

Expert on sexual torture takes on State violence

An interview with Dr. Yahika Yuksel by Luz Maria Martinez

In casual summer clothes, Dr. Sahika Yuksel looks a college student on holiday break, not the battle-tested, eminent psychiatrist in Turkey that she is. A socialist-feminist, human rights activist and member of the University of Istanbul medical faculty in Turkey, Dr. Yuksel not only endeavors to challenge the male patriarchy in her country. She is also often engaged in confrontation with the State for its system of organized violence against political prisoners.

Dr. Yuksel was presenter at the IV International Conference of Centers, Institutions and Individuals Concerned with the Care of Victims of Organized Violence, which was held in the Philippines in December 1994. She was invited to share her expertise in the issue of sexual torture. In her paper entitled "Impact of Sexual Torture," the psychiatrist defined sexual abuse not as a sexual act per se but as a form of violence that uses power and humiliation in a variety of ways against women and men.

"With sexual abuse, sexuality is used as a power tool. Sexual torture in detention is usually practiced for political and ideological reasons," she said. "Various methods are used to destroy the person's political

power and break his or her personality. A person's integrity is directly attacked."

Dr. Yuksel elaborates on how sexual abuse destroys the person: "If somebody meets a major accident, say an earthquake, the consequences may be serious, but the people can point to the earthquake as the reason for the damage and it's easier for them to recover from the trauma."

The effect of sexual abuse on the victim is comparable to the psychological ruin a sexually abused child undergoes, according to the doctor. "The impact attacks the very development of the person," she stressed.

Sometime in 1990 to 1991, a number of people from human rights and medical associations set up the Human Rights Foundation, a special human rights rehabilitation center for torture survivors. Dr. Yuksel's long-term involvement in human rights issues and credentials ensured her an invitation to the group. She notes, however, that her involvement stems primarily from her concern in women's issues. "Sexual abuse is a women's issue," she stressed. "Although sexual torture is used in breaking men, the victims are more often women and children."

She laments the Human Rights Foundation's failure to recognize the problem as one against women. "Torture survivors are referred to me as just requiring simple psychological assistance. The Foundation would say, [this woman] needs help because she is having nightmares."

Dr. Yuksel is personally intimate with the gamut of problems associated with political detention, having been detained for a month herself, following the 1988 coup in Turkey.

Boundaries of Sexual Torture

On voluntary basis, Dr. Yuksel took on the women referred to her, giving them both individual and group therapy. Of the 39 patients she sees regularly, 28 have been sexually abused.

"Most of the women were arrested for political reasons, but not all of them. For example, the State arrested one woman working with the teachers union. She was on a committee working for the teachers' rights. But after the coup, anybody who organized, who helped others or something—anybody in advocacy—was taken into detention, including students, workers."

Sexual abuse of women prisoners is not confined to rape alone, she clarified. As a weapon wielded

Violence Against Women

by the State, sexual abuse includes other, seemingly "insidious" forms of torture such as applying electricity to the sexual organs or a threat of rape, whether of the prisoner herself or members of her family.

"Let me give you examples." Dr. Yuksel flips paper on the table and points to a statement of a young woman: *They never undressed me. This is an advantage, but they often threatened to.* The second statement, that of another woman: *They told me that my mother was in the other room and that they were going to rape her because of me.*

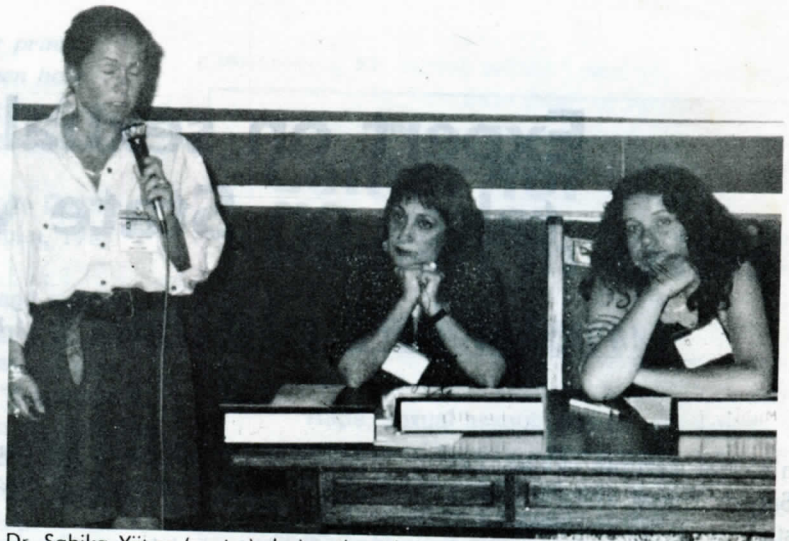
"It takes the victims about six months from the time we begin treatment before they can bring themselves to talk about their experience of sexual torture," the psychiatrist noted.

Does she report the abuses inflicted on her patients? Does she take the torturers to trial?

"[That] is all up to the victim," she said. Some patients have asked for a medical report indicating that they have been in treatment and that their psychological problems were a consequence of the torture they experienced. "I write an official medical report on behalf of the Human Rights Foundation Medical Association if the patient asks, although not a very official-sounding one. That's because the victim came to see me personally to ask for this—she was not sent to me by a Judge." In such a case, the report is seldom used to try the abusers.

Domestic Abuse, Child Abuse, State Torture: Total Effect

What is the total effect of sexual abuse on one who was sexually molested when she was a child,



Dr. Sahika Yikse (center) during the 4th International Conference of Centers, Institutions and Individuals Concerned with the Care of Victims of Organized Violence in Tagaytay City, Philippines

then later on sexually tortured by the State during her detention? Dr. Yuksel narrates her experience with a woman who was sexually abused by her father when she was 5 years old.

"I had her for treatment for two years, both for individual and for group therapy. In the group therapy, she was together with other women not politically involved—they were mainly battered wives who were teachers in high schools, employees at the post office—middle-class women. I expected this particular patient, who had recently married and had a good relationship with her husband, to talk about the sexual torture she experienced."

Once, during group therapy, she began to cry. "You all look like my mother, who was also beaten up by my father. I was the one who helped solve their problem," the victim said. As the eldest daughter, During those nights that her parents fought, this particular patient apparently saw it her duty to do something to lighten, if not settle,

the conflict. "In the middle of the night, she would sometimes get out of bed to go see if her father was all right, sometimes her father would wake up and take her to the bed. She felt it as an obligation to protect her other sisters," the doctor related.

"So, in my treatment of someone who experienced sexual torture from the State and was also abused when she was a child, I can not give priority to either one. I can only take the cumulative effect of the abuse this person has been subjected to. Perhaps if she had not had been previously abused, she might have coped with sexual torture in some other way," Dr. Yuksel said.

Some of her patients prefer only one to two months of treatment; others see her continuously for as long as two years. "When the treatment ends, I always give them a follow-up appointment. It's best for both of us. For her, she has a day when she can come to me and discuss her problems. As for me, it's

important that I know whether the treatment really helped or not. I try to see each of my patients once every three or six months, for two years straight. That gives me chance to evaluate what is happening," she said.

Purple Roof

Dr. Yuksel was part of the group of feminist activists who established Purple Roof, the first shelter for abused women in Turkey. "Since we opened Purple Roof five years ago, we have provided counseling, legal assistance, and advocacy and psychological services for 2,000-plus women. We had a little money and bought a house big enough to shelter 20 women. We redecorated this. But we've run out of money and can not operate this as a shelter just yet. We've just finished the restoration."

The center has one paid staff; all the other workers are volunteers.

Most of the women who come to Purple Roof are battered wives. "All of them are from the lower economical class with no other place to go." Dr. Yuksel added that the women come from "all over Turkey," not just Istanbul.

"The women usually look for somebody to take responsibility for them. If they leave their husband, they want someone else to be responsible for them. This was a big issue," she recalled.

Apart from living quarters, the center tries to arrange jobs for them, which put Dr. Yuksel and her colleagues in a tough position since most of the women have no professional skills or training. "All we can find them are simple, low-paying jobs, which they don't want. These

women used to be 'respectable housewives,' they don't want to work as waitresses. They want jobs as secretaries, which they're not equipped to do," the psychiatrist said.

The center once tried to go around the problem of lack of accommodations by putting up a couple of women in rented flats. "We hit a bigger snag. [These women] usually want to do as they please. Many of them have had dominating husbands and mothers-in-law; they've had to do all the chores at home. This time, they want to have time for themselves, which is understandable," she said. But for the people who accommodate the women, their willingness to lend support turns out a disaster.

"I may have graduated from medical school, but I received little education in working together with other women who come from different backgrounds and view issues in a different way," Dr. Yuksel admitted.

Grappling with the expectations and struggles of women from different social backgrounds is not easy. The differences do not always make for smooth interaction.

But the activist is not finished. "As long as we understand this as a process, we continue to work together." Such wisdom, after all, is Dr. Yuksel's source of energy.

"Although the feeling of helplessness in both situations—domestic abuse and abuse at the hands of the State—is very similar, in some instances, I have seen some women who cope much better with organized violence. They do not take the issue as a personal problem, their politics give some purpose to their

experience," she said.

Dr. Yuksel distinguishes between the two situations: With women victims of State torture, while acknowledging the damage they suffered, they are able to find strength in the knowledge that the issue is not personal, that the State has victimized many others like them. When a detainee is able to overcome her trauma, she feels a sense of power and victory. In the case of a battered wife, when she encounters a neighbor or someone whom she suspects may know of her domestic problems, she can not help feel shame.

High Stakes

Dr. Yuksel has been unrelentless in all her struggles, specially those against state-sponsored patriarchy. She defied government officials by exposing the State's abusive treatment of homosexuals and was one of the few heterosexuals in a press conference held to denounce the government's homophobic practices. She has organized demonstrations, one of them being the largest women's rally in Turkey's history, a mass mobilization held to protest a judge's denial of divorce to a pregnant woman who had been severely beaten by her husband. The judge had ruled that men have the right to beat their wives. And recently, she was charged of being a "separatist" because she and 39 other women showed solidarity with the Kurdish people by initiating a campaign called "Don't Touch My Friend." All 40 stood trial but were acquitted.

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