
Report

Living in Agony

The Long Term Effects of
Torture in Bahrain



Living in Agony

The Long Term Effects of Torture in Bahrain

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain

Introduction

Political prisoners and prisoners of conscience in Bahrain have all suffered gross violations of their fair trial and due process rights from the moment of their arrest and throughout their imprisonment. Arguably the worst of these violations is the torture they are subjected to during their arrest, interrogation and imprisonment as well, either to coerce confessions or simply as a form of reprisal.

Beyond the physical and short-term damage cause by these torture methods, it is important to discuss the long-term psychosocial impact torture has on victims' lives. This traumatic event leaves its many victims unable to go on with life as before, with several intrapersonal and interpersonal issues that are not often brought to light - especially in the discussion of torture in Bahrain. This report will discuss these invisible wounds that persist in Bahraini torture victims' psychological state and social relationships years after their mistreatment, relying on testimonies from the victims themselves as well as a specialist who has dealt with these cases.

Systemic Use of Torture

Arrest, Interrogation, and Detention:

When authorities, usually riot police, officers in civilian clothing, and Criminal Investigation officers, arrest an individual targeted for their political or social activities, they are likely to use violence. This presents itself in various ways, be it through a warrantless raid where the detainee's family's property is destroyed and confiscated and the family itself is threatened and terrorized, or through the physical mistreatment, kicking, beating, and blindfolding of the individual. This is often accompanied by insults, ridicule, and threats.

Upon their transfer to the investigation center, in the absence of a lawyer and with limited to no contact with their family, investigating officers torture the detainees and violate their basic rights with impunity. The torture is both physical and psychological. ADHRB, through its documentation program, has been able to record various methods used during the interrogation process, which include but are not limited to:

Physical torture:

- Kicking and slapping
- Beating with batons and pipes

- Suspension
- Being placed in extremely cold and hot temperatures
- Forced standing for long periods
- Deprivation of sleep and use of bathroom
- Burning
- Electric shocks
- Stripping of clothes
- Sexual assault

Psychological torture:

- Threats to harm family members
- Death threats and threats of further torture
- Prohibition from prayer
- Insults to family members, religion, religious figures
- Prolonged solitary confinement

For instance, one victim described a gruesome experience with authorities. He was arrested in a raid at 2:00 AM, handcuffed, and blindfolded by riot police. On his way to the investigation center, AlQareen Prison¹, he was subjected to sectarian insults and beatings. Once he arrived at the prison, officers beat and kicked the victim, specifically targeting his head. He was spat on, humiliated, and pushed to the ground repeatedly. After being placed in a solitary cell, an officer spilled water on him and turned on the cold air conditioning, in order to prevent the exhausted victim from sleeping. The nights that followed, officers would hit the bars of the cell in order to create a loud noise that would disturb the victim. They would enter the cell to mock, beat, and humiliate him. The victim would be forced to stand by the wall with his arms raised up for hours and was prevented from showering or changing his clothes for days. When he requested to shower, the officers poured cold water on him, while he stood by the wall, prohibited from moving. Furthermore, not only were revered religious figures mocked, but he was also threatened with the rape of his daughters. When he refused to film an apology, the victim was sexually assaulted. Later on, during trial, after one of his court sessions, officers beat the victim, hitting him with their shoes. They would place the heel of their shoes in the victim's mouth. When the victim informed the Public Prosecution Office about his treatment, he was ignored.

This testimony is meant to depict the inhumanity detainees are subjected to from the moment of their arrest, which can have a profound impact on their mental health. Coupled with the sense

¹ A prison under the jurisdiction of the Bahrain Defense Force.

of being stripped of one's humanity and personhood is the sense that nobody can or will help them, as their pleas are often ignored or met with further violence.

Imprisonment:

Torture does not end after individuals are sentenced and transferred to prison. On the contrary, it is utilized as a method of reprisal and silencing when prisoners make legitimate demands for their basic human rights. In prison, torture and mistreatment could additionally involve deliberate medical negligence - in effect a slow death sentence for ill prisoners. On the psychological level, prisoners are denied contact with their family members, have their visits or calls hindered in different ways, are prohibited from prayer, and are placed in solitary confinement for varying periods, among other forms of ill treatment, found below:

- Beating and kicking
- Death threats
- Isolation
- Suspension
- Denial of access to the yard (prisoners held in the cell 24/7)
- Insults and targeting religious beliefs or figures
- Prohibition of practicing religious rituals collectively or individually

A prisoner who had been isolated after he began a hunger strike to demand proper medical care, ending the use of severe shackling and harassment during calls, the provision of hygiene products, and the right to freely practice his religion, shared with ADHRB his experience during his isolation and subsequent enforced disappearance. The victim was shackled to an iron bed by his hands and legs for seven days, where he would be tortured on a daily basis and denied going to the bathroom. He was beaten and suspended by his hands. The victim sustained several injuries and was seen exhausted and pleading for help during his transfer. When this case was raised to the Ombudsman and National Institution for Human Rights, they responded by treating the prisoner as an assailant, not as a victim of torture. Once again, the torture perpetrated by officers, the conditions in prison, and the response of authorities perpetuate a feeling of hopeless injustice, inhumanity, and helplessness for the prisoners, who are still suffering the ramifications of the mistreatment they were subjected to during interrogation. Rather than being provided with the support and rehabilitation they need, their suffering persists, and traumatic experiences are relived in prison.

Psychological Effects

The painful and degrading torture that detainees and prisoners are subjected to has undeniable and scarring psychological impact on them. Major long-term psychological issues that victims of torture might face include difficulty concentrating, nightmares, insomnia, memory loss, fatigue, anxiety, irrational fears, hopelessness, loss of interest, thoughts of suicide, and irritability, among others. In this sense, victims exhibit signs of depression,² anxiety disorders,³ and posttraumatic stress disorder.⁴

A number of victims have disclosed the psychological problems they have faced in prison and after their release. The testimonies are detailed below to present the experiences of Bahraini torture victims and the psychological issues they are suffering from as a result of their mistreatment:

Testimony 1

One of the victims whose case ADHRB documented was arrested when his house was raided while he was in the shower. He tried to escape and was caught naked on the street, beaten, and dragged on the ground in front of neighbors. During his imprisonment, he became more isolated and did not communicate much with others. After his release, he has been constantly and uncontrollably angry and irritated, even over simple things. Moreover, he is afraid all the time, fearing that he would be re-arrested, especially since officers have threatened him with exactly that. As a result, he fears talking about what happened in custody and even seeing police officers. Also, he is paranoid over losing his family, that his family members might be arrested or killed. This fear has prevented him from attending therapy because he is terrified of facing reprisals for talking about what he was subjected to, which is the result of the threats from security forces.

Testimony 2

During interrogations, an officer forced the victim to strip and beat her when she refused, beating her further as she crawled on the ground. She was sexually assaulted, whipped, insulted, and threatened with rape and the murder of her children. After this torture, she felt completely changed. She could not focus easily or make decisions. She experienced a lot of self-hatred, was closed off, and preferred sleeping for long periods. Even though she would escape reality through sleep, she would experience disturbing recurrent nightmares. As a result of the brutal torture

² Learn more about depression here: <https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/depression/what-is-depression>

³ Learn more about anxiety disorders here: <https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/anxiety-disorders/what-are-anxiety-disorders>

⁴ Learn more about PTSD here: <https://psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>

and her deteriorating mental health, she contemplated medication and even suicide. After her release, this experience continued to affect her. She still seeks out silence and isolation from the world and experiences uncontrollable irritability. According to the therapist who treated this victim, she was exhibiting signs of PTSD.

Testimony 3

Another political prisoner suffered from depression and often went into a state of silence and isolation. She was spoken to in a humiliating manner and suffered inhumane treatment by officers, though she did not go into details of this treatment due to its sensitive nature for her. Moreover, she has been suffering from tachophobia, a fear of speed, because she would be taken to court sessions in a high-speed vehicle, and she would return to prison in a deplorable condition. She would faint repeatedly, in addition to hitting and biting herself without being aware of it after her condition had deteriorated without receiving any treatment.

Testimony 4

After being threatened, physically tortured, and sexually assaulted, this victim had to undergo a uterine operation because of repeated kicking on the sensitive area during interrogation. Now, as a result of the torture, she can't sleep at night due to an overwhelming feeling that she will be arrested or officers will raid her house. She also constantly feels like she is being watched when she is outside. The stress and fear that still haunts the victim prevents her from leaving the house, and she often does not want to talk to anyone or even leave her room for days.

Services and Accessibility:

Mental health services are fundamental in prison in order to provide inmates with proper medical care on every level. However, Bahrain has practiced extreme forms of medical negligence and denied prisoners their basic rights. Bahrain has disregarded both the physical and mental health of prisoners, leaving their cases to worsen in sometimes dire conditions. In Jau Prison, authorities have disregarded mental health issues completely, and have not provided professionals to help prisoners who are experiencing psychological issues, especially as a result of the torture they have been subjected to. As such, their mental health is left to deteriorate.

For instance, one prisoner, who was under 21 when he was tortured, has suffered from a deteriorated mental health in which he is refusing to see his family. He is also suffering from anxiety and trichotillomania (a strong urge to pull out one's hair). His parents - who confirm that he did not suffer from any psychological problems before his arrest - requested that authorities provide him with mental health care but were refused. Without the proper treatment, his mental

health is left to deteriorate further. Even when, in another case, the Public Prosecution accepted a request by the family of a prisoner to provide their son who is suffering from mental health issues with professional help, the appointment was not scheduled.

In the rare cases where psychological care is supposedly provided, such as when prisoners are transferred to the Psychiatric Hospital, they are not provided with therapy or treatment in relation to the mistreatment they have suffered in custody, as these violations are never acknowledged by authorities. Thus, with the source of their mental distress not being addressed, their situation does not improve.

A prisoner, who was healthy before his arrest but began exhibiting schizophrenic and suicidal tendencies after his arrest and interrogation, had been transferred to the psychiatric hospital four months after their arrest. The victim, who was tortured into confessing to the charges against him, was not responding to questions, was looking at the roof and the walls, said that he wanted to meet his grandfather who passed away, and had tried to commit suicide. Authorities did not disclose the reason behind the deterioration of his psychological state during detention, despite pleas from the family. In fact, a year into their admission into the psychiatric hospital, the victim escaped. He was found hiding, smelling of vomit, not fully aware, complaining of a severe headache, and begging to be protected from individuals who were following him and wanting to kill him. After a year of supposed treatment, the victim was still in distress, and he eventually shared that his mental health had worsened as a result of this mistreatment. He was transferred from the hospital to prison without having received adequate treatment.

Unfortunately, the inaccessibility of professional mental health help is not only caused by medical negligence, but also because of the social stigma that still exists around the topic of mental health. As such, many victims, even outside prison, opt not to seek professional help. Another obstacle is the distrust toward professionals due to the extreme authoritarian grip that the Bahraini regime practices in the country. Some victims have opted not to seek medical health out of fear that their conversations would not stay confidential.

Therapy and treatment are vital for victims' psychological wellbeing and rehabilitation, as corroborated by the psychotherapist who has treated the Bahraini victims of torture. According to him, individuals who are subjected to torture have been robbed of the ability to protect and defend themselves and so are in need of support and reassurance in their surroundings to re-establish a sense of security and agency. While support from one's family and friends is beneficial in this regard, treatment and therapy is a priority. Additionally, early diagnosis and intervention prevents the worsening of the disorder or psychological comorbidity, which then becomes more difficult to treat.

Gender Dimension

It is also important to address the gendered difficulties victims face as a result of their torture and the subsequent psychological distress, as men and women both experience social stigmas in relation to their gender identity and gender roles, which worsen their psychological situation and hinder access to treatment. On the one hand, men are supposed to present themselves as “strong” and “tough” as a proof of their masculinity. This often discourages many men from seeking help or professional treatment from therapists, as they have been conditioned to view treatment as a sign of weakness. As such, several male victims have refused to go to therapy, despite exhibiting signs of distress, low mood, irritability, and anxiety.

Women are also subject to strict cultural and social norms which makes it difficult to speak up about and overcome the mistreatment they suffered in custody. Women are sometimes subjected to sexual assault and rape during their detention and imprisonment. This torture prompts feelings of shame and is surrounded by judgment that often place women at fault. As a result, it is very difficult for women in Bahrain to speak out about this type of torture, and this trauma ends up affecting their social and intimate relationships. One female victim who was sexually assaulted in prison experienced many negative associations and intrusive thoughts which impacted her relationship with her husband, who had also been taunted by officers in relation to his wife’s torture.

Effects on social life

The psychological impact of torture inevitably flows into the social aspect of the victims’ lives, as one’s relationships with others and the way they interact with their surroundings is largely defined by their mental health. Therefore, many victims of torture have faced challenges in their personal lives, including their marital and familial life as well as their jobs, which they have disclosed below:

Testimony 1

The victim has children who grew up away from her while she was in prison. When she was released, her children were very happy but also terrified of the possibility of their mother leaving again. Some of her children were also pursued by authorities, so in addition to growing up without a parent, their childhood was further disrupted by police chases, surveillance, and imprisonment. Upon her release, the victim suffered from extreme mood shifts and anger

outbursts which affected her relationship with her children. During breakdowns, when she would leave the house, her youngest child would chase her, fearing that she would be taken away again. Furthermore, the victim has not been able to return to work after her release, which has placed financial strain on the family.

Testimony 2

Another victim states that after her release, the detrimental effects of torture on her mental health impacted her social relations and ability to interact with others. She was unable to meet anyone and felt that she couldn't trust anyone; she is very socially isolated from everyone. She also quit her job due to the anxiety and stress.

Testimony 3

While this victim was in prison, he was about to get engaged, but because of his 15-year sentence, an unfavorable medical diagnosis in prison, and the fear the fiancé's family felt after his arrest, the engagement was called off. Since his release, he has been very anxious and afraid of interacting with people because he is still under heavy surveillance and cannot leave the country for seven years.

Moreover, he shared that his family is always targeted by the police. He is arrested, held for hours in police stations, subjected to interrogation, tortured, and intimidated illegally and under false pretexts. This results in the family's instability and constant feelings of danger and insecurity.

Testimony 4

After her release, this victim felt that everything had changed, and it was difficult for her to easily adapt to these changes. She lost her job and became unemployed. She also faced problems in continuing her life as a partner and a parent. Her son grew up far from her and suffered psychologically while she was in prison during the most important stages of his life. While in prison, when her family would visit, there would be a glass border set up to separate the prisoner from her family, and this deeply distressed her son who just wanted to embrace his mother.

Testimony 5

This victim was subjected to severe torture in several instances throughout his detention and imprisonment. When he was released, after almost 10 years of imprisonment, it took him 2-3 years to adjust, though he still struggles at times. Prior to his arrest, the victim was an athlete; but, due to the torture, he suffered severe injuries that required surgery and treatment after his release, and he could no longer pursue his athletic career as a result. He constantly feels like he is behind his peers because his life was halted for years. He lost his job after his arrest and was denied his housing request, so he also felt like he could not provide for his family, with his son

having grown up without him. His partner also felt alienated from him because of how easily irritable he had become, causing a rift in their marriage. His mother's psychological state had worsened because of his torture and imprisonment. The victim often feels sad because he has gotten old, and his life has passed by without him achieving anything because he was arbitrarily detained for such a long period.

Testimony 6

Two siblings, who were each imprisoned as minors, were subjected to physical and psychological torture ranging from beatings and electric shocks to threats and being forced to imitate animals. The younger sibling was imprisoned after the older one, and so the latter had trouble seeing his brother in custody, as he was aware of the inhumane treatment he would be subjected to. The younger brother had given himself up after being wanted by authorities because he felt that he was putting his friends at risk, with one of his friends' mothers telling him to stay away from her son because he was endangering his life. After his release, he was very temperamental and was ashamed of burdening his family. He would be repeatedly summoned and stopped by authorities which made him feel unsafe and avoid going out. It has gotten to a point where he no longer cares about being re-arrested.

Conclusion

As demonstrated, torture has a detrimental impact on the mental health and psychological wellbeing of victims, which in turn impacts their lives significantly. Bahraini officials have been torturing detainees and prisoners with impunity, inflicting physical and psychological harm which victims struggle to recover from for years to come. Furthermore, Bahraini authorities who have deliberately denied prisoners health services have also denied them mental health care. Outside prison, the social stigma and the extent of securitization in the country has also discouraged victims from seeking help. As a result, many victims of torture must face the consequences of torture on their own without the help of professionals. Hundreds of individuals in Bahrain are left to live in fear and hopelessness, unable to lead fulfilling lives because they suffered through inhumane and violent treatment without ever receiving any form of justice or support.

In light of this, and through deliberation with the therapist who closely worked with Bahraini victims of torture, ADHRB issues the following recommendations:

- a. Impartially investigate allegations of torture in order to hold perpetrator accountable.
- b. Set up a program for victims of torture to directly undergo diagnosis and intervention once allegations of torture are raised.

- c. Provide reparations for victims of torture which includes physically and psychological treatment for sustained effects of torture as well as psychological support programs for the families of victims in order to raise awareness and empower them to create a safe environment for the victims.