



*Tibetan woman, 1994.*

*Photo: Brenda Cranney*

# Tibetan Women

by Carol Devine and  
Losang Rabgey

*Tandis que les groupes de femmes, les organismes non-gouvernementaux et les gouvernements du monde entier se*

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*préparent pour la quatrième Conférence mondiale des Nations-Unies sur les femmes qui aura lieu à Bei-jing en septembre 1995, on s'inquiète toujours à savoir si les Tibétaines auront*

*accès à la liberté personnelle et au droit de libre expression à la conférence et dans la vie de tous les jours.*

Since the start of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) illegal occupation of Tibet, the women of Tibet have been active, vocal, and effective in the human rights movement. Indeed, they are leaders in the ongoing struggle to achieve recognition of the widespread human rights violations occurring in their country.

Tibet was invaded by the People's Liberation Army of the PRC in 1950 and formally annexed in 1959 under the ideological guise of "liberation." At the time, the international community represented by the UN, was not willing to accept this line of reasoning as a justification for colonial expansion by the PRC military. Three and a half decades later, the same international community is more concerned with maximizing their trade options with a populous nation than with examining and redressing cases of human rights abuses and illegal occupation of countries. In the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, Tibetan women and men continue with their struggle because they know and see their reality which the global media machine largely chooses to ignore.

Among the many active protesters and organizers, Tibetan nuns have been especially visible in the struggle. Recently, some attention has been focused on Buddhist nuns from Gari nunnery known as the "Gari 14." The young nuns were arrested for demonstrating peacefully and given harsh sentences. They have been unjustly imprisoned and, according to the International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet, are in dangerous circumstances in the Chinese prison system. It is possible that they are being tortured at this time. In 1992, Amnesty International reported that in detention, the torture of Tibetans is endemic despite China's ratification of the UN Convention Against Torture. The "Gari 14" should be released and allowed to return to their nunneries without reprisal.

Their story is very similar to stories of other nuns that have been arrested. It has, in fact, been reported that approximately 50 nuns from Gari, a Gelug nunnery on the outskirts of Lhasa—about one quarter of its population—are currently detained as prisoners of conscience.

A testimony to the lack of freedom of religion and freedom of speech in Tibet is the fact that Tibetans—many of whom are monks and nuns—are fleeing Tibet to India and Nepal in large numbers. Some of the Tibetan women refugees are nuns as young as 13; the majority are under 25. In fact, there are over 1,000 nuns in the Tibetan exile community. Nuns leave Tibet because it is virtually impossible to practise religion and, for those who have participated in freedom demonstrations, to return to their nunneries.

A central concern for Tibetan women is access to information. Tibet is a police state. Getting information in and out of Tibet is very difficult. In many circumstances we must rely on the word of people who testify

that a woman's particular story is serious, credible, and must be told—without waiting for "corroborated reports" or a fact-finding delegation to be granted permission to enter Tibet.

Fortunately, in recent years, human rights groups worldwide such as Amnesty International, International PEN, Asia Watch, and Physicians for Human Rights are recognizing and condemning women's rights abuses as well as collecting testimony and publishing reports. Asia Watch recently reported that the number of political arrests of Tibetan nuns has risen significantly. Of almost 250 political arrests or trials in 1993, 80 per cent occurred in Tibet.

One nun, Kaisang Palmo, who was arrested with nine other nuns and monks for secretly planning a peaceful march to demand independence and the release of political prisoners, has since escaped to India. In a report to the Office of Information of the Tibetan government-in-exile in May of 1989, Kaisang states:

We swore that we would keep our activities peaceful as advised by HH the Dalai Lama. We pledged that we would not, even on the pain of death divulge the identity of others if one of us was arrested and interrogated. We also took an oath to sacrifice everything, including our lives, for the cause of our nation and religion.

For this pro-independence demonstration she was severely punished. The prison guards set a dog on her. She was kicked and beaten with a flat shiny object. She was made to undress and was sexually violated with an electric cattle prod in view of male prisoners. She reported that the food in prison was extremely poor and she was not given sufficient medical care.

According to research carried out by the Tibet Information Network in London, women are singled out for particularly severe treatment in detention centres. The cases of solitary confinement are most often of Tibetan women (*TIN NEWS UPDATE*). Amnesty International reports that women are singled out for human rights violations because of their strength and vulnerability, their political activities, community organization, and demands for respect of human rights.

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Amnesty International's publication, *Women on the Front Line*, documents the ill treatment and torture of Tibetan women who have acted non-violently: forcing electric batons into the mouth or vagina, setting dogs on detainees, stripping the prisoner naked before interrogation, putting rubber balls into the vagina, and beating with clubs.

Another grave gender-based abuse of Tibetan women that requires serious and immediate attention is unwanted abortions and forced sterilizations. Family planning policies implemented for Tibetans by the PRC deny Tibetan women their reproductive rights, and also violate women's rights under international law. A January 1995 report, "Denial of Tibetan Women's Right to Reproductive Freedom," by the International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet clearly describes how the PRC's family planning policies violate Tibetan women's rights:

Even though Tibet has always been sparsely populated, the PRC is regulating the timing and limiting the number of Tibetan children permitted to be born. The PRC has enforced these limits by a number of means, unofficially since the early 1980s and officially since 1992. Severe economic and social sanctions for having a child "out of plan" serve

to coerce women to undergo abortions and sterilization operations against their will. These sanctions include imposing fines, often exceeding the family's entire yearly income, and denying the "out of plan" child the papers required to attend school and receive medical care. Many reports have confirmed that Tibetan women are subjected to abortions and sterilization operations without knowing the real purpose of the procedures.

Dr. Tashi Dolma, now living in exile in India, reports how severe economic sanctions and pressures from her employers caused her to abort involuntarily. After having her office head come to her "almost every day" to insist she abort, Tashi says at 84 days, "I had no choice but to abort the child" (*Tibetan Review* 4-5).

The PRC's family planning policies are not only unsafe, violent and medically unsound (Kerr), but they also control population "quality" through eugenics laws.

In May 1990, Chinese authorities announced, without providing any sources or evidence, that there were 10,000 mentally handicapped people in Tibet. The authorities declared that this was a sign of inferior population quality and that efforts had to be made to improve the "quality" of the Tibetan population. ... It is also very possible that these 10,000 "mentally handicapped" Tibetans are those who engage in political protests against the continued occupation of Tibet. (International Committee of Lawyers for Tibet 7)

This application of family planning under the guise of quality control violates the UN Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide which the PRC ratified.

Another illegal policy in Tibet, population transfer, is used by the PRC government to destroy the dis-

tinct Tibetan culture and identity. The number of Tibetans in Tibet is estimated at six million, compared to seven million Chinese in Tibet (Van Walt Van Praag). Reports from Tibet and China show a steady and alarming increase in the transfer of Chinese into Tibet. Population transfer is also a violation of international law. Under Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, "the occupying power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own population into the territory it occupies." The PRC is party to the Geneva Convention which was ratified in 1956.

These two human rights abuses in Tibet—population control through unwanted abortions and sterilizations, as well as population transfer—are in effect genocidal.

The PRC abhors criticism from foreigners and interference with "internal affairs." But the upcoming UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 is without a doubt the time to raise the issues of Tibetan women and the human rights abuses facing them. One of the emerging issues to arise in the preparatory process towards the Beijing conference has been the question of choosing Beijing as the location for an international-level conference on women. Certainly, an issue often raised in direct connection with this matter is the case of the human rights violations experienced by Tibetan women. Critics rightfully and accurately argue that there is no country which does not have human rights abuses. That is a given. What those opposed to Beijing as a venue are arguing in essence is that there are varying degrees to which human rights violations occur. The Tiananmen massacre took place only eight years ago and since this time, the PRC government has not demonstrated any significant improvements in their human rights record. Reports from Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch-Asia indicate that similarly little real progress has been made with human rights in occupied areas such as Tibet. It is important to make clear that, from the perspective of

women from Tibet, holding the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing is similar to holding such a conference in Nazi Germany and then asking Jewish women to effectively represent their case to the international community.

In Vienna, in October 1994, Namgyal Phala, President of the Tibetan women's organization in Switzerland, addressed the critical issue of access to the First World Conference for Women in Beijing. The Platform of Action for the Conference states that women's universal human rights must be promoted, protected, and realized at all levels. But this goal of equality cannot be worked towards without equal representation at such international forums. Denial of access, and therefore equal representation, serves only to violate women's human rights. Clearly in the case of Tibetan women, the issue of access is paramount. The PRC government is keenly interested in using this international gathering as an opportunity

to deflect unwanted attention from its human rights record. Thus, Tibetan women are at an acute disadvantage on this issue. Tibetan women with concerns about torture, sexual abuse, unwanted abortions, forced sterilizations, and executions will not be heard.

*Editor's note: This article will not appear in the 2000 copies of this issue which are being shipped to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing because of possible incrimination and reprisals.*

*Carol Devine is a member of ACT 95, a subcommittee of the Canada Tibet Committee, formed in preparation for the UN conference with the goal to assist Tibetan women to gain a legitimate voice at the Beijing Conference.*

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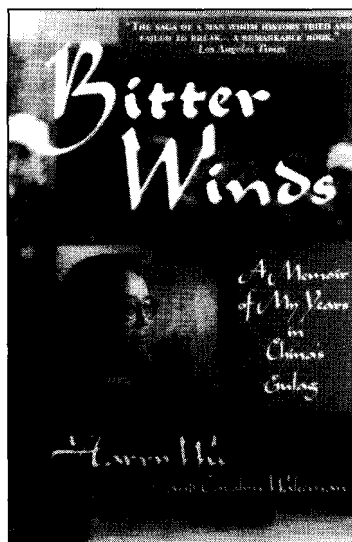
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## Bitter Winds

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Harry Wu and Carolyn Wakeman

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HARRY WU is currently a resident scholar at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University.



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