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WRI WOMEN



the
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working
group of
**War Resisters
International**



Focus on Latin
America

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5 Caledonian Road, London N1 9DX, UK

Newsletter of the Women's Working Group
of the War Resisters International

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Content:

- 3 Focus on Latin America
- 4 Justice for Brazilian Women:
An Interview with Virginia Feix
- 7 6th Feminist Encuentro for Latin America
and the Caribbean
- 8 Living on the Streets
- 10 Rapes in Mexico
- 12 Facts at a Glance
- 13 News
- 14 Letter from South Africa
- 15 Resources
- 16 Books and Publications



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**REMEMBER: the WRI office has moved. You can now
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Tel. +44 71 278 4040; fax +44 71 278 0444. The Email
address remains the same: warresisters@gn.apc.org.**

FOCUS ON LATIN AMERICA

Boa tarde! This issue of the WRI Women's Newsletter focuses on Latin America. Inside, you will find an interview with feminists from Brazil; an article on street girls; and information on the continent-wide struggle against violence against women. We hope this will provide some background on women's struggles in Latin America, as preparation for the next War Resisters' International Triennial, which will be held in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil, December 10-17, this year.

WRI women are preparing presentations throughout the Triennial around the theme of "Determination and Resistance: How Women Work Against Violence". A work group on this theme may meet every day. Some of the topics that have been proposed include the connections between militarism, violence against women, and economic oppression; women and demilitarisation processes, (including women's experiences of UN peacekeeping troops); and women and economic oppression. We may also discuss how can we work together internationally (for example, prioritising common issues, or looking at possible common campaigns). The proposals are tentative; if you are interested in working on this theme, please contact the WRI Women's Working Group Coordinator, Maggie Helwig, at the London office.

Last but not least: included in this issue is a special supplement in Portuguese, "Europa um Paraiso?" ("Europe, a paradise?"). The supplement is from a brochure prepared by a network of European groups against the traffick in women. It gives the stories of three Brazilian women who, believing they were being offered legitimate jobs in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, left Brazil and travelled to Europe for "uma vida melhor" ("a better life"). Once there, they were forced to work as prostitutes.

This supplement is especially for visitors to the Triennial from Europe. We encourage you to take it with you to the Triennial and share it with interested women and girls who may have questions about life in Europe. The supplement includes advice on travel (keep all valid travel documents and important addresses with you, etc.) and immigration, and the addresses of women's groups who are prepared to help in case of problems.

There will be one more issue of the WRI Women's Newsletter this year. This will continue the focus on Latin America. We look forward to your articles and news (in Spanish or English) by September 20.

Adcus!

Shelley Anderson

JUSTICE FOR BRAZILIAN WOMEN: AN INTERVIEW WITH VIRGINIA FEIX

by Shelley Anderson

Virginia Feix works as a lawyer in the human rights commission of the state assembly in Porto Alegre. It was a natural step for her, as she had been working on human rights issues--specifically, amnesty for prisoners of the dictatorship--since 1985. While the changes since then have encouraged her, "all the apparatus for oppressing the people is still there," she says. "Now, instead of repressing dissidents, the poor and blacks are repressed in the name of national security."

Brazil's constitution, promulgated in 1988, has been one of the biggest changes. "The Constitution achieved many rights for women. Criminal law is still bad for women, but under the Constitution, women are guaranteed equal wages, and men and women have the same obligations and duties within the family. One article even declares that the state must take measures and policies to prevent and avoid violence inside the family. That is why it is important now to make women aware of their rights. This is why we work in the legal area, to see that the laws become applied."

On paper, the Brazilian Constitution looks like a feminist dream. There is 120 days of paid maternity leave; even women in prison have the right to have their children next to them long enough to breast feed. There are articles setting a minimum wage and guaranteeing social security for domestic workers, and an article which outlines free state assistance for all children until six years of age.

"None of these rights are known or applied," says Virginia. "Most women don't know what a constitution is. We have good laws, but the judiciary system is not sensitive to women. There is a lack of public defenders, so access to the law is very limited and expensive, even though access is a right and the state is obligated to create conditions for the poor to have a public defender." This is why Virginia and a few other women created Themis, a legal literacy organization for women. The group is named after the ancient Greek goddess of justice.

"Themis tries to empower women to face the courts. We educate community leaders so they can go back to their movements and educate other women about their legal rights. Our training is eight months long. The first four months we give information about different areas of law such as human rights, family law, labor law, and we explain how the judiciary

is organized. The second half of the training we go to the courts and to the state assembly, so the women can talk with judges and defenders--and we take judges and defenders to the community groups.”

Last year women leaders from a slum community and from the national network of mothers' clubs were trained. This year leaders in the prostitutes' movement and from another poor community are being trained. “Just to enter a court building leaves these women lost and afraid,” says Virginia. It is not easy, she points out, for women who have been jailed and abused by the law to return to a court house. But the results can be powerful, especially in a society where physical violence against women is considered normal.

“Our problems are universal problems,” says Virginia, when asked what are some of Brazilian women's major issues. “Domestic violence is very common. Women know, of course, that this exists, but they don't know it is a crime, because the culture tolerates it. We have to make more people aware that the problem exists. Legally, to prove you were beaten is difficult, so we have to develop mechanisms to prove and to collect evidence.”

In Brazil, government funding created Women's Defense Councils, where representatives from both public and private sectors debate issues of importance to women, and make



decisions that are binding upon the government. One key issue has been violence against women, and, in particular, how the law deals with this problem. The Women's Defense Councils and grassroots women's organizing has led to changes in how violence against women is dealt with. Before the 1980s, many men who murdered women were acquitted when they plead a "legitimate defense of honor". The defendant claimed he was defending his honor, because his wife or girl friend had been involved with another man. In 1988 the Superior Court, in an unprecedented move, overruled a "legitimate defense of honor" justification made by an all-male jury in the case of Joao Lopes. The Superior Court declared that, "homicide cannot be considered a normal and legitimate means of responding to adultery, for in such crimes what is defended is not honor, but self-adulation, arrogance, and the pride of a man who considers his wife to be his property."

In 1985, thanks to groups like the Black Women's Collective, SOS Mujer and the Brazilian Bar Association-Sao Paulo Section, a pilot project involving an all-women's police station began in downtown Sao Paulo. The police women handled only cases of violence against women. Soon, long lines of women who had experienced rape, beatings, kidnapping, imprisonment and death threats began to appear in front of the new police station. The resulting media publicity about the project made violence against women a national concern. There are now 41 women's police stations in Sao Paulo. Virginia is sceptical about the project, pointing out that the special stations are too few and far between for most women. Some police women, she says, have trivialized victims and urged them simply to return home. Others argue that the stations have provided much needed assistance and helped to document just how prevalent violence against women is.

Virginia remains sceptical. "Police in general are violent against women, especially prostitutes. The police torture the wives and girlfriends of criminals just to get information. Our job is to make this violence more visible."

Themis, with three coordinators and 24 volunteers, hopes to make state and individual violence more visible in March 1995, when it will hold an international seminar on "Justice: Gender, Race and Class" for judges, prosecutors and other members of the bar.

Virginia is also excited about an event closer in the future: this year's upcoming November national election. Like many Brazilians, she is confident that Luiz Ignacio Da Silva (known as 'Lula') will win the Presidency. "He represents our history," she says. "Even his name is a common Brazilian name. He represents a party (the Partido Dos Trabalhadores--the Workers Party) that has clearly been in touch with the excluded groups in our country--the poor, blacks and women." It is with the marginalised and excluded where Virginia sees hope, and the future of Brazil.

Themis, Andradas 1137/2311, Porto Alegre/RS, Brazil.
Tel. 051 221 4290; fax 051 225 9028.

6TH FEMINIST ENCUENTRO FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

The 6th Feminist Encuentro (Gathering) for Latin American and Caribbean women took place in Costa del Sol, El Salvador, from October 30 to November 5, last year. Approximately 1,100 women attended the conference.

“Through workshops, working groups, forums and videos,” wrote one Peruvian participant, “the exchange of information and experiences took place, as well as discussions and an evaluation of the Latin American feminist movements. The topics were diverse: democracy, women’s human rights, electronic mail, racism, feminist theology, lesbianism, Beijing, etc. There was also space for learning to renew our energy and relax with massages, meditation, dances and rituals.”

The participant, a lesbian, noted that, “Lesbians met every afternoon, with women from each country providing information about the legal, economic and social situation of lesbians. Like the feminist movement, the lesbian movement has different levels of development in each country. Problems were mentioned: isolation in relation to other movements (especially the human rights movement); financial problems; the increase in violence, repression and murders. The next lesbian encuentro for Latin America and the Caribbean will take place in Brazil, in September 1994, several days before the regional preparatory committee for Beijing.”

Organizers of the 6th encuentro had debated cancelling the conference after receiving death threats from El Salvador’s extreme right wing ARENA party. ARENA had placed advertisements on television and radio warning Salvadoran women to stay away from the encuentro. ARENA used the fear of lesbians to try to intimidate potential participants, claiming that lesbian groups would be recruiting women, promoting abortion and the breakup of the family. Police detained some 100 women at the airport the day before the encuentro, singling out and questioning women who were travelling alone. Organizers placed advertisements of their own and noted that Salvadoran women attended the event in large numbers.



LIVING ON THE STREETS

“My family’s got a house and a bit of land, but I’ve been living on the streets since I was seven, the year after my mother died. I worked as a servant in a family house, but then a friend told me to come to the city.

“I got by in the city, picking up men, though I had to put up with them hitting me. What really makes me angry is the way that these machos beat you up all the time. It makes you want to kill them, that’s why I don’t live with a guy. I just sell my body to them from time to time.” Katia

The Anti-Slavery Society of Britain estimates that there are over 30 million street children in Brazil alone. “Meninos da rua” (street children) in Rio de Janeiro are regularly beaten up by police, and sometimes tortured and killed, in periodic “clean up the streets” campaigns. While all the children face problems like hunger and exploitation, girls are especially vulnerable to sexual abuse. It is a bitter irony that many girls run away from home in the first place in order to escape sexual abuse from male relatives. A study of child prostitution in Cochabamba, Bolivia, found that 79 percent of the girls surveyed said they became prostitutes because of economic need when they ran away from home to escape incest and rape by male relatives.

Children are organizing for their survival: again in Rio de Janeiro, several dozen children have found shelter in the Republica dos Meninos (Children’s Republic), an abandoned building taken over by Paulo Faustino. Faustino bought a similar abandoned house and set up a carpentry workshop to help the older children support the house by restoring furniture.

The National Street Children’s Movement began in Brazil in 1975 to defend the rights of young people living on the streets. It is now organized in 22 of Brazil’s 27 states with over 3,000 volunteers. One young girl, Andrea, talked about the work she does in the movement:

“We in the street, since we don’t have anyone to help us denounce these things, get together and talk. We choose a place, one of the houses of the Street Children’s Movement. We go there for the Thursday meeting of the children. We talk with the educators and tell them what’s been happening. We have a little newspaper, and they ask us to give them details which come out in the pages of the paper. We ourselves have demonstrations, give interviews on the radio and have debates to see if things might get a little better. But the more we debate, the more denunciations or demonstrations we make, the worse it gets. The



more dangerous it becomes.” (from Gilberto Dimenstein’s Brazil: War on Children, Monthly Review Press, NY, US, 1991.

Women’s groups like Sempre Viva provide medical, legal, emotional and educational support for girls on the streets. Based in Rio de Janeiro’s south zone, the group distributes information about contraception and the girls’ legal rights under Brazil’s Statute of the Child and Adolescent. The girls, says one educator, have a “kind of ignorance about themselves as citizens.”

Sempre Viva has helped with group housing for five teen mothers, and leads small group discussions where the girls, between the ages of ten and 18, are encouraged to share their experiences. The group’s professional educators meet with the girls on the streets in their neighborhoods, providing counseling, leadership training and help with looking for work. The educators, like the girls themselves, are threatened with violence, and one team member was murdered last year. Sempre Viva wants more contact with international human rights groups, in order to speak out against the abuses experienced by street girls.

RAPES IN MEXICO

At 4:30 pm on June 4th, a group of approximately 30 soldiers of the Mexican Federal Army (MFA) raped three young Tseltal indigenous women from Santa Rosita Sibaquil (in the municipality of Altamirano). The rapes took place at a military roadblock outside of Altamirano, where the soldiers were on duty.

The young women had sold their farm produce in the town of Altamirano and were returning with their mother when they were detained and taken to a room near the military roadblock to be interrogated by a sergeant. There, after being accused of being Zapatistas and threatened with death, they were raped by all of the soldiers.

The community has requested the neutral presence of the International Red Cross to counter the climate of oppressive militarization in the area around Altamirano. This presence could prevent new aggression such as the above, and also guarantee the passage of medical and humanitarian aid to the civil population in the zone.

We as the international community to fax and write the president of Mexico, to the denouncement the rapes, to insure the survivors' physical and psychological safety, and to ask for the installation by the International Red Cross of a neutral zone in the cooperative farming community of Eijido, Morelia, in the municipality of Altamirano.

The faxes and telegrams should be sent to the following addresses:

Lic. Carlos Salinas de Gortari	Presidency of the International Red Cross
Presidente de los	Attn Sr. Francis Amar
Estados Unidos Mexicanos	General Delegate for Latin America and the Caribbean
Palacio Nacional	19 Avenue de la Paix
Mexico, D.F.	Geneva, Switzerland
Fax: 2-71-17-74	Fax: +41-22 733-2057

Please send copies to CONPAZ. On June 30th, CONPAZ and the Grupo de Mujeres de San Cristobal (Women s Group of San Cristobal) denounced the rapes to the Ministerio Publico Federal (equivalent of the attorney general).

They accused the Mexican Federal Army of gang rape, intimidation and making death threats against the women. CONPAZ and the Women's Group presented the denunciation on behalf of the three young women, using a tape-recorded account of the case made by the women.

Additionally, the National Commission of Human Rights, and specifically their agent, Carlos Reyes N., were denounced. According to documentation, members of this governmental commission arrived at the women's community on June 21 in order to investigate the rapes. They used the names of another organization and another person in order to gain the survivors' trust and obliged them to sign documents with thumb prints. Possibly these documents will be used to cover up the illegal actions of the Army, as has happened previously.

From: Coalition of Non-governmental Organizations for Peace
(CONPAZ)

Chiapa de Corzo 19 El Cerrillo
San Cristobal de las Casas
C.P. 29220 Chiapas, Mexico



Felic Hoffman

FACTS AT A GLANCE

- Brazilian women won the right to vote in 1932. Today, women represent 5 percent of the House of Deputies and .24 percent of the Senate.
- Some 20 percent of Brazil's 35 million families are now headed by women. Most are poor and live with inadequate sanitation: over 90 percent of children under a year old in the Northeast live in homes with inadequate sewage systems.
- Women in Brazil earn, on the average, 52 percent of what men do.
- Latin America has one of the highest rates in the Third World of women engaged in economic activities outside of the home. According to authors Brydon and Chant (Women in the Third World), "in most countries in the continent 26 to 45 percent of women aged 15 years or more have paid employment, and on an average women constitute between 16 to 35 percent of the total labor force in Latin American nations." As work outside the home does not mean a lessening of household duties, many Latin American women have a double workload.
- 80 percent of women surveyed in Santiago, Chile, said they were beaten by male relatives or partners at home.
- In the Caribbean women aged 15 years or over display an average rate of participation in economic activities of between 45 to 65 percent, which is among the highest for the developing world as a whole.
- In Nicaragua, 44 percent of men said they beat their wives or girlfriends regularly.
- In a country-wide survey on violence in Colombia, one out of five women were beaten by their partners, one out of ten raped, and one out of three had been mentally abused.
- According to statistics covering the years 1985 to 1990, Latin American women bear an average of 3.6 children during their reproductive years. Bolivia has the highest birthrate in Latin America, as well as the highest child mortality rate in the hemisphere: 171 children per 1,000 will die before they are five years old.
- 61 percent of Mexican housewives are physically abused by their husbands or partners, according to a study conducted by the Federal District's Department of Justice. A statistical survey conducted in Netzahualcoyotl, a city next to Mexico City, found that one in three women had been victims of family violence; 20 percent reported blows to the stomach during pregnancy.

- During the colonial period in Latin America, Spanish and Portuguese legal codes identified women as “imbecilitus sexus” or “an imbecile by nature.”

(From Freedom From Violence: Women's Strategies From Around the World, UNIFEM, 1992; “Women and the 500 Years”, CLAI)



NEWS

Political Asylum for Women

In June of last year, Canada granted political refugee status to an Ecuadoran women who had escaped ten years of domestic violence, including marital rape. Her husband had threatened to kill her and local police had refused protection. The Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board ruled that this constituted persecution if she returned to her home country. The board cited Canada's new immigration guidelines--the first in the world that grant asylum to women facing gender violence. In July two Guatemalan sisters were also granted asylum: their father was allied with rebels, and government troops had threatened to rape the two young women repeatedly. (From Ms., Sept./Oct. 1993)

LETTER FROM SOUTH AFRICA

[Adele Kirsten, Training Co-ordinator with the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, has been a WRI supporter for many years. She attended the WRI women's gatherings in Glencree, Ireland and in Bangkok, Thailand. The following is an excerpt from a letter she recently wrote from her homeland, South Africa.]

“It has been the most extraordinary and incredible time for us all. I will try and capture some of what it meant for me. The weeks and the months leading up to the election were fraught with violence, fear and uncertainty. How many ordinary citizens would still be killed before we would elect a new government? The fears about indiscriminate killings, drive-by shootings and general anarchy on the days of the election were widespread. And then the first day of the election--people streamed in their millions to the voting stations. Many had been lining up since before sunrise--some had even made plans to sleep close to the voting stations so that they could be first in line. In the densely populated urban areas as well as the rural areas it was the same--long lines dragging far into the distance and people waited patiently to cast their vote--the first time for the majority of South Africans. I did some work for the local ANC branch assisting with monitoring the voting stations in my area and feeding that information to a central data centre. All was peaceful. So, Karl [Adele's husband] and I decided to go and join the crowds at one of the many voting stations in my area. We watched people come and go, relaxed, smiling friendly--there was a spirit of comradeship and togetherness. We waited. We watched the sun set and felt the chill autumn air in our bones and still we were about an hour away from the entrance. People sang, laughed, chatted to strangers as they waited, savouring this great moment. We had waited for five hours and then it was over in a matter of minutes. But the pleasure of having shared that moment with all the ordinary people of our suburb and our land remains.

“The festivities and parties began long before the final results were out but we knew that the people who had dreamed and hoped and fought against the evils of apartheid for a more just and democratic country--that those would be the winners in this election. Nelson Mandela's victory speech on the Monday after the election brought tears to my eyes--and again as he took the oath to serve the nation on the 10th May, I cried tears of joy and sadness. The sadness is because many people lost their lives in the fight for justice and I lost my youth and personal freedom during the dark days of the 1980s. There is also the loss of that close community of activists and friends--some have discarded their ideals, other become cynical, corporate employees.

“The surge of creative energy and hope that has been generated by these dramatic events in the life of our country make me optimistic about the future and the possibilities for something new. However, I am not blind to the reality that the burdens of apartheid will remain with us for many more generations and added to that, the many new government

officials who will not serve the needs of the people. But, the spirit of reconciliation which largely Mandela has contributed to, dominates at this moment....

“In ending, I am reminded that the joy and hope I feel because of the events of the past few weeks, is shared with all of you who played your part through the international community in bring an end to the injustice of apartheid....Isn't all this a wonderful event for South Africa--but the honeymoon will soon be over and the struggle will continue.”

RESOURCES

WOMEN'S COMICS

The last twenty years have seen an explosion of women's comics, most often in small magazines that women publish themselves. Adriana Batista and Ana Barreto of Mexico produce *Esporádica*, the comic magazine with the adventures of two women who face problems like rising rents or the debt crisis without ever losing their dignity or sense of humor. Speaking at an international feminist bookfair several years ago, Adriana said women must be very aware of their situation. *Esporádica* (Colectivo Editorial *Esporádica*, Apartado Postal 10249, México 1, D.F. C.P. 06000, México) helps to educate readers about important issues in an enjoyable way.

WOMEN'S RADIO EN INGLÉS Y ESPAÑOL

FIRE (Feminist International Radio Endeavour) began broadcasting in May 1991 (at 1800, 0000 and 1600 Universal Coordinated Time, on 21.465 MHz, 13.630 MHz and 7.375 MHz) on Radio for Peace International, an independent shortwave radio station in Costa Rica. The program, in English and Spanish, wants to give women worldwide a voice to speak out on all issues, and encourages women to send tapes (in mono, from 25 to 50 minutes long) showing a women's perspective. Contact: Radio for Peace International, Apartado 88, Santa Ana, Costa Rica. Tel. 506-49 1821.

NEWS FROM LATIN AMERICA

FEMPRESS publishes news and articles about women in Latin America, Casilla 16-637, Santiago 9, Chile....Latinamerica Press (LP) publishes a weekly 8-page newsletter in Spanish or English with news and progressive analysis of events throughout the continent. An individual subscription is US\$ 50 (special rates for students and solidarity groups). Latinamerica Press, Apartado 5594, Lima 100, Peru....The 500 Years Program of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI, Casilla 17-08-8522, Quito, Ecuador) will publish its magazine *500 Years* (in Spanish or English) until the end of 1994. Full of excellent articles on women, human rights and indigenous struggles. US\$10.

Books AND Publications

“Death Without Weeping: Daily Life in Northeast Brazil” is the theme of the April 1994 The New Internationalist. Based on the book Death Without Weeping (600 pages, 1992, University of California Press) by anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the lives of slum women and their children in Brazil’s poverty-stricken Northeast are shocking and moving by turns. The exploitation, by sugar cane plantations, is endless and gives rise both to desperation and resistance.

Hear My Testimony by María Teresa Tula (1994, 224 pages, \$14). A deeply personal account of the life of a human rights activist in El Salvador. Tula describes her childhood, marriage, political activism in CO-MADRES (Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Assassinated and Disappeared of El Salvador) and the resulting imprisonment and torture. Her testimony is followed by several chapters on recent Salvadoran history, women’s grassroots organizing and more stories of testimony. Translated by Lynn Stephen, available from South End Press, 116 Saint Botolph St., Boston, MA 02115, USA.

The January 1994 issue of The New Internationalist is on “Mexico: Through the Tortilla Curtain”. There are articles on the struggle of the Huichol indigenous people, the economic exploitation of Mexican workers in the US, NAFTA, GATT and an interview with a radical bishop, plus a short sketch of Mexican history. Contact the New Internationalist, 120-126 Lavender Avenue, Mitcham, Surrey CR4 3HP, UK. Tel. +44 81 685 0372.

Lesbians Talk: Making Black Waves (64 pages, 1993, Scarlet Press, UK, £4.50) by Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta is the first book by Black lesbians to document the lives and history of Black lesbians in Britain. “For me, one of the main aims of the book is for black lesbians to realize that there is a black lesbian herstory behind us. That Black lesbianism is something which has and does happen in our countries of origin, it’s not a product of colonisation.” The book highlights some of the 500-year-old story of black lesbians in Britain itself, and around the world: the women-only societies of ancient India called Strirajya, and the legal marriages between women among the Kuriar people of southwest Kenya and northwest Tanzania. There are fascinating interviews with Black lesbians (whose heritage includes Africa, the Caribbean, South and South East Asia and the Middle East) about their lives, political debates and issues today. Making Black Waves can be ordered from the feminist bookshop Silver Moon, 64-68 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0BB, UK. Tel. +44 (0)71 836 7906.

Lesbertária is the name of a new Portuguese-language lesbian newsletter in Brazil. For a sample copy send an international money order in the amount of US \$3 to: Caixa Postal, 01495-970 Sao Paulo, SP Brazil.