**Statement of the International Coalition Against Enforced Disappearance**

Women Search for their Disappeared
Human Rights Day
*10 December 2016*

This year, Human Rights Day calls on everyone to stand up for someone's rights! Human Rights Day commemorates the day when the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This year, ICAED is focusing on standing up for and speaking out about women affected by enforced disappearance.

Women can be victims of disappearance both through being disappeared, and as relatives of the disappeared. When women are disappeared based on their gender, it is considered gender-based violence. Losing a spouse or a father to disappearance has profound economic and social impacts on women. Since women are often socialized to stay at home, they can be inexperienced in financially supporting themselves. The disappearance of a breadwinner forces them to care for and provide for their children while searching for their disappeared loved one.

In South Asia, women with disappeared relatives are stigmatized for deviating from gender roles, while suffering immense grief, often without access to psychosocial services. In many South Asian countries, existing national policies are inadequate in supporting these women.

In Pakistan, it has been reported that women of the disappeared have committed suicide, unable to cope with the devastation. In Sri Lanka, many women have been affected by disappearances that occurred during the civil war (1980 – 2013). While the government has neglected to provide rehabilitation programs for relatives of the disappeared, ICAED welcomes a measure to introduce certificates of disappearance, which families of the disappeared could use to apply for compensation, pension funds, and land deeds, previously denied to relatives. Following the ten-year armed conflict in Nepal, women, including relatives of the disappeared, have been excluded from the transitional justice process, as well as discussions on rehabilitation and integration of combatants. In Bangladesh, relatives of the disappeared face intimidation, and have even been arrested under fabricated charges. Over the decades of violence in Jammu and Kashmir, approximately 8,000 enforced disappearances were perpetrated, resulting in 1,500 so-called ‘half-widows’ who are deemed ineligible for pensions and other government benefits, and isolated by the complex and degrading legal remedies available. The role civil society organizations play in supporting half-widows is inhibited by interference from the Indian authorities. The imprisonment of Khurram Parvez was just one such example.

The practice of enforced disappearance began in Latin America in the 1960s, and to date more than 270,000 have been “disappeared”. Since then, there have been thousands of women – mothers, wives, sisters- travelling all over the American continent, bearing photos of the faces of their children, husbands, brothers. There have been thousands of hopes, thousands of memories, immeasurable pain, but also a great deal of anger and countless struggles that will not stop until the disappeared are found. The pain has strengthened them, and the women continue along the path forged by their sons and daughters who fought for their people, for land, food, education, decent housing, and for respect of the sovereignty of their peoples, men and women of the countryside and the city. The disappeared are remembered by thousands and thousands of women who travel all over the world in search of truth, justice, and a peaceful homeland, a homeland where truth and justice exist. The mothers will not rest until they see their loved ones return home.

Every Wednesday, without any relent, - whether it rains, snow or under a hot heat - mothers of the disappeared in Algeria come out in the street to claim truth and justice on the fate of their loved ones disappeared during the 1990s. There are many cases where the security forces prevent them from meeting by violently suppressing their peaceful gatherings. How many blows they received from the police? How many injustices? How many humiliations? How many times the police brutally dragged them into police vans and took them to the police stations where they spent their whole days? Despite all these, they are still there. They want the Truth.

The mothers can be found in Argentina, in Bolivia, in Brazil, in Colombia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, Paraguay, Chile, and Peru, Uruguay. They can be found in public squares, in military camps, in government offices. They can be found in places that claim not to be holding any disappeared people, places where those responsible for the forced disappearances hide, places where thousands of young men and women who gave their lives for their people are kept hidden. But these brave women do not tire, and with each day that passes, they reaffirm their commitment to the fight.

In Peru, enforced disappearances occurred during the internal armed conflict in the 1980s and 90s. For several years, Peru had the highest number of recorded disappearances in the world. The main victims were male peasants between 15 and 35 years old. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report recognizes the humiliation and devaluation of victims of political violence, including through the (underreported and understated) rape of men, women and children. Organizations working on disappearance are composed mainly of women, who have been central to the search for victims of enforced disappearance, including through establishing norms, maintaining records, developing reparation, and locating remains.

In 2008, when there was a wave of disappearances in Zimbabwe women related to those disappeared imagined the worst. Many women today live unsettled lives as their loved ones have not been declared dead and no one wants to be bothered to assist in their search. A woman in the Mashonaland East town of Marondera, whose husband was last seen being bundled in a vehicle in the town, has not had peace to date and since then she has had to deal with a heart condition that seems to be getting worse.

She struggles like scores of other women to make ends meet for the family and to date she does not know what happened to her husband. Jestina Mukoko’s mother feared speaking to those who tried to assist during the time her daughter was disappeared. At least, her search story ended well. but the trauma she experienced is not something she can survive if it happened again. Her other children did not know how to break the news to her when it first happened.

On the occasion of Human Rights Day 2016, we therefore call on governments to protect the rights of women affected by enforced disappearance. We express solidarity with the human rights defenders who, often at great personal risk and sacrifice, assist women as they search for their disappeared.