



Inter Pares

BULLETIN

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Women's Struggle for Justice

On a warm evening last September, responding to Inter Pares' invitation, almost 400 people crowded into a community auditorium in Ottawa to hear four women's rights activists speak out about sexual violence.

The audience of men and women of all ages included university students, local human rights activists, and members of Ottawa's immigrant communities. Despite the topic, the hall was charged with an atmosphere of solidarity, and animated discussion followed well into the evening.

Our featured guests that night were Sophie Havyarimana of Burundi, Diana Avila of Peru, Zipporah Sein of Burma, and Asha El-Karib of Sudan. They were part of a group of fifteen women from around the world whom Inter Pares had invited to participate in a series of events spanning two weeks and four cities called *Breaking the Silence: Women's Struggle for Justice*. All of these women work with survivors of sexual violence in countries torn apart by armed conflict.

For many years, Inter Pares has worked in areas of armed conflict to support and accompany those most affected by violence. During armed conflicts, men's roles – as combatants, as casualties, as negotiators – tend to be the focus. Women's roles – as soldiers, as members of resistance movements, as political actors, and all too often as victims – are often obscured. In the shadows of war, the specific targeting of women through the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war is usually invisible. When conflicts end, women continue to bear the scars of the brutality they have experienced, but rarely is this reality acknowledged. Indeed, given the stigma and shame that survivors experience, these crimes are often shrouded in secrecy and remain unpunished.

Our events in September provided an opportunity for women working on issues of sexual violence to share experiences and learn from one another, as well as to meet Canadians who are confronting violence against women and gender inequality. Participants came from Burundi, Sudan, Burma, Colombia, Peru and Guatemala, countries that have all been deeply affected by war. While they came from diverse places, the experiences they relayed in their conversations with government agencies, international organizations, community activists, and the general public



From left to right: Nadia Faucher, Inter Pares; Diana Avila, Asha El-Karib, Zipporah Sein, Sophie Havyarimana.

here in Canada were virtually identical – horrific sexual crimes have been systematically inflicted on women, especially marginalized and rural women.

During our time together, we discussed the dilemmas, challenges and strategies common to our work. We spoke of how women survivors are organizing to demand an end to impunity for crimes against them, and the challenge of changing national legal systems so perpetrators of these crimes can be prosecuted. Our colleagues spoke of the profound respect they held for the survivors of these crimes, for their courage, dignity and resilience. We all shared the conclusion that the source of violence against women is not armed conflict itself, but a social order that devalues women.

In her presentation that evening in Ottawa, Asha El-Karib of Sudan spoke about violence against women in the Darfur region of her country. The scale and viciousness of this violence, she said, led her and her colleagues to reflect on why rape was being used as a weapon of war. "It is clear to us," Asha said, "that violence against women existed before the war. Violence has to do with the subordination of women, with women's inequality, with the perception that women are property." It is in this patriarchal reality, she said, that all violence against women is rooted.

Asha challenged the audience to break the silence about violence against women. "We need to ask ourselves whether by our silence and inaction, we are contributing to crimes of violence against women, not only in Sudan, in Burma, in Burundi, but also here in Canada."

This *Bulletin* describes the work of some of the dedicated women who support and accompany survivors of violence, and our shared learning in the search for justice. ☞

Watershed in Peru: Challenging Impunity

When Diana Avila, Project Counselling Service's (PCS) Executive Director, left Ottawa last September to travel back to Peru, little did she know that one week later, she would be celebrating a historic day in Peru's quest for justice. After years of work, human rights defenders had succeeded in persuading the Chilean Supreme Court to extradite former Peruvian president Fujimori to his home country. There he would face charges of human rights violations and corruption stemming from his decade of authoritarian rule, which spanned the latter half of Peru's twenty years of armed conflict. This was a watershed for many Peruvians, an important step in challenging the near-total impunity of government officials and the military for human rights violations.

The announcement also represented an important symbolic victory for women affected by sexual violence during the conflict. Although Peru's 2003 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report found that sexual violence against women by the military during the armed conflict was "systematic and generalized," constituting a crime against humanity, Peru's judicial system has yet to accord such a status to these crimes. With the support of Inter Pares and PCS, women's and human rights organizations developed a proposal to address this gap by amending Peru's penal code. Recently, working with the Congressional Women's Caucus, they succeeded in having the proposed amendment submitted for Congressional consideration. And in November, the local attorney for Huancavelica, one of the regions most impacted in the conflict, agreed that the legal cases of seven indigenous women accusing the military of sexual crimes will finally proceed to court.

As a result of years of awareness-raising by human rights organizations and survivors, affected women are also beginning to obtain support from their own communities and local organizations. A few years ago, human rights organizations were ill-prepared to address the issue of sexual violence during armed conflict. While still a difficult and largely taboo subject, the agenda of justice and reparations for women survivors is being taken up by organizations of displaced people, torture victims, families of the disappeared, and even by local and regional authorities.

These may seem like small steps on the road to justice and reparations, but along the way, Peruvian women and their organizations are becoming agents of change for themselves, their communities and their children. Fujimori's extradition represents one victory in the struggle against impunity for human rights violations in Peru – and women survivors and the organizations that accompany them are working to ensure that it will be followed by many more. ✂



CAROLINE BOUDREAU

Painting done by a Sudanese artist as part of a display about violence

Women's League of Burma: Confronting the Continuum of Violence

When Tay Tay, coordinator of the Women Against Violence program of the Women's League of Burma (WLB), returned to her home in exile in Thailand last September, she, along with the rest of the world, watched in horror as a nonviolent popular uprising in Burma was brutally suppressed. The people of Burma have lived under a military dictatorship for over four decades, one that has used particularly brutal tactics in its war against Burma's ethnic peoples. For thousands of rural women, this has meant being subjected to a systematic campaign of sexual violence by the state. It has meant living with that pain and trauma, with little means of support and no access to justice.

In response to this situation, members of Tay Tay's organization, an umbrella organization of exiled women's groups from Burma, have been documenting the prevalence of state-sponsored sexual violence. With the help of courageous survivors who dare to speak out, members of WLB have produced detailed reports on the regime's systematic and strategic use of rape as a weapon of war. The junta's denial of these facts has been vehement.

Through community exchanges and women's meetings, WLB creates safe spaces for women to build trust, allowing them to speak of what is happening in their own lives in refugee camps and migrant communities. For WLB, it has

Promoting Women's Rights in Sudan

When Asha El-Karib and Fahima Hashim returned to Khartoum after their visit to Canada last September, they were returning to the harsh daily realities of women in Sudan, a country where pervasive gender inequality has been exacerbated by decades of conflict and militarization. Yet they were also returning to the people with whom they are building a movement to challenge this situation, enriched by their various encounters with Inter Pares colleagues from Latin America, Asia, Africa and Canada.

Asha and Fahima are relentlessly challenging how women in Sudan are treated as second-class citizens. Their experiences in Canada energized and inspired them to continue confronting the widespread denial that violence against women, especially sexual violence, exists in Sudan.



Violence against women.

The global outcry against the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war in Darfur has brought more pressure on the Sudanese government and the international community to address the situation. However, Sudanese women's organizations, who are working to heal communities torn apart by armed confrontation, still face incredible obstacles when trying to work with women affected by sexual violence in camps around Khartoum, or in the other regions of Sudan where conflict still reigns.

For these Sudanese organizations, promoting women's rights and gender equality is a means to challenge the current social order in their country. Sexuality is taboo, which prevents women and girls from questioning, much less challenging, how society encourages them to be sexual objects. Popular songs and poems reinforce the idea that women and girls are the physical property of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. The relationship between rape and sexuality is so distorted within Sudan's interpretation of Sharia law that women who dare to report their rape are prosecuted for adultery. But Asha, Fahima and their colleagues share the view that sexual violence against women and girls – which includes the systematic use of rape, but also forced early marriage, domestic abuse, and female genital mutilation – is not an inherent part of their society. Cultural practices in Sudan have changed over time, and can continue to be transformed.

Asha's organization, the Gender Centre for Research and Training, and Fahima's organization, the Salmamah Women's Resource Centre, have joined with other Sudanese organizations to break the silence on violence against women. Despite the risks, they are making women's realities visible by producing video documentaries and publishing articles in the national and international media. They are also working with women leaders from Darfur and other regions to ensure that their concerns and voices are heard in peace negotiations.

Inter Pares is honoured to be able to work with Fahima, Asha and many other activists in Sudan, who are courageously speaking out to transform their own country and society. ☞

Visit Inter Pares' Web site to listen to a radio interview with Asha El-Karib in which she talks about the challenges women activists face in Sudan.

become clear that violence, including sexual violence, is not confined to situations of armed conflict; it exists in women's very homes and communities. Addressing the complexity of domestic violence in addition to state-sanctioned violence against women has been a new challenge for WLB. During her visit to Ottawa, Tay Tay noted that "it is sometimes easier to name the state as the 'enemy' than it is to confront violence that is closer to home." However, for WLB to address the reality of women's lives, it is necessary to acknowledge all aspects of violence.

Inter Pares supports WLB's Women Against Violence program in India, Thailand, and China, which assists women

from Burma to speak out on issues of violence. WLB provides practical support to women who have experienced violence through medical services, basic needs and shelter, psychosocial support, and help for women to access local legal aid networks. WLB's training program includes topics such as counselling, trafficking, and feminist approaches to documenting human rights abuses. WLB also continues to support documentation efforts on state-sponsored sexual violence inside Burma.

WLB's work is an inspiring example of what can be achieved when women come together to act in order to challenge the violence that affects women all over the world. ☞

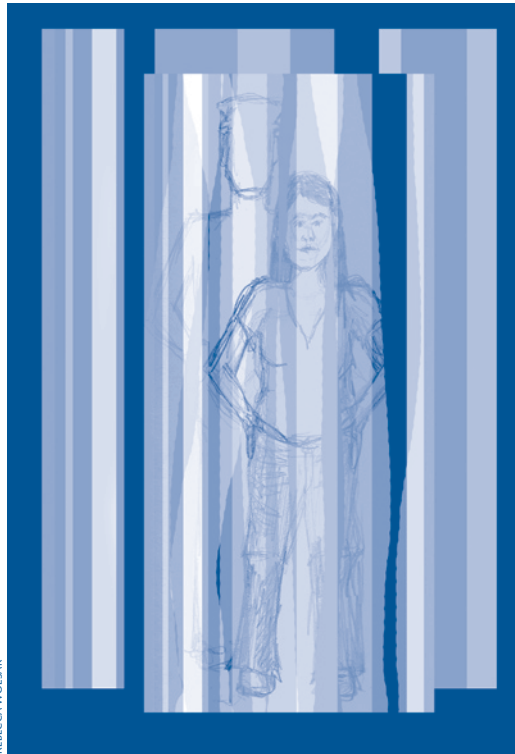
Acting on What We Know

Following the Women's Struggle for Justice events, Inter Pares staff member Rachel Gouin shares some reflections and questions inspired by meetings and discussions with colleagues.

Last September, Inter Pares called together women from around the world to deepen our collective understanding of sexual violence against women in armed conflict. We asked why this violence was so widespread and examined its root causes. By working in common cause with those who struggle for peace, and social justice, Inter Pares was able to convene discussions and dialogue around this difficult issue. We discussed patriarchy, violence as a continuum, feminism and resistance. Through our discussions, words loaded with meaning became more concrete. We linked them to our own experiences and to the contexts in which we live and work: in Peru, in Colombia, in Burundi, in Sudan, in Guatemala, in Burma, and in Canada.

As an activist and staff member of Inter Pares, I was inspired by Asha, Tay Tay, Diana and others as I listened to their experiences, dilemmas and analysis. I was struck when Asha asked, "What gives the predator the legitimacy, or the power, or the excuse to use sexual violence as a weapon of war?" As we discussed this question, we all agreed that violence tolerated in the private sphere legitimates and encourages violence in the public sphere, and vice versa. There is no clear separation between the two, though the perpetrators' context and motivation may differ. The domination of men over women is the backdrop for atrocities that are planned and perpetrated against women during war. When armed conflicts end without justice, power structures – including those that legitimize sexual violence – remain intact, leaving a legacy of impunity. A broad concept of sexual violence against women allows us to denounce the state's role both in orchestrating and in being complicit with this violence. But it also enables each of us to reflect on and challenge the ways in which we perpetuate gender inequality in our everyday lives.

Tay Tay relayed the challenges she faces in her work on the Thai-Burma border and asked, "If we don't touch patriarchy, the root cause of this violence, then how will we address state violence?" Giulia, from Peru, reminded us that "in increasingly militarized societies, gender stereotypes are manipulated for political and military ends." Without an



REBECCA WOLSKA

analysis of systemic gender inequality, violent acts against women may seem random, without coherence or underlying cause. Without a critique of militarism, women survivors of rape are victims of circumstance: they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the reality is that violence against women exists before conflict, during conflict, and remains after peace agreements are signed. While sexual violence in armed conflict must be confronted, all of us understood that our struggle must be broader.

To take these reflections further, Inter Pares organized a dialogue between local Canadian activists and our visiting counterparts. Our international colleagues were dismayed with the daily reality of violence against women and girls in Canada, and at how Canada is undermining women's and girls' equality. We agreed that all of our societies are becoming increasingly

militarized and obsessed with security, and that more feminist dialogue and action are needed to transform a prevailing ideology of fear.

While the patriarchal societies we live in are shaped by different forms of control and oppression, and while our struggles are diverse, the goal of ending violence against women is global. The events held in September reminded me that it is possible for a diverse group of women to share a common understanding of the root causes of violence against women. Feminism is not just a belief in universal equality, it is an action that we take together to turn this belief into reality. We are all a part of finding a humanizing way forward. ♻

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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