

ADOLESCENTS AND TORTURE

Adolescents are targeted in oppressive regimes throughout the world. They are often coerced into combat roles by such regimes and forced to engage in warfare.

In the best-case scenario, adolescence is a time of excitement, learning, and taking on new challenges. In the worst-case scenario, adolescence is a time of learning also, but learning about violence, oppression, and murder.

Not all adolescents are impacted directly by torture or other oppressive measures. Some are affected through such traumas as the loss of family members, generalized social violence, and warfare. Direct and indirect exposure to torture can have lasting and devastating effects and without recognition, the future can be extremely bleak.

For many adolescents who have been exposed to torture there is a gap between their age and level of maturity and their academic knowledge and skills. Consequently, many youth who have lived through violent and oppressive regimes are older than their years. One of the biggest challenges facing many adolescents who have been exposed to violent regimes and torture in their home country is adjusting to school in Canada.

While many students who are new immigrants to Canada share the challenge of learning English and generally adjusting to life in Canada, for those who have escaped violent regimes the struggle to come to terms with their past experiences can be extremely daunting. However, with the right support, sensitivity, and understanding, particularly by teachers and other authority figures, adolescents can overcome these experiences.

For Sayeed, 14, the adjustment to school in Canada was very difficult:

At first, when I saw the people, I thought this is the wrong kind of school for me. I did not have anyone to talk to in class. They do not want to know each other, not like the place where I grew up.

Refugee adolescents often take on an important role within the family when they arrive in a new country such as Canada. The adjustment can be incredibly difficult, particularly if there are immediate language and cultural barriers. As time passes and the adolescent adapts and learns the language and the social values of the new society, the rest of the family start to rely on them to communicate. Tremendous pressures can be placed on the adolescent in this way and can result in familial role reversal. The challenges faced by adolescents who have been exposed to torture can be great. Maria, 16, had difficulty forgetting her memories of torture:

Even now, when a car stops or dogs bark in the neighbourhood, I wake up and jump out of bed, sometimes at the least noises. You do have memories.

However, given the right supports these challenges can be overcome enabling the youth to thrive.

Youth Roundtables on War-Affected Children

In partnership with the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development, CCVT organized roundtables among youth. The Canadian government was interested in hearing youth's opinions on how Canada can best serve the interests of war-affected children and these roundtables were initiated towards this objective.

Roundtable discussions were held in Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, Halifax and Winnipeg, from May to July 2000. Over 200 youth, 12-20 years of age & representing 38 countries, attended the five roundtables. Most of the youth came from war-affected countries and had first-hand experience of war.

The roundtables were a valuable opportunity for them to share their thoughts and feelings about the plight of war-affected children. For the non-war-affected youth, the roundtables opened up their eyes to the situation of war in the world and the impact of war on children.

During the roundtable discussions, war-affected youth shared their personal experiences of war. Many described in detail the various ways in which war has affected their lives: grief, land mines, sanctions, child soldiers, abuse, disruption of schools and the loss of their childhood innocence. Youth participants also engaged in discussions of why wars occur and what can be done to stop war and to prevent war from happening. They traced the roots of war to several factors, including poverty, intolerance of differences, political/financial gain and the sale of weapons.

In light of this, some of the solutions they suggested to stop war are the following: redistribution of the world's wealth, stop selling weapons, more effective penalties for human rights violations, open-mindedness and tolerance for differences.

CCVT prepared a report on the roundtables to give to the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development. Moreover, several youth from each roundtable were selected to act as delegates in the National Forum 2000 on War-affected Children, which was held in Winnipeg in September, 2000. This youth conference was in conjunction with an international conference of Foreign Ministers, thus, giving youth delegates the opportunity to speak with world leaders on the issue of war-affected children.