

"Gender interrupted by forced psychiatry"

A personal testimony on gender experience and forced body cavity searches in mental health care.

7 October 2016, by Jolijn Santegoeds (Johanna Christina), founder of Mind Rights¹, Co-chair of the World Network of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry², Board member of the European Network of (Ex) Users and Survivors of Psychiatry³

Introduction

This article contains my personal testimony on gender perspective in relation to mental health care. My testimony contains various elements that may be experienced as disturbing to some readers.

Painful topic

I have gone through some very distressing personal experiences in mental health care, which deeply impacted my personal perception of my own gender. In particular, the forced body cavity searches between the age of 16 and 18 had a devastating effect on my personal experience of gender and identity.

These forced body cavity searches took place in a context of long-term forced psychiatric interventions. These were the most horrific experiences in my life. The general circumstances of these forced psychiatric interventions have already been described in my personal testimony: "16 years old, depressed and tortured in psychiatry"⁴.

This article elaborates in more detail on my personal gender-related experiences, and the impact of being subjected to forced body cavity search in mental health care. It has not been easy to come to the disclosure of these personal experiences and perspectives. For a long time, I have avoided gender-related topics in my life, because it confronts me with very painful experiences. This will be explained further in this article.

Taboo and shame

For a long time, I assumed that forced body cavity search is very exceptional in mental health care the Netherlands, and therefore I assumed that sharing my testimony would not be very useful for advocacy. I knew that bringing this topic up would cause pain, and I assumed it would be better not to do that. But when analyzing these assumptions carefully, I conclude something else.

Forced body cavity search in mental health care is not exceptional. In the Netherlands, forced body cavity search ("*visitatie*") is a standardized practice on adults and children in Forensic psychiatry as well as in prison settings. It can also be part of forced psychiatric interventions. In addition, in 2006, thousands of children were placed in regular prison settings due to waiting list for child care services, and they were also exposed to forced strip searches and forced body cavity searches, which has also been addressed in the report "Torture and ill-treatment in mental health care in the Netherlands"⁵.

¹ Stichting Mind Rights, www.mindrighs.nl

² World Network of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry (WNUSP), www.wnusp.net

³ European Network of (Ex) Users and Survivors of Psychiatry (ENUSP), www.enusp.org

⁴ Personal testimony: "16 years old, depressed and tortured in psychiatry", 10 December 2014, <http://tekeertegendeisoleer.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/16-years-old-depressed-and-tortured-in-psychiatry.pdf>

⁵ Submission of Stichting Mind Rights to Committee Against Torture: "Torture and ill-treatment in mental health care in the Netherlands" (2013) http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CAT/Shared%20Documents/NLD/INT_CAT_NGO_NLD_12840_E.pdf

So there are thousands of children and adults in the Netherlands who are exposed to forced body cavity searches.

Yet, the silence around this topic is deafening, while survivors of forced body cavity search describe deep trauma and pain^{6, 7, 8}. The silence around the issue of forced body cavity searches may be similar to the silence that surrounds other acts of sexual abuse, and be due to taboo and shame, and even feelings of culpability.

So, the use of forced body cavity search is actually widespread, and deeply traumatizing. Yet, it is a taboo surrounded with shame and fear. Altogether this countered my assumption that sharing my testimony would not be useful for advocacy purposes. Actually, my testimony can contribute to breaking the taboo, with the aim to put an end to suffering in solitude. Also, it can raise awareness on the urgency of installing a prohibition on forced body cavity search, in order to prevent this trauma for others.

Disclosing unspeakable harm

With this personal testimony, I disclose some of the horrible effects that this sexual violence had on me. It will illustrate that forced body cavity searches are extremely harmful, and need to be banned from mental healthcare practices immediately.

In the next paragraphs, I will outline how the forced body cavity searches deeply disturbed my personal gender perspective.

Age 16: Gender-dysphoria and psychosocial problems

In my adolescence, I started to feel weird, and I got confused about my gender. By now I know that I experienced a form of gender dysphoria, but at that time, I did not know what it was or how to deal with it. I had a hard time, and I was developing a number of psychosocial problems. The confusion over my gender identity contributed negatively to my wellbeing. On top of that, I also experienced harassment and unacceptable behavior by some people of my own age. I started to feel increasingly depressed and had suicidal feelings. Eventually the situation escalated and I committed a suicide attempt.

Forced treatments in child-psychiatry

After this suicide attempt, I was admitted against my will to a psychiatric hospital for children and youth. I didn't feel safe there, and attempted suicide again. Then I was put in solitary confinement because I was considered to be a "danger to myself" and the staff had no time to watch me 24/7. In solitary confinement, I only felt more miserable, and my suicidal feelings did not stop, but only increased. More suicide attempts and self-harm followed. In response, I was subjected to a range of forced psychiatric interventions, including forced psychiatric medication and physical restraint-belts, all in the context of the solitary confinement regime. These forced "treatments", "interventions" and "protective measures" were not helping me at all. It was horrible and very degrading. I could not live like that. My resistance and self-destructive feelings only increased. It became an endless chain of escalation and repression.

⁶ "I was biting back tears of shame, humiliation and flat out terror, despite never having been abused in any way. It was a gross violation of my privacy and personhood."

<http://www.mdedge.com/clinicalpsychiatrynews/article/52572/its-time-stop-strip-searching-psychiatric-patients>

⁷ "Why why why are people strip searched as part of the "process" during intake into inpatient psychiatry? Horrible degrading and humiliating standing barefoot naked on the cold dirty hospital floor being inspected by strangers, horrible. Never forget how nasty that made me feel."

<http://www.soberrecovery.com/forums/mental-health/345992-inpatient-psychiatry-intake-strip-searches.html>

⁸ <http://www.hcplive.com/medical-news/doctors-body-cavity-search-ends-in-15-million-settlement>

Degraded by forced body cavity searches

Then, in addition to the solitary confinement regime, on the grounds of being a so-called "danger to myself", they also performed forced body cavity searches. I was overpowered. They touched me everywhere, in all my body parts with their rubber gloves, to check for dangerous materials. And then they left me in the isolation cell. These body cavity checks were done for "security reasons". But to me, it felt like rape and abuse. It was horrible to lose my childhood like that. This violence has had a lifelong impact on me. It has changed me in many ways.

Abused by both genders

Personally, the fact that men, but also women did this to me, made it even harder to deal with this. I did not feel safe at all, and it was harder to identify with any gender. I was left to deal with these disturbing experiences in full isolation. This caused even more confusion in relation to gender-perspectives. I felt deeply excluded from any gender. I didn't want to think about gender any more, and tried to block it, and to become a neutral, genderless person. But it still confused me. I felt trapped.

Peer pressure and abuse

During institutionalization, at times when I was allowed out of the isolation cell, I could have contact with other inpatients. Some of them were putting a lot of pressure on me to engage in sexual relations, sometimes even by force, which in fact was sexual abuse. When I brought up this situation to the staff, they accused me of "abusing men", because in their opinion I gave out confusing signals on sexuality. This was again very painful and confusing. I felt utterly misunderstood, degraded and lost.

Avoiding all gender-related issues

So for a very long time, many years, I have tried to avoid the issue of gender and sexuality in most aspects of my life. I felt dehumanized, and could not identify with any of the gender-groups. I could only identify myself as a human-being, but not in a gender perspective. Whenever gender or sexuality was a topic, I would try to disappear, sometimes literally locking myself in the toilet.

Still confused about my own feelings

By avoiding all gender-related issues, I did not have to face these feelings of gender confusion and sexual violence. I created new words to describe my feelings. For a number of years I identified as "asexual", but I also had some doubts about that. I found out that it can be very hard to distinguish whether a certain feeling is caused by trauma or personality, or both. Anyway, I found it a complex feeling, so I also called it my "sex complex". I slowly started to accept my own feelings as a part of me, and I started to make room in my life for the existence of these feelings. It was a kind of secret that I dealt with all by myself.

Trying to relate again

It took me many more years to learn to speak about these deep and secret feelings, and to share my gender confusion and overwhelmingly traumatizing experiences of forced body cavity searches with my private circle. I found out that it was very important to allow these feelings to be part of my life. Whenever I shared these very real feelings, I felt liberated, strong and whole as never before. I felt included. I learned that relationships become much more meaningful when I put my heart into it.

Searching for my own identity

So I learned to follow my heart, to listen to my own feelings and to trust them, to be open and honest about how I felt. I also learned to aim for the future, and to aim for positive experiences. Eventually, a couple of years ago I decided that I wanted to identify as a woman, although that doesn't mean I have to conform to a binary stereotype. I can be as manlike or as neutral as I want, whenever I want. I am free to be who I want to be. And nowadays, I usually enjoy identifying myself as a woman.

Still avoiding intimacy

Inter-personal relationships often remain hard for me though. I still experience difficulties with envisaging love and engaging in intimate relationships, flirting and sex. I know this is due to various reasons, such as my experiences of severe abuse and a lack of access to justice, as well as the fact that I have become used to dealing with my feelings all alone by myself, and these complex feelings can still be very confusing. Sharing them is often still hard. Who would be able to understand this? Also, I fear that the burden is too much for others to be exposed to. So I tend to keep this to myself in this regard, and in general, I still avoid engaging in love affairs, even though I have always wanted to found a family. It feels like a controversy, and yet, I still haven't figured out how to overcome this situation.

Is motherhood out of reach?

My wish to found a family is complicated as well, since motherhood requires sexuality, and also good management of psychosocial difficulties and relations as well. I often fear that I am just not good enough in that regard, although I have achieved much more stability in my life. I fear that the burden of past trauma and difficulties may eventually prevent me from engaging in relations at all, and that my dream to found a family may be beyond my reach. I am already 38 years old, and I still have a long way to go to figure out how to deal with this all. It remains a challenge to deal with these painful feelings.

Identifying the damage done by forced psychiatry

It is hard to pinpoint the exact composition of my "sex complex", but it is obvious that the damage done by forced psychiatric practices has been enormous. If I hadn't been exposed to so much abuse in mental health care, I certainly would have had less complications dealing with my psychosocial problems and gender-confusion. It is clear that the forced psychiatric interventions actively harmed me, even though they were called "mental health care", and even though the domestic laws, guidelines and protocols "allowed" for these forced psychiatric practices. From the very first moment on, I knew that these practices were wrong, since it was a devastating experience, and not "care". I have been terribly abused, and most of my needs were neglected, which has deeply impacted my sense of self. The damage is still overwhelming and present in my daily life.

Since the very start of being subjected to forced psychiatric treatment in 1994, I started to search for access to justice in order to try to save myself and others from this harm.

No access to justice

Despite my fear of gender-related issues, I have always tried to find recognition and a remedy for the abuse. I tried to lodge complaints with basically all conventional and nonconventional complaint mechanisms that are available in the Netherlands. Unfortunately, in the past 22 years, all my complaints in the Netherlands, have been rejected so far.

Even the Communication sent by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right of Everyone to the Enjoyment of the Highest Attainable Standard of Physical and Mental Health and the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment in October 2013⁹ to the Netherlands on my personal case, has not led to the willingness of the Dutch authorities to investigate my case¹⁰. I am still trying to find access to justice.

It is outrageous that in the Netherlands, even such an excessive act as forced body cavity search in child care, is not recognized as abuse, while it obviously is.

⁹ AL Health (2002-7) G/SO 214 (53-24) NLD 2/2013 -Communication sent to the Netherlands by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health.

[https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/24th/public - AL Netherlands 08.10.13 \(2.2013\).pdf](https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/24th/public - AL Netherlands 08.10.13 (2.2013).pdf)

¹⁰ NV: GEV-PA 370/2013 – Response by the Kingdom of the Netherlands

[https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/24th/Netherlands 05.12.13 \(2.2013\).pdf](https://spdb.ohchr.org/hrdb/24th/Netherlands 05.12.13 (2.2013).pdf)

It is totally unacceptable that despite issuing explicit and continuous complaints about experiencing sexual abuse in child care, not any governmental mechanism took the effort to check if this is true, and to investigate what actually happened.

Discriminated on the basis of psychosocial disability

Apparently, the general standards of protection offered to women and children to be free from violence and abuse are not equally extended to me nor to other women and children in mental health care. Instead, a significantly lower standard of protection is applied, because of the existence of psychosocial problems. So, just because I was labelled with a so-called "severe mental disorder", I was not protected from abusive acts such as long-term solitary confinement and sexual violence by forced body cavity search. This is discrimination.

I should be recognized as a person, with equal rights in all aspects of life.

It should be my right that nobody be allowed to touch my intimate body parts against my will.

Every child, and every woman has this right. It should be my right too.

Long-term exclusion

Even years after my release from the mental health care institution, my complaints are still not taken seriously. So apparently, I am still not considered as a full person, or a full woman. I cannot enjoy the same basic rights and freedoms as others. I am still excluded in several ways, such as from access to justice, and from the recognition of equal respect to my integrity. That still makes me feel lonely and sidelined. In my daily life, this continuous inequality still makes it hard to really identify and relate with others, because it is unfair that I am treated in ways that would never be possible for others. I still feel separated in a way. I am longing for recognition and justice, and equal inclusion.

Longing for equal recognition

To be able to heal, and to feel equal to others, the devastating effects of forced body cavity searches need to be recognized, as well as the harm done by all other forced psychiatric interventions, such as long-term solitary confinement, 4-point restraint belts, and forced medication, amongst others. Compensation and remedies need to be put in place, in a similar manner as would be done for persons without disabilities who are exposed to comparable acts of sexual violence in similar circumstances of dependency, powerlessness, long-term solitary confinement, etcetera.

The pain keeps accumulating

The consequences of the trauma and the lack of access to justice are still present in my daily life. I am now 38 years old. And many years ago, at age 16, my already complicated gender experience was bluntly interrupted by forced psychiatry. It has taken me over 2 decades to recover as far as I have now. I know that it may never be fully over, and I will have to carry these experiences with me forever. It is hard to accept that.

Facing the lack of access to justice is also very hard. My story presents a very classic example of child abuse, and yet, it is not recognized in my case, due to the diagnosis of a psychiatrist. It is truly outrageous, and that feeling of injustice doesn't get any less over time at all. It is actually even more outrageous that I have been fighting for the majority of my life-time, to find a remedy for something that happened in my youth.

It hurts even more to see that my efforts to address this issue, and to protect others from this harm, have all been in vain so far. That is extremely painful.

I wish that one day, I can put these nasty experience to rest. But as long as the Dutch national laws¹¹ allow for such practices, I cannot be at peace at all. This harm should not be permitted.

¹¹ Dutch national laws on forced psychiatric treatments: Wet Bijzondere Opnemingen in Psychiatrische Ziekenhuizen (wet BOPZ) en wetsvoorstel Verplichte GGZ (Kst. 32.399)

The damage is enormous, the lifelong trauma cannot be undone. Such acts should never be allowed in mental health care. To quote the Hippocratic Oath: "First do no harm".

Speaking out for change

I am still advocating for recognition and remedy for my own case. And I also advocate against all other abuses that are taking place against persons with psychosocial disabilities.

This testimony is meant to bring to light the hidden burden I carry as a survivor of forced body cavity searches in mental health care. Breaking the silence is another step in advocacy, with the aim to counter the silence surrounding these horrible practices in mental health care, and to call for recognition of the deep trauma and devastating long-term effects of forced body cavity search.

I have now reached this point in my life, where I can express my true personal perspective on my gender-issues through a public testimony. This article is therefore a real milestone for me personally.

I hope my testimony can empower other persons as well.

I would like to take this opportunity to invite others to share their stories about gender perspective and mental health as well.

List of urgent actions to be taken:

1. Classify forced body cavity searches, as well as all other forced psychiatric interventions as abuse, and prohibit their use in mental health care immediately.
2. Remedy the lack of access to justice.
3. Compensate persons for the harm done.
4. Reform mental health care in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, its General Comment no.1 on CRPD article 12 Equal recognition before the law, and the Guidelines on CRPD article 14 Liberty and security of the person.
