

TO: Maria E. Andrade, Attorney at Law

FROM: Margaret Bassett, LPC-S  
Director, Expert Witness Initiatives  
Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault  
The School of Social Work  
The University of Texas at Austin

RE: Celia Primero Ismalej

DATE: February 18, 2015

Introduction:

I have prepared this independent assessment of Celia Primero Ismalej's application for asylum. In preparation for this report, I interviewed Ms. Primero for two hours on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015 at the Karnes City Residential (Detention) facility. Additionally I read case notes provided to me by Attorney Maria E. Andrade and reviewed current literature. This report documents findings that support theories and research related to trauma and the impact of detention.

I have over 25 years of experience working in the field of family violence and sexual assault. I have worked directly with thousands of victims in residential settings, non-residential settings and in the criminal justice system. I am currently director of expert witness initiatives at the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work in the Institute on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (IDVSA).

I am licensed by the Texas State Board of Examiners of Professional Counselors, (LPC-S), #17008.

The interview with Ms. Primero consisted of a bio-psycho-social-history social work assessment with an emphasis on gathering a history of direct physical and nonphysical violence that was directed toward Ms. Primero by members of her extended family, in addition to the continued threat of future harm/death. Specifically I was asked to provide my expert professional opinion on the impact this violence had on Ms. Primero as well as the impact of detention on her mental health. My review and summary are included in this report.

History and chronology of targeted violence

Celia fled [redacted] June of 2014 with her 10 month old son, [redacted]. She arrived in the United States in August of 2014 and has been detained since.

Celia was forced to flee her home due to increasing threats to her life and the lack of safety or protection in her community and surrounding villages and towns. Celia has no confidence in the police and in fact when she did go to them, there was no measurable follow through.

Celia grew up experiencing what could be described as a "reign of terror" acted out against she and her family by extended family members on her father's side. Celia's father, [REDACTED] is from [REDACTED]. He married [REDACTED], who was from [REDACTED] a more indigenous population. [REDACTED]'s family did not accept [REDACTED] nor did they accept their children. [REDACTED] raised her children in her customs which caused them to be seen as "different" by [REDACTED] family.

Celia talked about the violence and abuse she suffered growing up. [REDACTED] would hit and harass Celia and her siblings. They would call them names and throw dirt on them when they found them in the river. [REDACTED] Celia was not able to avoid [REDACTED] they all washed and bathed in the same river and went to the same schools.

[REDACTED]

In [REDACTED] attempted to kill [REDACTED] They had sticks and machetes. Some man [REDACTED] saw what was happening and intervened. [REDACTED] and Celia's [REDACTED] were able to escape and run to the home. Celia reports that she witnessed her mother being attacked afar from her home and was very scared. [REDACTED] Celia also reports that [REDACTED] was suicidal after this attack, made statements that she couldn't stand it anymore and that it would be better if she killed herself. She asked Celia to take care of the younger siblings. Celia's [REDACTED] talked her mother from committing suicide. Celia says that her mother changed after this, "she was different after that. She just cried and cried all the time". She deteriorated even more after [REDACTED] was killed in [REDACTED]

In [REDACTED] Celia married [REDACTED]

In [REDACTED] She pushed [REDACTED] to the ground, broke her container, grabbed her by the hair

and began to hit her. [REDACTED] had a bloody nose. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] filed a police report however the officer only gave [REDACTED] a warning, [REDACTED] No charges were ever made.

In [REDACTED] Celia was walking with her son [REDACTED] in her arms. [REDACTED] saw her and began to yell insults at her. She pointed at [REDACTED] and yelled "throw out that thing" then grabbed [REDACTED] from Celia's arms and threw him to the side. Celia bent to pick up [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] hit her in the head with a rock. Celia was able to run to [REDACTED] home. Celia needed medical attention and received 2 stitches as a result of this beating. Celia filed a police report and was given an appointment. Celia showed up for the appointment and they waited "half a day" for [REDACTED] to appear. She never showed. The police told Celia they would send her and [REDACTED] another appointment notice but they never did. Celia reported that everybody knew the police wouldn't follow up.

In [REDACTED] was killed in a hit and run motorcycle accident. The truck that hit him never stopped and as far as Celia knows there was never an investigation. Celia believes that [REDACTED] family is responsible for [REDACTED] death based upon statements [REDACTED] made after his death.

In [REDACTED] Celia reports that [REDACTED] threatened to kill a man. Within a year that man died. [REDACTED] was put in jail for a week and then released. Celia believes that [REDACTED] killed this man. Celia believes when [REDACTED] family says they will do something, that they will follow through with it.

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] The police officer only took Celia and [REDACTED] contact information and told them the report was over. Celia believes [REDACTED] was never contacted. [REDACTED] returned within a month and attempted to physically assault both of them again. He told them that he would kill them, that he would come in the middle of the night and kill them. [REDACTED] would return to the home sporadically and it was always to fight. Celia talked with [REDACTED] [REDACTED] told Celia there was nothing he could do, [REDACTED]. At this point [REDACTED] began talking with Celia about fleeing to the United States.

In [REDACTED] Celia came to the US alone but was deported. When she returned to [REDACTED] she moved in with her mother in [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] They beat him and stole his bike from him. After that [REDACTED] was afraid to go to work because they would kill him. [REDACTED] couldn't leave the house. Celia reports that [REDACTED]

threatened [REDACTED] Celia reports that [REDACTED] was always around and that she and [REDACTED] were afraid to go anywhere. [REDACTED] decided to come to the United States. [REDACTED] told Celia to stay home as much as possible to be safe. After he had settled in the United States, [REDACTED] went for Celia and that was when she was detained.

On [REDACTED] threatened Celia again. [REDACTED] This scared Celia who believes that [REDACTED] will kill her.

On [REDACTED] told Celia (in Spanish) "Oh good. Now I can make good on the threat that I should have carried out before. Now for sure I am going to kill you. You made a complaint against me and I will kill you when you least expect it." Celia believes that [REDACTED] will follow through with the threat and kill her.

A few days before Celia left for the United States, [REDACTED] killed an old man, the grandfather of one of the gang members. Celia reports that the police did nothing, adding "they only respond to money."

On [REDACTED] Celia left for the United States with her youngest son [REDACTED] and was detained upon arrival. She and [REDACTED] have been in a detention center for the last 7 months.

In December 2014, while in detention, Celia called her mother. [REDACTED] told her that [REDACTED] had been beaten up by [REDACTED] and that they were asking him where Celia was. [REDACTED] needed medical care as a result of the beating.

### Cummulative trauma

The cumulative trauma that Celia has experienced as a result of the targeted violence directed toward she and her immediate family throughout her life is readily apparent. In describing her life in [REDACTED] Celia reports that she "lived in fear." She was not able to walk alone, she always had to go with someone. After the birth of her children, Celia became even more fearful and desperate to protect them. Not only did Celia believe that [REDACTED] would kill her, but she lives in a constant state of fear that they will kill her mother and/or her other son. When asked how the violence impacted her Celia replied "I am not able to forget what happened, I am always having nightmares of them [REDACTED] killing my mom and my son, even when I am awake."

When asked to describe physically how the violence has impacted her Celia reports "I mostly don't sleep. I get up and assure myself my son is ok. I sit on the bed and think about what happened to me and to my family. I can't sleep. I have bad headaches and my chest weighs very heavy, my heart is painful." Celia reports that there are moments when she is alone that she will cry and at times she will get dizzy and her eyesight goes away, usually when she is overcome with fear for her family and her son. She reported that she went to the Dr. and was told that was "normal" and to just not be upset.

<sup>1</sup> Families celebrate the first-, seventh-, and fourteenth-year anniversaries of the death of a family member. The soul will be remembered with music at a happy social gathering. Pecllcer, Sergio Navarrete, From Maya Achi Marimba Music in Guatemala(Temple University Press)

Emotionally Celia showed a constricted affect and removal of association that is consistent with an individual experiencing trauma or stressor related disorder, such as PTSD. (DSM V, 2014). Celia identified emotional and physical symptoms of anxiety, depression and unease that impact her on a daily basis.

#### Detention aggravates Celia's preexisting trauma

Detention has the effect of creating an environment that forces Celia to re-experience her trauma on a daily basis, which serves to re-traumatize her. When asked what would be different if she was not in detention she talked about making her own food, cleaning, taking care of her children. She would be able to buy her own food instead of having to ask for what she needs, "it bothers me to have to ask for everything. Usually I won't ask for things. I sit in my room so my son can play." She is in a constant state of fear and anxiety- what will happen to her, what will happen to her children. She is experiencing intrusive memories, night terrors, and physical symptoms. She expresses a sense of agency when she considers someone else, for example talking about being able to buy her own food so she can feed her son- but has no real sense of future. The impact of detention on Celia is to create a situation that exacerbates the trauma she is already struggling with.

It can be argued that detention provides for women and children's basic needs; food and shelter. It is equally true that detention disempowers women and children. This lack of control over their future places women and children in positions of uncertainty, fear and isolation. At a minimum this can lead to depression and anxiety. Detention is neither developmentally nor socially appropriate for children. Additionally, parents who are detained may become too depressed and anxious to provide adequate care for their children. Over time, if they are denied appropriate treatment, their symptoms may worsen. This has the potential to impair their ability to care for their children. The negative emotional impact of detention has been well documented in the literature. Numerous studies have shown that women who are detained are more likely to develop psychiatric symptoms including depression, post-traumatic stress and anxiety (Coffey, Kaplan, Sampson, and Tucci, 2010; Robjant, Hassan and Katona, 2009; Steel, Silove, Brooks, Momartin, Alzuhairi & Suslijik, 2006). minimization of time spent in detention is strongly recommended. The isolating and controlled environment of detention is re-traumatizing Celia and furthering her symptoms of PTSD. Continuing to be detained prevents Celia from receiving much-needed services and support from mental health professionals and from her husband, [REDACTED] and other family members in the United States.

Women like Celia who are trauma survivors are psychologically vulnerable thus at increased risk of developing mental health problems in response to being detained. Longer detention tends to aggravate symptoms and increases the likelihood of long term mental health problems. Even short-term detention can negatively impact women, an impact that lasts after they have been released. The fear, uncertainty and lack of control over her life that Celia lives with while being detained mimics the fear, uncertainty and lack of control she experienced in Guatemala.

#### Diagnosis

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5<sup>th</sup> edition, (DSM-V) is a reference manual that mental health professionals and physicians use to diagnose mental disorders. In the chapter Trauma and Stressor Related Disorder is a diagnoses of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that captures the symptoms I observed in Celia during my interview with her. Celia identified multiple

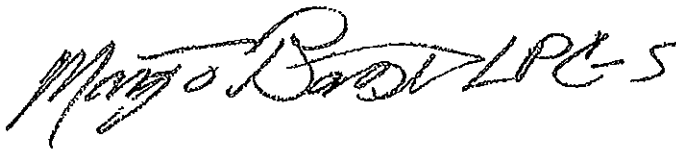
traumatic events; big T events, such as [REDACTED] threats to her life and that of her family, physical assault and witnessing life threatening violence directed toward her parents. Celia also identified little t events, such as the cumulative impact of chronic bullying with the occasional escalation to more severe violence- and the inability to escape. Her responses of withdrawing and staying in her room are reinforcing negative alterations in how she thinks and how she feels. Her method of coping is to withdraw and dissociate- physically remove herself and emotionally remove herself, as if she were an outside observer. [REDACTED]

### Conclusion

I understand that Celia will be involved in a court hearing. While it is important to recognize that Celia has shown signs of survivorship in her life and taken steps toward self-preservation, it is equally important to recognize that she is not free from the cumulative harm she has suffered nor is she free from the threat of death in her home country. Relevant to her presentation in court, Celia's trauma is likely to affect her ability to recall events, cause her to disassociate herself from particularly traumatic events and/or struggle with exact dates and chronology of events in retelling painful memories. I found Celia to be sincere in her beliefs that her life is at risk. When asked what she thinks will happen if she returns to her home she says she will be killed. This terrifies her and causes her "much sorrow to think that my children will grow up without a mother." I also found that Celia presented in a manner consistent with others I have worked with that have suffered ongoing trauma, and otherwise present symptoms one would expect after having personally suffered traumatic events .

Respectfully submitted

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Margaret Bassett LPC-S  
Director Expert Witness Initiative  
The School of Social Work &  
The Institute on Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault  
The University of Texas at Austin