

The Battle

by Janet Jagan

Abuse of

Everywhere, it's the same thing. Women and girl children are at risk, their lives and well being threatened and those responsible for the age-old and continuous assaults on their gender are mainly men. There is hardly a country that can hold up its head and say: "Our women are not sexually molested or endangered by violence. Our women can live without fear."

It's not an easy task to determine if today there are more assaults on women, percentage-wise, than existed in previous centuries. It's probably that for a number of reasons – quicker communications, more public awareness of the crimes, more women speaking out, more cases before the courts or whatever, but we can safely say that assaults on women are better known today than in former times.

And, of course, a considerable amount of the attention now being paid to assaults on women is due to the growth of women's rights groups. These brave women began the struggle for women's rights about a century and a half ago and had to face unimaginable hostility from both men and women.

Today, in most countries including our own it is different. Women's groups and individuals speak out frankly, women are moving into powerful positions. For example, about 20 women have led their countries as Presidents or Prime Ministers and scores have served as

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But despite the advance of women's rights, we can see even today, the absolutely horrific disadvantages some women face. There are two such

press. Her fine was then increased to 200 lashes and imprisonment. This case is still before the world court of public opinion. But to Saudi Arabians, that doesn't matter and the punishment of this grossly abused woman will probably proceed. It is impossible to imagine that

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cases that have hit the headlines in recent times and probably many, many more we never hear of. One brave woman in Pakistan challenged the courts in a vicious gang rape she suffered, which the courts put down to protect the attackers. But she persevered up to the high courts.

But the most recent and almost unbelievable outrage took place recently in Saudi Arabia where a woman was gang raped by seven men. While the rapists were charged, she was also charged and condemned to 90 lashes. Her lawyer protested and spoke to the

she could live through 200 lashes. This case and others show the distances we have to go to achieve women's rights, to be protected by law against all forms of abuse and assault.

Just closer by, in Brazil, our neighbour, it was reported that a young woman (her age between 15-20 years) was placed in a jail for a very minor offence. The cell she was placed in contained 20 men and for a month she was repeatedly raped! How on earth could such horrendous episode like that take place? But it did – and not too far away from where we live here in Guyana!

Against the Women

Almost every day, there are media reports of rapes, gang rapes, rapes of infants and little girls, sodomizing of both males and females, bludgeoning and killings of women, assaults by husbands on their wives and so on. The stream of attacks on females of all ages, all races and religions and all layers of society never ends.

And we can add to what the media reports, the hundreds who do not and will not report the assault to the police. I read AA Fenty's "Frankly Speaking" on November 3, 2007 in Stabroek News in which he bemoaned the fact that many rapists get off, scot-free in the courts. He quoted from that stalwart of women's rights Josephine Whitehead (and it bears repetition) concerning rape victims: "The combined effects of the myths and fallacies and the rules are as follow:

Very few women who have been raped make a police report - this is even less surprising given the fact that at least one woman who has gone to police to report having been raped, has been raped again by the very men to whom she has gone for help.

Those who do make a report find that the police are generally unsympathetic in dealing with the matter and make only limited attempts to find and arrest the attacker.

In the few cases in which charges are brought, the victim is made to feel as if it is she who is on trial, and



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the vast majority result in the accused getting off or being given a light sentence.

"The long and short of it is that nearly all rapists remain or soon go free to rape again, while their victims are left with the guilt and shame and the realization that rapists are not the only enemy. Experience in other countries has shown how difficult it is to change attitudes towards rape, but the government can, and should, lead the way by changing the law."

Ms Whitehead speaks about the shame of being raped. Years ago, I visited Bangladesh, which had, then, become a separate state from its former inclusion in Pakistan, following a long war. Many thousands of women had been forced into prostitution for the Pakistan Army - either that or death. The Japanese did the same thing to Korean women during World War II. After the end of the war, these poor women were treated as if they were the criminals, not the victims. No one wanted them. Their

husbands refused them, even their parents refused to allow them home. The new state had to find homes and jobs and rehabilitate these abused women. And in less terrible conditions, like Guyana, a woman whom is known to have been raped is scorned and treated like dirt. No wonder so many rape cases go unreported.

In St Lucia, just last week, a mother was sentenced to one year in prison for knowing that her 15 year old daughter was raped by her grandfather and did nothing to protect her child. This is also a frequent happening when a mother knows that her daughter is being sexually molested by the father, stepfather, uncle, cousin, etc. and does nothing.

Our young and energetic and resourceful Minister of Human Services has brought forth a brilliant working paper concerning all forms of abuses against the female sex and how to deal with these, particularly in the courts. Consultations are now going on and it is anticipated that proposals will go to Parliament for approval in strengthening the ways of dealing with those who abuse women and children. Domestic violence and all forms of violence against women, would be dealt with in an effort to reduce its incidence in Guyana. Our women need better protection so that they can get ahead with their lives, make the maximum use of available education and move up the scale to enjoy equal rights, equal opportunity.