

THE STATUS OF ARGENTINIAN WOMEN AT THE END OF THE UN DECADE

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Dans cet article Sara Rioja évalue la situation des femmes en Argentine à la fin de la Décennie pour les femmes de l'ONU. L'image qu'elle nous présente de l'oppression dans ce pays est démoralisante. On y trouve la misère, des lois injustes de mariage et de divorce, l'absence de contraception, d'avortements et d'éducation sexuelle, la prostitution, le harcèlement sexuel, le viol, la brutalité et la pornographie.

Au début de la Décennie, Isabel Peron est devenue la première femme argentine à être chef d'État. À la suite d'une année d'inflation renversante et d'agitation ouvrière, elle fut déposée par une junte militaire. Le coup militaire de 1976 s'est avéré être un sérieux échec pour les droits des femmes: des femmes activistes furent torturées, violées, tuées, ou sont 'disparues.' Leur persécution continue. C'est dans ce contexte que les femmes argentines luttent.

In our country justice is denied by patriarchy and the class system. Religion, tradition and custom interfere with our basic human rights. Women in Argentina have not yet understood that they are not inferior, but are oppressed by man and society. History has never recognised that the law has been the exclusive preserve of the male ruling class. We must try to take this idea out of female minds and make women realize that the law can be changed to serve the cause of justice. This oppression is linked to inequities in the economic system – problems of foreign debt, unemployment and unequal exchange. Our struggles are increasingly difficult. We must struggle against exploitation at all levels, especially in family contexts.

In spite of the ratification in 1985 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, equality has not been achieved. It is not

part of our daily lives. It has not been implemented and rights are only written on papers, formal and meaningless.

Family law is biased against women. Divorce does not exist: one can only obtain a legal separation, which precludes further marriage. Children born from these second "marriages" are called "extra-matrimonial" and are not legitimate. Maintenance of children, in the event of separation, lies most of the time in women's hands. Fathers sometimes are helped by the leniency of the law and so can avoid paying alimony. Men are chiefs of homes: they elect, by law, the place where the family is going to live. They have the administration of the common money. Penalties for adultery are not the same for both sexes. Many efforts must be made to remedy this imbalance against women.

Hospitals and union health services can not (it is forbidden by law) teach the use of or implant contraceptive devices. Most women, with their lack of sex education, have to endure conjugal rape and unwanted pregnancies. Violence directed at women by men takes the forms of physical mutilation or sexual aggression. Violence may be direct or indirect. While violence is universal, exploitation is at the core of most circumstances: oppressive forces combine and the principal victims are women. Certain types of violence directed at women, such as battering, are not only acts of individuals but a reflection of the attitudes of a whole society. It is almost impossible to set up a home for victims: women would lose their rights in case of separation (only men can establish the common home address).

The Argentinian patriarchal family is considered inviolable. Intervention by outside forces is not acceptable. The law is generally dismissive of domestic violence; fathers and husbands control female sexuality. In cases of "crimes of honour" the

legal system tends to victimize the victim while permitting the perpetrators of this violence, always men, to go either free or serve greatly reduced sentences. Rape is sometimes practiced in family contexts and young women are threatened by the offender and subject to his instincts, perhaps for years.

Popular music, advertising, and humour are particularly offensive regarding violence directed against women. The penal codes must be changed to protect women and reflect contemporary social reality. Nevertheless, the proposed amendments to the family law had to be of a mild nature; otherwise the patriarchal order would dismiss them. Our present law still reflects men's desire to perpetuate their property and control female sexuality.

Roman Catholic religious fundamentalism has had major implication for the status of women because it is in the area of family life and social relations that Catholic values are given maximum expression. It has contributed to the double standard in our legal system and to the artificial distinction between public and personal life. Whereby laws with regard to "public" life grow and change with the time, laws and practices with regard to "personal" life are stagnant, unchanged and oppressive to women. Religion, as a spiritual humanistic force, supposedly is not oppressive to women, but religious interpretations and practices do discriminate. Women must fight against this oppression.

During most of the decade our country lived in an extremely repressive "national security" state. We had not the minimum expression of democratic rights. At this moment, although we have a democratic rule, we are under an "emergency state of siege." We have worked and pushed for amendments in the law under a regime of great violence and disrespect of human rights. Super-powers that support repressive regimes with military aid should be strongly condemned. Women in our society have been politically oppressed and we were denied freedom to speak out against injustice. Some women who did were imprisoned and tortured. Some were pregnant and their children disappeared. Conditions of giving birth were especially cruel. We are trying to form an international commission to bring about international pressure against human rights violations against specific women;



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libertad para los presos de conciencia
juicios imparciales para todos los presos políticos
abolición de la tortura y la pena de muerte
en todo el mundo



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all the organizations must show solidarity and support for the women prisoners of conscience. Torture and cruel conditions of imprisonment are a reality for women activists in our country. This problem of violence and torture is receiving worldwide attention. The brutalization of an individual will always result in the brutalization of a society.

Prostitution is a major problem in many of our cities. Most women resort to it because of economic deprivation; their sexuality is exploited. Society usually takes a condemnatory stand against prostitution and the law is weighted heavily against prostitutes while permitting their clients to go free. Because prostitution is forbidden by law, prostitutes lack the minimum health care and sometimes, in jail, are raped by policemen.

Education has not changed in years. Books are sexist, depict stereotypes, and make arbitrary distinctions between sexes. Educational materials ignore women's issues, are always centered on men, and women are absent. Military acts

of violence are treated as the most relevant aspects of Argentine history.

During the last two years we have experienced an increase in pornography and the use of the female body as a sexual commodity. In advertising we can observe the double moral standards: women as sexual objects, giving pleasure, without any imagination or brains, are opposed to mothers, with clean beautiful children, promoting electric machines for the house or food. Newspapers, radio and television only print and show women in their traditional aspects. Feminist information must be conveyed through paid ads.

In the area of health, abortion is allowed in only two cases: rape and danger to the mother. As both cases are very difficult to prove, every year many women die as victims of clandestine abortions. Every year many young women from the poorer classes are kidnapped and sold for prostitution to other countries. Big organizations are behind this cruel traffic and it is very difficult to counteract

their activities.

Sexual harassment is common in the labour sphere. Because of the high rate of unemployment, women are afraid of losing their jobs and so do not want to make formal complaints. Sexual harassment of women patients by their doctors takes place but, as only two persons were present, it is his word against hers. The medical world stands firmly against the women who dare accuse their members, and husbands refuse to support complaints because their names would be involved.

Women of the world, let's unite, exercise and consolidate the power of being together. Come, join our hands and eradicate prejudices, change customs and create a new world for future generations of women.

Sara Rioja is the founder of Derochos Iguales para la Mujer Argentina (Equal Rights for Argentinian Women), an organization formed to promote research and education on women's issues, including total equality under the law.

DIFFICULT ERRATA FOR EASY WORDS

When poetry seems easy
Life is easy.
So far all I know are hard words.
'Freedom', for example, was a simple word.
'Life' made it hard.
'Living' was easy.
But breath got caught in the throat's snare
And body rings like an alarm.
'Laughter' was simple,
But its every letter is fraught with tears.
Try 'walking' for an innocent word.
Easy to read, but when I tried to walk
I stumbled with each step,
And fell.
Those words we are permitted to write
Are easy as words
But resist use.
'Desire' is a simple one,
But try to find that river of milk and honey
And you will end up
With a pillow wet with tears.
We all can seem like an open book.
Very simple:
As some truths
Lie with a straight face
Such lies as even lies
Do not dare to tell.

Kishwar Naheed
Lahore, Pakistan

THE CLOSEUP

You saw me smile once in a baby picture.
I was sucking my thumb.
Another time, in the picture
When I was wrinkled with love.
A third, in the picture
When I watched death
Turn its key in life's lock.
To talk to you
I had to borrow a smile.
In the wedding picture
We can still be seen smiling.
To follow traditions
We live on borrowed things:
Sweetness from borrowed sugar,
Warmth from a neighbour's fire.
It makes certainty weak.
Just to talk
We have to borrow a third person.
The style has changed now.
You talk by taking pictures.
You took a closeup of me
Sitting by the locked one-way phone.
The receiver, I am sure,
Was more sure than me.
Why did you not snap the smile of that moment?

Kishwar Naheed
Lahore, Pakistan