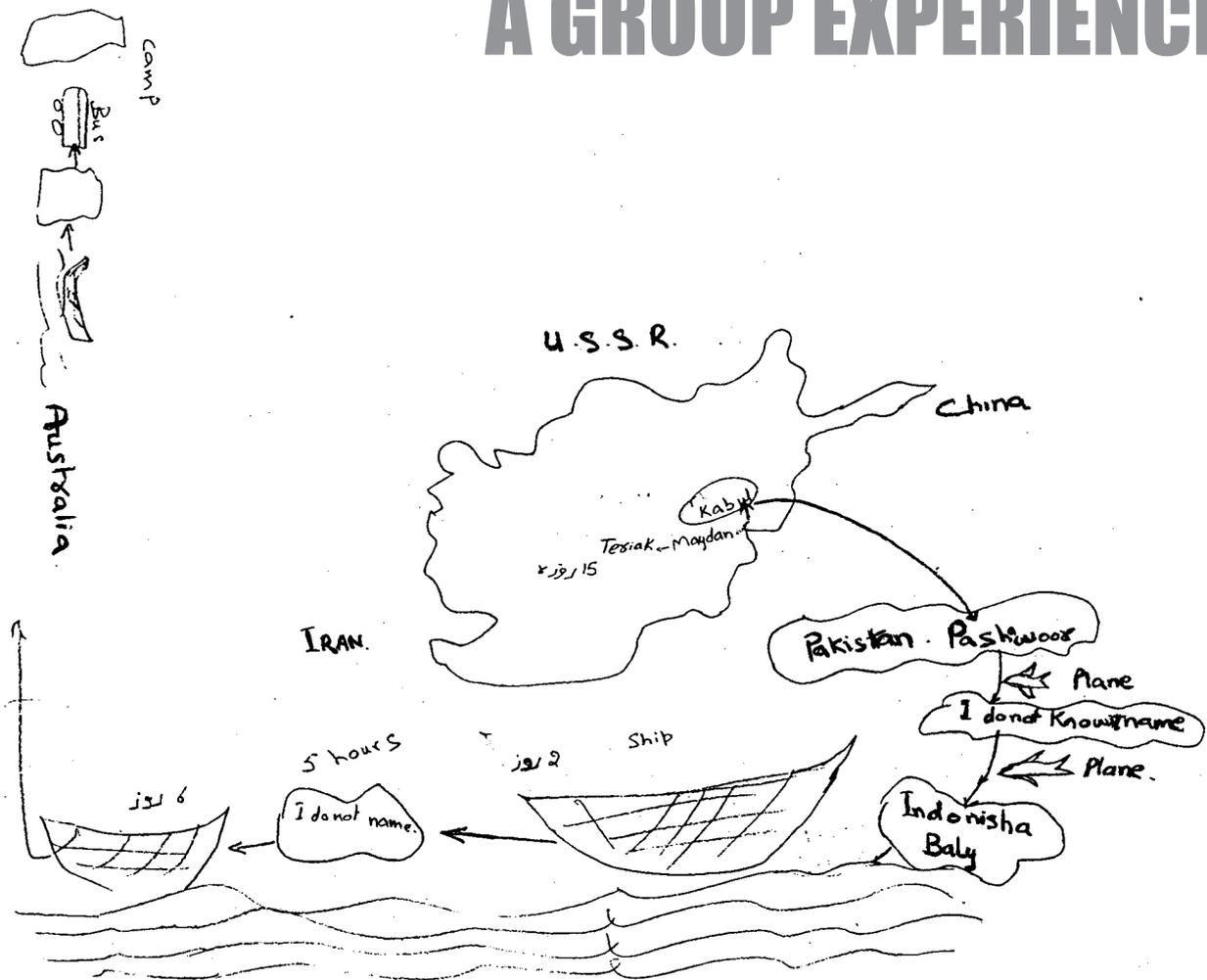


# Unaccompanied Child Refugees: A GROUP EXPERIENCE



**NOORIA MEHRABY**, an Afghan refugee and counsellor with the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, reports on how a group therapy approach was used with unaccompanied and traumatized Afghan child refugees. This is an edited version of an article that recently appeared in *Psychotherapy in Australia*.

The devastating wars that engulfed Afghanistan for the last twenty-four years have left the country with a mortality rate of 257 per 1000, for children under five. On average, seven children are killed or injured every day by landmines. Ninety percent of Afghan girls and sixty percent of boys are illiterate. Life expectancy for women is 42, the lowest in the world.

The Western world lost interest in Afghanistan at the end of the Russian occupation. Hospitals and schools for Afghan refugees in Pakistan were closed through lack of funding from aid agencies. Afghans were no longer considered 'refugees', but 'displaced persons'. Despite the worsening internal situation in Afghanistan and in the refugee camps in neighbouring countries, the international

intake of Afghan refugees was reduced. Consequently some Afghans came to Australia illegally, paying considerable amounts of money to smugglers in the hope of saving their lives.

Most of these 'illegal immigrants' are from the Hazara ethnic group who are predominantly Shiite Muslims, a 16 percent minority in Afghanistan.

The Hazaras have suffered from long-standing discrimination, racism and violation of their human rights by other ethnic groups. Figures from a Human Rights Watch report of August, 1998 on a massacre of 8000 Hazaras in the city of Mazara-shif, and elsewhere, show that they also suffered enormously under the Taliban regime.

The Hazaras come from the working class and the majority of them are illiterate. They were often forced into manual, serving and construction jobs, although their contribution to the construction of Afghanistan is priceless. They were not accepted into the broader Afghan community and, in Australia, other Afghan ethnic groups may still reject them.

Towards the end of 2001, STARTTS arranged to provide such a group intervention in response to a request from Jan Harrison, a school counsellor from Chester Hills High School in Western Sydney. She wanted counseling support for the Afghan students who attended the school. Harrison was aware that the nightly news reports of the American retaliation for the September 11 terrorist attacks were having an impact on the students, so she asked them if they would like to discuss their concerns with someone of their own nationality. They accepted unanimously.

The group consisted of fourteen children aged between 12 and 21. Culturally, an unmarried 21-year-old Afghan girl is considered unaccompanied. The group

comprised three girls and eleven boys. Three children from one family had permanent visas and were living with their parents, but the rest were unaccompanied minors who had arrived in Australia by boat. They had been detained in detention centres for between two to eight months before being granted three-year Temporary Protection Visas and then released from detention. All were severely traumatized in their country of origin and in their efforts to become residents of Australia.

When STARTTS was approached, only eight weeks remained of the school year. Given this, we decided to conduct a short-term group intervention consisting of five two-hour weekly sessions. There was also a follow up session after the school holidays. STARTTS also agreed to provide individual therapy if this was needed. Given the intensity of the trauma suffered by the children, and that only a short-term intervention would be possible, it was decided that emotional exploration would be limited.

In thinking about the groups we were guided by Judith Herman's model of trauma and recovery. According to Herman the first stage is the creation of a safe and trusting environment, the second stage is the exploration of the traumatic experiences, and the third stage is social reconnection. Since this workshop was conceived of as a time limited intervention with the specific goal to explore the impact and flow-on of the terrorist attacks, only restricted exploratory work was possible. The participants would have the opportunity to vent their

feelings, express their thoughts, share their experiences and normalize their symptoms. We also aimed to strengthen relationships and to develop a support network. The therapeutic interventions would consist of expressive techniques such as art therapy, story writing and some music therapy.

Three workers were involved in facilitating this group. I was selected as the active facilitator; being Afghan I understood the clients' culture, history and language, and I had trained in facilitating groups. Jan Harrison, the school counsellor was included. We hoped that this would facilitate her future counselling relationship with the students and role of case coordinator in making referrals and planning educational pathways. Fatana Rahimi, an Afghan STARTTS bicultural counsellor, was the third member. Her role was as a support counsellor in the group, and she could be available if a participant needed individual attention over and above what was possible in the group. For example if a participant became so overwhelmed and chose to leave the room, Fatana could attend to them. Since she was not running the group yet spoke the language, her capacity to observe the process was enhanced.

Although I was the main group facilitator, the participation of the other two workers and their contribution and support to parts of the group process was essential. The debriefing after each session was helpful in sharing our feelings and thoughts and enabled us to maintain our roles in the group.

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## THE FIRST SESSION

During the first session about my experience as a refugee from Afghanistan, I decided I would share some of my personal experiences in an effort to encourage the children to talk about themselves. I also thought it might help them to see that I was with them, not against them. Because of their low level of literacy I used very simple Dari in speaking to them. I talked about how I escaped from Afghanistan and paid a smuggler to get me out of the country. Escaping to neighbouring countries is often the only option for the majority of Afghans, and smugglers are chosen for their knowledge of travelling routes and their ability to interact between the government and opposition groups.

The two other workers also introduced themselves, and then each of the participants briefly introduced themselves. They stated which part of Afghanistan they came from, their age, their length of time in Australia and the length of time each had spent in the Intensive English Centre. With the exception of two Tajik brothers from the city of Herat, everyone referred to themselves as Hazaras. I saw this as reflecting their loss of identity as Afghans; members of this ethnic group always identify themselves primarily as Hazaras rather than as of Afghan nationality.

Participants and facilitators sat around the table. Each child was asked to throw a small ball to another participant and ask them a general interest question such as what was a favourite hobby. I

started the game by throwing the ball to one of the participants and asking him about his interests. He responded that he was interested in playing cricket and threw the ball to the next person. Each participant spoke about different things such as music and sports. When the ball was thrown to a seventeen-year-old girl she said, “I like my mother more than any thing else in the world”, then burst into tears, prompting her twenty one-year-old sister to start crying, too. I remained silent for a while, in order to validate their feelings and give them time to process them.

There is a fine balance between enabling the participants to express their feelings, and retraumatizing them by giving those painful feelings too much space. Prolonged silence might also disturb the continuation of the session. Soon I tapped the girls on their shoulders and the game was continued. The ball was thrown again and this time one of the boys said, “I like the food that my mum cooks the most.” Another said, “I like the fruit of Afghanistan, here in Australia fruit doesn’t have the same taste.” Despite the sadness and pain in the group, it was inappropriate to explore the trauma too deeply so we kept the group moving with supportive statements and humour.

In the second part of the game I asked them what they did not like. Not wanting to refer so soon to a serious topic like war, I started by saying that I did not like cloudy weather. Despite this, all the participants responded that they hated war and they hated the Taliban. This

was a clear indication of both their suffering and of the rapid development of trust amongst themselves and the facilitators.

An issue arose with regard to the establishment of group rules. It soon became evident that the children had little experience of how rules could be empowering for them rather than destructive. When they were asked what kind of reactions, behaviour and attitudes they would not like during and after the sessions they looked confused. Initially they found it difficult to believe this empowerment. I had to give them an example by using the issue of group confidentiality. For instance, if I cry during the session I would like this to be kept within the group and I don’t like people from outside to know about this. This was also an indirect way of saying that it was okay to cry. After this example, the children spontaneously brain-stormed several issues such as confidentiality, listening to each other, speaking up, respecting feelings, no put-downs, no blaming, being polite and the right to pass. It was also discussed that we had to respect differences among us.

Before the group, the facilitators developed a number of group processes aimed at developing trust and exploring feelings, but our planned ice-breaking artwork was not needed as the young people responded positively to the opportunity to tell their stories and to share their fears, concerns and hopes.

## EXPLORATION

Given the fact that the group was very open and the sense

of trust was high, I decided to move into talking about the war in Afghanistan. I was mindful of several concerns. Many of the children may not have had access to television or radio and may not have a full picture of what was going on in their country of origin. I also told them that if they did not want to share their feelings and thoughts it was okay. I used the word 'we' to give them the sense of us all belonging to the Afghan community, rather than they just belonging to the alienated Hazaras minority.

I began by saying that I was upset when I heard the news about the war in Afghanistan, and the two other workers also said that they too were sad about what was happening in Afghanistan. A sixteen-year-old boy responded by saying "I hate war and I am very worried about my family. I do not know if they are dead or alive. I am very sad and upset." He looked very upset but trying hard to control his emotions.

Then a fourteen-year-old boy said, "I am very sad and I am very worried about my family..." He could not complete his sentence and started to cry. He left the circle and went to the window, too embarrassed to stay in the group. I had to decide whether to leave him for a while or to encourage him back to the group. I also wondered whether I should leave the decision to the group members about how to support their friend.

At this moment another 13-year-old boy started crying. I went to the first boy and tapped him on his shoulder and told him it is okay to cry, and asked if he would like to join the

group or whether he would like to go out for a while. The boy decided to rejoin the group. By the time he sat back down nearly everyone was in tears. This was an extremely sad and powerful moment. It was difficult for me to separate my professional role as a counsellor and my personal feelings of sadness of being a part of a traumatized community. I am also a mother of three children of similar ages to the participants. However, I managed to contain the session, control my own emotions, and remain attentive to the participants.

With the exception of a 14-year-old boy, everybody spoke about their feelings and expressed their emotions. He, however, did not want to share his feelings and said that he was strong enough not to cry. This could have reflected his feeling of responsibility for his two older sisters who were in the group. He might also have been ashamed that his sisters were among the first to break into tears. The main concern the participants raised was whether their parents were being caught between the 'war against terrorism' alliance and the Taliban regime. They all said they hated the war and the Taliban and were extremely worried about whether their families were alive or dead. They had had no contact with them since they had left home. Although they did not speak directly about feelings of survivor guilt, it could be read into some of their statements. One said, "My parents sold all of their belongings to save my life. I am wondering who would have helped them to get out of the war zone."

## THE ENDING PHASE

To conclude the session we brought a number of scarves and I asked each of the participants to pick a scarf and say how it related to their feelings. I started by picking a blue scarf and I said, "I have chosen this scarf because it is blue and blue stands for peace and I like peace". One child picked a green scarf and said he chose it because it represented Islam. A 13-year-old boy chose a red scarf and said "I have chosen this scarf because it is red and red represents blood and I have not seen anything else but blood during my life." A 16-year-old boy picked up a scarf that had a design on it that looked like a chain and said, "I have chosen this scarf because it is like a chain and I feel I have been tied with a chain during all of my life." An 17-year-old girl chose a flowery scarf and said, "I have chosen this scarf because it reminds me of my mother who was wearing a scarf like this". A 14-year-old boy picked up a colourful scarf and said, "I like this scarf because it looks like the colour of trees in my country".

At the end the participants were asked to hold hands with the people on either side of them and make a chain. I said that this circle indicated the strength and unity of the group and that though some chains may hold them down others can help make them strong.

Because of the intensity of the session and the level of emotion involved, I suggested that the group might like to finish the session by singing a song. They said they would, but it was not an enthusiastic reply. During an earlier exercise two

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brothers had said that they liked singing songs. I asked if they would like to sing a song and the rest of the group said they would like to hear them sing. It took them a while to decide but eventually the older brother started singing. They sang a most powerful song about being away from one's homeland.

At the end of the session the participants thanked me very politely, saying that they felt relieved that even in a strange country there were people who care. I was painfully aware of my own feelings of loss, sadness, anger and resentment. I could sense the fresh smell of my homeland from this group who had arrived more recently. I also had feelings of guilt as I am from an ethnic group that has perpetrated human rights violations on the Hazaras.

My feelings of mothering them were bounded by professional boundaries. It was an extremely emotional session, which reached an intensity that I had not experienced before in my counselling career. As soon as the participants left the room, the other two facilitators and I burst into tears. I believe this was a normal human response. I felt that I had travelled with this group on a journey of years within two hours, and felt exhausted. I felt the exhaustion on my shoulders and tiredness in my feet. What astonished me were the strengths of these children and their ability to survive. Walking side by side with them on their journey enabled me to learn so much from their strength and I was left to wonder how much I had helped.

## SUBSEQUENT SESSIONS

The subsequent sessions were similarly characterised by a high level of participation and emotional expression. The second session followed the children's journeys from their homes in Afghanistan through intermediate countries of asylum, boat trips and detention centres to their current destination in Sydney. The stories described treacherous journeys with people smugglers from opposing ethnic groups often linked to the Taliban. Ninety percent of group members said that at some point they had thought that they would die.

The next two sessions aimed at normalizing their symptoms, helping them to understand the process of dealing with loss and grief, making new connections and creating a new identity. At the closure of both these sessions the children said that by sharing their experiences they felt that they were not alone in trauma. In addition, since this was a religious group they all asserted that Allah would help them and gained strength from this belief. Having a belief in some omnipotent being appears to be helpful when so much of their life has been full of hopefulness and despair.

The Eid celebration, which marks the end of Ramadan, coincided with the final session. This party ends the thirty day fast that celebrates atonement and re-connection with Allah and one's fellows. This seemed a fitting end to the group. There was singing and dancing, small presents were given to each child through donations given to STARTTS, addresses and contact

numbers were exchanged and free activities circulated for the holidays.

This was a new experience for them – that an ending can be happy rather than sad. ■

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