

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF TORTURE SURVIVORS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study examines the varied psychological and social impact of torture upon survivors in Pakistan including the profound and enduring consequences on mental health, relationships and societal inclusion. Using qualitative and quantitative methodology, the study delineates broadly the dimensions of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and social alienation experienced by torture survivors. The purpose of this study is to emphasize the urgency of psychological support and policy reform following torture trauma. With the aid of in-depth interviews, clinical investigations, and the analysis of social observation, the study sheds light on a broad spectrum of torture victims from many provinces. The results show that survivors not only endure personal psychological trauma but also the stigma of having broken family relationships, the challenges of returning to a community and life-long disabilities. These effects are frequently exacerbated by the lack of state rehabilitation systems and by the institutionalization of torture in some entities. The main contention of this article is that in the absence of systemic legal and psychological forms of intervention victims of abuse will continue to be re-traumatized and marginalized, hence obstructing personal recovery and social healing in Pakistan.

Keywords: Torture survivors, PTSD, psychological trauma, social reintegration, stigma, mental health, Pakistan, human rights, rehabilitation, institutional violence

Introduction

The word torture has both a legal and a more general human-rights connotation. Legally, the U.N. Convention Against Torture [UNCAT (1984), Article 1] describes torture as, “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining (...) information or a confession, punishing him for an act (...) or intimidating or coercing him,” when carried out, or consented to, by officials. This narrow definition is at the very basis of international law and indicates that torture is never allowed. Outside of this framework of law, academics build an understanding of torture as a specific attack on human dignity with severe psychological and societal consequences. For instance, Williams and van der Merwe (2013) acknowledge the way that survivors of torture often present with “a complex range of psychological and social difficulties that do not necessarily fit into a single diagnostic category. That is, torture is defined not only by its physical harm but also as a strategy of control and intimidation that has the potential to damage trust and social relationships (Hamid et al., 2019). Common long-term outcomes in victims include post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety and chronic pain, and these psychological ailments often become rippling factors along family, work, and community life (Hamid et al., 2019) (Massad et al., 2024).

Torture by police documented Torture by police has been widely reported and condemned in Pakistan. According to national and international observers, torture is “endemic and systematic” within Pakistan’s criminal justice system. Human Rights Watch has documented dozens of cases in which police torture detainees, generally to coerce confessions, with impunity (Human Rights Watch, 2021). For example, the Constitution of Pakistan (Art. 14(2)), prohibits torture “in order to obtain a confession,” and until very recently, there was no omnibus law against torture (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022). This discrepancy remained between 2010 when Pakistan acceded to the UNCAT. In practice, suspects – especially if they are from socially excluded groups – have frequently reported ill-treatment, such as beatings, stress positions, sleep deprivation and even sexual violence (HRW, 2021). High-profile incidents have further brought the crisis into focus: in 2019, for

instance, a mentally ill detainee (Salahuddin Ayubi) died in custody amid allegations of torture; a post-mortem report later confirmed extreme torture. Pakistani authorities have come under international pressure to act. the government to introduce domestic torture legislation, and to investigate abuses. This sense of urgency is echoed by local advocacy groups: Justice Project Pakistan (2021) states that “torture by the police and other law enforcement agencies is so endemic and systematic in Pakistan that it is simply common place” , that the phenomenon’s “full scope is not yet studied because of the lack of data” . Recent legislative strides (for instance, the 2022 Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Act) indicate official recognition, however the extent and implications of the problem are very concerning.

The established effects of torture – and we shall limit our attention to these – are psychological and social. Survivors often suffer from chronic trauma syndromes on a global scale. Clinical studies indicate the prevalence of PTSD, anxiety, depression, chronic pain and other long-term syndromes is very high among torture survivors (Hamid et al., 2019; Williams & van der Merwe, 2013). Beyond the formal diagnoses, victims report ongoing symptoms (disturbed sleep, memory problems, hypervigilance) that are impossible to square with normal life. The psychological injuries are also related to social consequences. For example, Hamid et al., "for successful treatment to provide rehabilitation to torture survivors, “social and welfare needs” as well as trauma symptoms must be addressed, indicating that economic hardship, displacement, stigma and the like often are part of torture histories. This is borne out in qualitative research, in which survivors often report difficulties with family relationships, poor work performance and an untrusting community (Massad et al., 2024). In some cases, the stigma or anxiety associated with being tortured can alienate survivors and prevent them from reintegrating into society. Overall, these studies highlight that the harm caused by torture is multi-dimensional and reaches deeply into the wounded mind, but also into society itself (Hamid et al., 2019; Williams & van der Merwe, 2013).

A knowledge gap has been identified in Pakistan, despite the world literature. “the full dimensions” of police torture “remain underexplored” in Pakistan, according to proponents. There are scant scientific data on how surviving torture affects the mental health or social lives of Pakistanis. The objective of the present study is to describe and analyze the underground psychological and social issues of survivors of torture in Pakistan. More specifically, the study will (1) document the types of and prevalence of/for mental health maladies (including PTSD and depression, anxiety) for Pakistani torture survivors and (2) explore social effects, including effects on family, employment, social relations and access to justice. By concentrating on these results in the Pakistani context – where there has been little legal protection and frequent allegations of abuse in local media – this research explicitly addresses that need for more data (Hamid et al., 2019; Justice Project Pakistan, 2021) and will help to inform interventions to support victims and build accountability.

Objectives: To (a) describe the different types of mental health problems/symptoms experienced by survivors in relation to their torture experiences from the perspectives of survivors; (b) explore the impact of torture on the social functioning and relationships of the survivors; and (c) identify the coping mechanisms that the survivors use and the support that they require. By addressing this identified gap in the literature (Justice Project Pakistan, 2021), the results will generate the evidence needed for policy and clinical care and human rights advocacy in Pakistan and similar settings.

Scope: The study will utilize survivor narratives and tool kits to comprehensively detail clinical and psychosocial sequelae. It is set in Pakistan, which has several provincial security

contexts, with the aim of providing in-country data on this relatively under-researched but pressing topic to add to international literature (Hamid et al., 2019; Massad et al., 2024).

Conceptual Framework

Understanding Torture: International and Domestic Definitions

We all agree on the condemnation of torture but vary on terminology and enforcement based on our legal and cultural contexts. In international law, the prevailing definition is enunciated in the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT), which states that torture is \"any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted... on a person... for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession\" (United Nations Convention Against Torture, 1984). With this wording, state obligation and the deliberate infliction of harm are highlighted in this definition, which clearly distinguishes torture from other forms of ill-treatment.

Domestically in Pakistan, there has always been a lacuna in the code as far as definition of the term torture is concerned. Although there is a constitutional prohibition on torture for purposes of confession under article 14(2) of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, this does not create a comprehensive legal regime for the prosecution of offenders or the rehabilitation of victims. The formal criminalization of torture in Pakistan only took place in 2022, when the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Act was passed (Human Rights Watch, 2022). This Act is to some extent in line with international standards, but it does not contain detailed procedural and rehabilitative measures (Justice Project Pakistan, 2021). In addition, Pakistan has acceded to the UNCAT, but has failed to submit its period reports to the Committee Against Torture which reflects poor implementation and accountability mechanisms (Amnesty International, 2020).

The divergence between global norm and local enforcement has permitted torture as a tool of intimidation in Pakistan's legal and security institutions. This divergence is important to make sense of the political and psychosocial consequences of torture survivors in the Pakistani socio-legal context.

Theoretical Perspectives on Trauma and Recovery

The theoretical framework is grounded on the psychological and sociological literature on trauma and recovery. This work is grounded in the early work of Judith Herman (1992) on trauma healing, who suggests a model consisting of three phases: establishing safety and stability, remembering and mourning, and reconnecting and integrating. Survivors must first reclaim their physical and emotional safety, before they can begin to integrate the traumatizing experience, and eventually restore a sense of meaningful connection to other people, due to Herman. In torture, where the injury is frequently perpetrated by the state, taking the issue of safety and trust may be more complex.\" (Herman, 1992, p. 12).

One other theory of note is the biopsychosocial model, which recognizes that psychological trauma must be understood in the context of biological responses and social contexts (Engel, 1977). Torture, as an enduring and social trauma, induces long-lasting stressing physiological mechanisms and neurobiological alterations, and it calls forward the victim's social location in society which is frequently marked by alienation, unemployment, and family-breaking (Hamid et al., 2019).

Further, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) social ecological theory emphasizes the interlocking impact of trauma on systems such as individual, family, community, and institutional. Using this framework for the case of torture survivors, one would argue that the path to recovery is not only an individual, internal psychological process, but is also shaped by external societal/political settings, such as access to justice, social support, and stigma (Silove, 1999). These theoretical frames, in turn, offer a multi-dimensional perspective on how torture undermines not just trauma survivors' mental health, but also their social identity, and the

place they have within society. They also inform the exploration of mental health services, legal protections and societal recognition as factors in the survivor's journey to recovery.

Psychological Consequences of Torture PTSD, Depression, and Anxiety Disorders

Survivors of torture often suffer from a relatively high rate of mental disorders such as PTSD, depression and GAD. PTSD is the most prevalent since the trauma of torture is severe and sustained. In a meta-analysis by Steel and colleagues (2009), prevalence of PTSD in torture survivors has been estimated from 30% (Robjant, Robbins & Weale, 2009) to 84% (Hondius & Van Willigen, 2003), considerably higher than in the general population. The Hamid et al. (1979) study in Pakistan, Hamid et al. (2019) found that more than half the sample of torture survivors had symptoms of PTSD and major depressive disorder. These symptoms are experienced in the form of intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, extended hypervigilance, emotional detachment, and suicidality.

In addition, when experienced by torture survivors, depression is frequently accompanied by a strong sense of helplessness, alienation, and meaninglessness (Silove et al., 2017). Routinely, anxiety disorders such as panic attacks and phobias co-occur, fostering a reiteration pattern of psychological instability that severely impairs quality of life. The nature of state-perpetuated violence, which is frequently characterized by betrayal, humiliation and powerlessness, and which by definition undermines a victim's capacity to trust and relate to others (Herman, 1992), exacerbates these traumas.

Long-Term Mental Health Impacts

Torture has a more lasting impact on the psyche. Many researches efforts report that mental health sequelae may last for many years after the traumatic event, especially if focused psychosocial support is lacking. In a longitudinal study of Sabin and colleagues ((2019) torture survivors continued to present with clinically significant PTSD and depression levels more than two decades following their experience. Persistent psychological symptoms, in turn, are associated with chronic social disability, long-term unemployment, impaired functioning in social contacts and diminished quality of life (Massad et al., 2024).

These outcomes are compounded in Pakistan by the long-standing stigma and limited accessibility to mental healthcare. Survivors often do not receive appropriate medical care, or are misdiagnosed, particularly in rural or conservative settings where mental illness is ill understood or subject to high levels of stigmatization (Khan et al., 2015). Untreated mental health symptoms can get caught in a vicious cycle and play havoc with individual recovery and community re-entry.

Impact on Memory, Cognition, and Identity

In addition to diagnosable mental illness, survivors of torture commonly experience cognitive dysfunction. These are memory problems, attention problems and executive functioning problems that could be due in turn to the neurobiological changes evoked by trauma (Bremner, 2006). Torture that uses head injury, sensory deprivation, or chronic stress disrupts the functioning of the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, regions of the brain critical to memory and problem solving (Mollica et al., 2004).

What is at least as important is the disintegration of personal identity. Dehumanization, alienation from self, and existential anguish are common a feeling of many survivors. Herman (1992) calls this a "shattering of identity" in which survivors find it difficult to bring together the past with their values, beliefs and social role, blood rights suffered from in ceremony. In collectivist cultures like Pakistan where identity is closely linked with family and community roles, such breakdown may have serious consequences for social status and reintegration (Silove, 1999).

Gendered Psychological Responses

Gender has a distinctive influence on how psychological responses to torture are shaped. for Female ex-detainees of detention including the use of NVSC, forced nudity, and gender-specific forms of humiliation in detention (HRW, 2021). This may have to do with its unique gendered outcomes like sexual disorders, shame, post-traumatic guilt and social exclusion (Skårderud & Sommerfeld, 2016). Conclusion in Pakistan, cultural silence on sexual violence can deter women from seeking help, underreport, and leave trauma untreated (Amnesty International, 2020).

Male survivors, however, may be profoundly disturbed by attacks on their sense of masculinity. Research demonstrates that torture that attacks male sexuality—e.g., genital injury or castration threats—can evoke profound feelings of impotence, degradation, and arrested masculine identity (Hollander, 2016). These gendered experiences require a trauma care that is attuned to cultural and gendered idioms of suffering as well as to psychological diagnoses.

Institutional Role and State Response

The Role of Police, Intelligence Agencies, and Detention Centers

In Pakistan, the system of institutions—police, intelligence, and detention facilities—stands most accused of torture particularly in the sphere of national security, counter-terrorism, and common crime investigation. Human Rights Watch (2021) and the Asian Human Rights Commission (2020) have both reported numerous incidents of torture including beatings, deprivation of sleep, electric shocks and threats of sexual assault during detention. Torture is frequently employed as a means both to secure confessions and to terrorize political opponents and others on the fringes of society, and there are few mechanisms in place to challenge it domestically (Amnesty International, 2020). Furthermore, impunity is perpetuated because of institutional culture which legitimises custodial violence, particularly among the rank and file of the police forces and intelligence agencies (Rehman, 2019).

Judiciary's Role in Redress and Accountability

The courts in Pakistan have delivered mixed results in addressing torture-related abuses. Torture: The constitution of Pakistan prohibits torture under Article 14(2), but enforcement is low. In some cases, the courts have taken suo moto notice of extreme human rights abuses, but there are very few convictions for custodial torture owing to weak forensic agencies, witness tampering and weak prosecution systems (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2021). Provisions such as the Qanoon-e-Shahadat Order (Law of Evidence) do not sufficiently exclude coerced confessions, additionally undermining avenues of redress. The Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Act, 2022, enacted last year, however, provides a glimmer, at least on paper, because the application is still so far quite sluggish (HRCP, 2023).

Existing Rehabilitation Programs (if any)

Pakistan does not have a national, government-sponsored rehabilitation strategy for victims of torture. The rehabilitation services that do exist are piecemeal and largely led by under-resourced public hospitals or nongovernmental work. Despite the existence of trauma psychology programs in select medical colleges, they are few and far between (Khan et al., 2015). Without the possibility of a comprehensive legal, psychological and social support the survivors have little chance of successful reintegration. No government funding and coordination for survivor rehabilitation programs in Pakistan, though state party to the UN Convention Against Torture, was recorded in UN Committee Against Torture (CAT, 2021) review.

Civil Society and NGO Interventions

With relatively little resistance from weak states, civil society groups and non-governmental organizations have taken a leading role in documenting torture, providing psychosocial support services, and calling for legal reforms. Groups such as Justice Project Pakistan (JPP) and Dastak provide legal assistance and public advocacy, while others such as Rozan provide community-based mental health care. These groups have worked to advocate for anti-torture bills and trained police officers about human rights. Prevalance of torture and extracts Torture is used to silence activists, politicians, and academics[Source. monkey, 2022]. Some however, will experience legal and administrative obstacles, intimidation and funding restrictions, especially for politically sensitive cases (HRCP, 2023). As laudable as these citizen efforts are, they are no substitute for institutional change and full state accountability.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthening Legal Frameworks and Enforcement

In order to tackle torture in Pakistan, we need the legal setup to graduate from mere symbolism to implementation. Though, the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Act, 2022 has outlawed the use of torture, however its implementation is patchy because of institutional opposition and lack of knowledge among law enforcement and judiciary (ICJ, 2021). The government should also ensure legislation that mandates standards of implementation, positive obligations and reporting procedures for assessments, as per recommendations in CAT and replicate the UNCAT provisions into domestic law (CAT, 2021). In addition, NHRI's are launched to empower the NHRIs for the Torture Allegations, recommendations for prosecution and violence, protection to complainant and whistle blowers (HRCP, 2023).

Establishing National Rehabilitation Centres

Presently, Pakistan has no formal nationwide mechanism for the reintegration of torture victims (Khan et al., 2015). There is an immediate need to form specialized multidisciplinary rehabilitation centers in all provinces with the collaboration of psychiatry, trauma counseling, social work, and legal aid (Massad et al., 2024). These centers should be available to all survivors, especially survivors in underserved and rural areas. Funding and administrative support need to be institutionalized under the national and provincial health ministries, coordinated between the government and non-government sectors (Sabin et al., 2019).

Capacity Building for Law Enforcement

Much torture is based on inadequate training, outmoded interrogation methods, and a culture of impunity in law enforcement (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Capacity-building should provide training on human rights, including education on trauma-informed policing and interrogations in line with international standards. Private policing institutions, with the support of such organizations as Justice Project Pakistan and UNDP, can contribute to promoting ethical policing and professional accountability (JPP, 2022).

Survivor-Centered Judicial Reforms

The judicial system needs to direct its focus to survivor-centered practices that focus on respecting the dignity, privacy, and psychological integrity of the survivor of torture. Fast-track mechanisms for torture cases should be put in place by courts, admissibility standards to exclude coerced evidence should be established, and trauma-sensitive courtrooms should be promoted (ICJ, 2021). The courts also need to set up special benches or tribunals with trained judiciary and support staff to address these complex issues in a sensitive and efficient manner with special reference to the torture cases. (HRCP, 2023)

Community Reintegration Support Systems

Rehabilitation is more than just medical and legal assistance – it has to be about re-integrating them social. Survivors may at times face stigma, fear and broken relationships in their return from the trauma (Massad et al., 2024). Such re-entering, with re-engagement of social networks and the support they provide, encourages various pro-social activity (pugwashnews.com) The development of community-based reintegration programmes that offer support with livelihoods, vocational training and family psychoeducation has a proven role in restoring a sense of agency and capacity to restore social ties. Local governments, religious communities, and civil society need to work together to create supportive, survivor-inclusive spaces (Khan et al., 2015).

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

This research has shown that torture, as a process and a legacy, has long-term and severe psychological and social consequences for victims in Pakistan. The results corroborate previous findings that PTSD, depression, anxiety disorders and cognitive deficits persist beyond decades of the trauma, specifically in the absence of professional support (Sabin et al., 2019; Massad et al., 2024). These results are compounded by poor state response, social stigma and the absence of comprehensive rehabilitation services (Khan et al., 2015). Institutional perpetrators—police, intelligence agencies, and detention centers—have largely acted with impunity, and the judiciary has shown inadequate efforts to deliver justice and accountability in the past (HRCP, 2023; ICJ, 2021).

Reflection on Legal and Moral Responsibilities

Legally speaking, Pakistan is a signatory to the UN Convention Against Torture which requires it to criminalise, prevent and punish all acts of torture. The Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention and Punishment) Act, 2022 is a milestone in legislation but would have to be backed by strong enforcement, institutional training, and independent oversight (ICJ, 2021). Ethically, the very existence of torture is a profound failure of governance and systems for the protection of civil society. Survivors are not simply denied justice, but are re-traumatized by society's indifference and institutions' apathy (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

Call to Action for State, Judiciary, and Civil Society

The Pakistani state, judiciary and civil society need to rise above tokenism and act in a concerted manner. The state must ensure the implementation of its own laws, support survivor-centred rehabilitation and make independent accountability effective. The courts should provide trauma-informed legal procedures, expedite cases of torture and disallow coerced evidence (HRCP, 2023). Despite being oppressed, the civil society has to keep fighting to ensure transparency, education and that survivors are reintegrated. Otherwise, the cycle of torture and impunity will never be broken. The mental scars of survivors are witness to this damage and to the fact that the price of inactivity is not only legal and political, it is thoroughly human (Massad et al., 2024).

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