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May 06, 2004, 8:34 a.m.

Not Unfamiliar

Images of sexual abuse and humiliation in Abu Ghraib.

By Donna M. Hughes

The photographs of sexual abuse and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib prison are shocking and disgusting. They are also familiar. I have seen images like these before in other places and contexts.

The Taguba Report on the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison found that "numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses were inflicted on several detainees." Credible evidence was found that Iraqi detainees had been subjected to acts such as:

- Videotaping and photographing naked male and female detainees;
- Forcibly arranging detainees in various sexually explicit positions for photographing;
- Forcing detainees to remove their clothing and keeping them naked for several days at a time;
- Forcing naked male detainees to wear women's underwear;
- Forcing groups of male detainees to masturbate while being photographed and videotaped;
- Writing "I am a Rapist" (sic) on the leg of a detainee alleged to have forcibly raped a 15-year-old fellow detainee, and then photographing him naked;
- Placing a dog chain or strap around a naked detainee's neck and having a female soldier pose for a picture;
- A male MP guard having sex with a female detainee;
- Taking photographs of dead Iraqi detainees;
- Pouring cold water on naked detainees;
- Threatening male detainees with rape;
- Sodomizing a detainee with a chemical light and perhaps a broomstick.

In these sadistic acts, there are themes, methods, and goals that cross a number of boundaries and categories we have set up to organize our thinking and comprehend such behaviors and images. These acts are attacks on the victims' dignity, identity, and bodily integrity. They create such feelings of shame and fear that they destroy the victims' ability to maintain their sense of self-respect and identity. These types of humiliation and abuse are used in other settings to achieve similar goals.

I once interviewed a trafficker in Ukraine. She was one of a number of pimps who worked for an organized crime network in upscale hotels in central Moscow. She had criminal collaborators recruit women and girls in Ukraine and send them to her in Moscow where she took their passports, made them watch hours of pornography, and then forced them into prostitution. She gave me a set of photographs of a young woman, probably in her teens, being humiliated and abused. In one photograph, the young woman is seated naked on the floor with a soiled sanitary napkin tied to her forehead. In other photographs the victim's face is being forced into the buttocks and crotch of a naked woman who is squatting above her. In yet another, her face is being forced into a stream of urine. The purpose of this degradation is to break a victim's spirit, to destroy her capacity to resist, and to transform her into a compliant slave who performs sex acts for men, and makes money for organized crime and corrupt officials. The process of breaking the victim was documented by photographing it so the victim knows that a record of her powerlessness and humiliation has been recorded. The photographs can be used later to coerce her into cooperating with the pimp by threatening her with exposure by sending copies to friends, family, a boyfriend at home, or put on the Internet for the whole world to see.

In Ukraine, I interviewed a young woman who should have been in a college classroom. Instead, she was on the street each night selling sex acts. She had been temporarily compelled into prostitution in order to earn money for a medical procedure to save her infant son's life. One night a man used a razor blade to cut the Ukrainian equivalent of the word "whore" into her flesh. She believed she was marked and defined for life.

I have read and heard survivor testimony from women imprisoned in Evin prison in Tehran, where democracy activists are raped, tortured, and sexually humiliated. The religious fascists of Iran attack the very essence of the women's being and identity in order to destroy their personal and political will to resist.

A few years ago, I was hired by the Council of Europe to research how new information technologies (mostly the Internet) are used to traffic women and children for purposes of sexual exploitation. I documented and analyzed websites which offered rape videos, live video chat of sexual abuse and torture of victims, sex tours, the sale of Eastern European women for the production of pornography, and mail-order-bride services that are likely front operations for trafficking of women and girls. I found websites with sexualized images of women depicted as being dead or murdered. I saw many images that resembled those from Abu Ghraib.

The images from Abu Ghraib are trophy pictures. The sadistic MPs are shown posing, smiling, and gloating over their victims and what they have made them do. Similarly, I found numerous offers on the Internet from pimps for men to bring cameras and video recorders with them to make trophy images and videos of their sexual use of women and girls.

Why are we shocked by these images from Abu Ghraib, but when the victims are women (or gay men) the images are called pornography or "adult entertainment"? Why can we easily see the violations of human beings in one set of images, but miss it in others? What if the Iraqi men had been forced to smile, could we be convinced that there was a newly formed "publishing and film production" company in Baghdad instead of sexual abuse and humiliation being perpetrated?

President Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld have condemned the acts and the abuse of the Iraqis. They said that these acts do not represent American values. I want to believe that is true. Yet, I see the common themes and methods used by other types of perpetrators on different victims. These similar images are what the young American soldiers from the Internet generation have grown up with and learned to call "adult entertainment." Did they become desensitized to the harm of doing such things to people by seeing multiple images of similar abuse to women? Did they learn how to violate someone by being a voyeur to abuse, and in Abu Ghraib they had the chance to become perpetrators — and pornographers? Did they fully comprehend the harm they were doing?

On days like this, I search for security, for hope that there is decency and good in the world, and for reassurance that there are people committed to defeating the terrorists, the pornographers, the torturers, and the slave traders — all of whom intend to enslave and destroy so many lives.

I am fortunate to have friends and colleagues who get out of bed each morning to work for human rights, freedom, and democracy, who risk their safety to rescue victims, who take positions for what they think is right even if it is unpopular, and who speak out against atrocities that most people do not want to think about. They know that only by exposing abuses, naming them for what they are, and holding perpetrators accountable can we build free societies. They are feminists, liberals, conservatives, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, women, and men. They are people who have the moral clarity and courage to be leaders in the fight against all the forms of sexual abuse, terror, and slavery. I am privileged to know and work with them.

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