



Fifty Years of Women Writers in Prison

8 March 2010 – International Women’s Day

2010 marks the 50th Anniversary of the Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) of International PEN, which has since 1960 helped many hundreds, if not thousands, of writers attacked for expressing their ideas and speaking their minds. Throughout the year PEN members will be celebrating the courage of these writers and the work of the Committee. Central to the campaign are 50 emblematic cases of writers for whom PEN has campaigned in the past half century. Among them are fourteen women who have suffered imprisonment and even death for their writings. On 8 March Women’s Day, the WiPC celebrates and commemorates all women writers, past and present, who have suffered arrest, attack and even murder for having spoken out.

To read more about the campaign go to: [Because Writers Speak Their Minds - 50 Years of Defending Freedom of Expression](#)



Among the first cases worked on by PEN’s WiPC was that of [Musine Kokalari](#), who, by the time the Committee was established in 1960, had already been imprisoned for 14 years. She was the first woman writer to be published in Albanian but fell foul of the authorities in 1946 and was sentenced to 20 years in prison. She was released into a job as a street sweeper in 1964 and died in 1983. All her work had been destroyed and PEN hopes to be able during this anniversary year to publish a piece for the first time in over 60 years.

Women’s rights activists have found themselves at the forefront of the struggle for free expression. One of those is [Nawal El-Saadawi](#), known internationally for her feminist writings and an outspoken critic of the Egyptian government. Saadawi was imprisoned between 1981 and 1983 and has over the years since received death threats, had her books banned and harassed by the authorities. Less well known but nonetheless influential, was [Alaíde de Foppa de Solórzano](#) a leading Guatemalan writer and activist who ran a weekly feminist radio programme in the late 1970s which, among other issues, highlighted the oppression of Mayan women. She was among the 45,000 people who disappeared during the internal armed conflict in Guatemala in the 70s and 80s. She was last seen in December 1980, 30 years ago.

Another woman writer who was among the thousands who disappeared in the Americas during the same period was [Alicia Partnoy](#). She, however, survived her ordeal and returned after six months in prison where she was beaten and tortured, to tell her story. She now lives in the USA.

[Nien Cheng](#) also wrote a searing account of her own imprisonment in China in *Life and Death in Shanghai*. In 1966 Cheng was accused of being a spy for the UK and incarcerated for six and a half years. During this time she was subjected to interrogation, torture and solitary confinement. In October 1978 government officials apologised for Nien Cheng's wrongful arrest and imprisonment. In 1980 she left China the USA. She died in 2009 aged 93.



In the Americas today, outside of Cuba, there are few countries that imprison writers, but since the 1990s there has been an alarming and consistent pattern of murders, particularly of journalists who disclose corruption. Today [Lydia Cacho](#), a Mexican journalist and campaigner against child sex abuse, lives under constant threat. She was briefly detained in 2005 and although she was eventually acquitted of defamation of a businessman she implicated as being involved in child pornography rings, the threats continue.

In the 70s and 80s, as today, women in Iran found themselves the target of oppression. [Shahnush Parsipour](#) has had the dubious honour of being imprisoned both under the Shah in the mid 1970s, and by the Revolutionary Guard in the early 1980s. Parsipour, like many other writers who survive prison, find themselves in exile. Poet [Maria Elena Cruz Varela](#) left Cuba in 1994 after two years in prison and now lives in Spain. [Martha Kumsa](#), an Ethiopian journalist and Oromo rights activist is now in Canada after nine years imprisonment without charge during which time she was subjected to physical abuse and torture by prison guards. The controversial Bangladesh author, [Taslima Nasrin](#), who fled death threats and a trial for her “blasphemous” writings in 1994, remains unable to return to her home country and continues to write challenging articles for which she is still threatened. [Sihem Bensedrine](#), a journalist and activist from Tunisia has suffered endless harassment, brief arrest and threat for over a decade, and now lives outside her country, returning as often as she can to maintain her work as an advocate and activist for democracy and human rights in Tunisia and the broader Arab world.

For decades, writers in the Soviet Union were sent in their thousands to gulags, prisons and psychiatric units. Among them was [Irina Ratushinskaya](#), whose poetry smuggled from prison has become a standard text for the study of the literature of incarceration. She was freed in 1986 after four years hard labour and came to Britain.



She has since been able to return to Russia. The fall of the Iron Curtain brought new dangers. Where in the past imprisonment had been used to silence critical voices, it is now the gun. Since 1992, 52 journalists have been killed in Russia, including nine women. In 2006, [Anna Politkovskaya](#), a courageous journalist who covered all kinds of dangerous assignments, from Russian army human rights abuses in Chechnya, to local corruption, was herself assassinated

One of the world's longest serving political prisoners is the Burmese writer and opposition party leader, [Aung San Suu Kyi](#), held under house arrest for 14 of the 21 years since she was first arrested in 1989. In February 2010 the Supreme Court in Burma rejected an appeal by Aung San Suu Kyi against an extension of her house arrest.

Women writers under attack today

Women continue to be imprisoned, threatened and killed for their writing today. Of the 900 writers and journalists who had suffered attacks recorded by the WiPC during 2009, 52 are women. Three of them are among the emblematic cases featured in PEN's 50th Anniversary campaign: **Lydia Cacho**, **Sihem Bensedrine** and **Aung San Suu Kyi**. Here follows outlines of three others.

PEN's annual Day of the Imprisoned Writer on 15 November 2009 featured [Natalia Estemirova](#), a journalist and rights defender working for the acclaimed rights group, Memorial, in **Chechnya**, was abducted and murdered, shot in the head and chest in a nearby woodland, on her way to work in Grozny. Estemirova was a close colleague of **Anna Politkovskaya**, and the two women had collaborated in disclosing abuses.



Parvin Ardalan, a leading and award-winning **Iranian** writer, editor and women's rights activist has been under threat since 1997. She has been repeatedly arrested, interrogated and harassed, summoned to court on numerous occasions and has been subject to travel restrictions and heavy surveillance. Ardalan left Iran for Sweden in September 2009, after being invited to give a talk by the Swedish feminist magazine *Bang*. If she is returned to Iran, the persecution against her would resume. [Olaf Palme Award for Parvin Ardalan](#)

[Tran Khai Thanh Thuy](#), a **Vietnamese** novelist, poet, essayist and editor of the underground dissident magazine *To Quoc* (*Fatherland*), has been under heavy surveillance and harassment since September 2006 for her writings published online. She was arrested at her home in April 2007, where she had already been under house arrest for six months. She was convicted of 'causing public disorder' and released after her trial, but still faces three years under a surveillance order.



For further information on International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee go to [Because Writers Speak Their Minds](#) or contact:

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