Women and Political Violence during the Years of Lead in Morocco
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By Nadia Guessous

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Foreword
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It should be admitted that women’s role in their societies, whether in activism or in suffering is often ignored and remains unrecognized. More particularly, this may be the case in societies where the Arab and Islamic culture is predominant.

As for the suffering of Moroccan women during a particular period of our modern history, which is seen, probably unilaterally, as “years of lead”, it has been dealt with for a long time, with some exceptions, as collateral damages only. In the collective psyche, the victim is undoubtedly the male gender par excellence. However, many women were detained; some of whom didn’t go back from the prison, be it regular or irregular.

There is also another group of women who are not less heroic than those who were put in prison. They are the women who were subjected to various forms of ill-treatment during events of oppression or before the gates of prisons where their husbands, sons and brothers were detained. They are also the women who, in the absence of their male relatives, took charge of their families in dire straits.

The Equity and Reconciliation Commission who adopted a comprehensive approach to compensations due to victims of the years of lead was aware enough to pay tribute to those women by giving them a hearing and organizing activities on gender, including the investigation leading to this analysis study. This approach included individual financial compensation, medical care, social reintegration, if need be, disclosure of truth about cases of enforced disappearance and introduction of legal and institutional reforms.

Of course, this study does not tackle the subject in detail. The Advisory Council on Human Rights, who is proud of publishing
it and of addressing a significant legacy of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, is committed to continue encouraging and supporting any action aiming to rehabilitate the victims of the years of lead, mainly those unknown, within the scope of national reconciliation.

Nevertheless, this study is of paramount importance. The readership will notice that it was written with great sensitivity and empathy, worth of the experiences which true heroines endured, who are women from Aith Hdiddou and elsewhere.

I would like to extend my thanks to Ms. Nadia Guessous for her competence and dedication, to the team of women researchers who bravely collected data to conduct this study and to the team of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, our partner in the tremendous effort to mainstream the gender approach in all the activities of the Advisory Council on Human Rights.

Rabat, on February 16, 2009

Ahmed Herzenni
CCDH President
INTRODUCTION
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In times of war and political repression, women suffer in unique and multiple ways from the effects of violence. Often targeted as a means to punish male relatives and to terrorize communities, women are as likely as men to be subjected to violence, torture, illegal detention, displacement and forced labor in times of conflict and repression.

In addition, the effects of violence on women’s lives are often made worse because of existing gender roles and discrimination in society, and because women are more likely to be illiterate, poor, and marginalized.

Women in times of conflict and political repression are also more vulnerable to sexual violence and unwanted pregnancies, which often lead to stigmatization within their own families and communities.

Further, women are more likely to have to bear the burden of taking care of children and of the elderly during times of conflict especially after the arrest or death of male providers.

And women are more likely to be divorced or abandoned by their husbands or to become “unmarriageable” as a result of the stigma associated with political and sexual violence.

The gendered effects of political violence and repression are too numerous to list here. Yet the suffering of women in times of political conflict often remains invisible and unacknowledged.

In large measure, this is because the public arenas within which politics and conflicts unfold are usually associated...
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with men; while the suffering of women often takes place in isolation and in private.

But it is also because the patriarchy of the state intersects with the patriarchies of the family and the community; and because political violence against women is reinforced by societal violence and discrimination against women. As a result, women’s experiences of political violence are less likely to be recognized.

Since the 1980s, the establishment of truth commissions in countries emerging out of violent conflict and political repression has increased our awareness of the multiple effects of political violence on the lives of individuals, families and communities.

The findings of these truth commissions have highlighted the fact that women’s experiences of political violence tend to be overlooked or minimized unless a systematic effort is made to incorporate a gender perspective and to inquire into women’s experiences.

It is only recently that truth commissions have begun taking gender into consideration by documenting and analyzing the particularities of women’s victimization in times of conflict and repression.

In Morocco, which experienced political repression and state sponsored violence between 1956 and 1999, women suffered in large numbers.

1 - For an excellent comparative analysis of how gender was and was not taken into consideration in the work of various truth commissions (South Africa, Guatemala, Peru, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste), see Ruth Rubio-Marin (editor), 2006.  What Happened to the Women? Gender and Reparations for Human Rights Violations. The International Center for Transitional Justice. New York, NY: The Social Science Research Council.

2 - While we may never know the exact number of women who were affected by political violence in Morocco between 1956 and 1999, it is nevertheless noteworthy that women constitute 15% of the dossiers received by the IER from "direct victims" and 46% of those filed by "indirect victims".
Whether as political activists who were punished by the state for their role in oppositional movements; as relatives (mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters but also aunts, nieces and grand-daughters) of political activists and prisoners and thus considered guilty by association; or as members of communities that were collectively punished by the state; women from all backgrounds and regions of Morocco were victims of state sponsored violence.

During this period known as the years of lead, it was not uncommon for the state to target women relatives of men who were arrested or disappeared for their political affiliations. Women were arbitrarily arrested, illegally detained in secret locations, interrogated, tortured, harassed, humiliated and degraded. They were kept under constant police surveillance and their freedom of movement was severely restricted.

They suffered tremendously when their fathers, husbands, children, siblings or other relatives were arrested, killed or disappeared.

Women, who had often never worked outside the home, found themselves with no source of income and had to suddenly become the sole providers for their family.

They lived in an environment of fear and suspicion and were often ostracized by their own communities. It was in this context that many women, especially those living in urban centers, became activists dedicated to freeing their relatives and to putting an end to the violence of the state.

Many of these women continue to play a leading role in the search for victims or their remains, in seeking truth and justice, and in advocating for the rights of political prisoners. Even so, little is known about these women,
about the extent and nature of the violence inflicted on them and its long-term effects on their lives. While the *Instance Équité et Réconciliation* (IER) and various human and women’s rights organizations have increased our knowledge of women’s experiences of political violence in recent years, the particularity, complexity and scope of women’s experiences of political violence have yet to receive the attention and recognition that they deserve.

Many continue to associate the years of lead with the politics and suffering of men and a silence continues to enclose women’s experiences of political violence.

While the testimonies of women during the public hearings of the IER (transcripts of which we include in this volume) and in various publications broke this silence in very powerful and memorable ways, we feel that more needs to be done in order to properly understand and acknowledge the roles and experiences of women during the years of lead.

It is in the spirit of contributing to a public dialog on Morocco’s recent history and to efforts at seeking truth and reconciliation that we have designed this volume.

Through this publication, which is a collaborative effort of the Consultative Council on Human Rights (CCDH) and the United Nations development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), we have sought to listen to women’s accounts of political violence, to honor and document their memories and experiences and to make these available to the general public in Morocco and beyond.

Our aim is to invite readers to listen and to participate in a collective process of remembering and reflecting, in which women’s perspectives and insights occupy center stage.
METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES
METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVES

This article is based on a study conducted in 2005 by a team of independent Moroccan researchers among women survivors of political violence. The study was initiated and funded by the Instance Equité et Réconciliation (IER) as part of its efforts to better document and understand the gendered nature of political violence in Morocco.

It was made possible by the financial and logistical support of the IER; however, its findings are entirely free and independent and do not reflect the official views of the IER.

While the results of this study were made available to all members of the IER in 2005 and helped inform the final recommendations of the commission, our aim in this article is to share the results of this important study with the general public in order to disseminate its key findings and contribute to increasing awareness of the history of women victims of political violence during the years of lead.

Research for this study was conducted in the summer of 2005, under the supervision of the members of the IER Latefa Jbabdi and Driss Yazami, and under the professional guidance of professor Mokhtar el Harras, an expert in qualitative research methods and a renowned family sociologist.

Over a period of two months (August-September 2005) a team of six women researchers trained in sociological and anthropological...
research were sent to regions of Morocco known to have been affected by political violence between 1956 and 1999\(^4\).

The researchers traveled to the regions of Figuig, Nador, El-Hoceima, Khenifra, Imilchil, and Laayoune where they conducted in depth one-on-one meetings and focus groups with women victims of political violence.

The researchers also met with former women political prisoners and with women who were active in the movement of families of political prisoners. All individual and collective meetings were taped with the permission of participants and then transcribed.

It is this archive of oral testimonies by women victims of political violence that constitutes the basis for this essay. Names of participants in the study have been omitted from this article out of respect for their confidentiality.

The IER study relied on qualitative research methods (life histories and focus groups) and analysis. Our aim was not to gather numbers and statistics but to record detailed and intimate accounts of political violence during the years of lead from the perspective of a diverse group of women.

Because the number of women we interviewed was relatively small, the study does not claim to represent the experiences of all women victims of political violence in Morocco.

We documented the life histories of 42 women and conducted five focus groups in which 5 to 7 women participated. In total then, we spoke to about 80 women.

\(^4\) The six researchers, in alphabetical order, are: Nadia Guessous, Amina El Mekaoui, Laila Moussaid, Khadouj Omari, Hayat Sammari, and Nadia Tikar.
We also limited our travels to six regions: Figuig, Nador, El Hoceima, Khenifra, Imilchil, and Laayoune; although we also met with women in the IER headquarters in Rabat, and in their homes in Casablanca, Mohammedia and Temara.

We recognize that women experienced political violence in many other regions of the country, but we had to limit ourselves to a select number of regions for the purpose of this study.

Although we made an effort to speak to women from diverse backgrounds and with different experiences of political violence, we recognize that there might be experiences that are not reflected in our analysis. This should in no way be interpreted as expressing a hierarchy of suffering or as a failure to recognize their experiences. Women’s experiences of political violence are too numerous, complex and varied to cover in one brief study.

Our hope is that future scholars and researchers will continue researching different aspects of this topic and that more women will write about their experiences in their own words.

What are needed in particular are situated studies that pay attention to the socio-cultural and historical particularities of women’s experiences of political violence in different regions of the country and during different episodes of political violence in the years of lead. The purpose of the study was to develop a detailed and nuanced understanding of the forms of violence experienced by women victim-survivors during the years of lead, including physical, emotional, sexual, verbal, moral, symbolic, economic, social and cultural.

We sought to better understand how women experienced the political violence that they were subjected to and how their lives were affected in its aftermath.
The findings of truth commissions in other countries suggest that women are more likely to talk about the suffering of their husbands, children and parents then to talk about their own.

The Center for Transitional Justice has suggested that this is in part due to the fact that women are generally socialized to prioritize the needs of their husband and children and are often hesitant to talk about their own experiences, especially if these involve sexual violence.  

Therefore, we tried to create a space where women felt secure enough to narrate in detail their experiences of violence without fear of judgment or retaliation.

At the same time, we tried to encourage them to talk to us about their experience as women, and to put themselves at the center of their narrative.

While some of the women victim-survivors were reluctant to do so, most shared their experiences of violence and suffering in great detail, as well as their struggles and hopes.

Focus groups (or collective meetings) had the added benefit of bringing together women victims of political violence in a safe, supportive and confidential space. The focus groups were a space of collective listening and exchange; and became a space for solidarity and validation.

As one participant in a focus group put it:

*Take our presence here today which is in and of itself therapeutic.*

*We talked and heard about each other’s viewpoints; we provided some relief to one another and we listened to each other. How can I say this? It is hard for us to find people who can understand us…*

*Even amongst ourselves, it is rare to find someone who listens to you fully and can feel what you feel.*

[Former political prisoner from Rabat who was arrested in 1985]

Among the key questions that we tried to explore in this study:

1. Why were women targeted by the state during the years of lead? Which categories of women did the state target? And for what purpose?

2. What forms of violence were used against women? And did the state deploy particular forms of violence against women?

3. How did women experience this violence? Was their experience gendered in any way?

4. What were the effects of political violence on the lives of women? Is there a specificity to women’s experiences of the aftermath of political violence?

5. And what can we learn about political violence as well as about Moroccan society in general, when we take the time to listen to what women victims of this violence have to say about their experiences?
While conducting the research for this study, many women victims of political violence told us that words cannot adequately represent the magnitude of their suffering, grief and pain.

One woman we interviewed expressed this best when she told is that:

“At least the men who spent time in prison and were tortured can name the violence that was done to them. We were imprisoned and tortured in ways that have no names.”

Many women also told us that they had been forgotten by the state and by society, and that nobody was listening to their accounts.

As one woman said: “Well what am I going to say? And even if I speak, who is going to listen to me?” In writing about the experiences of women victims of political violence, we felt particularly aware of the inadequacy of categories such as torture, detention, hunger, distress or stigma which are unable to capture that which they describe.

To compensate for this difficulty, we felt that it was important for the voices, words and narratives of women survivors of political violence to take center stage in this volume. If there are any words that are more likely to invoke and express the grief, terror and suffering experienced by women, then it is their own words.

Therefore, we have incorporated women’s voices in this volume in three ways:

1. by quoting them extensively in this article;
2. by including transcripts of their testimonies at the public hearings that were organized by the IER throughout Morocco.

We hope that this will enable readers to get a deeper sense of what is meant by categories such as torture, rape, terror or isolation from the detailed accounts of women who experienced such horrors.

We rely on their words and narratives extensively in order to express our deep respect and appreciation for the women who spoke to us in great detail about their experiences despite the pain that such a telling and remembering produces.

It is also our way of taking their narratives and memories of political violence seriously and of emphasizing that women’s experiences belong not only to the realms of private memory but are integral to our collective memory and history.

We hope that women victim-survivors of political violence will recognize themselves in this volume, that they will feel that we have listened and taken their views and narratives seriously, and that we have not failed to capture and express some of the pain and suffering that they endured.

It is to them and their families that this volume is dedicated.
WHO ARE THE FEMALE VICTIMS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE?
WHO ARE THE FEMALE VICTIMS OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE?

A large number of Moroccan women were victims of state-sponsored political violence during the years of lead. Women’s experiences of political violence were not homogeneous.

Rather, they were shaped by the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of the victims, as well as by their family situation.

It made a difference whether a woman was rural or urban; was married, single or divorced; had living parents and siblings or was an orphan; was literate or illiterate; had experience in the outside world or was mostly confined to the home.

The experience of a poor, nomadic woman living in the mountains of Imilchil is very different from the experience of a university student involved in leftist politics and living in a city.

Even though one cannot help but notice that poor, illiterate rural women who were orphaned or divorced suffered in particularly harsh ways because of their acute isolation and lack of access to a support system in the aftermath of violence, it is in our opinion impossible to quantify or rank suffering.

All women victims of political violence suffered enormously because of the excessive and indiscriminate violence of the state.

But, each woman also suffered in a unique way depending on the particularities of her situation before, during and after the violence.
As the wife of a former political prisoner, who was also an activist, told other members of her focus group: “Our experiences were different; but our suffering was one.” Thus in this study, we avoid classifications such as “direct” and “indirect” victims of violence, which suggest a hierarchy of suffering and come in the way of developing a holistic understanding of Morocco’s history of political violence.

According to our study, four main categories of women were targeted by the state during the years of lead:

1. women relatives of political activists, living in rural and marginalized areas;
2. women from rural and marginalized communities targeted for collective punishment;
3. relatives of political activists living in urban centers;
4. politically active women.

The majority of women victims of political violence were targeted by the state not because of their own political ideas or activities, but simply because they had familial or communal ties to men who were suspected and accused of being politically active or of being a threat to national security.

Amongst this group, the largest numbers of women were relatives (mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters) of male activists from rural or semi-rural areas of the country.

Because our knowledge of women victim-survivors from rural areas is minimal, we devoted the major part of our study to their experiences.

Most belonged to agrarian or nomadic communities, many of the latter living under harsh conditions and moving in search of pastures for their livestock.
In general, the rural women we spoke to were married at a young age and had a large number of children.

One woman we met had nine children, three of whom died. Most of their marriages were arranged by their families with their consent, although in some cases they were married against their will.

One woman we spoke to was married at age twelve to a man who was in his sixties. Divorce seems to have been a fairly common practice and seems to have been initiated by both men and women.

Polygamy also seems to have been fairly common and many of the rural women we spoke to had co-wives.

The large majority of them never attended school and cannot read or write. This contributed to their feelings of disempowerment in responding to political violence.

In fact, the more women were marginalized, the less likely they were to search for their loved ones or advocate for their rights.

The sense of disempowerment and of feeling abandoned by the wider society was palpable amongst the rural women we interviewed for our study. They would often say: “We are only illiterate women. We don’t know anything” or “How can we say? We are only illiterate women. You should ask those who know and have studied.”

In general, it is clear from the stories we gathered that rural women worked very hard both inside and outside their homes. They did all the cooking and cleaning and cared for the children and the elderly.
In addition, they fetched wood, water, worked on the land, took care of animals, wove rugs and made blankets.

Most of the rural women we spoke to lived in extreme poverty and had meager resources.

Yet, many of them felt content with their lives prior to the violence despite their struggles for a livelihood and spoke with great fondness and nostalgia about their years prior to the violence.

The large majority of the women we spoke to from rural areas were not aware of their husband’s political activities and were not involved in political movements or parties themselves.

The few women who were politically active or were aware of a family member’s political activities belonged to families with a history of participation in the national liberation movement.

Many of these women expressed outrage at the fact that men from their family who had sacrificed so much for the independence of the nation, were later treated like traitors.

Besides relatives of political activists, women living in rural areas which were the site of political dissent were also targeted by the state as part of its policy of collective punishment.

They were usually accused of providing food or shelter to politically active men and were treated with cruelty and impunity.

Often, these were poor and marginalized women who were orphaned or divorced and were subjected to torture, to sexual violence and forced labor.
We also documented cases of women who were caught in the crossfire, including a woman who was shot by a stray bullet in the leg while she was visiting some family friends.

She was crippled for life as a result and was abandoned by her family. She was raped while hospitalized and never married.

In addition, many female relatives of political activists living in cities were targeted by the state. This included newly urbanized women, many of whom were illiterate, had minimal experience with the outside world, and little knowledge of the political activities of their sons or daughters. Many of these mothers were to become involved in the movement of families of political prisoners.

The wives and sisters of urban male political activists, usually young and educated, were also targeted by the state.

Unlike wives in rural areas who tended to be unaware of their husband’s political activities, those living in urban centers were more likely to be aware and supportive of their husband’s political activities.

These latter two groups of women were also more likely to get involved in efforts to search for family members and advocate for the right of political prisoners.

Finally, women political activists living in urban centers were also targeted by the state during the years of lead.

Many of them were educated and young at the time of their arrest. They were politically active in various student movements like "23 mars" and "ilal amam", in labor unions or in left political parties like the USFP.
They often belonged to families in which one or more members were politically active in left and labor movements. Others were married to politically active men whom they had met in left circles.

A few described themselves as feminists and as having egalitarian relationships with their husbands or partners. They were critical of the ways in which women were treated as second class citizens and had often been moved by their mothers’ struggles. They were young and idealistic and unlike their counterparts in rural areas, they enjoyed greater mobility and were very active in politics. Most remember their own entry into politics with great excitement and exhilaration. They were involved in labor unions, in the youth wings of left political parties, in student movements and in the nascent women’s movement.

One woman we spoke to did literacy work among women and helped organize women factory workers.

Another became a leader in the male dominated student movement.

They had high hopes and dreams for democracy and a better world and were outraged by the different forms of injustice and oppression that they witnessed around them.

Most of them came from lower and middle class backgrounds and were the first generation of women in their families to be educated.
LIFE PRIOR TO THE EXPERIENCE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE
LIFE PRIOR TO THE EXPERIENCE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE

In order to obtain a richer understanding of the lives of women victims of political violence and situate their experiences within a social and historical context, we asked all the women we met to tell us about their lives prior to the violent events they survived.

From their accounts, it is clear that political violence was lived and experienced as a moment of rupture and uncertainty, a moment which profoundly re-organized and redefined the lives and self-conceptions of women victims.

All the women we spoke to tended to say little about their lives prior to the events.

They had to be encouraged to describe their lives prior to their encounter with the violence of the state.

In all our interviews and discussions, their inclination was to speak first about the violence and its aftermaths and not about what came before.

Their narratives would quickly jump to the time of the incidents thus suggesting that anything that came before was less consequential than the effects of the violence on their lives.

It is as if these women were deprived of owning and remembering a life prior to violence and suffering; and that what defines their sense of self is the violence that they suffered and its aftermath. In most cases, the women describe themselves as leading a normal and uneventful life prior to their exposure to political violence.
Words that were commonly used to describe life prior to the violence include: normal, quiet, happy, ordinary, and peaceful.

Some describe their life prior to the events as happy, plentiful and the “best years of their life.”

Others describe living under difficult conditions because of poverty and gendered divisions of labor in their community.

Many of the politically active women remember the years prior to the violence as filled with the idealism and solidarity that informed their struggle for justice and equality.

Here are examples of how some women, from different backgrounds, described their lives prior to the violence to us.

We quote a large number of them here to give readers a sense of the varied backgrounds of the women that we interviewed for our study:

We lived a life of hardship and of the people. We worked hard outside the home on the land.

I have seven children. I take care of their education, of their needs and their fathers’ needs. I take care of everything that has to do with the home (I cook, I do laundry, I make bread, I fetch water and wood).

My husband does not work. He only takes care of the animals. He takes care of the animals, the harvest and he studies... Women were not allowed to go out except to see their families or their husband’s family. She is forbidden from seeing strangers even if they are guests in her own home.

[Woman from Khenifra who was arrested in 1973]
We were very happy living with our parents. We had our money, our resources, our cattle, and we never lacked anything. We lived very well.

[Woman from Imilchil whose father was arrested in 1973]

We lived well. The children were going to school... My husband used to leave the house in the morning and I did not know what he did. He used to bring me what to eat, and drink and wear and I used to think that I lived in the best of conditions.

[Woman from Nador whose husband was arrested in 1984]

I married when I was young and I joined my husband in his home... I had my first child at twenty-one... I lived with my husband and did not leave the house or go anywhere. I went to the hamam at night to take a bath. I knew nothing about the market or about food shopping... We were middle class people, neither bourgeois nor poor, in the middle, self-made and working for ourselves and our children. My husband’s only concern was to provide for our children, for their food, drink and school.

He was a good man. He was on the right path. And our children thank God came out like we wanted them to.

[Mother from Marrakech, whose children were arrested in the 1970s]

I come from a family of workers in Hay al Mohammedi in Casablanca.

My father was from a modest family and this was one of the reasons that pushed me to question the
world around me, why it is the way that it is and why it is unfair.

I have a brother who is ten years older than me and who was politically active from a young age. When we were young, my sister and I were always surrounded by books and newspapers.

Our favorite pastime was to read… I became interested in politics, in the national question, in the history of Morocco in the 1970s… and I joined the 23 mars movement… I met my husband in the context of the movement.

[Political activist from Casablanca who had to seek political asylum in France and lived in exile for over two decades because she was being persecuted for her politics]

We lived in the countryside with our sheep and camels of which we had many. We used to live well and in a good way. There were lots of wells and plenty of water.

We were well and living well and we did not lack anything until they arrested my husband and they started terrorizing and threatening us.

[Woman from Laayoune whose husband was arrested in 1973]

Hamdoullah we lived well. We did not own anything but we did not need anything… I was born in Tantan. We used to live in peace and no-one bothered us, until the arrests of 1975, then our lives were turned upside down. Before that, life was quiet and everyone was in
a good state of mind. They had their children. Even if people did not own anything they were comfortable.

[Woman from Laayoune whose husband was arrested in 1975]

I was happy. I used to weave. I worked in the fields. I would go to the mountain to fetch wood. We used to sing... My husband and I used to consult with each other. We would help one another. We agreed on everything.

[Woman from Imilchil who was arrested in 1973]
EXPERIENCING POLITICAL VIOLENCE
EXPERIENCING POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Because of their diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, women’s experience of political violence was not homogenous.

Although our research highlights the fact that political violence is gendered and that being a woman made a difference in the experience of violence, it also suggests that not all women experienced political violence in the same ways.

Differences of class, culture, region, generation, family status, educational level, and relationship to politics mediated this experience and made each woman’s experience of political violence unique.

While we cannot speak of a singular female experience of political violence, we did identify common patterns and prevalent experiences and it is to these that we now turn our attention.

• Surprise and Shock

Most women were unprepared for the violence that they lived through.

A large number of women, who were targeted because their husbands or other male relatives were deemed to be a threat to the state, were completely unaware of the political activities of the men of their families prior to their arrest.

This was especially true in rural and marginalized areas like Figuig, Imilchil and Laayoune. An element of utter shock, surprise and disbelief repeatedly accompanies their telling of that first moment of violence.
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This often involved large numbers of armed soldiers or police officers knocking on their door or breaking into their homes in the middle of the night and interrogating and abusing them.

For many women this was their first direct encounter with the institutions of the modern state.

From their narratives, it becomes clear that their lives and worlds were turned upside-down without any warning whatsoever.

There was nothing that prepared them for what was to come.

The fear and terror elicited by that first encounter with the violence of the state was still palpable when we interviewed them for our study in 2005.

In part, the feelings of shock and utter disbelief expressed by these women reflect the arbitrary and cruel violence that they were subject to; and the fact that very few people can imagine this happening to them.

But the fact that rural wives in particular were so unprepared for this eventuality and so unaware of their husband’s political activities is also symptomatic of gendered divisions of labor and demarcations of space. It is because they were women that they had less access to the public sphere and to the world of politics which was almost exclusively a male domain.

And it is because the society they lived in believed that women had no business knowing about politics or about men’s activities in the public arena that they were so caught by surprise.
The lack of knowledge about their husband’s activities only heightened their sense of injustice. For not only did these women do nothing “wrong” or “unlawful”, the men in their lives did not even deem it necessary to inform them of their activities, let alone consult with them or involve them in decisions and choices that were to have extraordinary effects on their lives and their families’ lives.

Thee men might very well have withheld such information out of a desire to protect their wives and their children, but this choice had the unfortunate and unintended effect of heightening their wives’ sense of injustice and betrayal. It also gave the women no choice in the matter. Some of them may have taken precautions to prepare for the likelihood of state retaliation.

Others might have decided to leave their husbands had they known that they were putting their lives at risk. But regardless, women were punished and traumatized by actions and events that they were unaware of and targeted simply because of their family ties to men deemed to be enemies of the state. As these three women from different regions of Morocco told us:

_We are women with no relation to what men do; they arrested the men and left the women behind. I ask for your help._

[Woman from Imilchil whose husband was arrested in 1973]

This is injustice. We had nothing to do with political events. We were victims. We are women in the home, what did we do? If our husbands did something, then they can follow them and punish them. But women? What did they do? We only know about matters of the home. We were victims and suffered.

[Woman from Khenifra who was detained in 1973]
He used to go out of the house and I did not know what he did. He brought me food and water and clothes and I used to think that we lived in the best of conditions... We are not aware. We married men in this manner and they did with us what they wished... Had I known that this man was going to do what he did, I would have never married him and I would not have wasted my life with him.

[Woman from Nador whose husband was arrested in 1984]

One rural woman we spoke to had in fact been abandoned by her husband, who had taken on a second wife against her will prior to his arrest.

By the time of her arrest, she barely had any ties to him and did not feel any loyalty towards him because he had ceased to be a good husband and father in her eyes. Yet, she too was arrested, interrogated, tortured, and robbed of her possessions.

The fact that her husband had abandoned her for a second wife made no difference to state authorities who considered her a suspect by association.

One could say that in her case she was victimized on multiple levels:

- first she was victimized by her husband who did not consult her about choices he made;
- she was further victimized when her husband took on a second wife against her will and abandoned her and their children;
- state authorities then targeted her despite the fact that she was no longer tied to her husband; and she was discriminated against by her neighbors and members of her community.
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who avoided contact with her and withheld their help and support because she and her husband had been arrested.

- A final discrimination then took place after her husband was released from prison. She was divorced from her husband and therefore disqualified from receiving any reparations from the former arbitration board, unlike the second wife who received indemnities from the state:

  I was really distraught. I felt a void and a huge sense of injustice.

  What affected me a lot was when I went to pick up my divorce papers and I am in this advanced age and with white hair on my head.

  I suffered a lot and struggled since independence because of my husband... Women suffered a lot... They worked hard.

  They worked day and night for their families. They would go to the mountain to fetch wood and plants to feed their children. They would spend the night in the mountain and come back in the early morning. Men don’t know.

  [Imilchil woman whose husband was arrested in 1973]

Urban women, who were educated and politically active, never imagined that their activities could lead to such violence and repercussions not just for themselves but often for their entire families.

They too were unprepared for the harsh persecution that was to come, which they saw as unwarranted state retaliation.

They felt extremely violated and betrayed as a result for the unfairness of the reaction, especially since many of them were involved in student movements.
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One woman we spoke to who became a member of the USFP at a young age (15 or 16) told us the following:

I had selected what I thought was the good and righteous road, meaning the road of activism.

I joined the "Union socialiste des forces populaires" (USFP) at a young age around fifteen or sixteen. In the beginning, I used to go in secret. After that I started telling [my family] that I was going.

I figured that I was not doing anything wrong... When what happened happened I was not doing anything wrong. I used to go to seminars.

It is as if I was punished and beaten up for that.

I mean, as my sister here said, I had certain ambitions in my life. I had mapped out a certain direction for myself... I would have this, I would do these kinds of studies, I would go far, I would do this, and I would do that.

Then all of a sudden, overnight, and without any warning, all my dreams evaporated and the direction of my life took on a completely different path!

[Woman who was arrested in 1976]

Another woman who was arrested in Safi in 1979 for her involvement with the USFP and who had become an activist at a very young age said to us that for many women like her who had come from political families, activism was not always informed by a clear ideological choice or a conscious decision.

It was, she argued, often “instinctive”, “unconscious” and circumstantial. We interpret this as meaning that many of
the young women who got involved in activism at a young age were idealists and not cognizant of the violence of the Moroccan political context.

Another woman we spoke to became involved in Marxist-Leninist groups because her brother’s friend was detained and was beaten up in front of her.

The fact that she was exposed to the violence of the state being directed at her brother’s friend became a turning point for her, triggering her own activism.

From our research, we conclude that no level of consciousness would have offered adequate protection to these predominantly young women against the incredible violence of the state.

- Detention, Violence, and Torture

As far as violence and torture are concerned, women victims of political violence experienced many of the same things that men experienced. The state exercised no restraint in its cruel treatment of women.

As Fatna el Bouih has argued, in the context of torture, men and women are equal. Like their male counterparts, they were illegally detained in inhumane conditions; interrogations of women often involved cruelty and torture; they were deprived of their most basic rights while in detention; and were kept under surveillance and repeatedly harassed by state authorities after their release.

This was as true for politically active women as it was for female relatives of political activists and members of their community.

The prison conditions in which women were detained can only be described as inhumane. Most of the time, women did not even know where they were being detained because they had been blindfolded throughout their journey after arrest.

They were systematically denied food and water and suffered from malnutrition. Often they were given no more than a piece of bread and water once a day. Their prison cells were overcrowded, dark, filthy, and infested.

Women often slept directly on the floor with no mattresses or blankets to protect them from the cold. Toilets were kept filthy and were un-hygienic and women had no privacy.

They had no access to medical care and were only transported to the hospital if prison authorities feared that their lives were at risk. They were often left blindfolded and rarely saw the sun. Most of the time, they were not allowed to talk to each other.

In some instances, prisoners were made to perform forced labor. Women, like their male counterparts were tortured. Being female did not exempt them from torture nor did it seem to elicit any sympathy or lenience from prison guards. Women were beaten all over their bodies, sometimes with sticks and belts; they were kicked, punched, electrocuted, and suffocated; they were submerged in water, made to drink dirty or salty water, and hung from their legs; they were emotionally tortured, threatened with death, humiliated, verbally abused and emotionally tormented.

In some instances, parents were tortured in front of their children and women were forced to watch their family members and other women and men being tortured.
Women who were pregnant were treated no differently than women who were not. They too suffered from hunger and thirst while in detention and were denied medical care. They were tortured and raped by guards despite their pregnancy.

Some women had miscarriages as a result of the violence. Being pregnant did not seem to elicit any restraint or sympathies from the prison guards. The same was true of women who were accompanied by infants and were breastfeeding.

Many complained of running out of milk and described the agony of seeing their babies cry as they tried to suckle but found no milk. One woman said that her mother’s milk had turned to blood:

*My mother and two of my sisters were in the prison of Bouzmou. In that prison, my mother’s milk turned to blood; they were left naked, without food, without anything, just cold and snow to the point where my mother breastfed my sister blood.*

*They used to hang me from my feet and threaten my mother to leave me that way unless she told them where my father was.*

[Imilchil woman whose entire family was detained in 1973]

- **Gendered and Sexualized Violence**

In addition, a gendered system of humiliation was put in place for women. Forced nudity was regularly used as a deliberate technique of shaming and women were often left naked despite the presence of male guards and prisoners.
They were accompanied to go to the bathroom and had no privacy.

During menstruation, they were often left to bleed, would soil themselves and were provided with no sanitary napkins.

Many had no choice but to tear pieces of cloth from their dirty clothes and use them as pads during menstruation. Many suffered from heightened menstrual cramps due to poor conditions.

One woman said that torturers would urinate on them to humiliate them. Women were also called whores, bastards (wlad lahram), loose and immoral. They were left naked outside in the cold in the winter months or under the hot sun in the summer without water.

And they were also sometimes prevented from wearing clothes while in prison:

*During the time when I was in prison, they used to beat me and they would take off my clothes. We were some times, very rarely, allowed to wear some light clothes. But most times, they prevented us from wearing any clothes and they left us naked.*

[Imilchil woman whose father was detained in 1973]

One woman from Figuig was forcibly undressed in front of her brother and left naked with him in a room. He too was forcibly undressed. She was extremely traumatized experience.

She came from a pious and socially conservative family and was embarrassed to be naked in the same room as her unclothed brother:
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They took my brother and I upstairs, took off our clothes and threw us naked in a room together.

My brother tried to make all sorts of arguments, saying that this was against our religion, telling them to show mercy and that we had not seen him [her husband].

That if we had seen him we would have told them and helped them... Finally they let him out of the room and later when they finally made up their minds they gave me my clothes back...All this, I don’t like to talk about it and don’t like to tell anyone about it...

[Woman from Figuig who was detained in 1973]

Other forms of sexualized violence included body searches of women for the purpose of “identification” and other forms of sexual harassment.

One woman we spoke to from Figuig explained that the sexual harassment practiced by officers contributed to curtailing women’s access to public space and served to further isolate women victims of political violence from members of their community.

She told us about one of her female cousins who had come to see her and was harassed by officers:

I went from home to school and school to home. Nobody came to see me... At one point two of my female cousins came to see me when I was sick and tired and would spend the night with me in the house.

But one time, my poor cousin left the house and found the soldiers waiting for her in the alley. They caught her
and started searching her body and touching her breasts to see if she was a man or a woman.

From that moment on, she never came back to see me out of fear of being harassed.

[Woman from Figuig whose house was put under surveillance for months in 1973]

Sexualized forms of abuse and torture were also used in prison. A woman from Marrakech who was arrested in 1973 described her face being shoved between the legs of a policeman:

He shoved my face between his legs and kept pushing me down. He said ‘give me that bitch’, pushed me down and shoved my face between his legs. He wanted to suffocate me.

[Woman from Marrakech who was arrested in the events of 1973]

She also described being tortured with electricity on her upper thighs and possibly her intimate parts:

They took off my pants and they tortured me with electricity on my thighs... It felt like needles being inserted in my flesh; I still have the scars; I was screaming to God... They forced me to remove my clothes and left me like I was when my mother gave birth to me... They tortured me with types of electricity you can’t imagine. I would be embarrassed to tell you the kinds of things that were done to me with electricity... For there is men’s torture on the one hand and there is women’s torture on the other.
**Rape and Sexual Assault**

While we did not find evidence to suggest that rape and sexual assault were officially sanctioned practices, incidences of rape and sexual assault did occur frequently in prisons, and women prisoners lived in fear of sexual violence. One woman in Imilchil who was not sexually assaulted herself said to us:

> I remember one night policemen brought in a woman who was with us in Tadighoust and who was pretty.  
>  
> I don’t know what they did with her. As far as I am concerned, nothing of the sort happened to me. We were women of an advanced age. But there were two young women with us.  
>  
> They would take them into a room next door, and we did not know what they used to do with them.

[Imilchil woman who was arrested in 1973]

Underlying this woman’s narrative is an anxiety about sexual violence.

Whether the women she mentioned were in fact sexually assaulted or not remains unclear. However, the fact that is significant here is that fear of sexual assault was a central part of her prison experience. Another woman whose sister was kidnapped and disappeared in Imilchil told us that:

*That electricity that they did to me left everything in blood. They left me bleeding and leaking…*

[Woman from Marrakech who was arrested in 1973]
My sister was kind and beautiful so they took her because they desired her beauty...

They took her because she was [my father’s] daughter and because she was beautiful.

[Imilchil woman who was arrested in 1973]

Here again we find a theme of sexual violence looming large: the idea that men took advantage of women for their own sexual pleasures. But these were not just fears and anxieties.

Women were indeed sexually assaulted and this was confirmed to us by many women we interviewed. One woman told us that “women in Imilchil and Agdz had been raped and taken advantage of.” Another woman from Laayoune told us the following:

They would force women to take off their clothes. What can I tell you? I don’t like dirt and don’t like to talk about dirt... There were rapes. Everything you can imagine took place.

They used to take off women’s clothes. They would suck on women’s breasts; forgive me for talking about this (hachak).
Anyway, now we have grown up... But there were those things. They would grab women from behind. Everything happened. May God protect us, may God protect us.

God knows that there is no type of torture that we were not subject to. They would remove our clothes...

[Woman from Laayoune whose husband was arrested in 1975]
Another woman we spoke to from Imilchil told us that she had been raped by a guard while in prison and that other women knew what had happened to her and to others like her:

*He came to me and called me a whore. He pushed me against the wall and assaulted me vaginally. He kissed me and touched me. There was only one of them. I would scream whenever I heard another man come in. The women put their headscarves on their eyes so they would not see what he did to each one of us.*

[Women from Imilchil who was arrested in 1973]

She was later divorced by her husband who found out that she had been raped.

Another woman we spoke to who was raped by a soldier in her tent in Khenifra after her husband was taken away never told him of the rape because she was afraid that he would divorce her. She was pregnant at the time but this did not prevent the soldier from assaulting her repeatedly for one whole night:

*When the soldiers were watching our tent, I was raped one night. I don’t know if he was the leader of his team or a simple soldier.*

*I don’t know his name or his status. He took advantage of the absence of my husband and of his family to commit his horrible act. He was not concerned with my struggles or the fact that I was pregnant.*
His only goal was to satisfy his monstrous cravings at the expense of a weak woman whose wings were broken... My mother was the only person to whom I told what had happened that night and she told me not to tell anyone... I was not the only one to whom this happened... I was not able to tell my husband about the rape that I had gone through at the hands of a soldier who lived in our village out of fear that he would divorce me and that my children and I would end up destitute.

[Woman from Khenifra whose husband was arrested in 1973]

Another woman we spoke to was repeatedly raped by three to four soldiers a day for two weeks while in detention in Khenifra. They would beat her up and then would take turns raping her.

It was only after she complained to their commanding officer that they stopped. This she said to us was the hardest thing that happened to her while she was in jail:

The hardest part that I will never be able to forget is what happened to me at the hands of soldiers while I was detained the first time.

I was violently raped for two whole weeks. Every day, three of four soldiers would come to me and would force me to have sex with them.

[Women from Khenifra who was arrested in 1973]

The soldiers in question do not appear to have been penalized or transferred to another location despite her complaint.
This suggests that commanding officers were not only aware of sexual assault taking place; they also enabled it by not punishing the offenders.

Women were also raped in the hospital while receiving medical care. One woman told us that she was raped by a male nurse who took advantage of her weak health and social vulnerability:

What I will never forget is the day I was raped. I did not tell anyone in the hospital. I was young and did not find anyone to complain to.

I was raped by a nurse. I see men like animals even since. I don’t like men. I remember that day as if he tried to kill me.

I have nightmares where I see men who are trying to capture me.

I was afraid that if I told someone, they would kill me. I did not know anything then. I was not aware. Now I know about women’s rights and understand more. I don’t remember his name or his facial features.

[Woman from Khenifra who was a victim of political violence in 1973]

The widespread incidence of rape and sexual assault combined with the absence of any disciplinary actions against perpetrators appears to have created a culture of impunity. It also terrorized women who lived with the constant fear of sexual assault.

Women knew that other female prisoners were being raped and those who were assaulted were too afraid and disempowered to complain.
Often, they lived alone with the knowledge of what had happened to them and felt great shame and suffering.

The fact that they could not tell anyone only added to their victimization since they alone carried the burden and secret of what had happened to them.

That rape appears to have taken place on an individual level and not as a matter of state policy does not mean that the responsibility for such acts lies solely with the individual officials.

The fact that women’s bodies were systematically abused for the purpose of intimidation, torture, and humiliation, and the fact that a broad range of sexualized forms of violence were routinely used to torture and intimidate women, made it possible for sexual violence to take place.

Thus the responsibility for such violence lies with the state whose disrespect for women’s bodies was the condition of possibility for the instances of rape that did take place.

There is no evidence that the researchers came across to suggest that the state did anything to protect women against sexual violence.

• **The Use of Children and Maternal Love**

In addition to gendered forms of torture and violence, women suffered because of forced separation from their children.

This included women who were detained as well as women who were left behind and whose children were detained.

Many women we talked to said that the hardest thing for them was to be forcibly separated from their children.
One woman who was arrested in 1985 describes being separated from her six month old baby for two weeks as the worst thing that happened to her:

I consider that the worst violation that was done to me was when they separated me from my six month old baby for two whole weeks.

Even though I lost my husband, no violation was worse than those fourteen days of separation... That day, I felt that my life came to an end. I kept praying to God that nothing happen to my child. I died.

[Woman from Rabat who was arrested in 1985 and whose husband was killed under torture]

Women were also tortured in front of their children or made to watch while their children were being tortured. This was amazingly painful for both the women and their children.

At four o’clock in the afternoon, they came and got me, my husband’s son from another marriage (rbib) and my infant whom I was still breastfeeding.

He was only wearing a light shirt that did not protect him from the cold. I myself was barefoot when I was arrested and only wore a light caftan.

My son started crying and screaming out of hunger but the milk in my breasts froze because of the fear. They took us to the gendarmerie and we stayed there standing and my son was crying the whole time... They took me outside and ordered me to put my son down on the ground.

I heard one of them say loudly “that boy we want him to die.” They started interrogating me... One of
them hit me, I fell on the ground and he kicked me. My son started screaming and crying... Eventually they called my father and gave him my son. I could not part with him and developed a fever.

I did not eat for ten whole days. All I could think of was the image of my son screaming and crying.

[Woman from Khenifra who was arrested in 1973]

Another woman from Imilchil described the following frightening scene involving her and her children:

They took my children on a plane and threatened to throw them off the plane if they did not inform them of their father’s location. They would beat me up in front of them, to the point where my daughter is still sick today. They would inform me that my daughter was never going to marry and that they were going to inflict the worst kind of torture on her. They would tell me you are [name of her tribe]; your daughter will never get married.

[Woman from Imilchil whose husband was arrested in 1973]

Another woman from Khenifra told us about the incredible violence that was inflicted on her when she was a twelve year old child:

He would hit me with a stick that was covered with nails and when he hit me blood would be flying from all over my body. I suffered a lot and cried and screamed.

He used to say to me “tell me about the whereabouts of so and so and so and so and so and I will let you free.”
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And when I would tell him that I did not know anything about them, he would take off my belt and tell me that he was going to throw me out the plane. I would tell him “throw me, go ahead. I don’t care anymore.”

[Woman from Khenifra whose father was detained in 1973]

Deep anxiety and agony about the fate and suffering of children is a theme that repeats itself throughout the narratives.

This is without a doubt one of the gendered effects of political violence. This is not to say that men did not suffer from being separated from their children or from seeing their children suffer. They did.

But because women have tended historically to be children’s primary caregivers and because young children are more likely to be with their mothers than with their fathers, it is the mothers who saw firsthand their children’s suffering.

Women with young infants especially felt the separation from their children in particularly visceral ways and felt responsible for their mistreatment. Here is one woman’s account:

I will never forget the moment when they wanted to arrest me and I was carrying my two year old daughter on my back.

The gendarme asked me to put her down. She was crying and I was crying. I swear to God that it was the hardest experience for me.
He asked me: “Do you still breastfeed her?” I said “no.” So he asked me to leave her behind. My heart was quivering (she starts crying). I was on the edge of madness because she was crying “mamma, mamma, mamma”.

They started beating me. My children stayed alone in the home. Nobody was with them and they were very small. Nobody asked about them.

I got ill because of the torture and nobody took care of me.

[Woman from Imilchil who was arrested in 1973]

Countless mothers whose sons or daughters were detained, kidnapped or disappeared suffered because of the forced separation from their children. They felt completely disempowered, helpless and at a loss. They lived in fear of what would happen to their loved ones and feared for their other children.

They neglected their health and were often consumed by their grief and by efforts to search for their missing child/children.

They also suffered from the guilt of not having been able to protect their children (survivor’s guilt) and from having witnessed the violence that was inflicted on them (bystander’s guilt) and which they could not stop.

Children and siblings were also victims and sufferers. In addition to their own pain and fear, they had to live with seeing their parents’ pain and suffering at having lost a son or a daughter. Children and siblings were often deprived of their youth and childhood and became caretakers for their parents and younger siblings.
One woman whose brother was detained in Marrakech in 1976 and who was later detained herself told us the following about the added sense of responsibility that she felt as a young woman:

*My family had militant precedents. One of my brothers had been tried in the Marrakech trials and as a result he was the favorite of the family (le chouchou de la famille).*

*He was tried in absentia and our family atmosphere became tense. I felt that I was the one thing that my parents could still achieve in their life and feel proud of, and that I had to stay on the right path.*

*This meant that I developed no affective relationships, deprived myself of many things, wouldn’t go out, and wouldn’t lie. I was the youngest and had very strong attachments to my mother.*

*I would see her cry a lot... She would think of her son all the time, her son who had done this and had done that. I used to tell myself that I would do nothing that would cause them any more grief.*

[Woman whose brother was arrested in Marrakech in 1976 and who was later arrested and detained]

**Surveillance and Harassment**

Female family members also suffered when they were put under surveillance. As one woman put it, “while the men were in prison, the women were in prison too but in their own homes.”
Many women told us that their houses no longer felt like a home because of the constant presence of the police; they compared their houses under surveillance to the street, an office, a prison or a police station. They were interrogated and harassed on a daily basis.

All their activities were watched and scrutinized. Every person who came to see them was interrogated and they were interrogated about every person who came to see them. As a result, very few people continued to visit them out of fear of being interrogated or arrested and this compounded their isolation and social marginalization.

They had no privacy. Male state officials would walk in on them at all times of the day or night.

They would come during meals and disturb them. A woman from Figuig told us that state officials would sometimes come to her house six or seven times a day:

*For sixty-two days in a row, they would sometimes come five, six or seven times a day. There were those who lived in our house and those who watched our house.*

*You could be asleep and they would come and grab the blanket off you without your feeling their presence in the room, can you imagine?*

[Woman from Figuig whose husband was arrested in 1973]

Another woman from Figuig whose son was wanted told us that her home was under surveillance for two years and that she had to answer questions about her son every day despite repeatedly telling the officials that she knew nothing about
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her son’s political activities or whereabouts. She would tell them, “If you know where he is. Please tell me. I have not seen him in months.”

In addition to being put under constant surveillance and interrogated, family members were often harassed through other means by state officials. A common form of harassment involved withholding and/or confiscating papers and documents like identity cards, passports, birth certificates, and carnets de famille.

This had serious repercussions on women and their families, especially since many administrative procedures in Morocco require copies of documents like birth certificates.

This was a deliberate mechanism that was used by state officials to harass and punish family members of political prisoners and to prevent them from exercising their rights as citizens.

For instance, women whose husbands or fathers were missing or in prison would be asked by state officials to provide proof of their husband’s or father’s permission in order to obtain certain documents.

The state officials knew perfectly well that the women were not in a position to obtain such proof since their husbands and/or fathers were in prison or disappeared. Officials used procedures to justify what were in effect discriminatory practices intended to harass and humiliate family members of political prisoners and keep them in a subordinate position. These practices had particularly punitive effects on women.

They kept them marginalized, limited their mobility, made it challenging for them to seek employment or register their
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Children in school. They also had serious implications for children.

Some children who were born after their fathers were detained were never registered in their carnets de famille and were therefore never legally recognized.

These administrative regimes of harassment are a good example of the way in which political violence takes place within and strengthens existing gendered and patriarchal systems of oppression.

They both depend on and perpetuate the idea that women are second class citizens who must depend on the protection and permission of fathers, husbands or other male relatives in order to exercise their rights.

Women also suffered a lot during their visits to prison to see their relatives. They would stay up all night cooking and preparing food for their loved ones.

They would leave their house early in the morning and would travel long distances on foot or by bus and cab with no protection from the rain or the sun.

Often, they would get there after a long and arduous journey only to be told that visiting hours were over or that they should come back the following day or the following week.

Family members were subject to the arbitrary harassment of prison guards and administrators who treated them in demeaning, disrespectful and often violent and abusive ways.
WOMEN’S ACTIVISM AND THEIR POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS
WOMEN’S ACTIVISM AND THEIR POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

Women played a key role in sustaining their families and loved ones in prison.

When their husbands, children, fathers or brothers were arrested or disappeared, it was often the women in the family, the wives, the mothers, the daughters and the sisters who kept the family together.

They provided invaluable emotional support to their families and to their loved ones while they themselves suffered tremendous pain and lived in precarious circumstances.

By providing emotional support, they saved entire families and prevented them from loosing hope. In other words, they saved lives and gave life.

Many contemplated suicide and wished they had been dead, but they persevered and ensured the survival of their families.

Despite the great cost to their health and well being, they provided for their families who often found themselves with no source of income.

Those who worked outside of the home continued to work and to provide for their family despite their lives being turned upside down and despite the social marginalization and retaliation that resulted from political violence.

Those whose work prior to the events consisted of taking care of their home and of their children and who had never had an income of their own were compelled to look for work.
In some regions, the women had never left their homes on their own. They had never traveled on their own. They had never been to the market, had never met a government official or a policeman in their life.

Now, they were thrown into public space, an alien world that to them was a man’s world. And, they had to learn very quickly how to negotiate with an environment that was unfamiliar and sometimes hostile to women. In some cases, women had no choice but to rely and depend on the benevolence and charity of extended family. Many family members generously provided aid and assistance when they themselves were struggling to support their own families.

Some family members provided support and shelter despite great risk to themselves. Others were too afraid of being arrested, disappeared or tortured and withheld support out of fear and terror.

Some neighbors gave a hand whenever possible like taking care of the newborn child of a woman who was arrested six weeks after giving birth or feeding children left behind because both parents had been arrested.

In most cases, help was provided in secrecy and fear. But it is mostly the women, the mothers and the wives, and also the daughters and the sisters who became by default their family’s primary breadwinners.

They sold bread and vegetables in the market, waited tables in cafes and restaurants, cleaned people’s houses, and in some instances begged in the streets to provide food for their hungry families.

In some cases, minor children were compelled to work and exposed to risks in unsafe workplaces in order to make ends meet.
Some women, especially in the more remote and marginalized regions of the country like Imilchil, were too afraid, poor, and disempowered to search for family members who had been arrested or disappeared.

They were struggling to survive and to keep their families together.

They lived in isolation, with little information about their disappeared or arrested loved ones and no access to advocacy groups and organizations that could support them.

Most did not have the means to travel to the town or city to inquire about or search for their loved ones. To put it in their own words, they said:

*We had no money. We were afraid of the state (al makhzen). We were illiterate. If we wanted to look for our husbands or our sons or a relative, they would arrest us.*

[Imilchil woman whose father was arrested in 1973]

*We did not know where to look for him. All of us were women, I, my mother and my sisters. We didn’t know anything and our children were young... We cried and lost all desire for life. We used to think about them all the time. We did not know if they were dead or alive... We waited until God brought them back to us.*

[Woman from Laayoune whose brother and husband were arrested in 1976]

*We were afraid. My husband was arrested. I could do nothing to save him. He sent us a letter saying he was in prison, so we said al hamdoulillah.*

[Imilchil woman whose husband was arrested in 1973]
No we did not search for him until we read the news in the newspaper that he was dead... There was no-one we could ask... We had no choice.

[Imilchil woman whose husband was arrested in 1973]

While these women, due to their marginal location and extreme fear of the state, which they viewed as ruthless and cruel, were not able to play a direct role in the search for truth and justice, it would be a mistake to see them as passive bystanders.

On the contrary, by surviving, by providing for and preserving their families, they have played an extremely important role in our history.

They showed resilience and strength in the face of tremendous hardship. Through their silent and invisible struggles, they testify and remind us of just how much fear and terror the state generated among its citizens, especially amongst those that were marginalized and disempowered to begin with.

Women relatives who were less marginalized, and especially mothers, wives and sisters living in urban areas, played a unique role in seeking truth and justice by searching for victims, going to prisons, writing petitions, staging demonstrations, and meeting with state officials often at a great cost to their health and well being.

Many of these women became politicized not by ideological choice but by necessity when their husband, sibling or child was arrested or disappeared.

From housewives who had little experience with the outside world, they were transformed into outspoken and dedicated activists.
They wrote letters and petitions, organized sit-ins and demonstrations, met with state officials, contacted international human rights organizations, and communicated with the press.

They publicized the cases of their loved ones and the inhumane conditions of detention centers and prisons. Mothers especially played a unique role in this struggle. In the process, they developed a new sense of freedom and a new sense of identity as women who were fighting back.

In the words of two women who became involved in the movement of families of political prisoners and the disappeared after their family members were detained:

*If I were to start my life all over again, I would chose nothing but to live the life that I lived with its struggles and pains and everything. Even though it was an ugly life, we were constituted anew, we became different people…*

[Women whose husband was arrested in 1976]

*As that woman said, we became daring and we became aware.*

*We no longer were afraid of anything or anyone. Nobody could rule us anymore, we ruled ourselves by ourselves… Before this, we were weak and dominated.*

[Women whose sons were arrested]

Women involved in the movement of families of political prisoners also provided tremendous support to each other and made life more bearable for others like them.

This was an especially valuable source of emotional and logistical support, since many women found themselves isolated from their families and communities as a result of political violence.
The movement of families of political prisoners was unique in that it brought together women from different social classes, educational levels, regions and cultural backgrounds, many of whom had had no prior political involvement.

In addition, women active in the movement provided support and solidarity to each other and became like family members. If a family was too poor to provide food and supplies to relatives in prison, then other families with the means took on the responsibility of providing essentials.

During prison visits, those who had cars offered rides to those without. Or else they collected donations and contributions to help pay for the transportation of families who could not afford to go see their loved ones in prison. Families opened their homes to each other and provided shelter to those traveling from afar to visit their loved ones in prison.

They looked out for women who had no experience in the outside world and sometimes did not even speak Arabic. They also provided protection to each other.

One mother we interviewed told us that if one member of the movement got arrested during a demonstration, then others would volunteer to be arrested with her.

This, she told us, was a way of protecting each other from police violence since women were more vulnerable to abuse if arrested alone.

Men were also kept in the background of the movement of families; it was believed that women, and especially older women, were less likely to be kept in detention for long.

This was a truly unique and dynamic movement, in which educated and illiterate women, young and old, worked side by side for justice and human rights.
Women we spoke to told us that the stories and struggles of women involved in the movement of families of political prisoners merged, intertwined and became almost one: the suffering of one mother/wife/daughter/sister felt like the suffering of all; a protest for one prisoner was a protest for all.

Women were driven by a collective sense of pain, of injustice, and of responsibility. Many spoke to us with great fondness about the solidarity that they experienced and shared during those years of struggle.
Women and Political Violence during the Years of Lead in Morocco
LIFE AFTER POLITICAL VIOLENCE
LIFE AFTER POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The effects of political violence on women’s lives are far too numerous to list here. In addition to well known effects of political violence such as physical and psychological trauma, women also suffered in unique ways as women.

Here is how one woman summarized the multiple effects of political violence on her life:

*When you lose your husband, what life are you going to live? I lost my married life. My husband died when he was executed and I was twenty two years old.*

*My children lost their father. Their life went to waste. Only my father and brother helped me with their upbringing.*

*We lived in shock. My health is very bad because of all the torture and suffering. I had to undergo a surgical operation.*

*I left my children in their suffering. I tried to provide them with a place to live and to fill the void left by their father.*

*I was rejected by society. Everyone was afraid of me and seldom did family members come to see me. They were too afraid of being arrested.*

[Women from Khenifra whose husband was executed and who was arrested in 1973]

What the statement of this woman makes clear is that women were punished simultaneously by the state and by society and that it is this punishment by two powerful institutions that is one of the central characteristics of women’s experience of political violence.
In order to highlight the gendered effects of political violence on women’s lives, we discuss in this section the themes which predominate in women’s descriptions of the effects of political violence on their lives. While many of the effects we describe below are shared by men as well as women victim-survivors, women’s experiences have a particularity that is shaped and compounded by a gendered social system which marginalizes women.

• Lives Turned Upside Down

Without exception, the women that we spoke to said that their lives never went back to the way they were before the violence.

All of them had their lives, hopes and aspirations shattered and turned upside down.

The experience of political violence constituted a rupture; an irreparable break with what came before. They felt extremely betrayed and disillusioned, especially since many of them felt that they had done nothing wrong and that they had been unjustly punished.

In fact some of the women we spoke to told us that to this day, they still do not know or understand why they were targeted by the state.

In other words, not only were their lives turned upside down, they had no way of making sense of what had happened to them.

• Marginalization and Social Stigmatization

Those who were detained and tortured went back to a world that was hostile and unwelcoming to women, who were perceived as having transgressed the limits of socially “acceptable” gender roles.
In many instances, they encountered suspicion and hostility in their communities. They were subject to rumors, stares and hostile comments.

People would sometimes point fingers and spit at them, and insult them and their children in the streets, calling them traitors, criminals, or bastards.

Community members would frequently not reciprocate when greeted and would avoid social interactions with them altogether. In some cases, family members too avoided contact with them. Vendors would sometimes refuse to sell goods to them. They were marginalized and felt like strangers in their own communities.

They felt stigmatized and had to prove and perform their “morality” and “respectability.” One woman from Imilchil told us that after coming out of prison, she never wore jewelry or any other form of adornment. It is customary for women in her community to wear body adornments.

But she didn’t because she was seen as a fallen woman due to the time spent in prison and the fact there were rumors about what had happened to women in jail:

**During special occasions and festivals, women would wear white and colorful clothes, and they would wear “mouzoun” (a local from of adornment).**

*As for me, I used to wear black only, because people would never stop talking about me if ever I wore white.*

*They would accuse me of prostitution or immorality (fassad) and they would dishonor me. For that reason, I was always quiet. I would never enter*
into discussions with anyone in order to protect my children and my mother in law... I would never put khol in my eyes and would never wear “mouzoun”.

[A woman from Imilchil who was arrested in 1973]

We see from this example that the moral economy of rumors functions to keep women silent about sexual and political violence.

It also functions to keep them isolated and disempowered. Women had to work harder to prove their respectability and morality.

The fact that they were tainted and ostracized meant that they were victimized twice: once by the state and then again by society which was simultaneously threatened by them and afraid of what they represented.

- Economic Hardship and Poverty

Women whose husbands or fathers were arrested or disappeared suffered great economic hardships. A large number of the women we spoke to have been living in poverty since the time of the violence.

This suggests that poor and marginalized women were specifically targeted and acutely affected by political violence. In addition, the fact that so many of them are destitute today suggests very clearly that political violence had devastating economic effects on women in particular. Not only did political violence prevent poorer women from escaping poverty; it compounded that poverty and ensured that they would remain poor.

In some cases, women were made poorer as a direct result of political violence. Economic hardship, our study suggests, was both a mechanism and an effect of political violence.
Children too were not spared the devastating economic effects of political violence. A large number of them dropped out or were thrown out of school at a very young age. Some never went to school.

One woman from Nador told us that she had no choice but to send her children to work on the streets at a young age:

> When my husband was arrested, my daughter was about eight years old, my son was about five or six, I don’t remember, and my youngest daughter was about one…

> We lived in miserable conditions and I did what I could to survive, but my children’s lives went to waste. They left school and struggled in the markets selling water and plastic bags.

[Woman from Nador whose husband was arrested in 1984]

Another woman told us that some of her young children had to work while in school and that one of her daughters worked with her cleaning people’s homes to make ends meet:

> My poor daughter worked in people’s homes. She too worked in homes like me and suffered a lot. She would carry buckets, would fill up buckets for people even though she was young and did not have the strength.

> She on one side and me on the other. My other daughters too would study and work.

[Woman whose husband spent twenty-two years in Tazmamart because of the Skhirat coup d’état]
• Debilitating Fear and Emotional Scars

Many women survivors of political violence told us that they live with multiple emotional scars and suffer from depression. Many continue to suffer from flashbacks, nightmares and have difficulty sleeping and continue to live in constant fear.

Many of the women we interviewed spoke of feelings of panic and of having anxiety attacks whenever they came in contact with state officials and men in uniform. One woman told us that her mother fainted whenever she saw a man in uniform. Another said that she married a man who joined the army and that she was afraid of him whenever he put on his uniform. Many said they were afraid of the dark and could not sleep without the lights on. One woman told us that it took her twenty years to stop jumping and getting startled whenever someone touched her shoulder or came up to her suddenly.

Many said that their sense of security had been shattered and that they don’t even feel safe in their own homes. Memories of soldiers and policemen breaking into their homes in the middle of the night, creeping up to their bedrooms while they were sleeping and terrorizing them continue to haunt them. One woman said to us that soldiers would come to her bedroom quietly in the middle of the night and would violently pull off her blanket to see if anyone was sleeping with her. All this contributed to shattering their sense of safety and security to the extent that many felt unsafe even in their own bedrooms.

A large number of women told us that they also lived with the constant fear that something would happen to their children. They described this fear as debilitating for it consumed all their emotional energies and prevented them from living a normal life.
Many women were often arrested more than once, and subsequent arrests sometimes occurred several months or even years after the first one; and the women were often one amongst several family members to be arrested. All this ensured that women lived in fear of state sponsored violence.

**Grief and Mourning**

Women whose husbands or children were killed due to political violence speak of living in a constant state of grief. Many described their lives as unbearable and said that they wished they had died instead of their husband or children.

Others described being dead while alive and have lost all interest in life.

One woman we spoke to whose husband died in prison under torture said that she felt amputated after her husband’s death. She became a widow at age twenty-seven and never remarried.

Women, whose husbands or children are missing or disappeared, live with the inability to mourn. Having never seen the body of their loved one, they are unable to reach any closure. All of them expressed a strong wish to recover the bodies of their loved ones, to know where they had been buried and how they had died.

**Feelings of Guilt as Mothers**

Many of the women victims of violence who had children told us they struggled with strong feelings of guilt; they felt that they had betrayed their children and had not been good mothers to them.

One woman whose husband spent twenty years in Tazmamart, who was left destitute and had to work to provide for her five
children said to us that she felt her children were deprived of both a father and a mother. She worked multiple jobs to support her family. She would often leave at 6:00 am and not return home until midnight. She was therefore unable to spend much time with her children since she was too consumed with ensuring their survival. Many mothers felt responsible for the fact that their children lived in poverty, were deprived of the most basic necessities and were robbed of their childhood.

They feel particularly guilty for having been unable to properly feed and especially breastfeed their young children and they live with the fear that this will have long term effects on their children’s health. They see their children struggling with the effects of the violence that they experienced and witnessed.

These women told us that their children suffer from the effects of vicarious traumatization and they feel responsible for what their children are living with.

One woman who was arrested in 1985 when her son was six months old told us that her son who had seen her being taken away by the police when he was six months old started having recurring nightmares as a child:

When my son was eight or ten years old, he started waking up at night crying from nightmares. I would ask him:

“We have been arrested in the news today? Nothing bad happened in the news today?” One day, I asked him: “What is this nightmare that you keep having every night?” He said that he would be sitting when all of a sudden he would see his mother being taken away in a black car by four men and that as soon as she left in the car, four dogs would start attacking him...
In other words, he had remembered what had happened when he was six months old and that’s why he was having nightmares... When I explained to him what that image was about, he stopped having the nightmares.

[Woman from Rabat who was arrested in 1985 and whose husband was killed under torture in prison]

The same woman told us that her son’s performance in school had declined and that he had started failing his exams. She said that this coincided with the work of the IER and the fact that her case had received widespread coverage in the press, where it was revealed that her husband had died because of torture in prison. Her son was re-victimized through this process and was as a result struggling in school and unable to concentrate on his studies.

She said to us: “My son’s youth is going to be wasted if there is no true reconciliation.”

Some of the women we interviewed informed us that they chose not to tell their children about what happened to them and have lived all these years with the fear that they might find out. This is a common phenomenon among parents who have experienced political violence.

As Kaethe Weingarten has argued “parents wish to protect their children from the horrors that exist in the world. When those horrors are ones that people inflict on each other, the urge to shield children from knowing about this is even greater. However, the wisdom of the ages, whether literary or clinical, encourages us to resist the temptation to conceal and instead find safe ways to reveal.”

In our research, we found that there are many women whose young children died as a result of political violence. They died of illness or malnutrition or because of the violence that they were subject to at a young age. They died in prison because of the torture and deplorable prison conditions. They died while on hunger strikes. These mothers live with the guilt and agony of not having been able to protect their children.

We were told of one woman whose husband was arrested in 1964 and whose two year old daughter died within a few days after the arrest, of how she concealed her daughter’s death from the police by carrying her body on her back for days because she was afraid that her daughter would be buried in an unmarked grave by the state.

She wanted to at least be able to claim control over her daughter’s dead body and to protect her child from the police who did not even spare the dead.

• Effects of Sexual Violence

Sexual violence also had a devastating effect on victim-survivors. Women were further victimized because of a social context in which survivors of sexual violence were perceived as guilty and impure.

In effect, these women were punished for the crimes of others. In some cases, women whose husbands found out that they had been raped divorced them. Other women lived with the secret of the rape out of shame and fear of stigma. Perpetrators went largely unpunished and in some cases, continued to live in their communities.

Sexual violence also had devastating effects on women’s sense of safety and security. Their sense of dignity and
integrity was violated and many of them suffered from depression and other forms of mental illness.

They tended to withdraw and avoid contact with men, whom they associated with risk and violence. Many suffered from serious gynecological problems as a result of the violence.

Although none of the women spoke about the effects of violence on their sexuality, one can imagine the continuing and devastating impact of such violence. These effects were not restricted to those women who were victims of sexual assault.

Women who were subject to other forms of sexual violence like touching, harassment, forced nudity, or sexualized torture, or who lived with the fear of sexual violence while detained or interrogated, often suffered from similar fears and symptoms.

• Divorce and Polygamy

The climate of impunity created by the state made women more vulnerable to the abuses of men in their personal lives.

Women who sacrificed so much for their husbands, waited for them for years, took them food while they were in prison, provided for their children, kept their families together and suffered so much because of state harassment and social discrimination were sometimes divorced by their husbands after they were released from prison. Some women were abandoned and others saw their husbands take on second wives.

The large majority of women whose husbands were in prison, including those with husbands sentenced to life in prison, stood by their men and did not seek a divorce. Yet, many
found themselves divorced soon after their husbands were released from prison. As one woman from Nador said to us:

Look how much we suffered and sacrificed...and the moment they come out they want to substitute us with other women. Where are our rights?

[Woman from Nador whose husband was arrested in 1984]

This had repercussions when it came to women’s access to reparations and indemnities that were paid by the state to their husbands.

Some women complained that their husbands withheld the indemnities from their wives and children who continued to live in poverty while their husbands took on second wives and lived comfortably in new homes with their new wives.

Some women were also divorced by their husbands because they had been victims of political violence and had spent time in jail, which were seen as a sign of being “tainted” or having a “bad reputation.” Rumors of sexual violence in prison made divorce more prevalent.

This is a clear example of gendered forms of social retaliation where women were punished for what they endured. Finally, some women were divorced because of police harassment, which led to their husbands becoming too afraid to remain married to them. Here is what one woman from Khenifra told us about her experience:

I got married after my mother and I came out of prison. I stayed married for about five and a half years. We had a child together but my husband was afraid. The gendarmes would always come to our house to question us and to make sure that I had not
run away. Eventually, my husband and I separated because of his fear.

[Woman from Khenifra who was arrested in 1973]

• Deprived of Husbands

Many women became widows at a young age because their husbands died from wounds suffered in custody or were assassinated.

In some regions like Figuig in 1956, large numbers of women became widowed because their husbands were suspected of collaborating with the colonial regime. Most of these women never remarried because they were tainted by these accusations and were stigmatized by their community.

Other women whose husbands were killed under torture in prison were prevented from remarrying because of the aura attached to their husbands in left circles; and because of surveillance and harassment by the police. Potential spouses would be called in by the police, interrogated and “warned” about their future wife’s past.

This often had the effect of scaring the men away, especially since these police tactics of intimidation were compounded by the social stigma attached to political prisoners and their families.

Female children of political prisoners often had to overcome great social and cultural obstacles to get married because they were “tainted” by what had happened to their families.

8 - This section does not mean to imply that women cannot be happy or lead satisfying lives without the presence of a husband. We only express here sentiments that were shared with us by the women we spoke to.
Women and Political Violence during the Years of Lead in Morocco

• Feelings of Guilt as Daughters

Women political prisoners also struggled a great deal with feelings of guilt towards their parents, especially because of the suffering and abuse inflicted by the authorities. They often felt that they had abandoned their parents and that they had been ungrateful children. One woman who was sentenced to life imprisonment and had lived in exile for eighteen years had this to say about her experience:

**The police used to come to our house and would mistreat my father and mother. As you know, men in power don’t treat families the same way if they are poor or modest.**

They come in the house without knocking. My poor mother had a mental breakdown. She was bedridden and no longer left her bed...

When I left for France, I always had the hope that I would be able to come back during the summer, like all Moroccan students abroad, I wanted to study and then go home during the summer and see my mother and father...But I only came back to Morocco in 1994 after the general pardon.

[woman who was condemned to life in 1976 and lived in exile until 1994]

• Unspeakable Pain, Un-Representable Violence and Lack of Recognition

Social scientists who have studied political violence have often noted that this violence is unrepresentable. This is in part due to the nature of the violence itself and due to the
fact that the scholar or researcher was not present when the event being described occurred. More crucially, our inability to represent violence is evinced by the fact that victims of violence often remain silent in the face of questions about their experience or they say that they cannot find the words to describe the events that they have lived through.

During our research, we repeatedly encountered women who spoke of the violence inflicted on them as unspeakable or indescribable. For instance, many of them told us that the men in their families (sons, husbands and brothers) could name what they experienced as torture and thus have it recognized. They could describe themselves as ex-political prisoners and thus had a name.

In the case of women, many of them told the researchers that what they lived through was worse than torture and did not even have a name. In their accounts, what they experienced has never been recognized and remains unacknowledged.

Some of the women who spent time in jail also said that their families avoided talking about the subject of their torture and detention and wanted to pretend that nothing had happened.

This only contributed to heightening their sense of isolation and their feelings of guilt and shame. They felt alone in their struggle and that “something was wrong with them” if they were not able to just move on with their lives.

Healing for these women, the study suggests, will have to begin first and foremost with naming, acknowledging and rendering visible the violence that they lived through and endured and their experience as women.
The collective silence about their plight only heightens their sense of injustice and isolation and places undue burdens on them.

**Work Discrimination and Disadvantage**

Some women were fired from their jobs after they were arrested or because their husbands or relatives had been arrested.

There was also a systematic regime of police harassment directed at these women, which made it hard for them to seek employment or retain jobs.

Others were denied promotions and social mobility. In addition, many women felt unable to maintain a job because they suffered from depression and other forms of trauma. Time spent in prison or time spent dealing with the effects of violence prevented them from acquiring competitive work skills and experience.

In addition, many children of political prisoners were unable to pursue or complete their education and therefore did not have an equal opportunity in the labor market. Even today, many are unemployed or work for very low wages and with very little stability. The births of children of political prisoners were often not registered in the carnet de famille.

In many cases, documents were confiscated by state authorities and never returned or renewed. This prevented many children of political prisoners from normalizing their situation and from seeking education and/or employment.
SOME CONCLUSIONS
SOME CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to develop a detailed and more nuanced understanding of the gendered nature of political violence in Morocco between 1956 and 1999 and its effects on female victim-survivors.

It does not claim to offer a definitive account of Moroccan women’s experience of political violence. Rather, through a qualitative and gender-sensitive approach that foregrounds women’s voices and experiences, we sought to provide an account of the multiple ways in which women were victimized by political violence.

We also sought to provide an account of the multiple ways in which women contributed to our recent history through their labor, perseverance and activism.

In doing so, we tried to show that women were not just victims in this history; but that they were also survivors and agents of change.

Our study has shown that women were targeted in large numbers by state sponsored political violence. Most of these women lived in marginalized rural or semi-rural regions, were poor and illiterate. Further, the large majority of women victims of political violence were targeted as part of a state policy of collective punishment.

Mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, as well as aunts, female cousins, and nieces were punished because one or more of their relatives were viewed as a threat to the state.

In other words, women were largely targeted because of their kinship ties to men and became the means in a broader policy of punishing men and terrorizing entire communities.
Like their male counterparts, women were interrogated, illegally detained, harassed, put under surveillance, tortured, intimidated, and deprived of their most basic rights.

Being a woman did not provide any protection from the torture and violence inflicted by state officials. On the contrary, a gendered and sexualized system of torture, violence, intimidation, shaming and humiliation was put in place and deployed against women. While rape and sexual assault do not appear to have been officially sanctioned, we found no evidence of the state punishing perpetrators of sexual violence.

In effect, the state created a culture of impunity, where rape and sexual violence were tolerated and potentially encouraged. Maternal love and attachment to children were also systematically used to torture women. Mothers were tortured in front of children and children were tortured in front of their mothers.

This resulted in great emotional distress and long term emotional scars for both mothers and their children. Pregnant women were not spared and were also subject to violence and torture, including sexual assault.

Women’s experiences of political violence are defined by the intersection of state repression and societal discrimination.

The violence of the state not only depended upon gender discrimination and patriarchal practices, it reproduced them.

Thus, women were doubly punished: by the state as well as by a society that treated them unequally and viewed them with suspicion.
For example, women were disowned by their husbands or stigmatized by their communities because they had been victims of rape or sexual violence.

Political violence also aggravated the marginalization of women in multiple ways. Women who suffered from political violence are more likely to be poor, marginalized, divorced or unmarried, and traumatized.

The generalized silence in our society about women’s experience of political violence is a continuation of the victimization of women in that it fails to acknowledge both the suffering and the courageous activism of women survivors of political violence.

Our hope is that this publication will contribute to breaking that silence and to giving women victim-survivors of political violence the respect and acknowledgment that they deserve.