

Torture Victimization— Child to Adult: Flashbacks and Connection With First Responders

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***Editor's Note:** "The damage that is intentionally and purposefully inflicted by non-State torturers against their victims' personhood may extend to the point where they do not even perceive themselves as human beings any longer." This sums up the heinous impacts of interpersonal violence in which victims are tortured repeatedly, often in a sexualized manner, by members of families, organized groups, or institutions. As difficult a topic as this will be for many readers, authors Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald make a significant contribution to our knowledge of the most extreme forms of abuse, which they rightly conceptualize here as torture.*

Torture is the intentional and planned infliction of severe pain or suffering, physical or mental, compounded by the powerlessness of the victimized person. This succinct definition draws on the United Nations (UN) *Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading*

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An earlier version of this article appeared in *Sexual Assault Report*, May/June 2012.

Treatment or Punishment (CAT) and reports of UN Special Rapporteurs on CAT. In this paper, we focus on the topic of torture that is inflicted by non-State actors in the private or domestic sphere.¹ This type of non-State torture (NST) includes victimization of children by parent(s) and other intergenerational kin, guardians, spouses, and like-minded others groups. NST can also be inflicted against women (or men) in their adult years. For example, a woman's spouse can be her torturer (Sarson & MacDonald, 2009a; Watson, 2006).² When attempting to leave or exit from such systems, victims often describe experiencing chronic threats and/or assaults.

The insights shared in this paper come from working in connection with torture victims—primarily adult women—who detail victimization beginning in child-hood (even infancy) and continuing into their adult years, within the context of like-minded family/group systems. Many of these women describe male siblings who were also victimized within such family/group systems, yet only a few men have contacted us. For that reason, we will focus on the experiences of female torture victims in this paper. We do not in any way wish to minimize or render invisible the torture of male victims. However, we can only base our conclusions on the experiences with the female survivors with whom we have worked. It remains a critical question for future research whether these conclusions generalize to male victims as well. We issue an open call to our colleagues to begin the difficult work in exploring this question.

GENDER COMPONENT OF NON-STATE TORTURE (NST)

To acknowledge NST of women and girls as a specific and distinct form of gender-based violence is a relatively new development at the United Nations (UN). For example, in a 2010 Report of the Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, author Manfred Nowak wrote that all citizens (including women and girls) must be protected from torture victimization at all times (Nowak, 2010a). This is true whether the torture victimization is perpetrated in the private/domestic sphere or in the public sphere, and irrespective of whether it is inflicted by non-State or State actors. Nowak's report makes it clear that torture victimization is a distinct and specific form of violence with a destructive gravity that differentiates it from other forms of violence. This means that it is inappropriate to trivialize torture victimization, by categorizing it as an assault, for example. He also

¹ Non-State actors are persons acting in the private or domestic sphere, as described in the text. State actors are persons who, based on their position of employment, act as representatives of a nation's government. Military personnel are one example.

² As an example, a case involving torture perpetrated by a spouse served as the catalyst for legislation signed into law by Governor Granholm in Michigan, making torture a specific criminal offense in that state. The specific case involved a husband's infliction of torture on his blind, diabetic wife. During the trial, prosecutors had been frustrated that they could not charge the man with torture because no such law existed in the State of Michigan at that time. Following this trial, House Bill 5268 (PA of 2005) and House Bill 5269 (PA 336 of 2005) were passed, and torture became a specific criminal offense.

acknowledged that women and girls are the primary victims of acts that constitute sexualized torture. Sexualized abuse, rape, or assaults are increasingly recognized as forms of global gender-based violence. However, this recognition has not extended to NST, including acts that constitute sexualized torture. Yet we believe it needs to be. Identifying and intervening in cases of NST requires a detailed understanding of a victimized woman's responses.

The damage that is intentionally and purposefully inflicted by non-State torturers against their victims' personhood may extend to the point where they do not even perceive themselves as human beings any longer. This grievous destruction shows in the language that women frequently use describing their perceptions of self as being an "it," a "robot" or "nothing." Therefore, the goals for writing this paper are to make NST victimization visible to a wider audience, to share the knowledge we have gained from survivors, and to offer practical interventions that can make a positive difference for first responders when engaged with a person experiencing NST flashbacks.

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BECOMING AWARE OF NST VICTIMIZATION

We first became aware of NST victimization in 1993, when we met Sara,³ a professional woman in her late 20s with a masters' degree. Sara approached us for support, in our role as professional counselors with a part-time practice mainly supporting women who identify enduring childhood relational violence, including sexualized victimization. Yet Sara's victimization was so cruel and brutal, we realized we were listening to an experience that was nothing short of torture. We sought additional support for Sara, but we were unable to find professionals in our Canadian province to help her. Most of the professionals we contacted said they did not have any specific knowledge in the field of torture victimization. Neither did we, but we made an ethical decision not to abandon Sara. Thus began our search for knowledge, the development of effective interventions, and the evolution of our NST praxis.

Scouring the victimization literature for information on NST was generally unproductive. However, the writings relating to the brutalities and horror

³ Sara is a pseudonym, as are most, but not all, of the women's names in this article as several women preferred being identified by their first names only; both ways protect against exposing their true identities.

of the Nazi holocaust were relevant, as were those on classic torturing methods and the literature from rehabilitative centers for State-tortured victims. This material provided us with some initial support in our struggle to be effective in helping Sara.

Perhaps most important, our effort to seek out information also brought us into connections with many other survivors. Since 1998, we have listened to other women in our province who reported various forms of NST. One woman detailed torture by her spouse and three of his friends (Sarson & MacDonald, 2009a). Other women spoke of torture that began in infancy or shortly thereafter (Sarson & MacDonald, 2009b). These survivor stories fueled our sense of social responsibility, which was channelled into writing articles and launching our website in 2004. Since then, we have self-funded our ongoing work and efforts to expose NST victimization as a violation of human rights and a specific and emerging form of gender-based violence.

NST VICTIMIZATION: A VULNERABLE POPULATION DESCRIBED

Through our website, we have connected with many survivors, not just in Canada but also from the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Western European countries. To date, we estimate having approximately 3,000 initial contacts with survivors of NST. Their ages have ranged from their late teens to their 80s, although most have been between the ages of 20 and 50. Some are presently struggling to find ways to protect themselves from chronic, but sporadic victimization. Others have changed their identities or sought citizenship in another country in order to protect their safety. These women are incredibly diverse. They are single, married, divorced, lesbian, and transgendered. Some are mothers and grandmothers, working lawyers, therapists, anti-violence workers, artists, doctors, nurses, Ph.D. educators or university students. Some have histories of living on the street, many are poor, and some have been, or are on, disability. Our contact with these women has been primarily through email, telephone, and Skype; however, we have had extensive personal contact with some. Some of these women have sent us detailed written journals of their victimization, with a request that we review their journals to help them clarify unresolved issues. Other women have revealed details of NST written in short email messages sent over extended periods of time, so they do not become overwhelmed by the process of disclosure. We then place these details into a holistic narrative which they can use for their work in counselling. Many women have written to thank us for demystifying the many forms of NST they suffered and for providing language that helped them understand and explain their NST ordeals. We have also been contacted by other professionals for information and consultation.

Because of the intensity of the work, we can only offer extensive support to a limited number of persons at any one time. However, we have written this paper to summarize common themes that have emerged in the accounts

of NST victimization these women have provided to us. These themes are illustrated with their direct quotes.

CATEGORIES OF GENDER-BASED NST

Torture that is specifically gender-based (that is, inflicted predominantly against women and girls) is an emerging concept, both as a human rights violation and as a sexual victimization issue. Therefore, categorizing its various forms is also new knowledge. We propose the following working framework for categorizing the various forms of NST victimization, in order to capture the basic contours of the extensive global reality of gender-based NST victimization.

First, there are gender-based tortures that have been viewed as human rights violations and are entrenched as cultural, traditional, or religious-based practices. Female genital mutilation is one example (Méndez, 2011), as are acid burning and widow burning (Nowak, 2010b). These forms of gender-based torture are not the focus of our work, however, and are thus beyond the scope of the current article.

Second, there are classic tortures including both acts perpetrated by State actors and those committed by non-State actors. Examples include the following:

- Sexualized torture (family/group rapes, repetitive raping, hand/object rapes);
- Forced drugging (pills, injections);
- Electric shocking (on body, in vagina);
- Being beaten, burned, cut, whipped, falanga (beating the soles of the feet);
- Immobilization tortures (being tied, hung, caged);
- Water tortures (in bathtub, sink, in lake);
- Suffocation, choking tortures;
- Nutritional deprivation;
- Psychological tortures (humiliation, degradation, dehumanization, terrorization, horrification);
- Animalization (this term refers to how the girls/women were dehumanized when forced to act and feel like dogs, for example, being made to be down on all fours, fed dog food out of a saucer on the floor, or forced to wear a dog collar and leash);
- Bestiality;
- Forced nakedness;
- Sleep deprivation;
- Witnessing the torture of others;
- Powerlessness.

There are, nonetheless, unique differences when the torturer is based within the family/group system.

Third, tortures can be commercially based. Although one common purpose embedded in torturing is to exert control and inflict powerlessness over the tortured victim, these torturers' purpose and interest are the financial profits gained when involved in human trafficking and exploitation, such as forcing women's or girls' involvement in the criminal business of torture-porn, necrophilia (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2009), or creating snuff films or images (Sarson, 2011; Sarson & MacDonald, 2009b; Burke, Gentleman & Willan, 2000).

STATE VERSUS NON-STATE TORTURE VICTIMIZATION

Terrorization, horrification and torture pain are used to instill powerlessness within a child who is born into an organized intergenerational family/group system or in the care of guardians who are non-State torturers. Their intimate relationship with the torturers is uniquely different when compared to the relationship between the State torturers and their victims, which is generally not an intimate one.

It is general wisdom that State torturers inflict grave destruction onto the personality or humanness of the victimized person; however, in the specific situation where the tortured victim is a child in the "care" of the torturer, the

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destruction to their childhood development is unconscionable. All relational and growth and developmental tasks are attacked—tortured—with the intent of destroying the child's relationship with herself. Her

ability to experience humanness, to develop a sense of physicality—to know and feel she has a body and personal boundaries—even to realize and be aware that she has skin can be gravely damaged.

To illustrate, Sara experienced decreased sensory perception which she often validated by asking us to touch her skin, or to hold her hands. In her earliest years of recovery her response was always, "I can't feel your touch." One way Sara measured her healing was by evaluating her ability to experience this sensory skin touch, because all she could remember prior to this (including preverbal memories) was experiencing "torture touch." Her childhood survival had depended on developing a response that disconnected or dissociated the experience of severe sensory pain and suffering.

Other women have described similar experiences. For instance, an Australian mother described how her loss of skin temperature sensation prohibited her from using the common practice of gauging the temperature of her infant's formula and food by placing a few drops on her forearm. Unable to gauge the temperature, she feared burning her child with formula or food that was too hot. To be safe, she left the formula and food at room temperature instead (Email communication, 2008). Another woman (in her

50s and from the U.K.), described her discovery of having skin for the first time as follows:

It is a revelation to me that I have skin and hands and fingers ... I keep looking at my fingers and hands like I'd never seen them before ... it's a miracle of life ... I didn't know I had my own skin before ... I didn't know I have hands and fingers ... I do though don't I ... this is new and amazing to me (Email and telephone communication, February, 2010).

Jan, an American woman of 71, said it this way:

It's miraculous that the human mind and body can recover from these experiences. I'm awed that I have been on this journey for 22 years, and interested to see what "living in my own skin" will be like.

Jan had realized, for the first time, that the presence of skin made it possible for her to experience personal and physical boundaries (Email and telephone communication, July 4, 15, 2011). There are also specific acts of sexualized NST that differentiate it from State-inflicted sexualized torture. For example, many of the women have described how the NST family/group psychologically enforced the belief that torture-rapes were committed for the purpose of teaching them to be a woman—at the age of five or seven. Another common NST tactic was sexualized ritualism. Many of the women's accounts included references to family/group "ceremonies," such as a "marriage ceremony" which instilled the message that they belonged to the family/group forever. Rituals such as these are used for indoctrination purposes not only by NST families/groups, but may also be used by an individual pedophilic torturer (Appleby, 2006). Ritualizing acts of sexualized family/group torture implants a powerful psychological distortion onto child victims, reinforcing their "belongingness" in the NST family/group's psychological oppression and captivity.

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The uniqueness of child-to-adult NST victimization means that the tiny bodies of victims often develop a physical sensory deprivation to survive. Given the extensive length of time this adaptation is needed, it is likely to remain a lasting component of the victim's personhood. Clearly, NST constitutes a most profound violation of the intimate relationship of dependency and trust that children have with the adults in their lives—which often develops into a victim-torturer bond that is forged in survival. For Sara, this meant at least 10,000 torture rapes during 25 years of chronic NST. With at least one

rape daily, it is impossible to fully acknowledge the scope and impact of such non-stop sexualized torture.

REPORTS DOCUMENTING PEDOPHILIC TORTURE

Najat M'jid Maalla, the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography, made reference in her 2009 report to an Australian Federal Police study that found 21% of pedophilic crime images included rape, bondage and torture. A similar rate of 26% was cited from a U.S. study (Maalla, 2009), and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Child

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Exploitation Unit has stated that 20% of the images viewed by their Unit involved torture and bondage (Caswell, Kellery & Murphy, 2006). Clearly, the extent of pedophilic torture is far more extensive than most people imagine, even for those working in the closely related

fields of child sexual victimization and pornography. A 2009 report described the review of 4,110 pedophilic images taken from 15,662 websites hosting child pornography. Evaluation revealed that torture, bondage, or bestiality were present in 2.7% of the images (Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2009). The most violent of assaults, the report stated, were commonly inflicted on children younger than eight years of age. Newborns and toddlers were seen in 9.8% of the violent images and 83% of the pedophilic images involved girls. The violent images included children being forced to inflict sexualized harms against each other and the use of weapons against them. Some images were necrophilic. Others included demeaning words written on the bodies of the children, or images of children being humiliated or degraded in other ways, including being defecated and urinated on. The women we have worked with also recount surviving these acts of torture, thus validating such reports of unconscionable horror.

In 1993, when we were first introduced to and began speaking about NST, especially torture victimization that begins in infancy and is committed within the context of organized intergenerational family/group systems, we were often disbelieved. Attempts were even made to professionally discredit and/or silence us. These strategies had a negative effect, not only on us, but also on the women who have survived such horrors. It reinforced the sense of hopelessness, because these women had often been torture-conditioned to believe that no one would accept what had happened to them. As Alex, an NST survivor told us, she had been repeatedly told as a child that “[n]o one will believe you. What makes you think you are so special that someone would even want to save you or care about you?” (Email communication, 2011). In other words, if we were disbelieved—as professionals writing and

speaking about NST victimization—what hope did these women have of being believed if they tried to disclose? This concern often accented their fear that they could never get away from the NST victimization; that is, that they remained the property of these family/group systems. Reports such as those cited above did provide some support for these women, by offering validation that pedophilic torture victimization is a reality.

WOMEN'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Reports documenting sexualized torture victimization of children and even infants thus affirm many survivors' memories of preverbal ordeals. They also validate the women's experiences of witnessing the sexualized torture of other infants, including vaginal rape with a finger or object. As Hope shared, she witnessed "seeing a baby's eyes taped shut prior to being orally raped by a man in the family" (Verbal interviews, 1998-1999). It is all too easy for professionals and other support people to dismiss disclosures such as these as unbelievable, without the documentation such reports provide. As the reports recount, the women we have worked with have described having demeaning words written on their bodies and being urinated and defecated on. Degradations have involved being forced to swallow or be smeared with body waste. Some women have even described knowing that drugs or urine were placed in their baby bottle drinks. Bestiality reports validate women's ordeals of sexualized human-animal cruelty involving trained pets or other animals. Women also speak of necrophilic degradation, for example, involving the killing or use of dead pets or other animals during sexualized NST ordeals. Most of these women have also informed us they were repeatedly drugged during their life-threatening torture victimization ordeals. This not only rendered them powerless and silent, but it also enhanced the desire some torturers had for pseudo-necrophilic rape. Some of the women were raped in pseudo-necrophilic fashion when they were rendered unconscious or inert by being held underwater in a bath tub, choked, or hooded with a plastic bag. These women often used the word "blackness" to describe their sensation of sinking into unconsciousness during such an ordeal.

When such acts are documented in empirical reports, they validate women's dehumanizing ordeals of child-to-adult NST victimization.

Women have told us that weapons were often used to cause both physical and sexualized pain, and to terrorize or even forcibly perform abortions on girls who had been impregnated. Knife raping was frequently mentioned, and women have recounted their terror that they would bleed to death. For those women who were raped with a gun, it is impossible to describe the terror they experienced, because they never knew whether or not there was a bullet in the gun. Survivors of gunrape frequently described re-experiencing in a flashback the audible "clicking" sounds that accompany the cocking and dry

firing of a gun. Another sound that was mentioned by many survivors was the torturer's laughter, which caused searing humiliation and shame, delivering the message that they were worthless.

When such acts are documented in empirical reports, they not only validate women's dehumanizing ordeals of child-to-adult NST victimization; they can even promote hope. The science of Internet policing has countered the hopelessness of previous years, by revealing that such atrocities were, and are, real.

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