

Working with Refugees
by Nasrin Parvaz
for the Saturday Forensic Forum 2013

I was born in Iran. I first came to the UK in 1978, at the age of 20, in order to study. When the revolution broke out the following year I returned to Iran for a brief visit to my family, not realising that it would be 15 years before I would come to Britain again – as an exile. In post-revolutionary Iran I became active in the field of women's rights and civil rights, as a result of which I was arrested in 1982. I was tortured and sentenced to execution. My life was saved by the intervention of my father, who managed to get my sentence reduced to imprisonment. I was released in 1990 after spending eight years in prison.

A few months after my release from prison a friend asked me if I had been frightened the day I was arrested or when I was taken for torture. I thought for a few moments – I pictured that day and the following events – before answering, 'No, I didn't feel fear.' She was surprised; I was surprised by my answer, too. She asked, 'How come?' I replied that I didn't know. But her question and my answer stayed in my mind; now and then I thought about it, but I couldn't understand why I hadn't felt afraid then and there. Now, about 30 years later, I can see that I felt no fear at the moment of my arrest because I'd gone into a state of shock. The shock, which was the overriding sensation, led to a kind of freezing that affected my body both physically and psychologically and working as a defence mechanism at the time of my arrest and in the subsequent days and months.

Now, thinking back, I realise that I stayed in that initial state of shock for some time. It wasn't caused solely by the torture that I went through; witnessing the treatment of other prisoners was also shocking for me. However, I assume a state of shock, numbness or freezing must have different levels, since I remember I feared losing my life years later, not in 1983, when I'd been subject to an execution order, but in 1988 (for example), when everyone was awaiting her own death during the massacre of prisoners. In 1988, even the guards were frightened; they came to the ward in a pack, like wolves. Perhaps the shock I'd initially experienced had lost its grip by then, and I could feel my surroundings differently.

Perhaps what saved me in prison was the realisation that they wanted to break me, and I told myself I would not let them succeed. Under the interrogation I was subjected to psychological pressure to denounce my belief in a TV confession. I refused. Psychological pressure on prisoners led some of them into mental disturbances. Some prisoners became so disturbed that we felt that they might commit suicide, but we could not save them. After a few years in prison I could tell when a prisoner was going downhill and if she might commit suicide sooner or later. They withdrew themselves from others, by creating a wall of silence; a wall we could not penetrate. You were rejected from being with them whilst being so cramped that physically there was no gap between us. In some cases I tried hard to talk to them but I could help only a few people. Though I read a few

books about psychology in prison that I had acquired illegally, but it was still difficult to grasp what was happening within us. After a while I could recognise the patterns and identify that there was something wrong the next time I saw them. Silence and isolation were the warning signs that someone was going downhill and needed help.

Here I want to tell you about one particular woman who could not withhold her information under torture and betrayed one of her friends. It seemed she could not forgive herself and perhaps to bring about her own execution in compensation, she defended Marxism; which meant being an infidel in the eyes of the regime who should be killed. However, they did not kill her but put her in a box for months sitting blindfolded, among more than hundreds of prisoners in the same situation. They could not see each other, nor talk to each other. If they broke the rules and talked, coughed or touched their blindfold, they would be beaten. Most of those subjected to that torture were broken, but she wasn't. I met her a week after she had come out of that situation without accepting Islam or denouncing her beliefs. I realised she was psychologically disturbed. Why? She didn't talk to anyone. I saw her sitting face to the wall, as she had been forced to do for months. A few times I tried to talk to her, but every time she rejected me very politely. Four years later during the massacre of prisoners in 1988, when our situation was very tense and we thought we all were going to die, she committed suicide.

In 1988 when she killed herself, I was in the same ward with her; we had organised a team to work night and day watching her and another prisoner, who was also trying to kill herself. As she tried a few times to kill herself and we prevented it, we became her jailers, who were not letting her do what she wished to. She started to have hallucinations and swear at us. In that tense situation our only connection with the outside world, visits from our family, were cancelled, and she steadily deteriorated. We heard that prisoners were killed daily, and they executed more than fifty women from the ward I was in. About five thousand prisoners who were sentenced to imprisonment, many of whom had finished their sentences, were executed in those few months. The fact that she had been a healthy young woman when she was arrested and became psychologically disturbed in prison, gave me so many things to think about. The first lesson I had from her and other people who became disturbed in prison was: there are two essential connections each person needs if they are to stay healthy. One is between mind and body and the other is between the person and their environment. It is not difficult to push people to the corner of psychological problems or lead them to commit suicide.

After my release in 1990, I continued to see people who were organising themselves to fight for their rights, such as having unions. About a month after my release I stood in a bus stop queue and heard the man in front of me saying, "this is the men's queue" and, pointing his finger to somewhere else, "that's the women's queue". I became furious and realised how things had been changed for the worse regarding women's rights during the eight years that I had been in prison. After some time living in society again, I could see that people, especially

women, were depressed. I realised how women were suffering because of the open discrimination and segregation. Sexual apartheid, branding women as second class citizens, is the cause of so many suicides by women in Iran. I witnessed the fact that oppression is the cause of depression.

After my release I found myself constantly followed by the Islamic guards, and some of my friends were re-arrested. Realising that I could get arrested again, I fled to the UK where I claimed asylum in 1993. I was granted refugee status a year later. After a few months living here I started to have flashbacks of arrest and torture, and it led me to seek help from the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, where I received psychotherapy for a number of years.

My experience led me to study for a degree in psychology and getting involved with people who had psychological difficulties or relationship problems. I have to emphasise that a combination of things helped me to understand the affects of prison. As I understood them, they lost their grip on me. After my release I started to learn music and continued for a number of years, which I have to admit helped me a lot. Reading about the affects of abusive situations or relations, research about the aims and affects of prisons and writing all helped me to understand the impact prison on me.

However, I should say that the poverty and loss of attachments associated with exile in some way reminded me of prison; not exactly like the one I was in but a wider prison, a reformed prison. Exile means losing your attachments, which are vital for one's everyday life. Exile is like buying a one way ticket to walk out of your life, and losing the right to return; it puts an end to the relationships you have and you might take for granted. So here, as in prison, I could not see my family. My parents could not come and see me because of old age and illness. The loss of my father gave me a new understanding of exile and freedom because I was not able to visit with him when he needed me. My friends could not come and see me because of the border restrictions, which are only for ordinary people (the brutal rulers in Iran and everywhere else are free to come here or go anywhere they wish to). I want to emphasise to Westerners what losing our family and friends means to us; people from countries like Iran are still family- and community- oriented and losing them doesn't mean only losing your roots; some people dry up under stress and loneliness. So, even if refugees come here without any psychological problems, they soon have one, due to loss of attachments. The first problem with exile is attachment issues, the way refugees lose connection with their families and environment. When the connections are destroyed they feel despair and depression. Now these feelings are shaping their lives; they might constantly think about those who they left behind. After loss of attachment, loss of position is very important for refugees, by which I mean loss of one's position and status. For instance, many people define themselves according to their jobs but when people flee from their country they lose their position and cannot continue their profession. Language is one of the many barriers that prevent refugees from holding the same position or even gaining a job. If refugees can find work it tends to be working in roles of lower status and

income. Position is related to the income also and refugees not only lose their work and people related to their jobs, but they drop to the poverty. In a way they were someone there, and now they are nobody here

I mentioned about writing, I would like to talk about the effects of writing. As a refugee I could not have a voice in exile as I had not in Iran, yet the act of writing helped me so much. In the process of writing, I realised I'd built up so much anger and hatred in prison because of the torture and humiliation I'd experienced. Other emotions were suppressed and couldn't flow naturally as they once did. I needed to shed the hatred, because otherwise I knew I would become like those in power, and that was what they wanted. I learned to channel my anger into campaigning against execution and helping others who had similar problems. I can see that now I'm more comfortable in expressing my feelings – something I'd found too difficult before.

It was only in the process of writing that I could understand what PTS, which years ago my therapist had said I was suffering from, meant. It's said that writing is therapy, because it distracts you and takes your mind off your problems or experiences; but now, after a few years of practising writing as a survival mechanism, I feel it offers something more. For me, reading a good novel and socialising with friends are tools of distraction, while the act of writing is like a stream that carries pain from our well of suffering and pours it out into the sea. A means of distraction can't change us, or take the pain away – it's a temporary relief that only lulls the pain, whereas writing, by helping to wash the pain away, can make our lives so much easier to bear.

Writing isn't only a process of producing; at the same time it's a process of being produced. Other activities take from their makers and give them nothing in return, corroding them as they give themselves over to their creations. By writing, we can revisit the past and look at the effects of things that are done to the body. It's important to remember, however, that language, which is the only means available to a writer, can be another prison for someone who doesn't know how to write, or hasn't yet mastered the language she's trying to write in. At the same time the second language provides a distance that makes it easier to express painful feelings.

I want to finish this part of my talk with a bitter experience I had, which must be common among refugees. In the early years of my being here, apart from therapy, I also joined a writing group of which the aim was to help refugees like me to use writing as a therapeutic means. In this group there were European people as mentors and refugees as mentees and in this group I experienced racism. I reported it to the clinic and they didn't even care! When I left the group I learned that other clients too had experienced racism and reported it, and the person in question is still in her job! Looking down at refugees, treating them patronisingly and with ideas they don't understand adds to their pain. I witnessed laughing at what they did or criticising them for not knowing something. Perhaps I should mention that the media shape lots of people's minds here, particularly

their attitude to refugees. I have to admit that I don't read them now, but I remember there was much writing about bogus refugees, while there was nothing written by refugees. We were all considered guilty before it was proven. Especially after 7.7 in 2005, the media used the atrocity against refugees and foreigners. Like so many others I too experienced racism. I can say that after twenty years living here, I don't feel I belong to here, nor do I belong to the place I was born. My home is my body, yet I'm not free to take it wherever I wish to go, not to the place I was born for sure.

A few problems regarding working with refugees that I have noticed:

- The main discourse regarding survivals of abuse – systemic or domestic whatever the cause has been- is categorising them as victims. I remember the first time I went to The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, I felt offended. I used to see myself as a survivor, and I believed I was strong enough to help myself, but I needed help. I also don't use victim narrative, when I talk to the people I see. Contrary to the position of victimhood, the survival position helps people to see their power, the power that helped them to go through a domestic hardship, or could bear years of imprisonment. It also helps them to think how they can change their situation for the better, or put an end to an abusive relationship. Likewise, taking the survival position helps them to rebuild their life again in exile with injured mind and body. I mean you can help them to use their strength to help themselves, thus reducing the effects of prison. I know that there is a tendency within many people to take the position of victim; but we cannot help them before inviting them to come out of that position and look at things with their strength lenses. I think locating people into the victim's box, closes the possibility of change, which is crucial if they are to get better.
- Another problem is to treat refugees or people from countries like Iran, with the notion of cultural relativity. I see this as accepting patriarchy for women of colour, rather than recognising human rights for them too. There are cases in which even when an Iranian woman is traumatised from her family or husband's abuse, and asks for help, she is denied. The system or the therapists don't help her to change her situation or walk out of the abusive relationship. I heard a therapist say, it's their culture and we should not interfere with their system! I ask whose culture is this. This is some men's culture, and not women's. Which side are we standing? Are we going to support the husband by not helping the woman? So, not only women in countries like Iran are subjected to systemic patriarchy, they are treated the same here! You might have heard about women who were subjected to honour killing after they asked for help from police and were denied. If you want to have more information about it, you can look at the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation website. Of course there are other

organisations, this is only one, which is helping women in danger of domestic violence.

- The next problem I would like to mention is about not being open enough to learn about our client's culture, and treating them with our stereotype. The simplest example of this is that if you're from Iran, then you're Muslim! Cultural barriers provide a blind spot for therapists. For example many Iranian parents have a favourite child, and this can be the cause of children's problems; for someone who doesn't know the culture, it's difficult to pick up such a thing soon.
- Another problem is, not taking account of refugees' environment, the social situation they've grown up and lived in, and escaped from. For example, there was a big transition in Iran, which is the 1979 revolution; when the Islamic regime took power and caused more than 4 million people to leave the country. Some of these people are refugees, who have escaped to save their lives. Among them are people who experienced hardship like imprisonment and arrived in the host country traumatised. Becoming aware of the social situation that people escaped from helps us to understand their problems better. For example the law and enforcement in Iran tell men and women that they are not equal; and there is an on going struggle by women to change this inequality. In this situation in which the system gives men the upper hand, they might become over-confident while women lose their confidence. Everyday the humiliation in the street that women experience from the moral police to make sure they've observing their compulsory outfit, breaks something inside a woman. Women I'm working with have lost part of their confidence in a long process of systemic and domestic pressure.
- Taking account of refugees' situation means seeing if they have a decent life here and that poverty doesn't add to their psychological torment. Now that is a difficult time for everyone I can see that it is more difficult for refugees than perhaps any other section of the society. I can see widespread psychological problems, such as anxiety and depression among refugees, and not all of those who suffer seek help; and those who go to their GP's, only receive pills, because it's cheaper. Even when they are receiving therapy, their situation is not examined to see how for example poverty is contributing to their mental disturbances.

I like to conclude that, in a course of therapy, something has to be changed, so that the person with a psychological problem feels better. Since it's difficult to change their life's situation, the way they see things might be changed.