

## Keynote speech

**Helen Bamber OBE**, founder of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture and the Helen Bamber Foundation



*Helen Bamber has worked tirelessly in the human rights field for over 60 years helping thousands of survivors of human rights violations worldwide. She began working with survivors in the former concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen after WWII at the age of 19. Helen Bamber was an early member of Amnesty International and in 1985 established The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, where she was the founder and former director until early 2005. She established the Helen Bamber Foundation in 2005, a human rights organization dedicated to the care and treatment of survivors of gross human rights violations. Named European Woman of Achievement in 1993, she was awarded the OBE in 1997 and in the same year also received a lifetime Human Rights Achievement award for her work.*

Helen started by expressing that it was a privilege to speak to students because they had open minds, looking to persuade governments to make changes.

She shared about two of the lessons she has learnt. When she was 20 and working at Bergen-Belsen, a former concentration camp (still open after the war because the survivors had nowhere else to go), she met with the appalling results of carnage and chaos. She felt overwhelmed and useless. Then she sat on the ground with a survivor who was rocking back and forth from the effects of trauma who dug her fingers into Helen's arms and rasped out, "Tell, tell, tell". This was something that Helen knew she could do and this is what motivates her – telling survivors' stories, bearing witness to their lives. The Helen Bamber Foundation can provide help for STAR groups campaigns in the form of testimonies and stories of refugees. Please ask.

Secondly, she has learnt how quickly compassion dies. This is obvious from the procedures we have in this country dealing with asylum. Bergen-Belsen is a lesson showing that history must never be forgotten. It was open until 1950 because the inmates had nowhere to go. Those who tried to return to their countries were killed. What happened to compassion? These survivors proved an insoluble problem as soon as they started speaking out about what had happened. It was important to give people a voice and for them to speak out, but they were then viewed as a nuisance and were vilified. There was very little compassion and understanding.

Helen described her work with Amnesty. She has seen how institutionalized and sophisticated torture has become, designed to maximize pain and leave few signs. She became almost obsessive about the fact that people in the caring professions should raise awareness and should care about this, but they can often, in torture settings, be involved in the torture itself.

The Medical Foundation started life in a little hut in the Amnesty car park. They started to examine survivors and provide evidence to present to law-makers and government. She saw how when working together they grew and became a bigger force. Helen was in one of the first Amnesty groups, in Hampstead in 1960-1. Doctors were asking the Medical Foundation not just to campaign, but to set up a service for survivors, to listen to their stories, to hear their experiences, care about their fragmented family problems and their bewilderment. One doctor said to Helen, "We just don't have the time to listen to their silences". She wishes the immigration system would understand that phrase.

Why the Helen Bamber Foundation? Organisations have to have criteria to decide who to deal with themselves, and who to pass on to another organization. It was clear that some survivors of torture were beginning to fall between the gaps in service provision. In part, then, the Foundation was set up because of the story of a young boy who had picked up a Walkman that was deliberately designed to blow up. He lost his eyes and his hands. It was difficult for him to get help because he fell in between the gaps. She set up the organization to have a very broad remit. The story, for example, is not a typical case of torture in a conventional sense. The boy has now moved on, is in a special school and has artificial arms. The Foundation also treated his brother who was responsible for him. He was so absorbed with caring for his brother that he had no concern for himself. It is vital to keep in mind the subtlety of relationships.

Her work is all about relationships. We can care for physical scars – there are doctors who will document them, lawyers who will fight for the right to asylum, but it is also about PEOPLE, not 'clients' - her 'clients' relationship with the asylum procedure. The procedure is increasingly cruel. It is cruel to deliberately make asylum seekers destitute. We shouldn't talk of "failed asylum seekers". It is the procedure that has failed them. Again, the Helen Bamber Foundation can provide STAR groups with examples of where Legal Aid has not been enough, where people are not getting adequate representation.

It is so difficult to talk about torture. Helen gave the example of a woman who saw her father killed at the age of 10. From the age of 3 she was held by rebels and used as a sex slave. She is a "failed" asylum seeker. She is about to be made destitute.

Helen talked about the way some people view the system, and people who feel that we should not be "soft" on asylum seekers, because then too many will come into the country. It is in fact extremely difficult to get into the country and these people require compassion. She gave the example of a man who came from the Middle East. He had been tortured but was forcibly returned to his country. On his return, he was tortured again and nearly lost his sight. He came back, claimed asylum again, and this time was granted it with the help of immense public pressure.

To campaign we must use examples like this: please ask for stories from the Foundation.