

WOMEN IN THE FRONT LINE



From
"They Dance Alone (Gueca Solo)"
by Sting

Why are these women here dancing on their own?
Why is there this sadness in their eyes?
Why are the soldiers here Their faces fixed like stone?
I can't see what it is that they despise They're dancing with the missing They're dancing with the dead They dance with the invisible ones Their anguish is unsaid
They're dancing with their fathers They're dancing with their sons They're dancing with their husbands It's the only form of protest they're allowed I've seen their silent faces scream so loud If they were to speak these words They'd go missing, too.

by: Kourosh Mohseni

Women from all walks of life have been targeted for human rights abuses. In many cases the reasons are connected with women's occupation or peaceful, legitimate activities. Governments detain or direct violent attacks against women who are physicians, lawyers, journalists, trade unionists, teachers, housewives, human rights activists, community organizers and peasants.

In country after country women suffer assaults on their dignity by governments which deny their human rights. Women, men and children are imprisoned for their peaceful beliefs, for their peaceful thoughts and activities, tortured, denied the right to a fair trial, abducted and "disappeared", and both judicially and extrajudicially executed.

Women are also deliberately targeted for certain patterns of abuse solely or primarily because of their gender. Again and again they are viewed by governments as second class citizens who can be ill-treated with impunity. Death threats preceded the shotgun killings of many activists women in many countries.

Women have also been targeted because of their work to protect women's rights. There have been many cases reported by Amnesty International indicating arrests, torture and sexual assaults happened to those women who have been active with different women group. Cecilia Clea, who belongs to the Flora Tristan Women's group in Peru, has received death threats from a paramilitary group reportedly linked to the armed forces. Flora Tristan members publicize women's issues through the media, organize women's issues through the media, organize educational programs, and provide legal and social assistance to working women. The authors of the threat apparently consider Ms. Clea's activities on behalf of women to be subversive and have accused her of being a "communist".

Although governments have not limited their cruel and degrading practices to women, it is obvious that some types of human rights violations, however, are particularly directed against women and affect them in especially severe ways.

Rape, frequently and systematically used as a form of torture by law enforcement officials, is most often inflicted on women detainees. The United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading pain or suffering, whether physically or mentally, is information or pun-

ishing, intimidating, or coercing a person.

"No one shall be subjected to torture of to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 5.

Rape has been used to intimidate women from pursuing particular activities and to extract information or to obtain confessions from them.

Another inhuman use of power against women is using rape as a punitive measure. Amnesty International publications are full of stories



about raping women reportedly by many governments officials and soldiers:

"In Myanmar (formerly Burma) government soldiers were alleged to have repeatedly raped an 11-year-old girl and her 22-year-old aunt who were discovered trying to return home after an officially declared curfew."

In India according to official estimates, about 1,000 women (many of whom belong to the disadvantaged sectors of society known as the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, formerly the "Untouchables") are raped each year. Many of these rapes are reportedly committed by police. A "Times" of India editorial noted that "custodial rapes seem to be occurring so frequently that 'cop molests woman's has become

an almos: daily fare for newspaper readers."

Women are also particularly vulnerable to rape between the time of arrest and arrival at official detention centres. In some countries, law enforcement officials or military personnel have committed rape and other sexual abuses without having officially arrested the victim.

The most horrifying aspect of this inhuman crush of detention does not necessarily protect women from rape or other sexual abuses. Many have reported that prison guard have raped them or threatened them with rape. And that is not yet the end of abuses. A common accompaniment to rape is

a perpetrator's threat of additional violence if the victim tells anyone of the assault.

The psychological consequences of rape as any other crime that today women suffer from are also of a great importance. The shame associated with rape can be a strong inducement to silence. Amongst thousands of stories I have heard closely and been shocked by, are cases of rape as an official law enforcement done by prison guards in political prisons in Islamic Republic of Iran. It has been very traditional to rape young female student activists who have been sentenced to death before the executions. Hundreds of such criminal acts are still happening and the law behind it is based on Islamic beliefs enforced by prosecution offices, run by Ayatollahs across the country.

Rape often carries traumatic social repercussions, which may be affected by a

woman's cultural origins or social status. In some countries a woman who has been raped may face reprisals from her relatives for bringing dishonor upon her family. That also cause more depression for the victims, to feel humiliated not only by the criminal men who did this to them, but also to be isolated by the society and its barbarian culture. In many cases that I have read or heard women were asked to sign a statement declaring that they have been treated well in custody while may be only a few hours before they have been tortured and raped and because their dignity as women were compromised, and their husband were not going to like knowing this, they are subjected to suffer even more.

While men and women both fall victims to a range of human rights violations it is women who are the predominant targets of certain patterns of abuses. Many are subjected to human rights violations merely because they happen to be the wives, mothers, daughters or friends of people whom the authorities consider to be "undesirable" or "dangerous". In many African countries a strong tradition of family or community solidarity has protected prisoners in vulnerable situations. Unfortunately, this had led some governments deliberately to exploit family relations, by imprisoning, threatening and harassing prisoners' relatives.

For women who are pregnant at the time of detention, additional suffering often accompanies human rights abuses. They risk injury to the fetus, miscarriage and the prospect of giving birth in harsh prison condition. Women who become pregnant as a result of rape in custody face additional emotional distress. In Iraq, babies have been taken from their infants' cries while being denied access to comfort or feed them.

In recent years, Arpilleras, the traditional applique wall hangings of Chile have taken on importance in the battle to protect human rights. Since the overthrow of the freely-elected government of Salvador Allende in 1973, some Chilean women have been using the only means at their disposal - their needles, thread and cloth scraps to tell of the hardships they daily. Over thirty arpillera workshops are now in operation throughout Santiago. As a group, the women decide which themes will be portrayed on the arpilleras, and then women working individually, creates a small scene from her life within the larger context. Although their sale is not allowed in Chile, each simple cloth picture completed and sent outside the country carries a message about human rights abuses in Chile.

Pablo Neruda, the Chilean poet, wrote of the arpilleras of the Isla Negra in words that could be used today to describe those created by the courageous women of

Santiago:

"The embroideries were from the heart of the people and so embroidered with the colors of the heart... There is nothing more beautiful than these embroideries, unequalled in their purity, radiant in their cheerfulness that withstands many sorrows."

Today Amnesty International, a worldwide grass-root human rights organization that fights for human dignity, to release all the prisoners of conscience unconditionally, to prompt fair trial for all the political prisoners, to abolish torture and death penalty, stands for women's rights, to bring all the torturers, jailers and human rights abusers to justice.



The Women's Action Network is one of the eight Amnesty International's networks in Canada. In Amnesty International we believe that it is our responsibility to act as the voice of those who have been denied their freedom to speak. To combine and strengthen our efforts, using all the tools of education, research, community outreach, and action. To help us reach out, join Amnesty International.

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Amnesty International Group YC 405, University of New Brunswick will celebrate the struggles that today's women from all walks of life have been taking against racism, sexism and their struggle for equality of men and women, for justice and freedom. We celebrate International Women's Day:
7:00 P.M. March 8, 1993 Tilly Hall Room #102