**Medical Action Group (MAG)**

**About**

Medical Action Group (MAG) is a non-stock, non-profit organization of physicians, nurses, dentists, psychologists, health students, and health workkers established in 1982. MAG promotes and defends the human rights of all peoples. Since its inception, it has rendered total health services to the urban poor, political prisoners, internally displaced peoples and human rights defenders.

It has pioneered the use of the Istanbul Protocol or UN Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in the medical documentation of torture and has formed a referral network of individuals, groups, organizations, and institutions to support its service programs. It has established the Philippine Action Concerning Torture (PACT) in 1984 which anchored its direct services program for torture survivors and their families. Through PACT, MAG has able to conduct jail visitations, medical missions, and quick reaction responses to reported cases of torture. Aside from medical documentation and reporting cases of torture, MAG continued to provide assistance and psychosocial services especially to Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) at risk in the performance of their human rights work.

MAG has other programs like services, documentation and advocacy. it also trains health professionals, workers and students on health and human rights. Finally, it advocates for laws and policy to government agencies and Congress. The organization conducts general assembly and elect its leaders every two years.

**The Psychosocial dynamics of torture and ill-treatment:**

**The Philippine Experience**

Torture remains prevalent to a varying degree in many countries around the world. This is despite the fact that torture is prohibited and considered a crime under international laws. Some countries have even codified torture as a specific criminal offense. However, torture is still widespread and systematically being practiced as part of the conduct of criminal investigation. It is considered a norm than a deficiency of the legal system.

Philippines is no exception. In spite the enactment of the Anti-torture Act in 2009, torture continues to occur while allegations of torture are rarely investigated promptly, impartially and thoroughly, if there is an investigation at all and the victims are left without access to remedies. This legal impediment brings about impunity.

However, the continuing occurrence of torture in the country is much more complicated than looking at its legal deficiency but rather should also be analysed within its psychosocial dimensions. The practice of torture and its apparent social acceptance are undeniably embedded in the society’s social value system, political dynamics, social and gender divides and other situational factors. Many human biases that operate underneath the surface create receptive attitudes and unfounded beliefs about torture.

People conceive of wrathful gods, non-human entities and unexplained phenomena that are something with human attribution in a higher level. This tendency is reflected in how people anthropomorphize “state” as having legal and moral authority over the individuals. Torture, as an act of the state is a necessary conformity. It is their way of demonstrating sycophantic homage to authority, and a forceful adherence to the standard code of conduct and submissive values. Philippines has a fragile democracy. With its abundant history of rebellion and political unrest, the Philippines rests under an insecure state. The use of torture and other forms of state violence are reinforcement of the imminent power and invincibility of the regime. It is a way to show the state’s full social control over the society and its people. State uses torture by way of isolation, humiliation, psychological pressure and physical pain to break down the victim, to intimidate those close to him, and to discourage others.

Torture rarely occurs where it does not have the sanction and authorization of the state. It is the state that provides a permissive environment for torture and away from public scrutiny. It uses the legal system not only to further enhance the state protection from real or perceived threat to national security but also to escape accountability from human rights violations.

The state itself makes its security institutions a training ground for torturers. The entrenched culture of violence among law enforcement agencies coupled with the failure of the legal and institutional framework to address corruption, criminality and terrorism provides a propensity for a behavioural acceptance for the use of torture. Philippines remains a paternal and authority-oriented society. Being a person in authority is a privilege. Wearing a uniform is already a display of power. Military or police career supports one’s yearnings for power and status which is believed to be rewarding.

A society that is authoritarian and paternalistic like the Philippines, in which corporal punishment is accepted as an appropriate-form of discipline, facilitates the externalisation of inner aggression of individual especially with acquired power. Not only that they are trained with skills and techniques to torment but they are physically, mentally, and psychologically prepared for act of cruelty. They are made to view others as inhuman or evil and conditioned to believe that what they are doing is for the "good of the nation", and the urgency to act in a ticking bomb scenario.

The state emphasizes loyalty to the system which is distortedly viewed as a noble service to the country. There seems to be unwritten code of “omerta” which its security personnel vowed to secrecy. Failure to show loyalty is a disgrace that can bring punishment for those who are not following orders. The terror of experiencing violence during trainings and in assumption of duty led to submission and desensitization of trained personnel to violence, and becoming a killing machine. They are forever trapped between choosing tormenting others or be tormented and considered a weakling. While there are trained military or police personnel who might still hold their own moral compass, but they are expected to morally disengage whenever inflicting severe punishments on others or when an authority figure is present and they have to follow orders for fear of facing the same punishments. Others have become numb for repeatedly committing torture and ill-treatment that they just look at other people as a “thing to play with” or an “animal to slaughter”. This comes with human’s idea of anthropocentrism where they believe that humans are superior to all living beings or some groups of humans are more human than others and that those who have lesser stature can be abused however they see fit for their collective benefit.

Torture for victims and survivors serves as a reminder of the pedagogy of the oppressed. Poverty and marginalisation are considered as factors that significantly heighten people’s vulnerability against torture and ill treatment. Socially and economically disadvantaged groups including women and children, ethnic minorities, human rights defenders and many others, usually find themselves at an increased risk because of discrimination, and a lack of awareness and means to access justice. This is frequently compounded by victims’ fears of bringing lawsuits, complaints or testifying against authorities due to the risk of reprisals.

Torture is usually viewed by the victims and survivors as an ordinary conduct of police work wherein torture is expected once arrested. Other victims especially those from far flung areas believed that beating (such as manhandling or police brutality) is a standard operating procedure to instil discipline and cooperation. This usually comes with verbal abuse and even death threats which lead to forced confessions and signing of papers signifying their confession to the crimes the police want them to admit. The lack of understanding of torture also led them to believe that torture only happens when you are at the brink of death.

During the act of torture, victims are put is a state of anomie where they tend to feel helpless and alienated. They have been rendered vulnerable, powerless, and defenceless by the circumstances beyond their control and made them to accept their own fate. Torture provides an exerting and pervasive domination of the victim's existence. The torturers as symbol of authority reassert control over their lives and, thus, destroying their own sense of self-identity and self-worth.

Torture does not only torment the victims but the society as well. It terrorizes the communities by setting an example for what will happen to those who will continue to defy the power of the state. While many bystanders feel guilty and ashamed for having done nothing to prevent the atrocity but they would rather blame the torture victims for getting the ire of the authorities. The growing social apathy on torture and other forms of grave human rights violations is a by-product of the sense of insecurity and the social frustrations on the illusion that fairness, justice, and rule of law exist. It makes the society turn a blind eye and deaf ear on the agony of the victims. They will rather mind their own business and focus on meeting their own needs than to get their fingers dip into trouble.

Torture puts the entire society at the mercy of those in power by creating an environment for social disassociation. The bystander attitude develops a diffusion of responsibility where persons in authority assume that their acts whether good or bad are acceptable to the majority at least until it affects them directly. While the public assume that what the authority is doing is for the good of the greater number. It made the society accepts the utilitarian moral value that professes exigency or “exemption to the rule” where the state action is justified by its end not by its means.

Torture is unjustified under any circumstances anywhere. Yes, many states do not comply with their international human rights obligations. States may simply deny the existence of torture or make a lame excuse by pointing to its lack of necessary capacities and resources to implement preventive measures. Other states are just hiding behind the cloak of its legal systems to perpetuate cruelty under the guise of curbing criminality or combating terrorism.

Torture is both a process and consequence of dehumanization and alienation. It takes away civility and compassion by tolerating violent aggressive behaviours to proliferate. Indeed the psychosocial factors increase the likelihood of torture and ill treatment to continue as it is borne out of social dysfunction.

The social and psychological construction of reality that the state creates to legitimize the use torture and other forms of state violence manifests the historical and cultural biases and prejudices that spouse the war paradigm and hypothetical ticking bomb scenarios to justify the use of torture. This misperception is continuously being promoted to the public by television shows and movies, which depict torture as an effective tactic of heroes to defeat the enemies. This increases the social acceptance of torture as a necessary lesser evil.

Such social behaviours can definitely impact policies and practices not only among members of the law enforcement and military and policy makers alike, but also across the general public.

Addressing the problem of torture in these psychosocial contexts and dynamics requires a comprehensive approach which consists of:

1. Incorporating human rights in the education curriculum to reinforce human rights as a shared social values. Changing public opinion about torture issues can redefine or strengthen policy and in practice to prevent torture. If the public believes, for example, that it is permissible to torture suspected terrorists because they think it will work and therefore keeps us safer, then it is more likely that the state authorities will adopt policies along this line of thinking. Thus, education can impact on torture prevention policies by changing public beliefs that contribute to torture justification; and to make abolition of torture a state policy and commitments;

2. Reforming the police, security services and armed forces with a view to enhancing adherence to international human rights standards in their operation, including by reforming relevant legislation, strengthening internal and external oversight and putting in place effective accountability mechanisms. Humanizing the victims and changing the “them and us” mentality may help prevent torture and professionalize the security forces not as a killing machine but as career professionals;

3. Ensuring the independence and enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the judiciary at all levels and ensuring access to justice and guaranteeing the effective and impartial investigation and prosecution of acts and setting up mechanisms for the protection of victims and witnesses. Non accountability begets impunity and repetition of criminal action; and

4. Ensuring provision of and access to psychosocial services of victims. Rendering of services to torture victims is a form of remedial measure that can help empower the victims to seek for justice and exact accountability.

Countering the psychosocial narrative that justifies torture is a herculean task but a necessary effort not only to prevent torture occurrence but to a larger extent make the society just, humane, and free.