



## Cordelia Foundation – Project description

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### ABOUT CORDELIA FOUNDATION

[Cordelia Foundation for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims](#) has been offering since 1996 psychosocial counselling and psychiatric rehabilitation to traumatized war victims and tortured refugees coming from all over the world. Our Medical Team has over 10 years experience in this field of work. In recognition of the above the United Nations High Commissioner awarded the Cordelia Foundation the 2005 Menedék ('Refugee') Prize for its work with victims of torture in Hungary. The Foundation, as a member of the international network of [IRCT](#) (International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims), is operating in an extensive international co-operation network.

### GOALS OF THE PROJECT

According to the above mentioned facts, the project's main goal is to provide psychosocial rehabilitation of tortured and traumatized refugee women from Africa. This is a complex goal since it is not only necessary to deal with the maltreatments and violations happened in the past but also it is needed to provide a safe environment for these women to get to know more about the culture they are to integrate.

### RATIONALE

While being refugee challenges people regardless of their gender, women's experiences do have peculiar traits. The first arises from the distortion of gender roles in the process of fleeing the home country. In fact, most of refugee women come from societies, which assign specific roles to women and men, and these roles cannot be entirely preserved in the changing circumstances. Beyond secondary traumatization they get in a very serious regressive state being alone, uprooted, unable to orient among new circumstances. They are in a severe need of psychological, psychiatric, social and legal support as well.

The conflict between constraints and roles appears in virtually all aspects of refugee women's life. With respect to medical assistance, a striking feature of this phenomenon is that women feel they have to hide their experience of torture or rape. In such cases they cannot ask for any help in order to overcome the trauma. According to traditional cultural patterns, women coming from Muslim countries are not allowed to consult male doctors. In such cases it becomes crucial to provide the access to female doctors. These women should receive medical assistance and psycho-social assistance in order to help them to overcome PTSD and/or other long lasting effect of torture.

Besides the issues related to medical aspects, women torture victims face other risks. Within the acceptance stations (refugee camps) men often lose their role of breadwinner, while women may find work more easily. Thus women can become the bearers of traditional male roles, while also keeping the role of the guardian of the family.

### KEY ASPECTS

The project consists of four sequential steps in which every maltreated and violated women are involved. Since the flow of immigrants is constant these phases can be overlapping with different groups of women. However, the key aspects of the projects are, as follows:

1. Psychosocial assessment of the mental and somatic conditions of the African women arrived to Hungary
2. Writing medical-legal reports thereby contributing to gain refugee status for these victims of torture
3. Treating Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Major Depression while providing education in psychological and cultural integration matters
4. Helping to develop a new gender identity based on a new representation of body and self and the connection between these

#### PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The rehabilitation program works through our *‘Mobile Medical Unit’* which implies that therapeutic sessions are held at acceptance stations, the place of residence of the asylum seekers and refugees. It is a unique model in Europe which not only makes our services cost-effective but also we can have more beneficial access to clients in their temporary homes. All the therapeutic sessions are being held in the native language of the client. Therefore all sessions are carried out with the assistance of a specially trained interpreter. This means that each therapist is accompanied by at least one interpreter depending on the type of the therapy (individual or group therapy). This activity takes place at the refugee reception centres of Hungary, namely Békéscsaba, Bicske, Debrecen.

#### METHODOLOGY

The Cordelia Foundation, as the only medical rehabilitation centre working with torture survivors in Hungary, has been awarded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) the 2005 Menedék Prize for its work with victims of torture in Hungary. Through the years of active psychotherapeutic and psychosocial assistance, the Foundation's therapists have elaborated several innovative and unique methods themselves, which are now internationally recognized. Some of them are also applied with a special focus in this project.

#### **a) Psychiatric and psychological rehabilitation**

The choice of different therapeutic methods is made after the first encounter with the client. This first conversation facilitates a closer contact between the client and the therapist and helps the therapists to detect further therapeutic needs of the client. According to their needs, clients can enter different therapies at individual and/or group level:

##### **Special therapies for adult women**

- **Individual therapies** can help patients to deal with suppressed memories and emotions which stems from traumata of maltreatment and violation. The clients cannot deal with these posttraumatic effects alone and suffer from depression, anxiety and insomnia. By revealing the cause of these in verbal and non-verbal therapeutic sessions the clients can regain their lost self-esteem and trust.
- The same result of liberating the emotional life can be addressed by **Symbol-group therapy** which functions via art and creation liberates hidden forces by evoking and accessing suppressed desires relating the participant to others and/or to her. In a refugee context Gestalt therapy art work should begin with bringing in an object or materials that recall home. The primary requirement is that there should be a palpable object in the focus. Felting and ceramics are particularly well adaptable materials.
- **Somato therapy**: a new initiation of the Foundation's therapist based on special methods focusing regaining lost self-esteem and body scheme thereby alleviating the feeling of shame and guilt caused by humiliation and maltreatment.

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**b) Medical (somatic) rehabilitation**

In the Cordelia Foundation treatment of somatic and other physical problems and injuries are arranged through referrals to specialists, who are in cooperation with the Foundation. The social worker is in charge of organizing appointments according to the needs of the clients. The medical/somatic rehabilitation has two aspects: it has sequelae not only mentally, but also physically. Full treatment and rehabilitation includes psychosomatic and social elements as well.

**c) Social rehabilitation**

Due to the effects of PTSD, the challenge of integration into a new environment is even bigger for trauma victims. Accordingly, we assist torture survivors by teaching them the necessary skills for integration and offer them practical support. In other words, practical support means that the social worker assists clients in a wide range of practical issues of their day-to-day life. For clients with a somatic problem, the social worker makes appointments at the appropriate medical institution(s). For clients settling in Hungary the social worker gives information on relevant aid programmes and service providers. Also, it is the social worker's task to help in finding accommodation and/or looking for employment opportunities.

**RESULTS**

The results of this complex approach appear on two different levels: on the individual and the social level.

On the **individual level**, the clients are able to deal with their personal tragedies and the feeling of shame. This can happen through the elaboration of pathological defence mechanisms and by working through the experience of rape and humiliation/torture in a safe therapeutic context. These elaboration processes largely contribute to the rehabilitation of the following symptoms: memory and concentration problems, avoiding behaviour, emotional numbing, sleep disorders, nightmares, vegetative dysfunctions and chronic pain. By alleviating these symptoms the clients become capable of coping better in social interactions.

Therefore, the project has **social implications** as well since personalities with a more open and trustful attitude are more likely to find their way in a new cultural context. Moreover throughout the therapeutic sessions the clients also develop reconstructed gender female identities which are essential in a society with different behavioural patterns and gender roles. This also increases their chance of social integration being a further aim of the project.

**STAFF INVOLVED**

Cordelia Foundation has a multi-disciplinary approach as its members have various fields of specialisation. The following colleagues are involved in this project from our pool of expertise: **2 psychiatrists, 1 psychologist, 1 non-verbal therapist, 1 social worker, 1 interpreter, 1 programme-coordinator.**

**FINANCING**

This project is running under the auspices of a general project funded by the European Initiative for Human Rights and Democracy (EIDHR) and European Refugee Fund (ERF) aiming the rehabilitation of torture victims. Therefore, the budget of this project – approximately 12 000 EUR – is earmarked from the budget of this 'more encompassing' project.