

Political motivated imprisonment and torture survivors’ experiences of trauma and resilience in Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

Back ground: This study was aimed to explore the subjective experiences of trauma and resilience of political motivated imprisoned and tortured survivors. Findings shows that the prevalence of torture close to epidemic public problem levels in inmate communities and it makes tortured survivors subjected to traumas and other psychological atrocities while and after imprisonment. Moreover, the survivor’ pre, perie and post imprisonment cognitive, psychological and social factors were associated with the levels of trauma and other psycho social problems. Regarding the Ethiopian context, the EPRDF regime was highly known and criticized by imprisoned and tortured front line political and social activists and journalists. **Methods:** The study was employed case study by included two respondents who were subjected to political imprisonment and tortured five and above years. The researcher has employed phenomenological approaches to interpret the data which were collected via interview guide and semi structured questioners. **Results:** The study shows that the respondents were forced to witness terrifying and annoying actions, forbidden from taking shower and washing clothes and exposed to life threatening conditions. They were manifest traumatic symptoms of avoiding situations which reminds imprisonment like, being nervous and irritated when they see a man with military uniforms, being hyper vigilant for some sounds, feeling of numbness. Moreover, participants perceived that their families especially their children lost psychological, social and economic advantages due to their imprisonment and torture. **Conclusion:** The two respondents were experienced severe forms of tortured and inhuman handling during their imprisonment. However, their current trauma and negative psychological states were varied with their social capitals and political ideologies and religious commitment. Hence, mental health and rehabilitation workers had better to give attention to strengthen survivors’ social resources and spiritual commitments during the rehabilitations process of tortured survivors.

Keywords: Tortured, Imprisonment, Trauma, PTSD, Coping

International and national levels of human right laws and proclamations prohibited torture and inhuman handling as a means of interrogation however; evidences proved that it is practices exist in a wider level. Reports of human right interested groups have been shown that, the prevalence of torture close to epidemic public problems (Campbell,

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2007). The doses of torture have also highly correlated with the experience of PTSD. The level of exposure to physical, chemical and electric torture, psychological ill-treatment, and sensory deprivation and bombardment resulted in increased flash back experience, withdrawal, numbness, and hyper arousal (Johnson & Thompson, 2008). Similarly, excessive torture, displacement and pain memories further worsen the survivors' personal, social and physical identities and compounded by the losses of material possessions, status, family, friends, and community (Taylor, Carswell & Williams, 2013).

Post-traumatic stress disorder comes to the center of scientific discussion after the Vietnam War. Even if, starting from its conception trauma mostly associated with combat military returnees, findings on the level and type of PTSD differences among civilian and military returnees show that, civilians more exposed to shattering of assumptions and deprivations of safety and security than combat returnees (Johnson & Thomson, 2007). Likewise, PTSD and related psychological disorders were 4% and 48% prevalence in the general population and inmate communities respectively (Briere, Agee & Ditrieck, 2016).

The American psychiatrist association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR; American Psychiatric Association, 2000, pp., 467) define post traumatic stress disorder as “*experiencing, witnessing, or confronting events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others*”. DSM -IV-TR (2000) further point out that, individuals who diagnosis as PTSD might show traumatic flash backs, avoid situations or events which remind painful episodes, develop negative feelings and thoughts. Likewise, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) assert that, depending on the intensity, severity and duration of the actual trauma, people who passed through traumatic life circumstances experience physical, psychological pain and fear after the actual trauma was removed.

The effects of torture association with PTSD and related psychological distress were interwoven by pre, peri and post trauma variables. From the pre traumatic factors, high level of education associated with fewer chronic and more delayed trajectories (Maercker, Gäbler, O'Neil, Schützwohl, & Müller, 2012) While, peri-traumatic severity variables directly associated with the chronic trajectories. Likewise, the present life circumstances of the trauma survivors are more predictive of course and classes of trauma than from pre-traumatic peri-traumatic conditions. The finding argued that the social and interpersonal communications levels of disclosing and willingness to forgive are very vital to determine the progress of PTSD (Maercker & et.al, 2012, PP.2). Similarly, the post traumatic variables of level of social and interpersonal support, disclosure and psychological load highly determine the type of trajectory than the pre and peri traumatic variables. Parallel with this, social and family support, preparedness for trauma, religious and ways of emotional processing take the lead position in determining trauma trajectories (Johnson & Thomson, 2007; Hall, Bonanno, Bolton, & Bass, 2014). Hence, being religious and having rich interpersonal and social support have a protective role from PTSD development and maintenances (Taylor et al., 2013)

Moreover, Ehlers, Maercker and Boos (2000) findings of the two-level multiple regression result depict that, variance of PTSD predicted by variance of cognitive and subjective and objective severity measures during imprisonment. The cognitive variables of mental defeat, control strategies, alienation, permanent change and political commitment explained 45.2 % variation of trauma. The second levels of subjective and objective measures of severity

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which comprises severity of maltreatment during detention and in punitive prison, psychological maltreatment, unexpectedness of imprisonment and perceived threat to life during detention and in punitive prison predicts 27.6% variation of PTSD. On the other hand, high level of political commitment minimizes trauma symptoms (Ehlers et al., 2000, PP. 51). Being religious have also benefit the trauma survivors to develop external attribution of fate or God well which further keep them from the negative thoughts of self-critique, self-blaming which worsen the traumatic symptoms (Johnson & Thomson, 2008).

Even though a wealth of empirical and theoretical findings associate trauma with negative psychological, emotional and intra and inter personal changes, there are also findings which claims trauma experiences and life atrocities give opportunity to the victims to know about their resiliencies and make them emotionally and psychologically strong (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). According Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) trauma and life crisis shake the existing assumptions and thoughts and brings psychological growth which help to overcome challenging life situations. In contrast from dose response relationship repeated tortures and immunize PTSD and repeated exposure to trauma may result in immunization against traumatic stress (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Posttraumatic growth is not a mere survival after the crisis situation rather changes which is far better than from the pre traumatic statuesque.

Human right interest groups reports have been shown, Ethiopian has experienced massive number of social unrests and political protests in response to the oppressive and suppressive government, economic and political marginalization among ethnic groups called protests in the country especially, in the two largest ethnic groups of Oromiya and Amara since, (2016). The then government imposed emergency declaration that waited for 10 months in effect. In this time the government security forces exercise over power. As a result, thousands of protestors were injured, killed or detained before and during the state of emergency (Allo, 2017). But through continuous internal public pressures and unrests the present government of Ethiopia has made a lot of political and economic revisions starting from 2018. As part of this the current government released several political and social activists from various prisons and detention centers. Documented evidences show that, physical and psychological torture was practiced at Makelawie and other federal owned detainee and prison centers (Bader, 2013).

Moreover, the study has intended to add knowledge on the subjective experiences of imprisoned and torture survivors' subjective experience of trauma and resilience by using qualitative approaches since, large proportion of reviewed findings were designed in quantitative methods. The researcher has also observed from the literature review, except the political and legal statements of international human right interested groups, nearly all researches on psychosocial and emotional challenges of political imprisonment and torture survivors' community were conducted on out of African continent. Surprisingly due to the ill political system and dictatorial governmental structures, detention and torture of oppositional political party members, human right activists, and journalists are common phenomenon in this continent. So, this study would add contextual knowledge of torture and trauma to the scientific arena on politically motivated imprisoned survivors' torture experience and their subjective trauma and ways coping psychological pains and resilience.

METHODS

This study has aimed to explore the subjective experiences of trauma and psychological distress of politically motivated tortured survivors and impression and resiliencies of tortured survivors.

Research design

The researcher employed interpretive phenomenological analysis qualitative research designs. Since, it enabled the researcher to made sense of the subjective experiences and meaning of politically motivated tortured survivors from their personal experience and socio-cultural contexts.

Participants and recruitment mechanisms

The researcher purposively selected two individuals in this case study who were subjected to politically motivated tortured and imprisonment for five years and above and having political party engagements histories but not accused by any white crimes and those having consent to be participant in the study from Amara region, Ethiopia.

Procedures of data gathering

As a phenomenological approach recommends, the researcher was employed to an interview and semi structured questionnaires which facilitated the researcher to collect rich, detailed, first person account data and to depict personal sense of experiences about the imprisonment and torture related traumas and resiliencies. Hence, the researcher developed around 18 interview and 8 semi structured questions. Moreover, the researcher was not rigidly following the questions rather; I made some flexibility according to the dynamic during the interview.

Data Analysis Techniques

Thematic qualitative data analysis techniques were used for analyzing and synthesizing data gathered via interview and semi structured questioners. Themes identification and organization was Supported by free qualitative data analysis software. In so doing, the analysis followed the following steps. First, the raw data were entered into software in order to organize and identify the patterns of the data set. Second, meaningful units of codes were generated from the data set.

RESULT

The researcher categorized the results of this finding into the following themes: demographic profiles, torture and traumatic experiences, psycho-social impacts of torture, and resilience and coping resources of respondents.

I gathered data from two respondents whose name was Kassa and Gashaw (their names are changed for the purpose of confidentiality). They were in the late middle adult hood stages of 58 and 55 years respectively. Kassa and Gashaw also have family, with 5 and 7 children respectively. Concerning their educational and work-related experiences, Kassa was a diploma graduate and was teaching in junior and secondary schools. Gashaw was serving the Ethiopia national defense forces.

The respondents had also been actively involved as member level in oppositional political parties before they were putted under imprisonment. In relation to this, they were subjected to political imprisonment and torture. The total length of time they were in prison slightly

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differs; Kassa was imprisoned for a total of 7 years indifferent sessions; and Gashaw for 6 years from 2012 to 2018.

How do participants describe the torture experiences they encountered during their imprisonment?

The research respondents have experienced more or less all internationally prohibited forms of physical and psychological tortures. They were prohibited from taking shower, located in solitary confinement cell, hanging bottle of water in their testosteroles, and forced to witness terrifying and annoying actions. According to the respondents, the security forces have the above torture mechanisms as a means to interrogate the prisoners and get them to confess. As Gashaw portrayed:

I was brought in to the office; there were three police men there. They stripped off my clothes and warned me to bend down towards a wall. One of the police man slapped my face twice and the other two beaten my body via electric ropes. They frequently asked me to tell my relationship with Ginbot 7 militant group. I wish to have but nothing to tell them. They had beaten me again and again by electric robes and plastic sticks. At the end they hanged up a plastic litter which filled with water on my testosterone. I fainted and lost my conscious. In the next morning when I wake up the floor was covered by blood which flown from my body. I suffered a lot to urinate in the first weeks of this torture because the urine tube was blocked by clotted blood.

They also uncovered that they were forbidden from taking shower and washing clothes. These adversely affected their interpersonal relationships with cell mates and lower their self confidences. In this connection, one participant elaborated

While I was in prison, the security forces did not allow sunning, taking shower, and communicating with my family. As a result, I felt ashamed when I approached with other pensioners who shared cell with me.

In addition, the political prisoners were taken at mid-night and located in underground cell which is filled with cold water in their necked body. They took us out when they lost their consciousness:

They put us in dark and cold room with life killer criminals and homosexual prisoners. They took in the mid of the night and place us in the room which filled with cold water and return back to our cell when we lost our consciousness.

Furthermore, respondents disclosed that they were faced to life threatening actions. As one participant recalls;

One night they took me to the jungle which was about 5 km away from the town where the prison center was found. Then they asked me to confess what I did unless and otherwise we are going to buried you here in this jungle.... I told them I have nothing to confess and assured them to do whatever they want but I begged them do not do any harm on my children and family.

Beyond their tortured political prisoners also forced to look up very distressing and disturbing torture actions which happened on their cell mates. As indictor Kassa recalled one action which was happened on his cell mate:

I shared cell with one prisoner with hemorrhoid illness, he was forbidden to take, shower, wash his clothes, and medications. One day the head of the prisoner called

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up on these prisoners and ordered him to takeoff his cloths in front of others, he offended to do that but the security forces forcefully took off his cloths and beat him, the blood started to flow from his body. They were mocking on him.

How participants viewed the psycho-social and associated impacts of imprisonment and tortured?

Both Gashaw and Kassa not able to make sexual intercourse since, their testosterone production was failed due to the torture. One of the participants portrayed as:

At the end they hanged up a plastic litter filled with water on my testosterone, I fainted and loss my conscious. In the next morning when I wake up the asphalt was covered by the blood which flown from my body. I suffered a lot to urinate in the first weeks of this tortured because the urine tube was blocked by clotted bloods.

The participants disclosed that they cannot able to make sexual intercourses, due to the above torture experiences. Gashaw says:

I could not make sexual intercourse as result of the torture, but with support of medication I can able to manage the pains on my reproductive organs.

More than the physical torture, the respondents has also faced psychological abuse that deprives their identities and personality. One of the respondents expressed:

One day when the prisoners were seating for sunning, one security forces came and say you did not deserve to get sun lights; the sun is reserved for brave Tigriгна soldiers.

Participants perceived that their families also experienced and faced terror and abuse while they were arrested in their homes. The security forces were not followed the how to arrest legal procedures of suspected criminals. Gashaw says:

In the middle of the night the security forces knocked the door of my house and demanded me to give my hand. My wife was shocked when she heard their voices. She was five months pregnant during that time. They forcefully broke the door and got in my house and pointed gun in my head and my wife too. I was naked, with only my underwear on.

From the two respondents Gashaw has manifested symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorders. As he describes, he has been avoiding situations which reminds his imprisonment like, being nervous and irritated when he sees a man with military uniforms, being hyper vigilant for some sounds, feeling of numbness well. Gashaw says:

I become annoyed and nervous when I looked up security forces wearing military uniforms. It recalls all the bad experiences I spent in detention and prison centers. I heard voices like sound of airplane. Nevertheless, the CT scan result shows that my head is safe from damages; I thought that there was something wrong inside my head. I still feel that my living area is under the control of TPLF security forces and I also believe that every moment and actions are under the scrutiny of security forces.

Regarding the social impact of imprisonment, participants perceived that their families especially their children had lost psychological, social and economic advantages. Beyond this, the respondents thought that their children's vision was distracted by their imprisonments. Gashaw says:

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Regarding my family, the imprisonment caused my family to live in poverty. My well-established business was destroyed, my children were forced to leave their school and engaged in daily laborer works to generate livelihood to them and family too. I perceive my relationship with my wife's family is not as good as before my imprisonment.

Similarly, Kassa revealed that his imprisonment changed the family roles and forced the family to see optional means of income. He recalls:

It is obvious my imprisonment put black scar on my family life. I was the only source of income for my family. When I become imprisoned, my wife was forced to engage in petty trade and local beer selling activities. It was tough to my children; they missed my affection, supervision, and guide.

How have politically imprisoned torture survivors been overcoming their traumas and lead their lives?

There are differences in participants' in their view concerning those individuals who tortured and caused to their imprisonment. Gashaw believes that perpetrators were doing torture intentionally and deliberately to undermine the psychological and moral statuesque of the victims. On the other hand, Kassa believes that the perpetrator's cruelty rooted in wrong ideologies and strategies and not associated with their personality make ups. He describes:

I never feel resentments on the people who imprisoned me. I attributed that for to their political know how and the mistaken political ideologies and strategies. Surprisingly currently I peacefully talk and argue with some of them I know in my town on some political issues.

Participants believed that the current political improvements come through scarification of their personal interests. As a result of this, they feel as they have stakes on the coming changes. As Kassa says:

Though I knew my children suffered by my action and imprisonments, for me they are below my nation and people I strongly convicted myself for my people and my nation too. Nowadays I feel that I did my best to my people and my nation.

One of the participants thought that challenge full childhood histories, and praying as play protecting roles from tough sessions in Maeklawi. Kassa says:

As a coping I read religion books and pray to my God. More than this my childhood history also contributes to my resilience. I grew up with my uncle in Holeta Genet military officials training Campus. I was impressed by their morning training and disciplined more than this I was in forest with my father at my age of nine.

In addition to religious commitment, respondents viewed their political commitment has galvanized by institutionalized unfair and unjust treatments among different groups. As Gashaw expressed:

Honestly speaking I was not in need of personal fame or authority as did anyone else, rather I was bothered by then fair and unjust ethnic treatments which was established in the EPRDF regimes.

Likewise, Kassa perceive political imprisonment as paying or scarifying ones fate for the public wellbeing.

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Though I knew my children suffered by my action and imprisonments, for me they are below my nation and people I strongly convicted myself for my people and my nation too. Now days I feel that I did my best to my people and my nation. I am very proud of myself since I feel I scarified my personal interests for my community and nation as well.

Regarding respondents' social capital and interaction, Kassa viewed in two ways, before and after the political improvements has made. As he says:

Many people were afraid to appear and interact with me before the present governmental change has occurred. But now days, they give respect for what I have paid and have confidence to establish relationship with us.

Today, both of the participants are leading life with their families and children. Kassa feels that currently everything is going okay and all of his 5 children have got employed and supported him emotionally and financially. Contrary to this, most of Gashaw's children found under 18 and economically dependent on him and faces some economical challenge.

DISCUSSION

Research findings indicated that there are physical and psychological torture experiences in the large number of Countries. The reports of human right interested groups augmented that, the prevalence of torture close to epidemic public problems (Campbell, 2007). Here, the participants of this research have faced torture, cruel and miss treatment which are internationally prohibited actions on legally arrested individuals. As the participants point out, they were subjected to solitary confinement, severely beaten, forbidden from taking shower and washing their clothes, hanging water on their testosterone and terrified by gun and insulting their identities.

According to Johnson and Thompson (2008), review the dose of torture highly correlated with the experience of PTSD. Exposure to physical, chemical and electric torture, psychological ill-treatment, and sensory deprivation and bombardment resulted in increased flash back experience, withdrawal, numbness, and hyper arousal. The results of this finding also portrays that the respondents have faced the most severe forms of torture. DSM -IV-TR (2000) further point out that, individuals who diagnosis as PTSD might show traumatic flash backs, avoid situations or events which remind painful episodes, develop negative feelings. Consequently, among the two respondents Gashaw has manifested PTSD symptoms of avoiding people who reminds his imprisonments, distressing night mares, being nervous when he looks police and security forces who wear military uniforms and developed some forms of paranoia. Whereas, Kassa's symptoms of PTSD and negative emotions less proportional with tortures he encountered means, he shows minor traumatized symptoms. The difference mostly associated with the pre and post tortured life circumstances and protectorates of the participants (Maercker, Gäbler, O'Neil, Schützwohl, & Müller, 2012) Here, compared to Kassa, Gashaw experienced high levels of PTSD negative emotional experiences. Their demographic profile depicted that relatively Kassa has high educational profile, good socioeconomic status and warm family support. In contrary Gashaw has less education, low socio-economic security, and less support from family members. There are also slight perceptual differences regarding the perpetrators of the torturers. Kassa associated it with their consciousness whereas Gashaw perceived their action as revenge.

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According to the participants their imprisonment undermines their children academic progress and distracts their economies. Similarly, Taylor, Carswell and C Williams (2013), finding qualitative result supported the excessive torture further worsen the participants' social and physical identities and compounded by the losses of material possessions, statuses, family, friends, and community.

The consulted literature also prevailed that those have high political commitment prisoner torture survivors have less probability to develop post trauma and negative emotions than counter prisoners and torture survivors (Ehlers & et al. 2000 PP. 51-52). This result does not find any observable differences between the two participants regarding on their political, religion and personal commitments. Finally, both of the participants belief that their imprisonments and tortured has have stakes in the current political improvements and changes. Being religious and having rich interpersonal and social support have a protective role from PTSD development and maintenances (Taylor et al., 2013) from the two participants relatively Kassa is less prone to traumatic symptoms. According to him these strengths rooted from his childhood experiences he saw challenges in his early childhood ages. This supported by the Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), trauma helps to transform physical and mental settings and made strong to overwhelm any challenge that we encounter in later life cycles.

CONCLUSIONS

Respondents have experienced more or less all internationally prohibited forms of physical and psychological tortures. They were subjected to prohibit from taking shower, located in solitary confinement cell, hanging bottle of water in their testosterones, and forced to witness terrifying and annoying actions. So, the respective government structures specifically, the Ministry of health and social affairs shall better to install rehabilitation programs for those politically motivated impression and tortured survivors. The researcher of study has also recommended politically imprisoned and tortured survivors to establish self-help associations in order to safeguard their rights and to share their coping strategies and resiliencies to overcome the traumas and adverse psychological conditions. Beyond that the association helps them to heard their voices by the government and communities.

As participants reported the tortured and inhuman handling adversely affected their interpersonal relationships with cell mates and lowers their self-confidences. Among them one respondent experiences full blown post trauma symptoms of re-experiencing the torture through flash backs. They were also believed, their family members were victimized due to their imprisonment and torture.

Even if both respondents were experienced pain full torture and rejections and denials from the perpetrators, severity of traumatic symptoms and negative psychological states, or resiliencies and growth are highly associated with their peri trauma, social and family support, ways of emotional appraisals, mental set up and spiritual strengths, political commitment of the torture survivors. Moreover, survivors conceived their suffering as if they pay and scarify for their political ideology and the wellbeing of the society and being proud by their achievements.

The tortured survivors framing of the actions of the perpetrators have had impacts of their emotional reactions and anger. So, it is recommended that professionals on the area (clinical psychologist, social and rehabilitation workers) believed to contribute in enhancing the

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trauma survivors coping skills and resiliencies by targeting on their reframing of their thoughts regarding the actions of perpetrators.

Additionally, a survivor who made meanings from their imprisonment and tortured has less likely experience to trauma and negative psychological conditions. Hence, the professional had better to help the survivors to search meanings from those adverse conditions.

Lastly, but not least, it is also recommended to further researchers to conduct a research that demands to assess the lived experience of people with mental illness by employing large samples and quantitative methods.

Abbreviations

PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

EPRDF: Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Party

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Conflict of Interest

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