

Asylum Systems  
Quality Initiative

in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus



Ապաստանի համակարգերի  
որակի նախաձեռնություն

Արևելյան եվրոպայում և հարավային կովկասում

# INTERPRETING FOR VULNERABLE APPLICANTS

UNHCR TRAINING

ARMENIA

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# Objectives

1. To appreciate why vulnerable applicants require experienced, sensitive interpreters
2. To understand the importance of instilling trust and how it can be done
3. To consider particular issues when interpreting for minors, women presenting gender claims and survivors of torture
4. To be aware of challenges and occupational hazards

# Vulnerable applicants

- Mentally ill
- Minors
- Elderly
- Survivors of torture
- Survivors of crimes against humanity
- Applicants persecuted because of their sexual orientation and gender identity
- Gender claims by women

# Food for thought:

- What is your experience with children? Do you like them? Are you comfortable relating to them?
- How do you view domestic violence -- a personal problem between a husband and wife?
- How might your own history get in the way of interpreting for torture victims?
- What reactions might you have interpreting for survivors of sexual violence?
- How might your religious and cultural values have an impact on your work?

# Trust – Confidence in the integrity of a person



# Ways to instill trust

## 1. **Have the right attitude**

- Show interest in and concern for the applicant
- Be respectful – tone of voice and language used
- Try and remain calm and neutral at all times even when hearing disturbing testimony is difficult for you
- Treat the applicant not as a victim but as a person

# Ways to instill trust

## 2. Try and put the person at ease.

- Before the interview take time to meet the applicant and speak with him/her.
- Try and develop a rapport – explain your role and emphasize the confidentiality of the process
- Ask the applicant if he has any questions about your role – give the applicant a sense of control
- Be aware of body language

# Ways to instill trust

## 3. **Work with the Eligibility Officer**

- Meet with the EO before the interview to get a sense of the applicant
- Perform your duties competently



# Gender claims - women

Sex – Biological determination

Gender – The relationship between men and women based on society and culture

How can this relationship result in refugee applications?

# Types of gender claims

- Women fleeing punishment for transgressing social mores
- Women fleeing domestic violence
- Women fleeing female genital mutilation
- Women fleeing sexual violence
- Women fleeing coerced family planning
- Women fleeing trafficking

# Obstacles to overcome at the interview

- Fear
- Shame
- Humiliation
- Trauma
- Loss of confidence

Because of what happened to them – may not want to talk about it or reveal the true extent of what they suffered

# How can interpreters prepare for interviews based on gender claims?

- General rule – Use female interpreters for gender claims. This cannot always be accommodated.
- Read UNHCR Guidelines on Gender Related Persecution so you have a good understanding of the issue
- Be aware of and responsive to any cultural or religious sensitivities or personal factors such as age and level of education

# Refugee claims by children

- Below the age of 18

Some types of persecution:

- Trafficking of children for prostitution
- Sexual exploitation
- Slave labour
- Under age recruitment
- Female genital mutilation
- Under age marriage

# Obstacles to overcome at the interview

- Child's age and emotional maturity may have an impact on the ability to provide information
- Fear
- Feeling helpless
- Shame
- Lack of adult to care for them (separated children)

# How can interpreters prepare for interviews with child asylum applicants?

- Read UNHCR Guidelines on Child Asylum Claims to have a good understanding of the issues
- Before interview explain carefully that child will be asked some questions and why
- Be understanding and reassuring if the child shows signs of anxiety
- Sit closer to the child than to the EO – do not want to be seen as a person in authority

# Torture Survivors

Some physical and psychological torture methods

- Beating, kicking, whipping, violent blows, forced constraint, suspension, burns, asphyxiation, sexual violence, amputations, detention
- Sensory and social deprivation, forced to witness torture, threats against family, forced to engage in practices against one's religion, forced nudity, mock execution



# Consequences of torture

- Distrust
- Disempowerment/ Helplessness
- Shame and humiliation
- Denial and disbelief
- Disorientation and confusion
- Rage
- Psychiatric issues

# Obstacles to overcome at the interview

- Memory loss and loss of concentration
- Avoiding talking about what happened as a coping mechanism
- Re-traumatizing through having to talk about what happened
- Responding in emotionally unpredictable ways

# How can interpreters prepare for interviews with survivors of torture?

- Become familiar with terminology that can come up during interviews – medical terms/ torture methods
- Do not treat the applicant as a victim but as a person
- Be calm and neutral at all times
- Body language – do not stare, look away, use large hand gestures, point, tap your fingers, clinch your fists – gestures may be taken as accusatory or intimidating

# Challenges faced by interpreters

- Over identification
  - Shared history
    - Trauma history
- Stereotyping
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Finding the right terms for mental/ physical problems

# Occupational hazards

Vicarious trauma – the development of trauma reactions (e.g. intense fear, helplessness or horror) secondary to exposure to an applicant's traumatic experiences

Burn out

Interpreters need practical and emotional support!

# What do you do?

The applicant alleges he was tortured. At the interview he describes what happened to him without any apparent difficulty. You don't believe that a person who was abused in the manner he applicant claims could talk about it so calmly. You don't believe he was tortured. What do you do?

# Answer

It is not your role to determine what happened to the applicant. That is the job of the EO. You must remain calm and neutral and translate appropriately. You also need to be aware of stereotyping – expecting people in certain situations to behave in certain ways. One of the characteristics of torture survivors is that they can act in different, often unpredictable, ways.

# What do you do?

The 10 year old applicant arrives at the interview with her Aunt. At a break the Aunt goes to the bathroom. You have developed a good rapport with the little girl. The applicant tells you that the woman is “not my Auntie but please don’t say anything because she will be angry with me” What do you do?



# Answer

*Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 3:*

1. In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

You should inform the EO who will have to investigate.

# What do you do?

You have been assigned to interpret for a woman whose claim is based on rape by a police officer. She has asked for a female interpreter but one is not available. The applicant is a woman from your community. You do not know each other but she eyes you suspiciously. Before the interview begins, you speak to her and she dismisses you by saying, "You men are all the same. I know you will gossip about me." What do you do?

# Answer

You should not be offended by what she has said. Rather in a very measured voice explain that everything she says at the interview is confidential. You will not disclose her evidence. If she is not happy to proceed with you, you should tell the EO. This is not a reflection on you personally.

# What do you do?

An applicant who states he was brutally tortured is part way through his interview. He has been unable to remember much of what happened. Outside the window of the interview room, a helicopter flies by. The applicant suddenly becomes agitated, gets up from his chair and goes to a corner of the room where he cowers with his hands over his head as if trying to hide. He is crying uncontrollably. What do you do?

# Answer

You should take direction from the EO who will presumably try and calm the applicant. Do not show alarm at his behaviour. Speak to him in a quiet, reassuring manner. Provide him with water and some tissues. The EO should allow for a break so the applicant composes himself. You should remain calm, neutral and respectful at all times.

# What do you do?

The applicant is trying to describe what happened to her at the detention centre where she was sexually assaulted over a 2 month period. She is clearly upset and starts to use language that is very offensive. What do you do?

# Answer

Try and contain your emotions and focus on translating meaning rather than words. Sometimes people chose words poorly when speaking about sensitive or emotionally-loaded matters such as sexual abuse. Ask permission to have a word with the applicant explaining that her distress may be behind her choice of words. Double check that she really wants to use the offensive words before giving a word to for translation.

# Conclusion

Being an interpreter for refugees and asylum – seekers is a privilege. Providing the applicant with a trusting environment in which to tell his/her story, interpreting competently and impartially and maintaining confidentiality are the hallmarks of a professional interpreter. Good luck to all of you with the challenges ahead and I hope you find the work ultimately very rewarding.