



NARRATIVE REPORT

5th International conference for Health and Human Rights "Conflict, Health and Social Reconstruction"

3-6 December 1998

Cape Town
South Africa

Background:

This report summarises discussions and highlights emerging from the conference attended by organizations and individuals working with survivors of human rights violations worldwide. The conference was a continuation of the strategy of the International Society for Health and Human Rights (ISHHR) to create a forum for the fruitful exchange of knowledge and information among those interested in the promotion of issues related to Health and Human Rights.

Previous conferences convened by the Society in Costa Rica, Chile and the Philippines emphasized the importance of strengthening regional networks offering care to survivors of human rights violations. In this regard, ISHHR had adopted a wide-ranging resolution, which committed it to addressing all world Regions. It was emphasized that Africa and the Middle East should benefit from the conference in South Africa, and the value of regional gatherings was emphasized in the planning for the 5th International conference. The five regions identified were:

- Central and South America
- Asia/Pacific
- Africa/Middle East
- Europe
- North America

Collaborative networking and the sharing of skills and expertise across regions was an overwhelming success at the conference. The contributions were active and enthusiastic which resulted in the success and dynamism of the strategies for future work in the field of human rights.

It is important to note that discussions among participants highlighted the need to develop further opportunities for cooperation and coordination, and assisting Regional partners for forthcoming international conferences. The exchange of skills and the development of capacity in developing countries were deemed crucial for the future.

The Conference:

The International Society for Health and Human Rights (ISHHR) welcomed the participants from a range of countries from all the continents: Australia, Armenia, Brazil, Chile, Croatia, Costa Rica, Cambodia, Mexico, Sweden, El Salvador, Peru, Rwanda, Mozambique, Namibia, Tibet, India, Denmark, Finland, Guatemala, United Kingdom, The U.S.A., Pakistan, the Philippines, Israel, Palestine, Norway, Paraguay, Germany, and South Africa among others.



Officers from Amnesty International, IRCT, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC-S.Africa), as well as members of the South African government and the City of Cape Town attended as observers. The number of participants totalled two hundred and thirty six.

From the outset the conference emphasized the importance of exchange, cultural diversity and action-oriented outcomes. It provided an opportunity for participants to meet, share experiences and engage in dialogue in a safe, supportive environment. The development community building strategies and opportunities for contact with local communities was fostered at the conference.

Key Themes Dialogued at the Conference

- Truth, Justice and Reconciliation
- Children, Trauma and Oppression
- Gender, Trauma and Oppression
- The Uprooted People, Forced Migration and Repatriation
- Treatment, Diagnosis and Evaluation
- Indigenous Healing, Ideology and Community Development

The conference language was English, with many delegates using Spanish and French. A lack of funding for simultaneous translation was a severe limiting factor in fostering nuanced discussions among participants. Nevertheless, the camaraderie and supportive ethos that had developed among participants went a long way in remedying this difficulty.

Truth, Justice and Reconciliation

The opening plenary session set the tone for the conference in a moving and poignant manner. The key speaker, Judge Albie Sachs of the South African Constitutional court, spoke with much depth and emotion about the issues facing developing democracies following a conflict. A survivor of an attempted assassination by the Apartheid regime that had resulted in the loss of his arm and eye, he unravelled the issues of forgiveness and reconciliation facing survivors of human rights violations, when confronted by those who sought to murder them. In a personal account, he shared his experiences of meeting the man who planted the car bomb that almost killed him. He emphasized the importance of the element of justice in any reconciliation between forces at war. His contribution was both touching and inspiring.

This theme was echoed by others during the conference when they spoke about the genocide of the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Burundi and the conflicts of Sierra Leone, East Timor and Liberia. A session was devoted to this theme of Truth and Reconciliation with a special focus on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that had just recently completed its findings on Apartheid and its violation of the human rights of the people of South Africa. The trauma of this system was discussed and its impact on the psyches examined. The chief prosecutor of the TRC emphasised the importance of setting up legal parameters to ensure that these violations are never repeated and that the perpetrators of these torturous activities are not given impunity. The issue of impunity was a particularly vexing one at the conference, and much debate



emerged from agencies working with survivors of human rights in Latin America where many of the torturers have been given amnesty in the political solution following a transition to democracy from a military dictatorship.

The importance of training and developmental was repeatedly highlighted at the conference. Many participants emphasized the need for preparing health workers for community trauma assistance and the reconciliation process. The case of the Philippines, Croatia and Mozambique was highlighted. It was also suggested that training in human rights for health professionals is absolutely critical.

The theme of Truth, Justice and Reconciliation was particularly important at this international conference, given the similarity of experience in post-conflict countries and the attempt to address the issues of community wide healing amongst people. The cross-country and continent discussions were enriching and also encouraging. The new strategies for cooperation among participants from different regions facing the same dilemmas were an important outcome, and an excellent achievement.

Gender, Trauma and Oppression

The key speaker from Palestine, Nadera-Kevorkian-Shalhoub examined in an energizing and empowering talk the challenges facing women in developing countries. In a poetic and inspiring address, she encouraged participants to look at the silent torture of patriarchy and its resultant consequence of defeatism and self-oppression among the oppressed. Much discussion ensued and from this emerged a vibrant and vital progressive formulation of strategies for the amelioration of the trauma associated with this oppression. Participants were challenged to examine their own subtle contribution to the perpetuation of violence against women, both physically as well as in processes in their society. The notion of culture and the embedded oppression of some traditional beliefs about the role and rights of women were well explicated.

The emphasis on the trauma of gender was given voice by other participants in sessions that looked at the poor social services available to women afflicted by AIDS, genital mutilation and violence. A special focus at the conference emerged from those health workers facing the AIDS crisis in Africa. The impact on women has been tremendous. South African statistics show that half of all pregnant women in a region of South Africa are HIV positive. The lack of a coordinated strategy to respond to this has been particularly distressing.

The Uprooted, Forced Migration and Repatriation

This theme was given immense focus and debate from participants at the conference. Given the nature of recent social upheaval in the Great Lakes region in Africa, as well as the former Yugoslavia, the focus on refugees was of priority during discussions. The key address by Patrick Taran mapped out the relationship between globalisation, migration and human rights. His contribution ignited intense dialogue on the role of advocacy and empowerment in addressing the forced migration of entire populations fleeing from poverty, war and death. Delegates worked especially intensely in developing both psychosocial and socio-political strategies to respond to this crucial area.



This was complemented by a second key address by Gabriela Rodriguez on the issues of forced migration and repatriation in Latin America. The parallel nature of uprootedness across continents was visible and the coordinated strategies to intervene drawing from lessons across all continents was particularly encouraging.

Further contributions ranged from discussion of the protocols for the assessment of newly arrived refugees in countries offering asylum, to the somewhat sad and despairing sharing of the stories of refugee children and unaccompanied minors. The secondary traumatising of refugees seeking care in safe havens like Srebrenica and the impotence of those entrusted with providing safety and care was particularly distressing. Important strides were made by participants who developed community wide interventions, and shared examples of their success in engendering autonomy from uprootedness.

Clinical case examples of therapeutic work with refugee children in Europe, and the development of health policy in the Netherlands as well as in the USA offered an integrated approach to the challenges of working with refugees. The areas of diagnostics, policy development, therapeutic interventions, community development, and cultural awareness combined to mirror the importance of a synergised response to this extreme global situation.

African and Latin American participants were particularly concerned about the savage manifestation and breadth of aggression against civilian populations in the region that had resulted in massive loss of life and the disruption of entire communities in recent ethno-conflicts. The orchestrated campaign of terror against civilians that has marked recent genocide in Africa was especially disturbing. A participant from Rwanda shared heart-rending tales of death and brutality that were sadly echoed by other participants from countries that had experienced similar terror and forced exodus. This issue was foregrounded for further focus at future ISHHR meetings.

Children, Trauma and oppression

Children and their vulnerability and special needs were discussed at length at the conference. The work of programmes in Brazil addressing violence among poor adolescents was both innovative and well researched. Input from participants from the Asia-Pacific region as well as some African countries focused attention on the issue of child soldiers and their rehabilitation. This issue was debated at length and small discussion groups attempted to develop protocols and instruments to encourage countries involved in internecine conflict to raise the age of conscription to the army to 18 years of age. Mozambican colleagues shared the brilliant work that they were doing in the rehabilitation of child soldiers and their effective integration to civil society.

The paucity of research on the impact of social disintegration on youth development was underlined. In this regard, it was emphasised that family cohesion, both of the nuclear and extended type, and its contribution to the development of resiliency needed further exploration. The concept of cultural transition and developmental strain was helpful in understanding the needs of children. The high incidence of violence against children, and especially the sexual



exploitation of girls was of urgent concern worldwide. South African delegates spoke with outrage and dismay at the situation of children in their newly democratic society. Government representatives shared these concerns and outlined a well-constructed plan of action to address this horror.

Many training workshops focused on therapeutic interventions aimed at traumatized children and in responding to their needs in a holistic and cohesive manner. In this regard skills exchange at the conference was very fruitful.

Treatment, Diagnosis and evaluation

Clinical case discussions of individual and group psychotherapeutic interventions were well represented at the conference. The treatment of survivors of torture was specially focused upon. In this regard, participants countries most recently afflicted by this form of inhumanity (especially in Africa) were afforded the opportunity to learn from their colleagues from Latin America and Europe who had a wealth of expertise in treating this issue. Given the lack of capacity and skills shortage of these in Africa, the conference succeeded in upgrading the knowledge base of participants. Clinical supervision and mentoring at the conference went a long way in addressing this lack of capacity. Cutting edge techniques like the use of EMDR in the treatment of severely traumatized torture victims was both demonstrated and taught as part of the skills exchange and training workshops.

The importance of the use of rituals and rites of passage in Africa and Peru added an important dynamic ingredient to the learning of colleagues from developed countries that often assisted refugees from less developed countries and those seeking refuge in safer environments. Clinicians welcomed the importance of fostering empowerment among survivors of human rights violations rather than adaptation. Innovative therapeutic modalities and the use of complementary therapies and holistic medicine was demonstrated and appreciated by a wide spectrum of participants. The need for further collaboration and exchange in this arena of treatment was mooted as urgent.

Professional Development, Training and Skills Exchange

ISHHR endorses skills exchange as central to its methodology not only at the conference, but also as an approach to ongoing regional education. Previous ISHHR conferences have emphasised this area as crucial to the development of those interested in the advance of services for survivors of gross human rights violations. The 5th International Conference was no exception. It continued the policy of training and professional development by participants for participants in a facilitative and culturally diverse environment. Participants are a vital resource for the professional development of services working with survivors of human rights violations.

Workshops ranged from training individuals in using movement and art therapy skills to assist traumatized children, to using creativity as a means to healing and social reconstruction. Participants these workshops most beneficial and have asked for further opportunities for training and development.



Special Foci: Ethics and Indigenous Healing

The area of ethics has been of special importance in the Society, which has a special sub-group that has developed ethical guidelines and practices for membership as well as for those working in the field of health and human rights. Honorary President Loes van Willigen and Council member Ahmad Baker spearhead this active special interest group and have produced sterling work for use in research and service provision in the field of Health and Human rights.

The centrality of the issues of indigenous healing and spirituality in the healing process were explored and explicated by participants from Tibet, Africa and Peru. The healing power of spirituality was seen as an important factor in the rehabilitation of survivors of torture, as well as integral to the re-integration of child soldiers in Mozambique who have a well-developed traditional belief system. The importance of incorporating traditional belief systems of attributing meaning to successfully intervening in situations of trauma was highlighted.

Other Conference Highlights

A visit to the Robben Island prison that held President Nelson Mandela for 27 years was both moving and inspiring. This prison is a mere 30-minute boat ride from the mainland, and is clearly visible on a clear day. The visit was conducted by an ex-political prisoner and a keynote speaker, Saths Cooper who having shared the same block of cells as the humble president, related tales of hardship and resiliency in an informative and sometimes light-hearted manner. This however did not detract from the broader message of overcoming adversity and the triumph of the human spirit. For many participants this was an important highlight of the conference.

A special reception hosted by the Mayor of the City of Cape Town was another event of note. The City as a mark of tribute and appreciation for human rights workers worldwide held a formal reception for delegates to the conference. The gravity of the issues of Health and Human Rights on the international agenda was given further impetus at this social function. Tribute was also paid to Helen Bamber, secretary general of ISHHR for her lifelong dedication and commitment to the advancement of care for survivors of human rights violations.

Conclusion:

The 5th International Conference for Health and Human Rights was a resounding success in meeting its goal of providing a forum for the advancement of the issue of Health and Human rights worldwide; in promoting opportunities for discussion and skills exchange across the continents; in providing a safe environment for the development of strategies for effective interventions with survivors of human rights violations; as well as encouraging the development of collaborative networks between all those from the developed and less developed countries interested in the pursuit of care, democracy and universal human rights.

The Society was also successful in expanding its active Council to include representatives from Croatia, Tibet and the USA. This will enable it to expand its area of focus and assistance.



The participants of the 5th International Conference for Health and Human Rights have decided to hold its next conference in Croatia in 2001.