the Mothers of May Square in Argentina, Women in Black in Israel and Palestine, the GAM in Guatemala – Mutual Support Group for Families of the Disappeared and Political Prisoners – play an essential role in this regard. Who, better than the peer, can share and in doing so alleviate some of their suffering? Who better than the peer can open a perspective of life after the trauma, bring the HRD the hope to escape one's own annihilation and become again protagonist of one's own life? In other words, to move from being a helpless victim to being a survivor taking their lives back into their own hands.

The involvement of family, friends and of the community

The psychosocial impact of political violence does not only concern the individual itself but the entire community. The mutual recognition of suffering is an essential element for rebuilding group cohesion in the light of the drama and its consequences. The community is the place where the HRD and victims of violence can rest, find their bearings again, as well as a securing affective and social environment in as much as there is mutual acknowledgement of the suffering of both the community and the HRD/victims.

The narration

Because he/she feels protected, the HRD who has been the victim of political violence will find it easier to speak. The narration begins. The narration of what he/she has been through, the circumstances, the feelings, the distress, the disillusion, changes in values that events have brought about in him or her, the new perception of life. We will be there to listen to him or her, validate his or her experiences and gradually, without rushing him or her, get him or her to put everything back into its context of political violence. The narration has multiple potential effects: for the person concerned, for the collective memory for the fight against impunity, etc. All of them are complementary. Post-traumatic stress can reoccur at any point in time. One can never be sure to have overcome it once and for all. The awareness that the account given can contribute to the fight against impunity can be a relief for the person who relives the post-traumatic stress.

Putting what we have experienced into words contributes to the analysis of facts, of feelings, to their elaboration, to the reconstruction and transmission of the collective memory, to the knowledge of the other HRDs, the action, the fight against impunity, to our identity as HRDs, to continue to resist, to affirm our conviction, to not being erased and depersonalised by the repressive power.

The analysis of the events

The analysis of events is necessary to get better and to give sense to our positioning and our action against the aggressor, not give in to the trap of guilt and/or to question our action.

Examining new choices

After the analysis of the events, the HRD will consider new choices. These choices must be in line with the essential values of the individual but must also be taken on the basis of a thorough and open analysis of the limits of the HRD. Here too, he/she needs to be listened to and supported by his/her peers, and his/her friends and family, to find the right balance between the need of a solid security basis to rebuild him/herself and his/her need of justice. At this crossroads, the HRD must be able to feel free to abandon or to continue the fight.

Become aware of the multitude of identity facets

Due to the impact of political violence, the HRD has had to survive multiple attempts by the oppressive power to deprive him/her of his/her identity as HRD, as responsible citizen, as mother or father responsible for her/his family, as friend and colleague of his/her comrades. Yet, he/she has only adapted to the circumstances in order to survive. She/he might reproach her/himself of not having lived up to the

expectations of friends and family and of not always and in all circumstances having been able to keep up the ideal of the identity as HRD. He/she might have lost confidence in human beings, life, the world and his/her own values.

This can lead the HRD to see themselves as cowards or traitors, to identify with *'that'* and to condemn themselves.

It is fundamental to see that it is not about qualifying one's identity as good or bad but to see oneself as a human being with a multitude of identities, and that some of these are identities based on adaptation and transition. The identity of a human being consists of multiple facets of identity. This is why the HRD should be supported in acknowledging that there are many facets of identity and that human beings are not homogenous or unequivocal. One has to live with the contradictions of the world and accept that these contradictions have an impact on human beings. There is no single and unique identity. It is the set of all its facets and of their interrelations. It is not static. It cannot be build or destroyed by the oppressive power or by those who support the person in need. Those who provide support should not be afraid to destroy the person because of their clumsiness. This does not mean that they should not be careful not to hurt the person they support.

On this basis, in full acceptance of all their facets, the HRD can decide whether they want to continue their fight against injustice or whether they wish to devote themselves entirely to their families, their profession, etc.

When a HRD supports another HRD he/she should:

- Be aware of his/her own limits
- Accept that there is no universal recipe; that the minds of human beings are complex and above all, that it is not about oneself rather about the accompanied person. In other words, the focus stays on the accompanied person;
- Be aware that the psychosocial impact of political violence on different individuals has effects that differ as a result of what people have experienced in their lives;
- Accept that he/she isn't a psychologist, be aware of the limits of his/her skills, one shouldn't try to impose one's own solutions for the problems of others, transfer one's own experiences and choices to others. But rather ask oneself: *"Am I acting for myself or for the other?"*;
- Be aware that the wish to impose one's own choices on others is human, that it derives from our feeling of powerlessness and from the fear that the other does not turn into what we wish him/her to be. This awareness helps us to avoid mistakes, not least the mistake of being impatient, of wanting to take power over the other, who is ultimately the only one entitled to make their own choices;

- Be aware that we don't have the power to destroy or to reconstruct a person (which should be reassuring for us). Our gestures, words, even the *'clumsy'* ones won't destroy the other. Neither will they reconstruct him/her. We can be by his/her side, be a kind of mirror with our questions, our attitudes, our empathy. We can accompany him/her during the various stages of his/her reconstruction. However, we cannot put ourselves in his/her place;
- Set objectives that can be reached, respectful of the personal path of the person to be supported
- Bring regularly the accompanied HRD to visualise the progress made, so that he/she perceives the movement towards the better.

Precautions to be taken to ensure good communication with the objective of listening and understanding

This manual has been written in French and certain words can be translated differently in different languages. Emotions are universal, there are multiple ways of expressing them: by words, orally, by writing, by songs, drawings and gestures. It is vital that everybody speaks the same language, that the words have the same meaning, regardless of their mode of expression. It is not about imposing one word instead of another. It is rather about knowing how a universal emotion is expressed and described in another language or culture. For example, in French *'être en deuil'* (to be in mourning) and *'faire le deuil'* (to mourn) do not mean the same thing (*'être en deuil'* describes a state of being while *'faire le deuil'* describes a process through the pain).

The accompanying persons could start by trying to answer the following questions, before asking them to others:

- How do you say *'mourning'* in your language, in your culture? What do you usually do to get through it? (What is the usual grieving/mourning process?)
- What is the word for *'sadness'* in your language, in your culture? How is it usually expressed? (How is it celebrated?)
- We'll do the same with other emotions (see part one of the manual).

We'll remember the answers when accompanying someone else. We'll check how concepts express themselves in their language and culture by being very attentive to the words used, by checking the meaning they have for the other. Some words like *'I am sad'* may seem obvious to us. In reality we will find that they can have a very different meaning from one person to another. The very source of this sadness must be clarified in order to be able to help them in a relevant way.

Example

It is likely that the HRD says that he/she is sad. His/her sadness is justified; it is legitimate. His/her sadness might seem obvious to us. However, the sadness can relate to different reasons: aspirations that haven't been achieved, the family, the political situation, etc. We can ask the HRD to explain why he/she is sad, what he/she feels when being sad. All this in order to help the HRD go back to the source of his/her sadness, to put things into perspective, to identify responsibilities that are not his/her own, etc.

We should also pay attention to words which hide others.

Example

The HRD could say that his/her sadness is due to the fact that the culture of his/her community doesn't allow the defence of the rights of women. It is possible that as the exchange goes on, it turns out that the real feeling is anger at the denial of the confusion between power and culture by one's own community.

It has become clear that in order to understand each other it is necessary to improve one's own **ability of active listening** in order to help the other to name his/her emotions, explain what has happened to him/her, and raise the awareness of what hasn't been said. Active listening is also referred to as '*empathic listening*' as the one who listens develops a sensibility for the other's feeling through empathy and putting oneself in their place.

Active listening means leaving room for the feelings of the other person and accepting them. It is not just about '*information*' as it actually helps us help the other person.

Active listening is essential for psychosocial support. It can be enhanced as follows:

- By not turning the interview into an interrogation. Depending on the case, it may be better to get the person to '*tell a life story*' (let them tell the story of an event) than to conduct an interview and systematically interrupt them with questions. It is very likely that the latter can be asked at another time;
- By adopting a physical attitude of openness and interest in the words of the other person;
- By showing one's empathy;
- By rephrasing the other person's words and then use ours to make sure we understood their words;
- By not imposing our preconceived ideas;

- By remaining neutral and empathic. At this stage one may share the point of view of the other but one should not contradict him/her or add to it;
- By not interpreting what the person said, especially if the answer is general or imprecise;
- By helping him/her with open-ended questions to clarify his/her thinking, to say what he/she means, feels and thinks. Open questions can be introduced by '*what, how, where, who, why, etc.*';
- By not asking closed-ended questions. If a questions can only be answered with '*yes*' or '*no*' it is called a closed-ended question. A question is also considered to be closed-ended when it requires a multiple choice (i.e. if the other person has to choose one reply out of '*our*' multiple answers);
- By not laying blame on the other person by asking '*why didn't you do this or that?*' On the contrary, we will validate their choices and acknowledge that he/she did what they could given the moment and the circumstances with the resources at their disposal then and there.

The assumption that today she/he would act differently is the result of circumstances that were not there at the time of the event. Thus one cannot call into question actions at the very time of the event;

- By ensuring that our questions will help us help the other person and not only help us get information;
- By not interrupting the other person and respect his/her rhythm, silences;
- By accepting that the victim might not be able to talk about the events without using metaphors;
- ...

Remember that some people need to feel safe/trusted first before they can talk, whereas others prefer not to talk to strangers at all. Culture may also require not speaking in public, in a group or with someone of the opposite sex.

Understand what has happened

Help the HRD to explain:

- How he/she feels;
- What has happened and how;
- Why these facts happened and in what context;
- What is the impact of what happened, on whom, on what;
- His/her values and convictions
- The values on which the aggressor's attitude is based
- How things were before the dramatic event, thereafter and at present;
- What people say about it (help the person to distinguish between facts and rumours)
- ...

Reaffirm one's own identity

Helping the accompanied HRD means to affirm or reaffirm his/her identity; i.e. his/her identity as member of a community which shares the values that he/she defends. He/she is a defender of human rights. The repressive power aims at annihilating this identity and the important role that he/she plays in society. It imposes its own rules and its own language.

It rarely learns the language of the oppressed and even when it can speak it, it avoids using it.

Guatemala: semi-illiterate peasants ask not to oversimplify the terminology of the training so that, when they meet *'the other'*, they are not intimidated by the sophisticated language it knowingly uses to intimidate and belittle them or because it does not make the effort to put itself in the place of the HRDs, of the victims. The *'other'* does not deign to learn their language, their culture. It does not know them or decides to despise the peasants by ignoring them.

Brussels: at a citizen meeting, during the 1st Gulf War. The North-African participants state: *"The foreigners (colonialists or neo-colonialists) in order to show their disdain or for whatever other reason have never learned our language, know nothing about our culture. We do know their language and culture though, not least because we were obliged to. We know them now, whilst they still don't know us."*

This is obviously an advantage for the *'oppressed'* even though it is painful to be relegated to the category of those whose language isn't worthwhile to learn.

There is no definition of the HRDs. They are primarily defined by their activities. Their legitimation is the defence of victims of human rights violations. The international community recognises them. Their activities are in line with national and international texts.⁷⁶ No HRD is born a HRD. She/he became one, despite their will, for specific reasons. Sometimes they choose this path as a result of threats and aggression due to the simple fact that they did their work, they published, defended or took care of some HRD; or they reported violations of human rights in their quality of member of family, community, trade union or in their quality of professional – be it journalist, lawyer, doctor, teacher, farmer, etc. In other words, they acted from a position that was not necessarily the one of human rights defender from the outset.

⁷⁶ Constitution and other national legal texts guaranteeing human rights; Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all other successive declarations for specific groups; UN Declaration on HRDs, 1998; EU Guidelines on HRDs, 2004, etc.

If the identity of the HRD also depends on the recognition of the group, the same applies to psychosocial support. Support is mutual. This implies that from the moment when the HRD wishes it, the following (non exhaustive) steps can be taken together:

Understanding the strategy of the oppressor

Help the HRD understand the strategy of the oppressor by asking the following questions :

- Why do the authorities criminalise the HRDs?
- Which are the mechanisms used?
- How does the HRD perceive the oppressor?
- Are the HRD stigmatised and, if so, how?
- Who decides about their identity?
- Who decides about their dignity?
- ...

Decrypting and understanding of the strategy of the oppressor will allow the HRD to regain control of their own identity and not to fall into the traps set by the oppressor.

Understanding how to face political violence

Everyone reacts differently to political violence. This reflection will also include the family, community and organisation, all of which will contribute to mutual psychosocial support.

This reflection will lead us to highlight all that can strengthen resistance to political violence and all that can weaken it. This reflection will also have an impact on community psychosocial action. To carry out this reflection as a group, focus on the positive actions that unite and avoid the negative actions that risk dividing the group.

Here some non-exhaustive examples

Positive approaches:

- Try to determine what creates a feeling of belonging together within the group and the community, e.g. the ideology, the religion, the socio-economic sector, etc. Explain their importance in our lives. This may also encourage those who didn't identify with the group to join in. This mutual understanding of belonging together may also help to find out whether a member of the group, of the community has been directly affected by the political violence. This is everyone's business. We are sisters, brothers, members of the same group. Thanks to the group, we can build mutual trust which allows us to address problems, to reorganise by taking collective security measure, by sharing tasks from the most simple ones (cooking) to the most complex ones (advocacy and legal action) etc. Everyone has a role to play, from the oldest to the youngest. This is what contributes to community support;
- One can symbolise this feeling of belonging together by rituals and symbols. For example, planting a tree can express that belonging together against all odds makes strength grow;
- One can also discuss the question of how to explain political violence to children.
- One can also use role-plays for simulating situations of all kinds: being arrested, a trial, a conflict within the organisation, tensions within families, etc. In this way all parties involved take the stage and everyone can embody all roles. In this way we discover that the other person is not only a distinct individual but also a facet of ourselves. Role-plays are an instrument which allows us to understand what has happened, what happens now and what can happen in future. One can play the role of the other and then play again one's own role in order to understand the dynamics between facets of the identity of each individual at a precise moment and

learn how to identify and express which one is now considered as most adequate in a similar future situation. This technique permits to close '*unfinished situations*'.⁷⁷ By way of example: One would have liked to tell the oppressor what one thinks about him but it wasn't possible at that moment because one would have risked loosing one's life, or one would have wished to bid farewell to a loved one who died in our absence. Role-plays also allow raising the awareness on social conditioning and to stage situations where we propose alternative social models. Moreover, we can use role-plays to express our feelings and emotions when facing political violence. They allow us to learn how to channel our feelings, if we so wish, and to prepare for situations to come. Role-plays can also be used in reconciliation efforts.⁷⁸

...

Negative approaches (to be avoided)

- Asking blaming questions like: Why didn't you do that or the other?
- Avoid fundamental questions like, for example, on the power balance within the community;
- Adopting a fatalist attitude when faced with the repressive power and so reproducing the polarising logic imposed by the repressive power;
- Not to explore possible alliances and room for manoeuvre;
- Not to consider day-to-day problems as, e.g. a lack of income due to the fact that one has lost one's job or source of income as a result of retaliatory measures by those in power
- Disregard the role of the various actors
- Denial of the importance of social conditioning

...

⁷⁷ Ancelin Schützenberger, *Anne Le jeu de rôle (Role-Playing)* Ed. ESF.

⁷⁸ Lecomte, Frédérique *Théâtre et Réconciliation (Theater and Reconciliation)* www.theatre-action.be

5.4 Vicarious stress

Vicarious stress is the kind of stress that can affect persons who support the victims of post-traumatic stress (See Part 1 of this manual).

Vicarious stress has an impact on both physical and psychological health of the accompanying person who has a tendency to resist stress, to hide or deny their permeability for the suffering of the victims even though the consequences are identical.

In the group reflection, we shall address the issue of the likelihood of vicarious stress in order to develop joint strategies which allow the person suffering from vicarious stress the same possibility to speak up just as the other victims.

Experience sharing, interpersonal relations are important. And so is resting.

5.5 Children

Reflection and exercises are also useful for children as they too are exposed to trauma and different forms of stress. They too, are indirect and sometimes direct victims. They may have been witnesses of an assassination, abduction, of verbal, psychological, physical violence or quite simply feel the tension around them, feel neglected at times. They do not always have access to psychological support. They need to break the scary silence around them which haunts their minds. The truth might be painful but won't kill them. One can help them discover it and explain it in their own language. One can allow them to ask questions, to verify, to express their feelings, to also affirm their identity, to make them aware of their important role as children in the present. Too often, we talk about them as potential adults, who will own the future and forget that they exist in the present, that they feel and perceive what surrounds them. Too often, they have had to take over the tasks of missing adults. The distinction between generations becomes blurred; we treat them as adults by giving them a role which is not theirs. We must not forget that they are still children even if they took on the role of adult at a time when there was no alternative. Moreover, since they contribute to the emotional support of the HRD, children have an important place in the life of the HRD. They need all the recognition and tools they can get to work out what is happening to them today because their future is being built on the foundations of their present and past.

If the community has paper and pencils one can propose to children (and to illiterate community members) to draw faces that express their emotions and feelings and then ask them to comment their drawings. One can also draw on the soil with their fingers, just do as children there do, or ask them to act out, replay their emotions and

feelings and ask the other children (observers) to comment them, explain what they see and what they think that the other children feel and what they themselves felt when observing them. Children imitate adults. This is why it is likely that they also reproduce the way in which the adults express their emotions.

One can also explain the meaning of loss and grief/mourning. Children are often afraid of the unknown but not necessarily of the truth, even though it might be painful. It also helps them to find adequate words to describe what happens to them, and possibly, help them avoid expressing their emotions in a distorted way e.g. by silence, loss of self-confidence, fear, aggressiveness, enuresis, lack of appetite, regression to the development stage they were in before the drama. These are negative manifestations for them and their entourage. One has to accept their manner of reacting, legitimate their feelings and help them to express their emotions in a positive way.⁷⁹

The same goes for the adolescents and young people.

5.6 HRD victims of torture

Victims of torture suffer from physical and psychological aftereffects. They need medical care to ensure that their life is not at risk.

Responses to torture are not homogeneous. It even happens that by survival strategy some victims minimise the impact of torture. It would be part of the fate that any HRD can expect. If this is the case, we should not minimise its impact and think that nothing can be done.

People with an ideal have a greater chance to resist torture than those without one, because they understand the objectives of torture. Torture remains nonetheless a traumatising experience.

Family, cultural and social contexts play an important role in assisting HRDs who have suffered torture. These contexts can provide the protection that HRDs need now. But they can also overwhelm them, when relatives feel helpless, impatient and would like HRDs to recover quickly to become what they were before. But it is not possible to erase the experience and consequences of torture. Sometimes, when it comes to sexually tortured women, families refuse their support. Women may not have access to the medical care they need, let alone psychosocial and legal support.

⁷⁹ www.savethechildren.org

When working with victims of torture active listening is of the utmost importance. Below a non-exhaustive list of tips:

- Torture probably occurred during interrogations. It will be understood that it is therefore essential not to reproduce the dynamics of an interrogation;
- The physical distance that HRD victims of torture will need is who has been a victim is to be respected. For them it is a question of security distance. This will contribute to the sense of trust they need;
- The security distance is a necessary but not sufficient condition. HRDs will need the presence of a trusted person.
- One has to respect the rhythm of the HRDs. It is likely that before addressing the facts of torture in detail, one might have to talk about generalities first. Everyone reacts differently. Some are able to speak earlier than others. This is why the HRDs should not be forced to speak even if the process of denunciation depends on the description of the facts;
- Confidentiality must be guaranteed. Especially in the case of sexual torture, the intimacy of the person is concerned;
- ...

Psychosocial support requires sensitisation, awareness, analysis, decryption of the destructive strategy of the potential aggressor, the *modus operandi*, etc. This is indispensable to be able to react to and jeopardise the strategy of destruction. This requires the recognition of feelings, their elaboration as well as the elaboration of facts. Solidarity between all, regardless of gender, economic or social situation, etc. is, in itself, a psychosocial action of affirmation and resistance. Solidarity endangers the strategy of the oppressor. When victims of political violence can count on the people around them to carry out this elaboration process, they can survive political violence. This process is important. It shakes the oppressor's strategy.

5.7 Realistic expectations

In order to determine what are realistic expectations in regard of psychosocial community action we cannot ignore the need for an analysis of the political context, of violence, of the capacities of the HRDs and their communities. We need as much support as possible from the HRDs and their communities. The networks give us access to the experiences of other HRDs and enable us to improve our psychosocial support. We should be realistic enough not to expect immediate results, as it is a long-term and slow process that involves several actors.

Consideration should be given to setting up mechanisms within the HRD community or organisation itself or in an external structure, shared with other organisations. These mechanisms will require the collaboration of all. They will contribute to strengthening the resistance and resilience of HRDs and thus make it possible to perpetuate their action.

“ No one, acting alone, can achieve success ”

Nelson Mandela

Summary

Experience shows that the majority of victims of political violence don't falter. They survive the worst events and take their lives in their own hands. The same is true for the HRDs. Their motivation, their convictions, their commitment and the role that the HRDs play contribute to their ability to survive. Tackling stress reinforces this capacity.

Power is never absolute, i.e. only in the hands of a dominant group or a dictator. The HRDs must reinforce their ability to take action by accessing local, national and international support.

Power is always based on consent and obedience. In regard of the oppressive power we need to analyse the phenomenon of consent and the reasons why people obey in order to be able to come up with arguments that make them question their consent and obedience.

Psychosocial intervention is not an emergency intervention in the sense of medical *'first aid, in the sense of "life or death"*. This goes also in contexts of natural disasters, war, political violence, etc. It is hence futile to address this question. Every moment is right. The main issue is how to convince HRDs to take the necessary time to build mutual psychosocial support which is essential to strengthen their action.

Good communication is essential. To insure it we'll need to make sure that we speak the *'same language'*. This means that all those that play a role in the psychosocial support community understand the words used. Everyone has a role to play, from the oldest to the youngest. Children should also be at the centre of attention of the psychosocial community.

It is important to distinguish the political, organisational, family and community contexts as each of them requires specific action.

Active listening is of the utmost importance in psychosocial work.

It is important to distinguish between simple stress, post-traumatic stress and vicarious stress. Although some actions are common to all three, each has particular characteristics requiring specific actions.

Community support and action mechanisms can be shared between HRD organisations. Community solidarity endangers the strategy of the oppressor.

Exercises

The exercises will be carried out in groups in order to address the multitude of individual experiences and reactions. This will make it possible, through analysis, to deepen all the elements, to distinguish individual and collective perceptions, to understand the origin of these perceptions, to give them a certain logic, to see if we can change them and under what circumstances. To see how we can live with the experiences and perceptions that we cannot change without being overwhelmed by them. Exercises can also be performed by HRDs and relatives exposed to vicarious stress.

These exercises require a commitment from everyone to express what they really feel and perceive. If the person does not wish to speak, they have the right to do so. They can speak or remain silent. Be careful not to force anyone to speak. Their right to silence must be respected. Give them time to talk later, if so they wish.

For the exercises and then the work with victims of political violence (HRDs and/or victims accompanied by HRDs) it is important to remember that peer listening is fundamental. Peers share similar experiences and are therefore able to understand each other from the outset.

Before conducting the exercises, those present must undertake to keep the exchanges confidential and the authors anonymous. Keeping confidentiality and anonymity does not mean not passing on the acquired knowledge of exercises that could be useful to other HRDs. It simply means reformulating the acquired knowledge in such a way that the authors cannot be identified.

The list of exercises is not exhaustive.

A. Psychosocial community action

Keywords

- Analysis
- Deterrence
- Tolerance
- Action
- Capacity
- Vulnerability
- Psychosocial community action
- ...

Exercises:

- a. Translate each of the key words into your own native language or words.
- b. In your own mother tongue, describe as spontaneously as possible, what each word evokes.
- c. Note similarities and differences to establish what is common to the group or particular to each.
- d. In the medium and long term, take these notes and check if the evocation has changed.
- e. Explain why.

B. Analysis

- B.1. Explore possible prejudice and its origins

Examples:

Women and children are allowed to cry, men aren't ... Why? If suffering is associated with tears does it mean that men do not suffer?

Not expressing pain is a sign of blockage

Restraint is more dignified than the exteriorisation of pain

Depression is an element of mourning

It is useless to dwell on things. One should accept them

Restraining one's feelings so as not to affect the children

...

Add other similar statements that you hear in your day-to-day life.

- B.2. Say whether you agree with them and explain why.
- B.3. Ask everyone to explain how they express the above emotions and feelings. When and how are these emotions expressed? Immediately? Later? Always in the same way?

- B.4. How can we address them together?

Is it possible to allow people to express their emotions and feelings, to make others aware of them together with the needs that arise from them? How? What can an organisation or community do to allow it?

- B.5. Simulate, in the form of a role-play an interview with a person that has been tortured. We are no therapists. This is why the discussion should not focus on the exploration of the emotions and feelings but rather on trying to gather elements (facts) to build the memory necessary for community action.
- B.6. Plan a debriefing⁸⁰ and feedback⁸¹ session on the simulated interview in order to improve the following one.
- B.7. A parent (father or mother) tells you that he/she has lost their son/daughter who was a human rights defender. He/she was assassinated by the oppressive power. The last time that the parent had seen his/her son/daughter, he/she had accused him/her to endanger his/her family by being involved in human rights action. They had a heated discussion. The son/daughter slammed the door and left. The parent is in distress. They blame themselves. They are shattered. How can we help the parent?
- B.8. Give examples of metaphors heard from victims of political violence. Explain what they represent, what they mean.
- B.9. How can we help the family of a passed away HRD? What are the immediate needs of the family? Consider the short, medium and long-term.
- B.10. A HRD of your organisation shows symptoms of stress. What are the signs of it? What do you do?
- B.11. Take the list of examples of negative impact of the family, cultural and social context. Explain what can be done.
- B.12. Imagine a mutual support group. Identify its members.
- B.13. Imagine a psychosocial community support project. Define its components and implementation process. Identify the actors to be involved.
- B.14. How will this psychosocial community support project help HRDs take legal action against the oppressive power?
- B.15. Throughout the book, several situations were mentioned. Take all those that can be taken up and analyse them in order to draw useful lessons for community psychosocial work.

⁸⁰ Debriefing: an 'account of the facts' without analysing or interpreting them.

⁸¹ Feedback: analysis and interpretation of the facts in order to then 'feed' the next experience.

Here are a number of examples:

Obedience is mainly voluntary.

Every government, every power is based on consent.

Analyse the consent, the reasons why people obey. Take the political, economic and social context in which people live into account and any other conditioning element you might think of.

Power and its sources

1. Authority
2. Human resources
3. Capacities and knowledge. Information and misinformation
4. Intangibility – psychology, ideology, faith, traditions
5. Material resources
6. Sanctions – imposition of obedience

These sources depend on obedience (reasons why people obey)

1. Habit and ignorance
2. Fear of sanctions
3. Moral obligation
4. Self interest
5. Psychological identification with the ruler
6. Zones of indifference (avoidance of critical questioning))
7. Lack of self-confidence
- ...

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Suggested websites

www.psicosocial.net

www.protectioninternational.org

www.justassociates.org

www.im-defensoras.org

www.savethechildren.net

www.mujiresparalasalud.org

Annex: Suggestions for Exercises

Practical suggestions for the above exercises at the end of each chapter, especially if the group is composed of people who don't know each other well. In this case an atmosphere of trust must be created first.

At the beginning and whenever necessary, it is advisable to remember that the group is not a therapeutic group and that exercises (at the end of each chapter) can arouse emotions to the point of causing emotional stress or post-traumatic stress (for example, when simulating an interview with a victim of torture). In order to prevent this emotional or post-traumatic stress, it is not enough to repeat that the interview is not an interrogation, that the interview can take place on the basis of a life story and follow the advice in the manual. It should be remembered that no one is obliged to participate. Before the exercise, one can also ask if there are people who have experienced torture or any other type of violence in order to make sure that they choose to participate or not in the exercise. The important thing is not to force anyone.

If the group so wishes, the sessions (exercises of the manual) can start and end with a moment of relaxation. If possible, this should be done with the help of a person who is familiar with the techniques (exercises) of emotional contention (respiration, relaxation) and who can intervene in case of emotional stress. These are techniques that help limit but not suppress painful feelings. They allow focusing on the present and on the fact that we are in a protected environment.

It is not always possible to find a specialised person in these techniques but one can agree with professionals during the preparation of the sessions in order to have, at least, a list of trusted professionals who can be recommended to the participants, if they so wish.

Before the exercises one can learn to:

- Create an atmosphere of trust, community and respect
- Propose joint activities which help build solidarity and understanding independent of the age of the participants
- Show goodwill and understanding (it can be a look, a gesture, a hug, a moment of silence, or just one's presence)
- ...

You can find numerous techniques in several languages on Internet. Here are a few and I suggest looking for more.

1. Opening and/or end of the session

Upright, seated or in a supine position (even on the floor if it isn't cold)

- Ask the group in a friendly and serene way to close their eyes, to concentrate on their respiration and progressively, slowly to inhale through their nose, expand the abdominal cavity; exhale through their mouth by emptying their abdomen. Invite the group to visualise mentally the serenity when inhaling and the stress, anxiety and anger when exhaling. The respiration should be calm, abdominal. Feel the body as it relaxes progressively: the feet, the legs, the lower abdomen, the abdomen, the breast, the shoulders, the arms, the hands, the fingers, etc. up to the head. Visualise that your body now forms a entirety, that the mind is aware of it. Call for positive images or keep the awareness that *'my body is here, and so am I'*. End the exercise progressively without pushing, like a slow awakening that allows keeping at rest.

2. In case of emotional stress

Help the person – depending on the situation and without pressure – to understand that he/she is in a protected environment and amongst friends, and that what had happened belongs to the past. It is quite likely that there are participants in the group who know each other better, because they have affinities or common experiences. They may react spontaneously, hug each other, and accompany the person without suppressing emotions, with goodwill and empathy so as to help the person to become aware of the here and now amongst friends. The person may decide what he/she prefers. It is not recommended to close the episode and pretend that nothing happened. Neither is it recommended to insist on what the person has been through. It is better to propose a joint break and find out what the person prefers: to stay, to leave, to relax, to speak, a glass of water. He/she may wish to be left alone, accompanied, or to return to the exercises. It's important that the person doesn't feel abandoned which is why it should be proposed to meet again at another time (after the session, later, etc.), unless the person wishes to be accompanied immediately. In this case one or two people can stay with him/her, preferably at another place than where the group is. It should equally be ensured that their entourage supports the person all the more if he/she doesn't wish the support offered immediately or later. If the emotional stress is too strong (i.e. if the person doesn't calm down) one has to seek professional help. One always has to anticipate the possibility of a crisis and have a list of available professionals at hand).

When the group session is resumed, one should inform the participants that the person is supported and not left alone. One should ask the group members how they feel, whether they wish to speak about the episode immediately or perhaps later, whether they need something, i.e. a relaxation exercise, a collective hug etc. The coordinators should take part in a debriefing (during the break or at the end of the session) where they share with the group elements that could help in building their capacities/autonomy. The wishes of each member should obviously be respected.

Some persons make physical contact easily and spontaneously. They rub shoulders and provide massages even during breaks and in moments of emotional stress. This is another form of relaxation. We should remember that nothing should be imposed on participants who don't like it or are more reserved. Empathic physical contact (whether one provides it or receives it) can be learned progressively provided that the participants accept it. Shoulder, neck, arm and head massages are another way to contribute to relaxation, proximity and trust.

3. Build a community of experience

When performing the exercises contained in the list at the end of each chapter of the manual it is necessary to let go, to explore and to accept the experience of others, the community of shared experiences, and to know that one is part of the right group.

Here are some activities for all age groups. In case members of the group are illiterate or children written texts can be replaced by oral description, by drawings, objects, images, photos and songs.

From the very beginning, one should try to find out together what everyone expects. Use a big sheet of paper, on which everyone can draw, write or glue pictures and objects of their choice.

Provide the needed material including newspapers, magazines, etc. for cutouts. End the session by giving participants the time to share their comments.

Other possible activities (to illustrate situations) that are quite appropriate when the group has already started getting to know each other. They can be performed between two sessions of exercises of the manual:

- Create a human statute in a group of several persons, Every one receives or chooses a topic related to the lists (concepts) in the manual. The rest of the group explains what the statute represents.
- Write a song, a poem, a theatre piece with persons, marionettes, objects, etc. to speak about the words (concepts) listed in the manual.

In general: consider having inclusive recreational and sports activities. Collaborative activities don't only help the group to perform the exercises of the manual but also contribute to reducing the stress of the HRDs in their day-to-day activities, e.g. a walk in a park, a museum visit, go swimming, dancing, singing...

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“ *When the spider webs come together,
they can attach a lion.* ”

Ethiopian proverb

“ *If you feel you’re too small to change anything,
try sleeping with a mosquito and you’ll see which one
keeps the other from sleeping.* ”

Dalai Lama⁸²

“ *Borders I have never seen one. But I have heard
they exist in the minds of some people.* ”

Thor Heyerdahl⁸³

“ *I am a woman
and a touching warmth wraps me up
when the world hits me
is the warmth of other women.* ”

*Of those I don’t know
but who shaped a common dream
of those who have made life
this sensitive corner
soft-skinned fighter
and gentle warrior heart* ”

Flora Alejandra Pirzanik⁸⁴

⁸² The Dalai Lama. He is the highest spiritual leader of the Tibetan Buddhist faith. Head of the Tibetan Government in Exile, 1959-2011. Nobel Peace Prize, 1989.

⁸³ Thor Heyerdahl. Anthropologist, archaeologist, biologist, Norwegian navigator. 1914-2002.

⁸⁴ Free translation of a poem by Flora Alejandra Pizarnik. Argentinian poetess. 1936-1972.