

From echoes of silence to whispers of hope: Narratives of survivors of sexual torture

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Key points of interest

- Survivors of sexual torture could be assisted to overcome the stigma, impunity and the psychological sequelae of shame by a strategy that sensitively integrates testimony therapy.
- There is a need to develop gender neutral approaches that target multiple levels; family, community and the international community to address the stigma and silence that perpetuate sexual violence/torture.
- Group therapy can instil courage in survivors to revisit their past.

Abstract

Sexual torture continues to be used indiscriminately against both women and men, combatants and civilians, in armed conflict and war. Specialised interventions that sensitively assist survivors to release and integrate these traumatic memories are likely to assist with healing and recovery. As survivors reconstruct their past, they view their experiences from new perspectives and rediscover their resilience. This gives them hope.

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Introduction

Sexual violence and torture has consistently been used as a weapon in war and armed conflict, but it has only recently been recognized as a war crime (Tappis et al., 2016). Perpetrators were first successfully prosecuted and sentenced in 1996 at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Following this, the Rome Statute (1998) was passed by the International Criminal Court (ICC) that defined sexual violence as an individual crime, a war crime and a crime against humanity (Askin, 2003; Zawati, 2007). However, very few perpetrators of sexual violence and sexual torture have been prosecuted. This impunity partly explains why sexual violence, sexual torture and rape are so rampant (Vu et al., 2014). This trend of impunity, as well as cultural taboos associated with sexual torture, perpetuate survivors' tendency to remain silent (Doja, 2018). Designing effective mental health and psychosocial support services for survivors of sexual violence and sexual torture has remained a challenge.

There is a dearth of research on mental health and psychosocial support interventions in the context of sexual violence in armed conflict. However, the

provision of psychosocial interventions—particularly using culturally adapted interventions, group therapy approaches and elements of exposure therapy—appear beneficial in addressing the psychological sequelae resulting from sexual violation (De Jong, 2014). Schopper (2014) suggests that specialised interventions are required to address the complexity of trauma responses and the need to raise awareness of sexual violence in conflict. Some literature suggests that the impact of sexual and gender-based violence during conflict may be different for men and women and they may need distinct intervention strategies to address these impacts (Linos, 2009). However, both women and men are reluctant to seek assistance to deal with the consequences of sexual torture and this often results in overwhelming distress, symptoms of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress which are exacerbated in the face of additional stress (Berman, 2006; De Jong, 2014).

The NSW Service for The Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) in Australia developed a group therapy programme for male asylum seekers. All were of Tamil background, from Sri Lanka, and reported experiences of sexual torture. The group intervention was dubbed MANTRA, an acronym for ‘MAN Torture and Rape’. Mantra is a Sanskrit word that translates as ‘instrument of the mind’ (Fernandes & Aiello 2018). Participants in MANTRA communicated that women could also benefit from such a group intervention. Consequently, the Surviving Torture Rape and their Intrusions (STRI) group was trialled; an intervention for women requiring assistance. Stri, the Sanskrit word for women, integrated strategies that were already successfully implemented in MANTRA, which is a narrative exposure

therapy that incorporates breathing and relaxation, cultural stories and metaphors in a culturally sensitive manner.

This paper presents the narratives of a male client who participated in MANTRA¹ and a female client who participated in STRI and reveals their journey of courage and survival. Using the journeys of Vijay and Jaya,² this paper attempts to provide an overview of the complexity of the experiences of refugee survivors of sexual torture, paying particular attention to the cultural specificities of their backgrounds. This paper illustrates that the underlying terror associated with sexual violence and torture, at least in these two cases, is equally debilitating for both genders. There is a need for therapeutic interventions to assist survivors to break their silence as a possible path forward to make meaning and rediscover their resilience.

Methodology and overview

MANTRA and STRI³ were comprised of ten weekly group sessions that were facilitated with the assistance of interpreters accredited by the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) and each session lasted at least 2.5 hours.

In addition to the group sessions, individual sessions were offered to all participants to assist them with reconstructing their narratives. Draft

¹ See Fernandes & Aiello (2018) for a detailed description on the method and outcomes of the MANTRA group.

² Vijay and Jaya are pseudonyms in an effort to protect the identity of both participants. The names Jaya and Vijay are derived from the Sanskrit word “jai” (जय) that translates as “victory” or “success” in English.

³ MANTRA commenced in 2014 and STRI was piloted in 2016.

testimonies were read back to participants to make additions or deletions to ensure that what they had shared was accurately captured in the testimony.

The cases of Vijay and Jaya: A journey of courage and survival

Vijay: Vijay is a young man in his 20's. Vijay is single. He has been a student and is keen on continuing his studies. Vijay smiled shyly when we met him outside the counselling room. Vijay had a prosthetic limb; however, when he first entered the counselling room, Vijay displayed no abnormality of gait, posture or movement. He indicated that he had been brutally tortured and sexually assaulted.

Vijay was keen to be part of MANTRA. During initial group sessions, he was assertive and took the lead despite being the youngest member; sharing personal experiences and thoughts about issues being discussed in group.

However, as group sessions progressed and participants began to share detailed narratives of their experiences, Vijay became subdued. He admitted that thinking and talking about his past was a challenge and the “*pain*” was not easy for him to connect with. There were moments when he grew pensive and silent, in stark contrast to the initial sessions, and appeared to be in deep thought. Vijay appeared to be struggling with his internal conflict and urge to avoid traumatic memories from his past.

Jaya: Jaya, a middle-aged woman and a widow, fled her home in Sri Lanka along with her four-year-old son. When we first met with her, she and her son were being held in an immigration detention centre (IDC) as illegal maritime arrivals. She initially attended three individual sessions where she revealed

that she had been sexually assaulted on multiple occasions. She displayed a plethora of emotions and concerns throughout these sessions: how her life had been devoid of “*peace and happiness because she was born a Tamil*”; periods of silence and listlessness; and crying uncontrollably.

By the third session, however, Jaya was unable to access her past and could not complete her narrative. She did not visit STARTTS until a year later when she was referred following her release from the IDC.

It is likely that being detained failed to provide Jaya with a sufficiently safe environment for her to begin to process traumatic memories and hence she was not ready to engage in reconstructing her past. However, following her release, participation in STRI helped Jaya to once again resume her journey to rediscover the past she had struggled to forget. Jaya narrated multiple acts of violence that she had witnessed since she was a young child. Her sexual violations were by far the most difficult for her to articulate.

Jaya requested individual sessions, in tandem with the group sessions, to assist her with processing the horrors of her past. Her memories continued to torment her and she confided that these details were not easy to process on her own. Jaya communicated that the group activities and reflections had, once again, helped her to understand the importance and the need to visit her past.

Common themes: What Vijay and Jaya shared

Theme One: Early Years; Living in Fear and Expecting Danger

Vijay recalled memories of trauma since he was a child:

“I would be in my house and shelling would start and we would run. We wouldn't even

take basic needs. At those times when we were caught between the fighting, we would hide within the boundaries of the rice farm areas. These sectioned off areas had metre high boundaries made of mud brick to store water for the paddy fields. The fighting could go on for half an hour to a day or more. By the time I was eight years old the war between the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was well under way. It felt like there were flowers burning all around me. I felt like a tree burning in the desert.”

Jaya also recalled a life of fear and shared how her brother was taken away by the Army when she was a young girl, leaving him disabled:

“I thought the SLA was going to kill us. (...) They took my brother away in a tractor along with a few other boys. They kept him in the camp and we could hear shooting coming from the camp. We went every day to the camp, four or five miles from our home, in the early morning around 4 or 5 am and we would stay until around 8pm on the road side, rain or shine. We didn’t have any food but neighbours would offer us some food. We would use a plastic bucket to get some water from the well. It was so hard that one day my sister fainted. My brother was released a month later. He has not been the same since then.”

Theme Two: Significant Loss

Vijay recalled how his leg was severed. Initially Vijay stated, “I do not remember much about what happened that day”. He clarified that the memory was so painful that he has not tried to think about it since the day it had occurred:

“I think it was August 2006 on a Saturday that I was on my way to school...I then

heard the noise of the shells exploding. It was a deafening sound. It was all very quick. One shell landed right next to me. It hit me from an angle on my right side and I was thrown onto my back by the impact of the shell. I remember noticing my leg away from me. It looked like a banana tree that had been chopped...I only remember that one sound and the blast that followed. I remember lying on the ground and noticed the sun shining through the lids of my slightly closed eyes. At that time, I understood what pain meant. In addition to the physical pain I also had mental pain that I could not handle. I was broken down. I could not put myself together. I thought my life was destroyed.”

Jaya also recalled her conscription to the LTTE and the murder of her husband who was an LTTE member: we were “targeted by the Sri Lankan authorities because of our membership in the LTTE”. Jaya also recalled the following occurrence about a year after the birth of their son:

“Some masked men dressed in black came to our home in a white van and took my husband away. My husband had my son on his lap and kissed him on the head, before giving him back to me and leaving with the men. My husband never came back. Forty-one days later I met a friend of my husband’s friend when I went to a shop to buy milk powder. He informed me that my husband was no more. My husband was shot dead the same day he was taken by the men who arrived in the white van. The man said they had performed the last rites for my husband.”

Theme Three: Being Isolated and Vulnerable

Jaya communicated how she was “terrified as I was alone and isolated” when her son was born and how she had to continually move as

being a former LTTE member endangered family members and friends.

Vijay was separated from his family when he was unable to find a bunker during further shelling attacks, whilst he was still recovering from the injuries to his severed leg. An LTTE cadre lifted him and took him to their camp in a forest. He recalled how he was young and how the LTTE members provided food, medicine and advice on how to take care of his legs, but stated:

“I was upset always wanting to know if my parents were alive or if they had died in the conflict. The bomb blasts start again and again we had to move so I was taken by the LTTE to PTK (Puthukkudiyiruppu). I lost my hope of returning to my parents.”

When fighting broke out in the final stages of the war between the LTTE and the SLA, Vijay injured his other leg and was taken to a makeshift hospital in the war zone for medical treatment. He recalled the following:

“Whilst in the hospital I cried more than when I had lost my leg, because I was alone. I had no one to comfort me. I know I have the strength to handle the pain when I got wounded again but I did not have the strength to handle the loneliness. I was then cornered along with other civilians as the Sri Lankan forces (Navy and Army) advanced in the final war. Both my legs were injured at this time and I was dependent on people to carry me. Wherever they took us I had to go alone. Other patients had their family come for them, but I was all alone. I had no family around me and no one to comfort me.”

Vijay was captured in the ‘final war’ by Sri Lankan forces and explained that the Sri Lankan authorities “*stamped me as an LTTE member because I had lost my leg and I didn’t*

have my family”. Vijay clarified that the authorities may have perceived that he had lost his leg during combat, particularly as he was on his own with no family members to care for him.

Theme Four: Shame; Silence Prior to Disclosure

Both Vijay and Jaya felt challenged by remembering their loss. They needed reassurance and support before they could re-visit their experiences of sexual violation; by far their most difficult experience that they were yet to disclose.

Vijay needed multiple sessions before he managed to provide a coherent narrative about his incarceration in an SLA camp. It was apparent that he was overwhelmed by memories that led him to edit and adjust his narrative in progressive sessions.

Vijay recalled different stages of sexual torture where he was restrained and beaten when interrogated on multiple occasions. He reported one stage as follows:

“At each stage they would do the torture in different ways. Sometimes I was taken to a room where there was a table and chairs. They stripped off my clothes and made me sit on the chair with my hands tied behind my back. They started to beat me with sticks and the Palmyra tree stalks which were spiky. They started to beat me in my private parts and across my stomach and chest with their hands. With my hands tied behind my back I couldn’t do anything to help with the pain. I think I was put on this chair frame about twenty to twenty-five times. Some of the interrogators were crazy. (...) From the severity of the torture I could tell who the more sadistic people were.”

Vijay described a gradation in the intensity of sexual torture and described a final stage as follows:

“In the final stage of torture, they stripped all my clothes off and covered my whole body with a hot chilli sack. (...) Each and every part of my body was burning, though especially my eyes and my private parts. (...) (another day) they urinated on me from both sides in front and behind. (...) I was so angry because they tried to penetrate their penis into my mouth and ejaculate on me. I found this revolting. I told them I am a man and they could not do this. At that time, I suddenly had a lot of energy. After I yelled at them, they pushed me down and beat me up very badly. It was the worst beating I had. They used a baton and stick to beat me all over my body and especially on my knees to the point they were bleeding. I have wounds from the beating though the scars are fading but the psychological scars/pain is still there.”

Jaya also needed multiple sessions that were interspersed with periods of dissociation and teary outbursts to disclose details of how she was sexually violated by both the Karuna faction and Sri Lankan authorities. Jaya recounted how the young man who was sent to protect her abused her trust and raped her. She reported this as follows:

“He was much bigger than me. It was in the middle of the night. When he came for the water, he was wearing his clothes but he took these off and he was naked. I do not know what I was thinking. I was only thinking of my child. I was frightened. I could not cry or shout for help and my body was shivering. If anyone heard they would think bad things about me. It was very painful and I was struggling to try and avoid him but I could do nothing to fight back. He held me with just one hand and used the other to strip me. I could smell the liquor on him. He was drunk. He pushed his penis into my vagina

and when he was finished with me, he went to sleep. I could hear him sleeping after he had achieved what he wanted. I could call no one, not even my relatives to tell them what had happened to me. Even the people assigned to protect me did this to me. The more I think about it the more it makes me sick.”

Jaya recounted that, when she was interrogated about the whereabouts of her husband, she was gang raped by Sri Lankan authorities on multiple occasions, such as the one she described below:

“They pulled my hair and shoved me into the kitchen up against the bench. They then pushed a pestle into my vagina. When I first saw the pestle, I thought they were going to hit me and kill me with it. It was so painful and I screamed. The pestle was made of iron and was about 10 inches long and the width of my wrist. I was bent over the bench with my face down and I couldn’t do anything. They used horrible words to talk to me; they were saying ‘cottee’ (the Sinhalese word for tiger) and ‘utti’ (a derogatory way of saying vagina). When I screamed, they covered my mouth to stop me. One of the men was holding my head down and not allowing me to move. I think the other three all took turns in raping me. I think they used their penises as well to penetrate me. It was a different type of pain. When they did this to me, I thought I was going to die. After they finished raping me, I was weak and I felt numb. I was unable even to scream.”

Jaya’s intense sense of shame and fear of being stigmatised by her community made her reluctant to work with onsite interpreters from Sri Lanka. She was open to work with the Tamil interpreter who was not from Sri Lanka and was present when she first

disclosed. She requested offsite telephone female interpreters when the interpreter she trusted was not available.

Theme Five: The Compelling Need to Flee

Jaya and Vijay could not tolerate the fear of being assaulted and the ongoing harassment they experienced. Vijay shared the following:

“I still had to go to the SLA camp every week to report and the CID began to harass me every week. They would call me in for an enquiry and verbally abuse and beat me. They would make threats that they would shoot me and even put a gun inside my mouth. Sometimes if they came to my house I would run away and because of this they would harass me more.”

They had tried moving homes, on multiple occasions, to escape from the Sri Lankan authorities but were always tracked down. Jaya began to consider suicide.

Their fear of being repeatedly tortured by Sri Lankan authorities led both Jaya and Vijay to risk their lives and undertake a dangerous journey to Australia by boat with the hope that they would find peace and safety.

Theme Six: From shame to ‘Whispering Hope’

Jaya and Vijay gradually began to tolerate their memories and gained confidence in talking about their traumatic past. As they began integrating their fragmented memories, they started to reconnect with their hopes and dreams. Vijay expressed this as follows:

“I have not fully recovered. No one can fully recover especially mentally from an incident like this. But I keep two things in mind. One: I need to be happy for my parents to be happy. Two: I need to study

to have a good future. Remembering these things helps me.”

Likewise, Jaya reflected on the importance of moving forward to create a future for herself with her son. She also began to speak about the possibility of remarrying and continuing to build her family.

In addition, Jaya began to believe and understand that her ethnicity and close links to the LTTE movement could have influenced the reasons why her perpetrators may have symbolically replaced the “battleground” of the civil war in Sri Lanka with her physical body. She shared this realisation and clarified that despite her experiences she was motivated and determined to continue to have a positive outlook and sustain hopes for the future.

Jaya and Vijay’s journey: Interpretation and lessons

Jaya and Vijay’s journeys illustrate how a cumulative, continuous series of torture and traumatic experiences can lead to a pervasive sense of dread as the anticipation of ongoing trauma is difficult to cope with. This anticipatory distress forces many refugees to flee their homes in fear of their lives (Doja, 2018). Due to stigma and impunity related to sexual torture, it is not easy to disclose. The complex networks that these memories are imbedded in, often make them difficult to access. These case reports suggest that re-constructing the past in a supportive environment at a pace that is determined by survivors could lead towards recovery and healing.

Vijay and Jaya experienced sexual torture as intensely humiliating, painful and dehumanising despite their circumstances and the form of torture that they experienced being different. Their narratives indicate that they were both put

to the trial when being sexually tortured and when they had to manage the impact of the sexual torture; including retrieving and disclosing details of the brutality they endured. This similarity in their experiences and its aftermath challenges unfounded assumptions that suggest that men are stronger and better able to deal with sexual torture or that sexual torture only occurs to women (Touquet & Gorris, 2016).

Once Jaya and Vijay were able to face and find meaning in their horrific ordeals, their shame began to dissipate. This helped them to, once again, connect with themselves and begin to make plans and share their hopes for the future.

The therapists' ability to "hold" the emotional pain and listen in an open and non-judgemental way that conveyed solidarity may have encouraged Jaya and Vijay to commence their narrative. However, progress achieved was a collaborative effort, and was assisted by Jaya and Vijay's willingness to embody their narratives in sessions, which allowed for recognition of their own strengths and meaning making.

Learnings from both Jaya and Vijay's journeys suggest that recovery could be maximised by appropriate interventions that target shame and secrecy at various levels; not just the individual level, but also family, community, national and international levels. The MANTRA group also provoked men to advocate for a comparable project to be initiated for the women who had survived rape in their community. Therefore, working with and validating the experiences of sexual torture of men could motivate them to assist in campaigns to renounce violence against women.

Further, given the widespread occurrence of sexual violence, identifying survivors through an appropriate screening

tool would help to provide intervention in a timely manner and hence speed recovery.

Conclusion

The narratives of two survivors of sexual torture highlight how both men and women need support to assist them to recover from their traumatic experiences of sexual violence and torture during conflict.

The lessons that can be gleaned from these illuminating cases is perhaps limited by the absence of clinical forensic documentation using the Istanbul Protocol to assist in verifying claims of experiences of sexual torture. However, clinical forensic evidence that is diagnostic and highly consistent with narratives of sexual torture is extremely difficult to obtain after a lapse of time, can risk re-traumatisation, and may cause clients to leave therapy. In light of this context, the consistency in verbal and nonverbal expression of emotions, cognitions and behaviours during the interviews and when recording testimonies of both survivors can be considered as proof of a 'psychological forensic analysis'.

These narratives highlight the increasing need to identify and document incidents of sexual violations to assist in the development of specialised therapeutic interventions to support survivors of sexual torture and sexual violence. Whilst acknowledging that conducting psychological assessments requires skill, empathy, cultural understanding, and a careful exploration of the history of torture experiences (Patel, 2016), there is a need to improve the identification of victims of sexual violence and torture. The international humanitarian community must support and deal with the sequelae of sexual and gender-based violence and torture with a gender neutral and gender inclusive approach.

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