



# COMMUNIST WOMEN

## End violence against women



LIZ PAYNE

### VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

THE RECENT publication of the Georgetown Institute's *Women, Peace and Security Index 2021/22* (GIWPS) makes grim and shocking reading.

Women around the world are shown to have been at greater risk of intimate partner violence during COVID, while at the same time being less able to extricate themselves from domestic violence due to loss of independent income and pandemic lockdown restrictions. The full picture is yet to emerge.

Women's predicament is compounded in many countries by years of austerity cuts to the support services on which those fleeing abusive relationships rely.

A survey of 2,500 women in Iran showed that an already high rate of domestic violence (54%) before COVID rose to 65% within the first six months of the pandemic and highlighted the increased likelihood of abuse where either the woman or her partner had lost their job.

Large numbers of women reported being subjected to intimate partner violence for the first time in this period, while already abused women reported an increase in the severity of attacks. The GIWPS noted, that across the world "measures to address violence against women have been uneven and often inadequate" and stressed the vital

role that women's organisations, taken shape and developed during the pandemic, have played in supporting women and girls. We have heard much about their work through our international contacts. They need our support and solidarity.

Women's perceptions of being safe in their own neighbourhoods is a major factor affecting everything. It severely restricts women's lives and their potential to participate in the economic, political, social, and cultural spheres if they feel unable to go freely about their everyday lives. For example: which routes to take to reduce the risk of attack and how to alert friends and family if they are in danger.

In Latin America, the majority of women do not feel safe to be out alone in their own locality after dark. Afghanistan was shown by GIWPS indicators to be where women felt least safe out in their immediate surroundings. Here, some of the most misogynistic attitudes to women appear. In parts of the country between 67% and 97% of men considered wife-beating 'a norm' and, unsurprisingly, a correspondingly large number of women reported domestic abuse within the previous twelve months. This was before the US-negotiated Taliban return to government and highlights that the years of occupation and conflict did nothing to alleviate but much to entrench the oppression of women in Afghanistan, whatever the mass media may say.

Wars and conflicts at state and sub-state level worldwide have increased in the past year and this has taken a huge toll on women and children both in and "beyond the battlefield". Intimate partner abuse in the home is much higher in war-ravaged zones, with women's exposure to violence being exacerbated by disruption of their means of livelihood, food shortages and breakdown of public services.

Where there is displacement (women and children make up the majority of the world's 90+ million refugees and internally displaced persons) the risks of all forms of gender-based violence is higher, with huge risks to women in camps and temporary shelters.

The struggles for peace and women's equality must remain inseparable.

Research for the GIWPS applied indicators to the experience of women in 170 countries. Of the twelve countries in which women fared the worst, nine were ex-British colonies and/or have been the targets of its economic and military strategies - Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, South Sudan, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Palestine, and Somalia.

US, British and other imperialists' focus on investment and profits at the expense of all else, and their collaboration with the most reactionary regimes to secure resources, cheap labour and markets including by military means, leaves the women of many countries trapped in a cycle of misogyny, cruelty, oppression, and exploitation.

Violence against women need not continue for another day but if it is to be eradicated as the United Nations Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women calls, then its true origins in the insatiable greed for profit must be recognised and called out and solidarity built with women's and progressive organisations everywhere which are finding new strength and developing new strategies in the struggle for equality, justice, and socialism.

LIZ PAYNE IS A MEMBER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY'S WOMEN'S AND INTERNATIONAL COMMISSIONS

LEFT: The Soviet woman who works for the building of socialism, fights against religion and domestic violence, 1931.

BORIS GRIGORYEVICH KLINCH (1892-1946)

## Challenging the depiction of violence against women in popular culture



▲ Artwork for the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women



▲ Arendse Lund takes the Staunch Short Story Prize and Ros Thomas takes the Staunch Flash Fiction Prize with *How to Leave Your Childhood Behind*. See the rest of the shortlists at [bit.ly/3nFdHFh](https://bit.ly/3nFdHFh).

The winners were announced on 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and was followed by 16 days of activism on social media.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (VAW) is one of the most serious challenges to health and social inclusion for women and girls worldwide, with UN Women among the global organisations taking a lead in the drive to highlight and combat the issues.

Yet while countless organisations work tirelessly towards ending violence against women, little attention is given to the fact that in popular culture – books, films and television drama – fictional violence against women has seen a massive upsurge.

To help highlight this, the Staunch Book Prize was set up in 2018 by writer and editor Bridget Lawless as an international award for thriller novels in which no woman is beaten, stalked, sexually exploited, raped or murdered.

News of the prize was met with an instant backlash from female crime writers who accused the organisers of censorship, denying women's lived experiences and damaging writers' livelihoods. None of these were the case and no one was being silenced, but a new conversation was sparked simply by an unusual set of entry criteria.

The controversy took news of the

Prize around the world and in fact, it has been widely welcomed by readers, authors and publishers across the globe.

The Staunch prizes (now including short form thriller fiction) are awarded on 25 November every year, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

In 2021, the Staunch team addressed the increasing depiction of physical and sexual violence on screen. Why, they ask, has showing women being brutalised in film and TV drama, night after night, week after week become so normalised we barely even question it? Given its prevalence, should we be concerned about how this level of exposure affects viewers? Shouldn't we also consider representation, and its impact on the way women are viewed and treated in society?

Might it not unintentionally contribute to the unconscious bias women face when seeking justice for violent physical, psychological and sexual assaults by perpetuating rape myths and exaggerating serial killers over the reality of the much greater danger from known assailants, including current or ex-partners?

We have an epidemic of male violence towards women and girls, and prosecution rates have never been lower. Trivialising and monetising this issue is cynical exploitation, and not without consequences.

So the Staunch Test was launched – a system for rating or checking whether films and TV dramas contain violence against women, using Pass, Fail and Debate criteria. Debate is reserved for titles that contain VAW, but challenge it in a genuinely original manner as the central premise, as, for example, Michaela Coel's award-winning series *I May Destroy You*.

A crowd-sourced database of films and TV dramas is also being built using the Staunch ratings.

The book prize and Staunch Test rating system have been brought under the umbrella of The Staunch Group, a non-profit organisation which will also commission research on the wider effects that the excessive depiction of violence against women in popular culture has on women in real life. Challenging commissioning bodies is also on the agenda. It's time they started to monitor and genuinely consider their contribution to society when repeatedly presenting women's suffering as entertainment.

# BLOCKS

Christiane Ohsan looks at the obstacles to Black women accessing specialist services in cases of violence and abuse

Between March 2020 and June 2021 Black women were 14% less likely to be referred by police for support to **Refuge**, a UK charity providing specialist support for women and children experiencing domestic violence, than white survivors of domestic abuse. [www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk)

Refuge found that Black survivors were 3% more likely to report abuse they experience to police than white survivors of domestic abuse over the same period.

Refuge's data shows that during the pandemic Black women supported by Refuge were 3% more likely to have experienced physical abuse and 4% more likely to have experienced sexual abuse than white women survivors.

**Sistah Space** ( an organisation set up to support African heritage women and girls who experience domestic abuse or sexual abuse ) have highlighted the many ways the police fail to recognise or address abuse against Black women. <https://www.sistahspace.org>

**Women's Aid Federation** England's **No Woman Turned Away** (NWTVA) project which provides dedicated support to women who face barriers in accessing a refuge place, reported in June 2020 that almost half the women supported by the NWTVA project were from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds (103 out of 243 - 43.2%)

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/no-woman-turned-away/>

The situation is even worse for those women with **No Recourse for Public Funds** (NRPF). Just 5% of refuge spaces listed in 2020 were accessible to women with NRPF. Some women with NRPF may be eligible for support under the Destitute Domestic Violence Commission, but there remain several challenges to accessing this route.

As Southall Black Sisters have highlighted, these rules do not extend to migrant women workers with non spousal visas and who are subject to NRPF. <https://southallblack SISTERS.org.uk>

CHRISTIANE OHSAN, HACKNEY AND TOWER HAMLETS COMMUNIST PARTY



## A tale of two cities

LAURA MILLER  
PHILADELPHIA AND HAVANA

WHEN I WAS young and living in Philadelphia, the police chief firmly believed the police could do no wrong. He was elected mayor a few years later and put what he believed into practice.

Violence against young men, white and black was constant. One young man, picked up going to the store, was beaten so badly he lost his testicles. The Move community, a relatively peaceful black commune with many children, was bombed out of their home – 40 streets around burned down because the police refused to let the fire department attend. If young people like me demonstrated against the Vietnam War or anything else, the treatment was brutal.

Gradually, violence against women on the part of the police became whispered about, too. Sex workers were the first victims. Any women seen in the so-called 'red light district' were arrested on sight. Of course, they could get out of the arrest with bribes. That was 'normal', according to testimony from the women.

Then the police became more open in their venality. They did not care who saw them or who they arrested or brutalised. Working class, especially young, women became targets.

I am from a Communist family and have been working politically since I was 10. I was used to the police taking photos of me on demonstrations, and thinly disguised FBI men asking questions about my family and friends. I was not used to receiving innuendo and sexual threats.

At 18, in between studying and working

my way through university, I helped an independent member of the city council in his campaign. We went to a party in a two story walk-up one night with a group of black activists. The councilman was in a wheelchair so had to be carried up.

It was a normal 60's left wing party – a gigantic pot of spaghetti in the middle of the floor, plates and forks around. Nearby were bottles of beer and various types of cigarettes. The music was loud and there were lots of hot and sweaty bodies dancing.

All at once, a voice yelled 'Fuzz' and everyone dived out of windows, doors and into the next apartment. Left in the room were me and the councilman in a wheelchair with a pot of spaghetti and beer enough for 200.

In came five policemen with truncheons drawn, and saw a girl with a man in a wheelchair. One of them looked at me with devouring eyes. 'Oh' he said, 'So you're with a cripple? Where's the others?' I smiled and said 'Others? We're just very hungry.' At that point, the councilman introduced himself, and the police attitude changed. They told us to keep the music down, and left.

Fast forward a week. I was walking out of my house and going shopping when I saw a police car parked nearby. It was the same policeman from the party. 'You better come over here and make me happy' he said, from his police car. 'Otherwise you know what will happen.' What he meant was that I would be arrested for prostitution if I did not have sex with him. What struck me was his belief that he could do what he wanted from his police car with the number emblazoned on it and that no one would touch him. I managed to get out of that situation unscathed, but I never found out how he knew who I was or where I lived.

Nevertheless, every time I walked down the street alone, the hairs were raised on the back of my neck and my eyes swivelled constantly (even now, when I visit, and police authority is not so total, I don't like being on the street alone. There are other men around who deliver threats).

Many years later I was a volunteer teacher in Cuba, living with a family in a quiet area of Havana. They gave me breakfast, for other meals I was on my own. Electricity in Havana is unreliable, street lights are few and far between and the pavements are potholed. After-dark walking is a little difficult. The closest restaurant was four blocks away, and I would go there for dinner whenever I could.

The thing was, I was always at home on the streets of Havana. I had very open conversations with men and women in Spanish and never felt afraid. I never felt threatened or insulted. I knew that there was some crime I was told to keep my handbag on the floor of any car I was in, because there are bag snatches from stationary cars. But violence against women? Everyone, including women, said that it was very rare. Equality between the sexes is enshrined in the constitution. However, even now the sharing of housework is not equitable.

Cuba, as we know, has been under an oppressive American blockade for many decades. Infrastructure is rickety and distribution problematic because of petrol shortage, so food supply is unreliable. It's not an easy place to live. But I never had or saw an incident of sexual threat or male posturing. If only Philadelphia and Havana could exchange their weather.

LAURA MILLER IS A MEMBER OF HACKNEY AND TOWER HAMLETS COMMUNIST PARTY

## Communist women going forward!

CAROL STAVRIS  
PARTY CONGRESS

The 56th Congress of the Communist Party of Britain, held in November 2021, was always going to be noteworthy – not least because it was three years since the last one.

For women in Britain, these three years have not been good. The ruling class offensive sharpens as the economic crisis deepens. The Women in Work Index 2021 reports that, despite some advance, it will take at least 112 years to close the average gender pay gap at current slow levels of progress.

The effects of working from home because of the Covid-19 pandemic have resulted in less job security for women despite the furlough scheme. Recent data from the scheme shows that more women's jobs are at risk than men's. Unpaid care and domestic work, on the rise during the pandemic, have added to the burden carried by women.

On top of this, all types of violence towards women, especially domestic violence, are increasing. UN Women, the organisation delivering programmes, policies and standards that uphold

women's human rights, describes it as a shadow pandemic.

Racism and discrimination towards Black and Asian women continues unabated and they bear disproportionately greater financial and psychological consequences from the Covid-19 crisis than their white sisters (Fawcett Society research).

These are the material realities faced by women every day.

As well as electing a significantly higher proportion of women comrades to its Executive Committee, the 56th Congress accepted there was much to do to attract and recruit women, especially Black and Asian women, into party membership.

The crucial rôle being undertaken by women comrades campaigning in their Unions and communities for better pay, conditions and services gives opportunities for communication, interaction and solidarity, and raises the potential for recruitment

Understanding the nature of women's oppression and recognising that the liberation of women is integral to the class struggle is key. We need to develop ourselves politically in order to contribute to building a women's movement which will strengthen and defend women's rights alongside the fight for socialism.

The main points of the Resolution on Women's Rights passed by Congress to take our struggle forward are:

- Advance the understanding that the fight for women's liberation is integral to the class struggle by encouraging all comrades, male and female, to study the classics of Marx, Engels and Lenin on the position of women in society; feminist writers including Alexandra Kolontai, Sylvia Pankhurst, Rosa Luxembourg, Claudia Jones and Angela Davis as well as *Women and Class*.
- Highlight the triple oppression of Black and Asian women in its activities and its publications on women's struggles.
- Promote the work of women comrades in local community organisations fighting against cuts to the services that women need and use.
- Raise and support the demands of the National Assembly of Women's Charter for Women within the labour movement and progressive women's organisations.
- Confront and combat by political argument those reactionary liberal ideas which undermine, challenge and attack advances in women's rights.

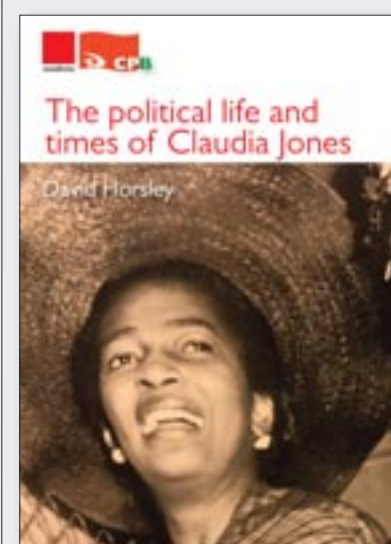
CAROL STAVRIS IS THE COMMUNIST PARTY WOMEN'S organiser



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