

Refugee Women, Sexual Assault, and Communities

Authors

Julie Savage and Rise Becker

Presented at

Paper presented by Julie Savage at "Practice and Prevention: Contemporary Issues in Adult Sexual Assault in New South Wales Conference", University of Technology, Sydney, 12-14 February 2003.

As participants in a conference such as this on sexual assault, and its effects upon women, children and men, I expect that we all know a lot about it.

In these 15 minutes, I hope to add to this knowledge by giving an impression of: the context of state organised or states sanctioned violence and sexual assault:

- the intention of sexual assault as a weapon of war
- the effects that this has upon the victims, survivors and their families and community
- the implications for refugee survivors of sexual assault and their communities of the increasingly state-sanctioned voicing of racist opinion and commentary in Australia today.

I am indebted to my colleagues at STARTTS – Rise Becker, my clinical supervisor, Robin Bowles, Gordana Hol-Radic, Amal Hormiz, Nooria Mehraby, and Fatana Rahimi, for their input and insights; and to my clients for sharing their experiences with me. Through this I have got some sense of the emotional impact on these woman and begun to understand the pervasive effect of this form of torture. In so doing I have been able to think with them about the implications of their experiences for themselves, their families and their communities.

UNHCR estimates that 80% of all refugee women experience rape and sexual abuse (Mehraby, 2001).

I would like to look first at the effects upon women of this massive scale of violence against them within the context of state sanctioned violence. The intention of state-sanctioned violence is the "terrorizing of the whole population through systematic actions carried out by the forces of the state" (Martin-Baro, 1989) It includes the tacit approval of and support for, acts of violence and assault upon the population by paramilitary and "rogue" forces. It also includes the actions of specific groups vying for power and dominance in conflicts that arise in civil disintegration.

The intention of organized violence, is to subjugate entire populations to the power and will of the state. It is part of a larger strategy to create terror and division in society by attacking the values and beliefs of any group that may resist the state or dominant group. There are times when the only reason that this occurs is that the less dominant group is different or seen as "the other". It is part of an attempt to destroy alternatives. It is an attempt to deny the existence of anyone who thinks differently. Dissent or discussion is labelled as subversive and is morally discredited. People who assert these rights are harassed and attacked. It is an essential tool to create a sense of powerlessness in entire populations.

The continuing existence of devastated survivors in the community, or their release back into society of detainees who have been in gaol, is a living reminder to others of the powers of destruction that can be released upon anyone at any time. In other words the continued existence of survivors of torture and extreme war trauma suffering from the devastating effects of severe Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is part of this continuing subjugation. This was poignantly described by a client who said to me, the devastation to his life, his family life, his friendship groups, his loss of economic usefulness, brought about by his continuing difficulties as a survivor of torture, has caused a lot more damage than he imagines his death would have done, and this damage will continue into the future.

Sexual assault within the context of organised violence is not only an act perpetrated against an individual, but also part of the systematic oppression of an entire population. Rape and sexual assault are used as weapons of war. Women are targeted for their ethnic, religious, racial or political identity. Violence of any kind can be and is used to terrorise individuals and entire populations. The difference between this and sexual assault in a country for example Australia today, is that for survivors of sexual assault in a state that condones torture, nowhere is safe. The state or the opportunistic-armed groups that arise in contexts of civil disintegration are all pervasive. Homes can be and are invaded at any time. Outside the home, one is watched and judged. One is totally vulnerable to forces stronger one's family and community.

The pernicious nature of the violence of sexual assault is that attitudes to sexual assault are so woven into the fabric of our different cultures, that it is an attack not only upon the core of the individual but also upon the culture at the level of its deepest beliefs (Becker, 2003). Sexual assault in these circumstances perverts the essential human act of sexual contact into an instrument of war. It attacks not only the woman's sense of herself, but also her relationships with her partner, her children, her extended family and her community due to deeply held beliefs and feelings around issues of sexuality that are embedded in religious and community attitudes (Becker, 2003). It isolates the victim from her cultural group, and tears apart the sense of solidarity and community of the group to which she belongs. The continuation and reproduction of the ongoing community to which she belongs is attacked through her (Becker, 2003). In this way organised strategies of rape to create pregnancies in women of subjugated communities are part of the attacks associated with ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide. This perversion of sexual relationship is mirrored by the perversion of religious and cultural beliefs (Becker, 2003). The torturer in Muslim countries has been known to say to a prisoner he intends to rape, "I marry you" and after the rape "I divorce you", thereby creating for himself a grotesque compliance with his own sense of religious law.

Sexual abuse of women and girls from refugee communities occurs not only within the community in the country of origin. Other forms of sexual abuse also occur and include:

- Torture in prison, where sexual abuse is the most common form of systematised torture against women (Pittaway, in Mehraby 2001). Parts of the body, used to express love, receptivity, mutualism and nurturing are attacked and tampered with obscenely (Bowles, 1998).
- Organized sexual abuse within oppressive systems, such as the so-called "comfort women" (Bowles, 1998)– an example of the perversion of language regarding the experiences of these women

- Child soldiers - an estimated 30% of child soldiers are female, many of them used sexually by more powerful members of the troupe (Queen, 2002)
- Attacks during the refugee journey
- Attacks within the refugee camps by officials or other refugees
- Opportunistic attacks, including by members of UN peacekeeping forces
- Opportunistic sexual assault in exchange for food or survival of herself or their families
- Forced marriages
- Sexual assault from husbands and other male relatives, which similarly to all communities, may be happening in Australia as well as previous to arrival (Pittaway in Mehraby, 2001).
- Secondary traumatising of children forced to watch as their mothers are raped (Hol-Radic, 2003)

It should be noted that this happens within the context of multiple sequential trauma, the world as it is known collapsing, the world gone mad.

In 2002 Kofi Annan articulated his concern regarding the situation in Afghanistan that in the culture of violence against women fostered by civil war, women and girls are at continued risk of assault (AP Feb 20, 2002). It is known that there has been a long history of institutionalised gender oppression there.

While not assuming that all refugee women have been sexually assaulted, in working with women who are refugees, it is important to bear this background in mind. The statistics do indicate that the likelihood is high. In more traditional cultures, the disgrace not only to oneself but also to the family, and fear of rejection by the community, maintains a deep silence regarding sexual assault. Nooria Mehraby was a doctor in refugee camps in Pakistan for 5 years, and in this time not one woman disclosed that she had been sexually assaulted. A Canadian study found that over 94% of refugee sexual abuse survivors did not disclose their experiences to their refugee workers (Mehraby 2001).

Lack of disclosure may be due to traumatic amnesia, not having the language to speak, being too traumatised to speak, cultural taboos or a combination of these factors. In some communities there is no alternative language for the symptomatology and concept of PTSD than that you are "mad". Survivor's fears of going mad may prevent them from talking out and retreat into a fearful silence. In some societies the cultural imperatives around sexual assault are so strong that the family works out their own means of surviving the dissonance of loyalty to the family and compliance with their cultural beliefs (Becker, 2003). There will be an implicit understanding that there will be no voicing, or overt recognition, of the fact that the woman has been sexually assaulted. The husband may even more overtly indicate to his wife his commitment to their marriage and relationship, while implying that, if either of them voices the fact that she has been sexually assaulted, even to each other, then he will be forced to disown her due to his cultural or religious beliefs, which he clearly does not want to do. It is a strange irony that a caring spouse has to engage in this subtle subterfuge in order to protect his wife and maintain his family (Becker, 2003).

Despite these myriad taboos and complications, it is the experience of counsellors at STARTTS that in an atmosphere of trust, there is often disclosure in the long-term. Alternatively a useful means of talking around the issue is arrived at by consensus. The attitude of the counsellor or community worker is vital to this process (Hormiz, 2003). I have heard workers in this field state

that child sexual assault does not exist in their communities and countries of origin, as it does in Australian society. While there is not the space here to discuss the issues of child sexual assault, refugee women have histories prior to the attacks upon them as adults. A percentage will have also experienced sexual assault by family members and others in childhood.

Women who understand that it is the cultural and religious beliefs of their community that enforce their silence and that their own reality may have their own separate validity, can more easily begin to speak (Rahimi, 2003). Women who can begin to understand that the responsibility for the attack lies with the attackers and the governments that utilise rape as an instrument of war, and not with themselves, can begin to speak.

Those who are in oppressive relationships, often cannot talk, and isolate themselves, or are isolated from their community. There is an internal conflict for these women between awareness of the level of their own pain, and the punitive beliefs of their community, which they may share, about women who have been raped. Women have killed themselves after being raped, rather living with their shame, the reactions of their family, and the shame brought upon them and their community. Rape in war is often in front of the family or of other known witnesses, which is an added level of humiliation, as they cannot get away from those who witnessed their shame. For example, over a period of 3 years, between 1992 and 1993, 30,000-50,000 women were systematically raped in an organised manner in the Former Yugoslavia (Mehrabiy, 2001).

A further difficulty for women dealing with the effects of sexual assault is the context of overwhelming tragedy in which their personal trauma is situated. How, in the face of the disintegration and destruction of entire communities and societies, and the multiple deaths, can women give serious weight their own experience, to the effects that sexual assault has had upon them, while they are at least still alive. How can they feel entitled take their own pain seriously? How can they feel entitled to the space to honour their own grief and pain?

As workers with refugee women, while it is important for us to provide such spaces, it is essential that we understand and respect that these women are survivors- individuals, friends, partners, wives, mothers, workers -who have enormous strengths and resilience, and a vital position in their own communities.

To conclude this paper, I would like to come full circle, back to the influence of the state on the individual's way of life and their ability to access their own life and world fully.

Migration of refugee communities to Australia brings them into a society that for 30 years has been attempting to come to terms with the meaning and implications of sexual assault for individual women and for this society. We have been attempting to change laws, structures and attitudes, that oppressed women in the area of sexual assault, and open up the topic for discussion, in order to reduce women's isolation and sense of self-blame. We have been challenging gender roles and relations that are oppressive to women, and have been giving ourselves language to name our experiences and our feelings. Refugee communities arriving in Australia become part of this society and part of a dialogue and hopefully, of a two-way osmosis of opinion over time. This I believe reaches and will reach the women who suffer past and current abuse in silence. Over time, this dialogue encourages changing attitudes within communities, allowing for less rigidity of gender

roles, and more understanding of sexual assault as a violent instrument of power and control against women.

However conversation with colleagues at STARTTS suggests that the current political climate in Australia will be damaging to this process. Increasing expression of antagonism to, and racist attacks upon, the so-called "other", the so-called "foreigners", the Muslims, will undoubtedly force these communities to "circle the wagons" and close in on themselves. They will be unavailable for a dialogue of values, that would ultimately be helpful in freeing up the women, and men, who have been sexually assaulted and whom we have been talking about today. The departure from the two-party political tacit agreement not to "play the race card" initiated by our prime minister after the rise of Pauline Hanson, the state sanctioned expression of increasingly racist attitudes, can only be damaging to the relationship of Australian-born and refugee Australian communities. Unfortunately, this political abuse is a reminder and a mirroring of the abuse and vilification that refugees experienced in their country of origin, and many of our clients testify to the effect that such reminders have upon them.

In dealing with sexual assault as an issue for women from refugee communities, it is important that we not only foster individual trust with our clients by separating ourselves from these attitudes, but that, on the larger scale, we find ways to counter this current political strategy that nurtures racism and the rejection of people who may differ in any way from our idea of what an Australian is today.

References

Becker, Rise (2003) In conversation

Bowles, Robin (1998) "Sexual Assault and Torture: Some Thoughts about Clinical Work with Refugees who are Sexual Assault Survivors" presented at Conference "No More Falling through the Net" Sexual Assault Forum , June 4-5, University of Sydney.

Hol-Radic, Gordana (2003) In conversation

Hormiz, Amal (2003) In conversation

Martin-Baro, Ignacio (1989) "The Psychological Consequences of Political Terrorism" presented on January 17, at Symposium on the Psychological Consequences of Political Terrorism, Berkeley California

Mehraby, Nooria (2001), "Refugee Women: The Authentic Heroines", in Transitions, Autumn 2001, Issue 9, STARTTS, Fairfield, Sydney.

Queen, Jenny (2002) "Under Arms and Underage" in Refugee Transitions, Spring/Summer 2002, Issue 13, FASST, Fairfield, Sydney

Rahimi, Fatana (2003) In conversation

The Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Survivors of Torture and Trauma (STARTTS) is a statewide service, established in 1988, and mainly funded by the NSW Department of Health, to work with refugees and people from refugee-like situations who have survived torture and other traumatic experiences in the context of organised violence. STARTTS has a multidisciplinary staff from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. Julie Savage is a Psychologist, counsellor, supervisor and trainer. Rise Becker is a Clinical Psychologist and psychoanalytically-oriented psychotherapist, supervisor, consultant and trainer, who also works in private practice.