

Ladies in white

Mothers Demand Justice Against All Odds in Cuba

By Frank Calzón

American mothers will be honored this Mother's Day. In Cuba, the day to pay tribute to mothers, and the artistic scientific and political achievements of women is International Women's Day, March 8. Fidel Castro led this year's celebration with a five-hour speech announcing the sale of thousands of pressure cookers at a discounted price. It was a true-to-form message to Cuba's women: Stay in the kitchen.

Paired with the ration card, the kitchen has become a symbol of desperation for Cuban women, especially as Cuban society divides; a small but privileged elite still receives remittances from abroad, the overwhelming majority continues to endure hunger and hardship.

Food, of course, is not the only worry on this island of political repression and pervasive communist indoctrination. During his 1998 visit, the late Pope John Paul II vainly pleaded with Castro to respect parental control and stop sending teens to "schools in the countryside" [work camps] to work in the fields. The Pope denounced the alarming levels of sexual promiscuity at such "schools."

Cuban women won the right to vote in 1940 and in the 1950s took leading roles in fighting the Batista dictatorship. Today, Castro permits no free elections and bans independent women's organizations. The Federation of Cuban Women is an instrument of state coercion headed by the wife of General-Minister Raúl Castro.

Havana trumpeted the right of Elián González to be reunited with his father. Yet the Cuban government denies the right of a woman to visit her son and grandchildren in Argentina. Argentina's president tried to intervene, but Castro vindictively holds Dr. Hilda Molina and her elderly mother hostage. Molina, a prominent neurosurgeon, offended the Cuban dictator by resigning from Cuba's parliament to protest regime health policy that gives preferential care to foreign tourists while denying basic care to Cubans.

Authorities used to boast about Cuba's healthcare system and low rates of infant mortality. The government still touts healthcare as it builds its tourist industry, but the country's few first-class hospitals are all reserved for those foreign tourists. The neighborhood clinics and hospitals serving Cubans are woefully short of supplies and equipment, such as X-rays, antibiotics and aspirin. Women with difficult pregnancies are simply encouraged to abort.

In an economy where everyone works for the government and the average wage is \$15 a month, prostitution is one of the few ways to get money needed to buy food, soap, clothes and medicines. Increasing numbers of women feel that the government is forcing them into prostitution to provide for



their families. Castro used to boast that he eradicated prostitution. Now he boasts that Cuba's prostitutes are the best educated in the world.

Cuban women, however, continue to fight for their families and basic rights. Mothers Against Repression (MAR) is an organization of Cuban mothers living abroad who tirelessly work in the United States, Europe, and Latin America for Cuba's freedom.

In Cuba, the "Ladies in White", wives and mothers of imprisoned members of Cuba's political opposition, dress in white and parade after Sunday church services demanding the release of their husbands, sons, and brothers. Castro denounces them as "mercenaries of the United States" and sends goons to the Havana church where the women attend Mass to surround them and shout insults as they leave. Despite the pressure, the "parade" of mothers and wives continues — symbolic of their commitment to wrest political liberation and economic recognition even from Castro.

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