

# PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

## Women Political Prisoners in Iran:

### A Political Art Project

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A missing page in a vibrant history of Iranian women activism since the 1970s is the struggle of women political prisoners. With the coming to power of the Islamic regime in Iran, women became the first target of political and social oppression. There were many women among the several thousand prisoners who were executed in the summer of 1988. This is known among Iranians as “the Massacre of 1988” (*koshtar-e 1367*, in Farsi).

Over the years, some of the prisoners who served their prison terms have been able to leave the country. They, unlike ex-political prisoners in Iran who are not free to write about their prison experience, have produced momentous literature, which provide detailed accounts of theocratic disciplining of prisoners, torture, rape, execution of loved comrades, husbands, sisters, brothers, and resistance within the prison. This literature is written in Farsi, and is thus not widely accessible to international human rights activists, prison abolitionists, feminists and academics. These prisoners have also spoken about their ordeal in art forms such as music, film, painting, and photography that visually depict their individual and collective resistance and some of the atrocities committed against them.

This literature is significant in its own right, although it is perhaps unique in its details about Islamic theocracy and the gender dimension of its penal practices and policies. In both torture and indoctrination, womanhood and motherhood turn into sites of state repression; there are stories about children living with their mothers in jail or separated from them, a situation where unborn and newly born children are targeted by the state to break the resistance of the prisoner.

In the last three years, I have tried to open a space in academia for the voices of women political prisoners of the Middle East. This initiative includes the compilation of a comprehensive bibliography consisting of books, films, art productions, journal articles, and web-based materials; I plan to mount them on a website. An outcome of my SSHRC-funded research on the impact of war and displacement on women’s learning has been the realization of the importance of political autobiographical writing as a process of resistance and conscious healing. Political autobiography can encourage a radically

new approach to understanding the histories and struggles of women activists. I have organized writing workshops for women political prisoners, the first of which was facilitated by Haifa Zangana, an Iraqi woman political prisoner, novelist, and anti-war activist. Haifa discussed the importance of autobiographical writing and the process of using art to express historical and political events. The workshops continued with the volunteer work of a respected Iranian-Canadian woman novelist and writer, Mehri Yalfani. The writings produced by women prisoners in these workshops will soon be published as the first English anthology on this subject.

I have also used the Prison Film Festival, organized by Prison Justice Action Committee in Toronto in the last two years, as a politically exuberant space for educating the public on the struggle of women political prisoners of the Middle East. In collaboration with *Sumoud* ([www.sumoud.tao.ca](http://www.sumoud.tao.ca)), we have shown a series of films on women political prisoners of the Middle East (for a complete list of films check the following website [www.pjac.org](http://www.pjac.org)).

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