

Responding to the Needs of Women Who Survive Torture: From Silent Torment to Speaking Out

by [Sabina Acosta](#)

Testimony Reveals Effects of Sexual Torture on Women

The mental picture we too often have of women who have been victims of organized and systematic violence, of torture or forced exile, is mistakenly that of activists working in clandestine organizations against the prevailing regime. We tend to forget that military regimes punish any form of resistance to the oppression which dictatorships impose on whole generations at a time. Within other countries, characterized as "democratic", a more general and diffuse sexual subordination of women takes place. This subordination exists both at the physical and psychological level, often leaving permanent stigma on the victims. If, for these women, testimony constitutes an efficient and durable psychotherapeutic vehicle, it also reveals what they have suffered and the state of their inner being.

Add to all the problems which have already been mentioned others related to exile itself: the survivor is cut off from her cultural origins, has had to abandon plans she may have made for the future, and must confront a cultural, social, economic and political context which is totally new. All of these confrontations, which are inevitable in exile, can shake or fracture the survivor's sense of identity.

Psychological Consequences of Uprooting

Upon their arrival in Canada, exiled women feel as if they have to start anew. They have to get used to the look and feel of their new city, their foreign environment; they have to recreate a social and affective network, develop new habits, get used to a new private, public and political space, rebuild relationships with themselves, other people, and their surroundings. Thus, they have to develop a new identity, a sense of belonging.

Thrown into a society where people and surroundings are unfamiliar, it then becomes important to appropriate a cultural referent. Everything becomes a source for new fears: the language, the culture, assumptions, unspoken meanings and so on. It is therefore necessary for women have been exiled by repression to "write" their stories, including both the past and the present; to invent a new reality for themselves; and to learn how to participate in the life of the host society, according to its own rules, eager as they are to identify with this community.

From then on, the support given to these exiled women, whether of a psycho-social nature, community-based or otherwise, is not only aimed at helping them to adapt to the external world, but also to achieve successful integration (a term which is too often mistaken with homogenization) in their adopted country. This support also aims concomitantly to restore the fundamental experience of women as "subjects" who can act and participate. It will then be necessary to discuss their past, often marked by traumatic and horrifying events which left terrible scars. We have to deal with a confused and painful situation, taking into account the limits within which the person is prepared to move, as well as ever-present fears for her life, even in the country of exile.

Rejecting Paternalism in Favour of Solidarity and Empowerment

From this perspective, if assistance to exiled women is limited to a "paternalistic" approach, we are sure to fail since the aim is to eliminate rather than have an effect on causal elements. Our intervention with these women requires us to help them redefine their identity and sexual integrity as women and human beings, in spite of the psychological traumas they have been through. The beginning of this healing process rules out any kind of justification of or identification with state terrorism and its human rights violators. Instead, it entails alliance and solidarity with exiled women.

We consider our work as mediators in mental health to be the fruit of a deep inter-personal commitment through which exiled women must recover the capacity to face the situation, particularly by identifying for themselves the disruptive elements. We must be aware of the latent, and at the same time, omnipresent fears that lie behind the atrocious physical and psychological violence they have experienced: fears of once again becoming a victim of criminal attempts aimed at humiliating, degrading and attacking their moral and physical integrity; fears of violence stemming from the same social, cultural, political and familiar environment, in which they remain vulnerable.

Whatever our nationality, culture, sexual orientation, social status, age or colour, listening to the stories of women who have survived experiences of torture and repression is to assert their rejection of any injustice, subservience and exploitation. It also signifies support for their own significant vision of their past and present situation; their own perception of their experience, linked to their principles and values; and their search for help in order to rebuild their lives. In fact, our task is to enable these women to recover their capacity to interact in their adoptive country, having gained better understanding and awareness of themselves, as well as their personal resources in the face of new realities. As intervenors, we cannot ignore life and that which can negate it.

The importance of our work is based on the need to break the silence. We must allow space for these women who have been forced into exile because of violence, a place for them to express their pain and their wounds, where confidence and safety enables them to speak. This constitutes the first step on the path to freedom for all women, throughout the world.