

Center for the Victims of Torture

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

<https://www.cvt.org/blog/healing-and-human-rights/working-restore-dignity-and-hope>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Biro Okwory Ongom is a psychosocial counselor at CVT Kalobeyei.

Working with clients who have survived torture and war has taught me many things while also helping them to gain strength and hope. At CVT, I have learned many skills and I've seen a lot of different ways that clients get better. They change their lives. When clients first arrive at CVT, they often look traumatized and very distressed. Some are not able to eat and describe many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But after they go through our program, they are much happier many are happy even at the middle of our 10-week cycle of sessions.

A client said to me, I have changed a lot now. I can eat well, sleep, even work and finish the sessions. He appreciated CVT. Doing this work helps clients get hope, and it gives me hope. I know that I can still do something. Living as a refugee, away from my home country is not the end of life. I can make a difference.

I came to Kalobeyei in 2017 and learned about CVT the next year. Before coming here, I lived in my home country, where I was young and still in school. There was trouble, however, and violence from militias. Many people from my tribe were being killed by government military. My life changed and I became insecure by feeling unsafe, without hope, and with thoughts I might be killed by the military. I hid in the bush as a way of protecting myself from the military.

However, the militia caught me and forced me to carry for them a heavy bag of bullets to the camp where they were staying. It was hard work and I became very tired. But I had to carry it even though it was heavy because I had no other options. I even thought that I might get killed as we walked towards their camp. But I just kept doing the work. There were other captives with me. They locked us in one of the primary school rooms in order to interview us with irrelevant questions.

Then one day all of us children were released. I went home. However, the militias still would come to our town. They wanted to take you and force you to do labor for them. I then ran away from my home country, walking very long distances days and nights without food and water. I was very afraid and I thought that I will die. My life had become so hard. My elder brother also had to flee from our home, so we reunited and went to South Sudan together. I was there for two years, and life there was also very difficult. There was a lot of hunger, starvation, no school, no food. We tried to do some business there, but finally we had to leave to Kenya.

We went first to the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, and I was able to finish primary and high school there. Then the UN relocated us to Kakuma camp. Because I came here in 2017, I arrived before CVT and I saw when they were beginning to open the center here. I saw an ad for a position as a psychosocial counselor (PSC) at CVT. This interested me as I knew that people had a lot of problems and needed help. I interviewed and took the position.

As a PSC, I work in the community with clients and people who left their home countries because of war. We help them through a lot of trauma that resulted from torture and war, and help them begin to have hope again. When the COVID-19 pandemic came, we had to change the ways we care for clients so that we could use social distance and safety protocols.

In fact COVID-19 created many psychosocial and physical challenges for many people, including clients, such as anxiety, stress, depression, lack of sleep, loss of hope, and many more. As a CVT team, we have continued committing ourselves to give service to the people through the phone there are many clients who are struggling with how to cope with the situation, and using this method is working out well. At first, I thought that it may not be effective enough, compared to the 10 sessions we had been doing at the center before COVID-19, but with the positive feedback we received from clients, I came to realize that it is working well. Their feedback became my strength to carry on the work.

Working with CVT gives me a lot of hope. I feel everybody deserves to be protected. Everyone deserves to be respected. When I see how clients change and improve, I find I am learning, too. I learn by giving hope to others. Clients tell me that some of them lost hope, but for many, when they are respected, it gives them hope. Some have told me that they felt like they were nothing. But then when they come to CVT, they find healing and people regain their hope.

For myself, I hope to further my studies, further my learning. I'm still young, I can still learn more. I know that I can make a difference in my community, in the world. I am very happy at CVT all I have learned has changed my life and allowed me to gain skills. Working with clients gives me strength and resilience. It gives me hope that I've done something good. I would like for CVT to go to other areas where



people are suffering from trauma. I know that CVT would help them restore dignity and hope.

Trauma and war make people lose hope. CVT is there to help restore their hope.



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