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Victim Re-Empowerment for Healing and Reintegration

“The problem of what helps a victim is both simple and very complex: simple, because it is very evident that what people wish who have been the victims of abuse - whether deliberately or not - is expressed by them very eloquently; and complex, because it is inordinately difficult to deliver this.” This is the opening proposition in a paper prepared by Dr Tony Reeler of the Amani Trust in Zimbabwe, called *Old Wine in New Bottles: A Human Rights Paradigm for Victim Empowerment*>

Dr Reeler contends that it is undoubtedly true that the realisation or attainment of health is beyond health workers, and by extension, the empowerment of victims is beyond them and their helpers. He suggests therefore that it is care workers of all kinds can be very important agents in dealing with disempowerment. Care workers can play an enormous role as allies for victims and as facilitators of their re-empowerment.

The state of disempowerment of most victims comes about through their deliberate disempowerment. Most victims were powerful before their trauma - before the events that traumatised them and removed many of their capacities to cope with life’s adversities. The most damaging form of removing power from a person is through torture.

The highest rate of victimisation of Khulumani’s membership was torture. Torture has long-term deleterious consequences on its survivors and its witnesses. Dr Reeler explains, “Starting with the personal, there is bodily injury, both acute and chronic, which leads to disability and pain.” Sometimes there is little evident physical aftermath to torture, but where people have been subjected to extreme physical abuse, it is not uncommon for people to suffer disability and

chronic pain. It is also the case that victims who have no detectable disability may suffer from chronic pain. This is often the result of the body apparently carrying a “memory of the pain.” This pain may be either real or psychological. Survivors of torture regularly report pain and they report pain as being persistent. Pain has not only physical effects, but also psychological effects. These do not only affect those who suffered physical or psychological abuse, but also those who witnessed torture. Psychological disorder of some kind is the most persistent effect of deliberately inflicted trauma or torture.

The disempowerment caused by torture is not only individual. It also causes effects on the family, the community, the economy and the political situation. It is for this reason that Khulumani’s membership finds itself in circumstances of deep social adversity. It results in obvious and measurable differences in social and economic status between survivors and others within the same communities. These manifest as greater illiteracy; higher unemployment; increased spending on health care; less income and less earnings; lower household expenditure; more dependency on credit with greater potential for indebtedness; poorer housing [both structurally and in terms of the state of repair of the dwelling; a tendency to travel further for fuel wood; less production of food at the household level; less food security; less likelihood to have fruit trees or wood lots; less use of natural resources; less access to information; and a higher rate of dependence on social welfare.

Most survivors of torture show signs of having lower self-esteem and greater apathy than others in the same community. They are more likely to see their trauma as a reason for their poverty; they are less likely to be optimistic that their situation can be changed; they are more dependent on outside help and they tend to believe they need money help as opposed to empowerment help.

Their greater social adversity results in greater vulnerability to ongoing stress, which in turn exacerbates their medical and psychological problems. Survivors thus tend to be preoccupied with the practical problems of their lives - their challenge is not post-traumatic stress but ongoing stress. They become victims of feelings and beliefs of powerlessness, which reinforces their lack of self-efficacy.

What can be done to address this level of adversity and to secure the re-empowerment of survivors?

Foremost in the healing and re-empowerment of victims is the need not to silence victims and survivors. They have a right to tell their story, and there is a responsibility for the society to hear these stories. Seeing and acting on this as a right is enormously empowering for survivors, because all victims feel dirty and shamed. This is part of the psychic damage that is done to victims and survivors.

Along with the right of survivors to tell their stories, goes the right of the wider society to hear these stories and to acknowledge what happened. The society must come to know what happened to victims. This means that society needs to change its attitudes to victims and survivors and in particular the attitude that victims somehow deserved what happened to them - perhaps because of their political beliefs.

Victims also need to experience justice. The model of restorative justice has created opportunities for the healing of relationships between victims and perpetrators, but little has been accomplished in this arena to date. The Healing of Memories workshops, designed by Fr Michael Lapsley, and offered by Khulumani Support Group, are of vital importance in this regard.

The final component required to effect the re-empowerment of victims is for programmes of reparations comprising restitution, compensation, and rehabilitation. Khulumani's Community Rehabilitation programmes are designed to provide a mechanism for compensation to be directed into targeted programmes created for those communities most affected by gross human rights abuses.

It takes very little to create opportunities for healing to take place. When an individual expresses to a victim their regret for what happened to them, the immense feelings of anger and vengeance amongst victims are drastically reduced and the victims are enabled to take the next steps in their journeys towards healing. Re-empowerment needs to be in the hands of victims themselves. In becoming the active participants in their own lives, in a supportive environment, they become progressively re-empowered. Khulumani welcomes the involvement of all South Africans in creating conditions and opportunities for the re-empowerment of victims and survivors.