

Glossary Term: STA – Stress- and Trauma-Sensitive Approach

Definition

What is the STA – Stress- and Trauma-Sensitive Approach?

STA is a low-threshold approach that offers women*¹ and girls* affected by sexualised violence access to support even within a working environment with very limited resources. It was developed in close cooperation and based on practical experience with *medica mondiale* partner organisations from Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Afghanistan and Liberia. While being shared in trainings, it is adapted and further developed in the respective professional and regional context.

The STA – Stress- and Trauma-Sensitive Approach aims to:

- Ensure that **survivors of sexualised and gender-based violence suffering from the consequences of trauma** receive competent support based on safety, empowerment and solidarity in individual and group counselling services, in their social environment, with service providers and in institutions. This helps them to stabilise themselves again and thus supports the overcoming of traumatic experiences of violence.
- Enable **activists and professionals, organisations and institutions** to make their offers for survivors stress- and trauma-sensitive and at the same time ensure that they themselves remain stable by establishing self-care and staff-care measures.
- Contribute to trauma recovery and violence prevention and thus to **social change** by advocating for the implementation of STA at all levels at which sexualised violence affects and can be prevented (see *medica mondiale's* multi-level approach).

Background: Important pillars of the STA – Stress- and Trauma-Sensitive Approach

- **The feminist and socio-political understanding of trauma within the STA:**
Not only does it focus on the trauma of the individual woman*, but also on violence against women* in a patriarchal and heteronormative political-social system as a cause of traumatisation. We evaluate post-traumatic stress reactions as survival and defence strategies in the face of violence, threats and oppression.
- **Conceptualisation of "trauma as a process" as the basis of STA:**
When we consider the impact of women*'s experiences of violence in the context of war and conflict, it is important to bear in mind that these are not single events, but usually a **cumulative and chronic exposure to violence** ("cumulative burden", Kahn 1963). Sexualised violence is also part of a **"continuum of sexualised violence"** (Kelly 1988) to which women* are also exposed in the period before and after armed conflicts, which can lead to **"sequential traumatisation"** (Keilson 2005). Sequential traumatisation is

¹ We use the *asterisk spelling to make the diversity of gender identities clear.

supported by the taboo of sexualised violence and the stigmatisation and social isolation of the women* affected. At the same time, STA understands "trauma as a process" also in the sense of historical and collective experiences of violence such as racism, takes into account the **intersection of different forms of violence** and thus also addresses collective and transgenerational trauma consequences.

- **STA's integration of neurophysiological foundations of trauma:**

The STA - Stress- and Trauma-Sensitive Approach is based on researched psychological theories on neurophysiological foundations with regard to how trauma arises and is processed - and thus so far primarily on foundations rooted in a Western understanding of psychotraumatology.

- **STA's multi-professional orientation:**

Sexualised and gender-based violence has an impact on psychosocial, physical, sexual/reproductive, legal and also economic levels. STA is therefore a multi-professional approach that can be applied by all people in all fields of work and also in different sectors of international cooperation.

- **STA's embeddedness in a multi-level approach to prevent and protect against violence:**

The STA is designed in such a way that it can be implemented at different levels of *medica mondiale's* "multi-level approach to the prevent and protect against violence" together with partner organisations in order to bring about sustainable change for women*.

Practical implementation of the STA – Stress- and Trauma-Sensitive Approach

Communicating the STA approach through training programmes:

The aim of training programmes – such as advanced training, professional counselling and coaching – on the STA – Stress- and Trauma-Sensitive Approach is to enable professionals and activists to offer competent support to women* and girls* affected by SGBV and to accompany or advise them in a stress- and trauma-sensitive way – while remaining healthy and stable themselves.

In the training courses we familiarise the participants with the background and effects of SGBV and trauma. They are taught to recognise signs of stress and trauma and to apply principles of stress- and trauma-sensitivity in their own work setting. The training offers also provide impulses for the development of a stress- and trauma-sensitive attitude, which is characterised by solidarity and connectedness in communication and in direct contact with people affected by violence – because it is not only important what we do, but also how we do it.

In training courses and workshops, *medica mondiale* pays particular attention to a stress- and trauma-sensitive learning setting as well as sufficient space for self-reflection and exchange with peers on the topics dealt with in order to create favourable conditions for the development of a stress- and trauma-sensitive attitude.

Application of the STA principles in different professional fields:

The basic principles of STA are at the basis of every form of practical implementation. They guide action and promote a specific attitude towards people affected by violence and also towards oneself as a supporter. The basic principles are designed to counteract the typical psychological

and social dynamics that are triggered by traumatic experiences that are existentially threatening².

STA principle of safety: Providing safety reduces post-traumatic stress³ and fears in order to stabilise people who have been subjected to violence and to strengthen their trust in themselves and others. This applies equally to internal and external safety.

STA principle of solidarity and connection: Promoting solidarity and connection counteracts stressful feelings of shame and guilt and post-traumatic isolation and aims to enable survivors to participate socially again in the community. Possible ways to do this include acknowledging suffering (solidarity – in personal encounters, but also socially and politically) and experiencing a sense of connectedness – both with oneself and with others (connection).

STA principle of empowerment: Empowerment in the trauma psychological context aims to enable survivors of violence to regain autonomy and control over their own lives and therefore plays a central role in trauma processing and integration. This means, for example, to work towards ensuring that persons receiving counselling or treatment can make informed and self-determined decisions.

STA principle of self-care and staff-care: Activists and professionals working with people affected by violence are exposed to multiple stresses that can affect their psychosocial stability. Therefore, it is important to support organisations in developing concepts for staff-care that enable self-care measures and counteract the negative effects of stress- and trauma-dynamics also at the level of teams and the organisation as a whole.

Practical tools, exercises and guidelines on STA:

STA offers practical tools that aim to promote the above STA principles and contribute to (self-)stabilisation and empowerment.

Practical exercise instructions help to regulate and strengthen others – but also oneself – in particularly stressful situations (e.g., through dissociation stop). STA also includes numerous self-care and resource exercises.

Reflection and exchange on the application of the STA principles in the respective work context – the systematised, context-related practical transfer of the principles – is an essential part of teaching the STA approach in further training and coaching.

medica mondiale also provides STA guidelines for specific areas of work. Ideally, they are developed in close cooperation with the professionals or activists in the respective context or tested and adapted in practice⁴.

Importance for *medica mondiale* e.V.

The core of the STA – Stress- and Trauma-Sensitive Approach lies in the historical origins of *medica mondiale* itself. Already in the early days of the first women's counselling centre *Medica*

² The basic principles of the STA were developed following the work of Judith Herman, who in her book "Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror" (1992) she first referred to comparable principles in the context of sexualised violence.

³ Post-traumatic stresses often occur immediately after traumatic experiences, can become chronic and persist for years. They are related to the fact that traumatic experiences exceed normal processing mechanisms physically and mentally. These typically include, for example, nightmares and sleep disorders, persistent tension, avoidance behaviour, depression and somatisation, loss of trust in oneself and others.

⁴ See, for example, *medica Liberia's* manual on stress- and trauma-sensitive advocacy.

Zenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the mid-1990s, it became clear how important it was to train the various professional groups in the environment in such a way that they could competently and empathically support women* and girls* affected by sexualised and gender-based violence. At the same time, it was essential to strengthen those providing assistance who had themselves experienced the war. These and other practical experiences and working approaches of *medica mondiale* were later further developed, documented in 2004 in *medica mondiale's* handbook on supporting traumatised women in various fields of work⁵ and systematised in 2011, first as TSA (Trauma Sensitive Approach)⁶ and since 2015 as "STA – Stress- and Trauma-Sensitive Approach".

Literature

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⁵ In English see *medica mondiale* e.V. (2005): *Violence against women in war. Handbook for professionals working with traumatised women*, Frankfurt/M.

⁶ *medica mondiale* e.V. (2011): *Training Manual for Health Professionals: A trauma-sensitive approach*, Cologne, Resource Manual, compiled by trauma therapist and trainer Maria Zemp, based on training programmes implemented with Medica Afghanistan and medica mondiale in Afghanistan, also available in Dari.