

THE GLOBAL CRISIS OF VIOLENCE

COMMON PROBLEMS, UNIVERSAL CAUSES, SHARED SOLUTIONS

Trauma: Survival Is Victory



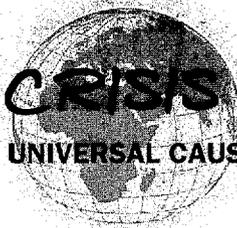
One in a series of six
briefing papers produced
by the Violence and
Development Project.

*The Violence and Development Project is a collaboration between
the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education,
the Benton Foundation and the U.S. Agency for International Development.*

OFFICE OF PEACE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

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Trauma: Survival Is Victory

Rwandans fleeing the mass killing in their village are emotionally numb by the time they reach the border with Zaire. A Vietnam War veteran abuses alcohol and cannot hold down a job. A child becomes withdrawn and takes no interest in her schoolwork after her family is forced to move to a homeless shelter.

Across national borders, people who have been traumatized share many of the same symptoms. All have experienced or witnessed overwhelming violence, whether it be structural violence (such as poverty, hunger, and homelessness); personal violence (such as mugging and rape); or institutional violence (such as war, genocide, state repression, and torture).

In the following pages, we will explore three causes of trauma. We will look at the relationship between trauma and violence. And we will examine strategies used in both the U.S. and the global South to heal trauma victims.

What is Trauma?

Exposure to sudden, prolonged, or repeated experiences of a life-threatening nature may result in deep emotional wounding, or psychological trauma, for victims and witnesses. Such emotional injury often includes feelings of intense rage and powerlessness. The scenes and images of violence become permanently imprinted in the psyche, along with associated feelings of terror and anguish.¹

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychological condition

which results from exposure to a traumatic experience that exceeds a person's ability to respond or cope effectively. Symptoms associated with PTSD include: flashbacks (in which the victim repeatedly reexperiences the event in his or her mind); a numbing of responsiveness and an avoidance of situations associated with the trauma; and a tendency to overreact to loud noises or quick movements.²

Among those at risk for PTSD are political refugees, torture victims, combat veterans, and survivors of rape, incest, alcoholic homes, assault, domestic violence, war and natural disasters.³

Three Causes of Trauma

War. Children who witness acts of violence during war often have images that haunt them for years. The international development agency Save the Children estimates that ten million children around the globe experience emotional stress resulting from war.⁴ Like children exposed to conventional warfare, America's young people who live under conditions of chronic violence (for example, in neighborhoods where gang warfare and police crackdowns are common) may experience symptoms of trauma.⁵ Parents, too, can become traumatized. Studies show that parents everywhere who are unable to provide a safe environment for their children sometimes lose confidence and become emotionally unresponsive.⁶

In addition to affecting individuals and families, war often effects entire com-

munities and nations. The collective trauma caused by the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki still haunts Japan. And in the former Yugoslavia, symptoms of trauma are pervasive in communities that have been ravaged by war.

Migration. Over the past two decades, more people than ever before have been forced to flee their homes as a result of political repression, war, torture, and other violent conditions. The number of refugees worldwide jumped from ten and a half million in 1984 to fourteen and a half million in 1994.⁷ Not only are the situations that provoked flight horrific, but the actual process of migration can be filled with terrors as well. Among refugee populations who have been uprooted from their homes, post-traumatic stress disorders are common.⁸ Many refugees experience a profound sense of loss or defeat as a result of being separated from "all that is important and familiar: family, friends, language, culture."⁹

Homelessness. Conditions of poverty and deprivation are both physically and psychologically damaging. When human beings are unable to provide for their own basic needs and those of dependent family members, their sense of security is shattered. Homelessness, for example, deprives people of their right to security, and is often traumatizing, especially for children.¹⁰

Researchers have previously reported that the majority of homeless children suffer from serious de-

The Violence and Development Project

The Violence and Development Project, a collaboration between the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education, and the Benton Foundation, aims to educate social work professionals about the parallel conditions of violence in the U.S. and less economically developed countries. To this end, the project, with the help of funding from the United States Agency for International Development has prepared a series of six papers focusing on violence as a global affliction and sustainable human development as a global antidote.

In this series, we will address the following questions:

- What is the interrelationship between violence and related problems in the U.S. and less developed nations?
- What do social workers know about these problems, and what is the role of social workers in solving the global problem of violence?
- What can we learn from past and current international development efforts of the U.S. government and non-governmental development agencies?

This paper provides an overview of the connections between violence and development. The remaining papers in this series will focus on violence in relationship to five sub-themes: substance abuse, women and children, ethnicity, poverty, and trauma.

Key Concepts

Sustainable Human Development

The term development may be defined as "meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfill their aspirations for a better life." According to this broad definition, development focuses on fostering economic opportunity, equity, human rights, dignity, democracy, peace, and spiritual and emotional well-being.¹

Social workers will readily understand this concept, for it is what they strive to do everyday in their work with individuals, families, communities and organizations. In this series, however, we will be examining development from a national and international perspective.

Beginning in the late 1980s, a new consensus emerged within the international development community about how to best achieve long-lasting, positive change within poor countries. The agreed-upon strategy, known as sustainable human development, is based on these underlying principles:

- Meeting basic human needs for food, clean water, shelter, health care and education.
- Expanding economic opportunities for people, especially the poor, to increase their productivity and earning capacity in ways that are environmentally, economically and socially viable over the long-term.
- Protecting the environment by managing natural resources in ways that take into account the needs of current and future generations.
- Promoting democratic participation, especially by poor women and men, in economic and political decisions that affect their lives.
- Encouraging adherence to internationally recognized human rights standards.²

The International Development Community

The United States, through the federal office called the Agency for International Development, spent slightly less than one percent of the annual national budget, or \$14 billion, on foreign assistance in 1994. Of this money, 15 percent, or \$2.1 billion, went to fund projects to help people in poor countries better their lives. Other monies went toward military and security aid; food, exports, and other economic aid; and emergency humanitarian assistance.³

In addition to federal funds, there are several hundred U.S.-based charitable international development organizations, called private voluntary organizations (PVOs) or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These organizations receive an estimated \$4.5 billion a year from individuals and businesses that goes to support relief and development efforts in the poorest nations of the world. Some of the better known of these organizations are Save the Children, CARE, Oxfam and the American Red Cross.⁴

Global North/Global South

The term global North refers to the world's industrialized, wealthy countries, while the term global South refers to the world's poor nations. These terms are merely descriptive, as the split between rich and poor nations does not fall along strict geographic lines.

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According to per capita gross national product figures from the World Bank, there are 24 high-income countries, with 15% of the world's people, including the United States, Switzerland and Japan. Sixty-three countries, containing 29% of the population make up the middle-income category, which includes the Philippines, Romania, and Iran. The low-income sector, with a total of 45 countries and 56% of the world's population, includes Guatemala, Somalia, and Bangladesh.⁵

Violence

Violence may be broadly defined as an act or situation that harms the health and/or well being of oneself or others. Violence includes both direct attacks on a person's physical and psychological integrity, and destructive acts that do not involve a direct relationship between victims and the institution or person responsible for the harm.⁶

One of the goals of this project is to expand the common perception of violence to include such problems as racism, sexism, poverty, and hunger. These social ills grow out of institutions, governments, and economic structures that encourage the domination of certain groups of people over other groups, perpetuating unequal access to wealth and other resources. Inequities, which may be based on class, race, gender, or ethnicity, are often enforced through the use of violence by police forces, government troops or their proxies, foreign powers, and other forms of sanctioned militarism.

Threats to personal security and social stability come

from several sources. Among them: social and economic systems (deprivation, lack of access, oppression); the state (repression, torture, police brutality or inaction); other states (colonization, war); other groups of people (civil war, ethnic conflict, discrimination, hate crimes); and individuals or gangs (homicide, muggings). Violence may be directed against specific groups such as women (rape, domestic violence, lack of access to better education or jobs); children (child abuse, neglect); and ethnic populations (genocide, hate crimes, discrimination), or against the self (suicide, substance abuse).

Among the underlying principles of the Violence and Development Project is that long-term solutions to violence must include permanent changes in structural and institutional systems that give rise to deprivation and oppression and create a world of haves and have-nots.

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The following chart lays out three tiers of violence. These tiers form an intractable cycle, each feeding upon the other.

Structural

Avoidable deprivations built into the structure of society based on norms and traditions that subjugate one group in favor of another (poverty, hunger)

Institutional

Harmful acts by organizations and institutions (oppression, unequal treatment under the law, police brutality, torture)

Official forms of violence (state repression, war and invasion)

Personal

Interpersonal acts of violence against persons or property (rape, murder, muggings)

Harmful acts against self (alcohol, drug abuse, suicide)

Acts by organized groups or mobs (hate crimes, looting, rioting)⁷

velopmental, emotional, and learning problems . . . For preschoolers, these five years span critical developmental stages. Extended trauma during this time may initiate a cycle of underachievement and emotional problems that cannot readily be reversed.¹¹

—Ellen Bassuk and Ellen Gallagher

A survey of thirty U.S. cities found that families with children account for 39% of the homeless population. The same study found that children account for just over one-quarter of the homeless population.¹²

The Effects of Unresolved Trauma: Roadblocks to Development

Trauma, if left untreated, may prevent individuals from moving forward and living their lives to their full potential. Long-term effects of unresolved trauma include PTSD, low self-esteem, depression, chemical dependency, and violent behaviors.¹³ Some common responses of traumatized individuals are:

Flight response. Sometimes, trauma evokes responses which initially function as a form of self-protection. The flight response, for example, involves avoidance of painful memory. Trauma is hidden and denied as a defense against shame or self-blame.¹⁴ Denial prevents individuals from getting the help needed to address and cope with current realities. In the absence of emotional healing, the protective response is likely to become rigid and chronic, resulting in self-defeating patterns of behavior.¹⁵

Identification with the aggressor. Traumatized individuals often suffer devastating assaults to self-esteem and increased helplessness and dependency, resulting from an inability to protect themselves. Unless trust is restored through psychological healing, the victim may adopt the dominator's perspective of themselves, forming a "traumatic bond" with their oppressors. They may internalize or redirect aggression toward others similar to themselves.¹⁶

Role reversal, in which a former pow-

erless victim assumes the attributes of the aggressor, is a critical dynamic in the cycle of violence. The former victim may provoke repeated abuse or reverse the roles, so that victim becomes victimizer. Such learned and repeated patterns of behavior have been documented in cases of family violence as well as physical assault with a deadly weapon.¹⁷ "When considered within the context of a cycle of violence, violent acts — which may at first appear to be irrational when viewed as isolated incidents — often become comprehensible as the symptoms of painful, humiliating and shameful experiences that have not been effectively healed."¹⁸

Truncated moral development. Chronic violence has been linked to truncated moral development in several cases. Fields' (1987) research in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, for example, revealed that children who lived in violent communities remained at more primitive stages of moral development than other children. If adults, such as parents and teachers, do not model higher moral reasoning, then it is likely that moral development will not occur.¹⁹

Towards Solutions: Approaches to Healing

Empowerment. Empowerment approaches to treating trauma, including self-help groups and community-based services, allow individuals, families and communities to make peace with the past and to regain control of their lives. Victims can be empowered by:

■ **Developing trust.** Confidentiality and a safe, caring environment are essential to help trauma victims search for forgotten and unhappy memories and to rediscover a sense of their own power. Traumatized people often find it easier to share their feelings in a self-help group where other members have had similar experiences.²⁰

■ **Speaking the truth.** Full disclosure of available facts about a traumatizing event and associated feelings

are crucial elements for recovery. If disclosed, feelings of anxiety, powerlessness, pain, and fear are likely to be defused and diminished over time, becoming part of conscious life history and the development of identity.²¹

■ **Expressing grief.** Grieving and accepting loss—of other people, of trust, of safety, of life's meaning— are critical components of psychic healing.²² In the global South, communities use unique interventions to encourage people to come to terms with their grief. These interventions may be based on cultural rituals and traditions, ceremonies, spiritual experiences, drama, dance, storytelling, artwork, music, and other group activities.²³

Community cooperation. Because the healing process relies on social supports and connectedness to others, it can be very powerful when communities draw upon their own resources to heal from violence and trauma.²⁴ Two examples:

In a closed refugee camp in El Salvador, members divided responsibilities for child care, agriculture, food preparation, sewing, and carpentry so that everyone contributed to community survival and well-being. New arrivals were assigned integral roles in the settlement in order to make them feel at home. Salvadoran psychologists working with this camp reported significant positive psychosocial results.²⁵

In the US, residents of five underdeveloped neighborhoods in Kansas City are working to rebuild their communities by offering support to one another. "Block leaders" receive limited financial compensation to spend time with young people and their parents. These leaders offer such services as help with homework, field trips, wake-up calls, home visits, and school advocacy. They are demonstrating that neighbors can reduce crime and repair the fabric of their own community block by block.²⁶

Apology and forgiveness. Apology by

Learning to Cry In the Same Room

Nancy Baron, a clinical psychologist based in Boston, has spent the last two years exploring ways in which psychology can be used to help war widows and children displaced by civil strife in Sri Lanka. She began by helping a small nongovernmental organization that was working with war widows, most of whom were under 30 years old, and some of whom had up to eight children. Many of the displaced families had been in camps for up to four years.

She realized that in Sri Lanka she was working with a society that does not give people an opportunity to express sadness. "The society tries to make people forget. We gave them an opportunity to explore their feelings." She started with a large group of per-

haps thirty war widows from the four ethnic factions affected by the fighting. She used art to overcome language barriers. "They drew an early childhood that was happy, a young adulthood that was happy and then the beginning of the trouble after the death of the husband. The women were able to sit together and say that each group was responsible for killing each other's husbands. Everyone was crying, and they were able to hug each other."

One woman did not cry. She pointed to the scar on her face and said that her husband had stabbed her. She was relieved when he was killed. "The women empathized with her. They could talk about the experience."²⁷

people or nations that have caused trauma to others is an important and powerful step along the path to healing.²⁸

When South African president F.W. de Klerk offered a deep and dramatic apology for apartheid in April, 1993, he helped pave the way for a new future for South Africa. Former Alabama Governor George Wallace accomplished what the U.S. as a nation has not yet achieved. Once an avowed segregationist who ordered dogs and fire hoses to be turned on black demonstrators, he eventually came to the realization that he was wrong and publicly apologized for his former position. In 1982, he ran for a fourth term. In a dramatic testament to generosity and forgiveness, it was the black vote that carried him.²⁹

Peace researchers view interpersonal forgiveness as the smallest unit of peacemaking. Moreover, forgiveness is beginning to be seen as a legitimate method of international conflict resolution.³⁰ Whether between individuals, groups or nations, apologies for former wrongs (in tandem with a conciliatory forger) tend

to soften the memory of former conflict and promote an atmosphere from which mending and progress can occur.³¹

Conscientization and Democracy Building. For oppressed peoples, an important part of the healing process takes place when they are able to analyze the political and social forces that contributed to their trauma in the first place, and then take action to end inequality. This kind of self-awareness and participation are essential for a true and flourishing democracy, liberty and self-determination.³²

Real change and healing may mandate a shift in the traditional power structures of the past, enabling victims to gain more control over their lives and ensuring that atrocities are not repeated. Combatting helplessness at all levels, and replacing it with hope and action for a better future is a key element in complete recovery from trauma.

One inspiring story of the power of individuals to effect change comes from Guatemala. Motivated by the "disappearance" of their loved ones by government-

tal security forces, surviving relatives united to form El GAM — the Mutual Support Group for Relatives of the Disappeared. The founders had met by chance while looking for their sons and husbands in prisons and morgues. They exchanged names, phone numbers, and support. At the first official meeting in 1985, 25 women came together. One member recalls, "We all got up and told our personal stories. It was very emotional." Subsequently, they petitioned and demonstrated in the streets, demanding to know what had happened to their family members. As the disappearances continued, their numbers swelled to nearly 1,000. For their courageous and selfless efforts to gain justice in the face of adversity, they have received international recognition and support. Their work continues today.³³

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FURTHER RESOURCES

Save the Children

52 Wilton Rd.
Westport, CT 06880
203/221-4000

Works in more than 25 countries with child victims of war. Trains social workers to provide treatment for emotional distress and carry out family programs.

Amnesty International, USA

322 8th Ave.
New York, NY 10001
212/807-8400

Works for the release of all prisoners of conscience and an end to torture and executions.

What You Can Do

- Become an advocate for global social justice. Understand the inherent political forces behind many traumas and be willing to assist people in understanding and changing their socio-political situation.
- Recognize that responses to trauma may differ according to a victim's cultural background, and plan treatment strategies accordingly.
- Assume that refugees have experienced some kind of trauma. Ask them whether they have been tortured. Direct inquiry is important because few victims will spontaneously disclose that kind of experience. Communicate a sense of understanding about their pain and suffering.
- In the case of refugee children, develop interventions that include parents, teachers, and members of the community, such as law enforcement officers, public assistance and child abuse workers, and medical professionals. They need to be alert to the post-migration stressors, how children manifest their distress, and how the stress can be alleviated.
- Social workers themselves can be traumatized by what they see and hear in their work. Be alert to what you are exposing yourself to. Build peer support into your work.

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