

Mental health needs for former political prisoners

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Setting the context (1)

- Since 1988 Burmese government has denied freedom of expression and assembly by stifling opposition through arrest and incarceration of
 - Journalists
 - Political activists
 - Ethnic nationalities
 - Human rights defenders
- Deplorable prison conditions
 - Systematic torture during interrogation and as a result of “violating prison regulations”
 - Denial of medical treatment, poor diet, and lack of dental care
 - Remote prisons far from family
- After release, cannot practice profession or continue studies and may be detained again



Setting the context (2)

- As of December 2011, 1,572 political prisoners (PP) were in jail
- In 2011-12, 1,015 PP were released
- Currently >500 political prisoners still in jail
- Current government denies existence of PP, claiming all have broken criminal laws



Background of AAPP

- Established in 2000
- Run entirely by former political prisoners (PP)
- Aims
 - Advocate for release of all PP
 - Improve prison conditions in Burma
- Activities
 - Provide basic needs to current PP and families
 - Document/report human rights abuses against PP and pro-democracy activists
 - Secure international support for campaign to release all PP
 - Protect PP from harassment and intimidation by the Burmese regime once released from prison
 - To assist in the reconstruction of former political prisoners’ lives, including **both their mental and physical well-being.**

What the research says

- Former prisoners are twice as likely as others to suffer from psychological difficulties.
- Almost 1 in 3 of former PP are prescribed anti-depressants. The rate of prescribed anti-depressants for male PP is five times that of age peers.
- Over half of PP surveyed reported symptoms characteristic of PTSD.
- Over a third (39.9%) reported suffering clinically significant mental health problems.

Source: US Embassy Rangoon



Factors that contribute to lack of mental wellbeing among political prisoners

- Torture
- Solitary confinement
- Prison dog cells
- Denial of family visits, letters, packages
- Transfer to isolated, remote prisons
- Use of prisoners in forced labor camps and as porters and minesweepers in areas of ethnic conflict
- Holding a family member in prison while releasing another



Mental health concerns for former political prisoners (1)

- Depression and anxiety
 - Susceptible to crying
 - Sighing heavily
 - Irritability
 - Easily angered
 - Lonely
 - Hopeless for the future
 - Worry about things out of their control
 - Reticence
- Difficulty concentrating
- No one to rely on
- No more interest in daily work
- Worry too much in general
- Feeling everything requires effort
- Loss of appetite
- Sleeplessness



Mental health concerns for former political prisoners (2)

- Night sweats
- Insomnia
- Recurring thoughts of hurtful or terrifying events
- Difficult adjusting to daily life
 - Temper problems
 - Tension, stress
 - Suspicion
 - Insecurity and fear of authorities
 - Feel like a 'misfit' in society
- Harmful coping mechanisms
 - Alcohol and drug abuse



Mental health concerns for former political prisoners (3)

- Family problems
 - Misunderstanding of feelings and identity
 - Feel that others do not understand them
 - Blamed by family members
- Loss of libido or sexual pleasure
- Social isolation
 - Others afraid to engage them due to the threat of harassment, social exclusion, and pressure by authorities
 - Out of the loop with popular trends



Support for political prisoners

Overall goal of support is to facilitate rehabilitation

- Counseling, encouragement and moral support to help regain confidence and readjust to society
 - Group therapy and individual counseling
- Ease insecurity and uncertainty by support for resuming education, careers, and access to health care
 - Financial support for university education
 - Computer and vocational trainings
 - Medical check-ups
 - Language?
- Follow-up surveys to track progress, evaluate program, and identify further needs

Important things to remember

- Many PP who experiencing psychological difficulties say they are not getting the help they need.
 - Former PP constitute at 'at risk' group for both social exclusion and mental ill health.
 - Create solidarity and a self-sustaining support network for former PP so they never have to feel alone or feel that there's no one for them to rely on
- Overall the way to ease problems is to listen to what former political prisoners say*



Ways to improve mental health services for former PP

- Bring in psychiatric experts and provide medicine to those in need
- Promote mental health advocacy
- Take measures to prevent employment discrimination
- Develop community education for family caregivers of former PP with mental illnesses
- Work to reduce stigma and discrimination against former PP with mental illnesses

