

# Dealing with the Past: Aspects of Trauma and Healing

Edited by Alice Murage, Ali Al-Nasani and Dara Bramson







*Alice Muthoni Murage is a researcher with the Heinrich Böll Foundation Cambodia. Her research explores issues around parenting, mainly focussing on the roles and challenges of, and the support structures available for, parents and children in rural and urban communities in Siem Reap province. She has previously worked on research projects relating to gender-mainstreaming, women's rights, and post-conflict transitional justice in Myanmar, Kenya, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Germany, and Canada. Alice holds a bachelor's degree in international relations and a master's degree in public policy, with a focus on conflict management.*

## Concluding Remarks

It was a great honour for me to participate in this milestone conference on trauma and healing, and to moderate the panel discussion on children, trauma, and parenting. The conference allowed for an open discussion between and among students, academics, psychologists, therapists, social workers, judges, museum officials, and other practitioners working with foreign government agencies and non-governmental organizations. Discussing about trauma and healing is not always easy but the panellists and participants were open to sharing their expertise, knowledge, opinions, and personal stories. This made the conference an avenue for sharing not only ideas but also emotions.

Panellists brought to the conference a broad range of expertise on trauma and healing from different contexts in Cambodia, Germany, Poland, Singapore, and Nepal. They demystified trauma and teased out various approaches to healing. The approaches that were highlighted include: story-telling, resilience psycho-therapy, meditation, family dialogues, dance therapy, and art therapy. It was emphasised by most panellists that healing is a personal process that takes commitment and time. Dr. Carol Kidron cautioned us not to dismiss those who choose to deal with trauma privately or in silence. It can be assumed that these survivors are deeply troubled by the trauma so that they do not dare to narrate the traumatic event. However, it could be that the survivors who chose to be silent are resilient and that silence is their strategy in moving forward with their lives.



Interesting discussions on whether and how museums and judicial processes contribute to healing inspired great interest from participants. In the field of transitional justice, justice and commemoration are considered key components in efforts towards national reconciliation and nation building. While judicial processes re-establish social norms by acknowledging a violation of a social code or norm, commemoration reaffirms that a violation of the social code should never recur, by displaying effects of such a violation. However, transitional justice theorists do not concern themselves with how such transitional justice mechanisms contribute to the personal healing journey of survivors. In the conference, however, some panellists made this linkage.

Chhay Visoth, the Director of the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, emphasised that the role of the museum is to establish the truth and keep memory as evidence for victims and survivors of the Khmer Rouge genocide to seek justice. Dara Bramson, on the other hand, noted the importance of museums in creating spaces for healing. Reflecting on her experience working in, and visiting, genocide museums and memorials in various parts of the world, and seating in the White Lotus Room, a meditative room at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Dara argued that physical spaces in museums can be curated to create an environment conducive for reflection and healing. Based on her research and numerous interactions with visitors of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Natalia Sineaeva-Pankowska also acknowledged the significance of museums in creating a space for reflection, as well as a space where one can explore the whole complexity of traumatic events, countering selective memory.

With regards to the role of justice in healing, Judge Martin Karopkin emphasised on the importance of victim, rather than survivor, participation. The Khmer Rouge Tribunal, he informed, allowed survivors to participate fully through their legal representatives, hence enabling them to seek answers from suspects and to share their truths. Although participation in judicial proceedings can be retraumatizing for survivors, it could also be an avenue for survivors to find closure when handled in a sensitive manner. Being heard and acknowledged is important for survivors whose suffering has been untold, downplayed, or denied. In addition, the Tribunal also ordered reparation, albeit limited to collective and moral reparations, largely implemented through memorials and educational programs. While these reparations have been effective in promoting broader acknowledgment, Norbert Feige reminded us that reparation, even that done through financial compensations, can never repair or compensate for “the loss of life, health or freedom or for being exposed to any other kind of inhuman treatment”. Reflecting on Germany’s compensation programs following the Holocaust, he emphasised that the most important role of judicial processes and consequent reparations is recognition and acknowledgment of victims. Acknowledgement of their suffering and guarantee of non-repetition through structural changes can offer relief to survivors and allow them to look inward for individual healing and reconciliation with self and the society.



The conference also highlighted children as survivors of traumatic events and recipients of secondary trauma. Joanna Sliwa challenged us to recognise children survivors as individuals with valid memories and a need for recognition. In supporting them to heal from trauma, Chankroesna Prak shared the ecological model applied by First Step Cambodia in helping boys who have suffered from sexual-based violence. She emphasised on the importance of creating a safe space that would enable disclosure and grief for losses resulting from abuse and subsequent trauma. This way a reconnection of the child survivors with ordinary life can be inspired. This, Chankroesna noted, is not easy for Cambodian boys who grow up in a culture where they are not allowed to show weakness or vulnerability.

While children suffer from trauma in their own right, they are also susceptible to inter-generational transmission of trauma. Demonstrating through various theoretical frameworks, Jolene Hwee shed light on how this transmission is possible. Most notable, the attachment theory highlights how the bond between a child and parents or caregivers can allow for such a transmission. Dr. Carol Kidron also shared how everyday interactions in the household, through words or silent actions, can allow for the effects of trauma to be felt for generations. Children, therefore, ought not to be treated as by-standers in traumatic events, even those which occurred a generation earlier. They are survivors who need support and guidance to find healing.

In compiling this conference paper, I have had the opportunity to reflect on so many components of trauma and healing. While my concluding remarks highlights issues I think are critical in any discussion on the subject, I hope that you can find messages in this conference paper that will resonate with the work that you do on trauma and healing, or with your personal journey to find healing. I would like to end by encouraging you to approach healing in a cultural-sensitive manner and to be open to the different and, sometimes, unexpected, forms it can take.

Thank you very much for your attention and interest in the conference on “Dealing with the Past: Aspects of Trauma and Healing”.