

France: In solidarity with the feminist playwright and actress of Algerian origin Rayhana

Statement of the International Solidarity Network, Women Living Under Muslim Laws

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On Tuesday 12 January 2010, the feminist playwright and actress of Algerian origin, Rayhana, was doused with petrol and narrowly escaped being burned alive when the lit cigarette thrown at her by two assailants failed to ignite. This completely unprovoked attack took place in the eleventh arrondissement of Paris as the 45-year-old actress was arriving at the theatre, 'La maison des Metallos', where she was due to resume her role in the play about women in Algeria, 'At my age, I still have to hide to smoke!' This grave act of physical aggression was accompanied by a verbal assault that left few doubts in the minds of the victim's family about the link between the attempted homicide and the play's representations of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

In the weeks leading up to Tuesday's attack, the actress said she had received threats and had filed a complaint with police on 5 January. This precaution turned out to be in vain. In an interview with AFP, the actress said, "I talk about women that I know well, about a culture that I know well. The play talks about women in general," and said she would continue performing to show that "I'm not afraid of them" and that France is a country where "there is freedom of expression".

Ni Putes Ni Soumises (NPNS) released a statement in which they emphasised that it is women who are on the frontline in the battle with fundamentalists, and who are the first to be attacked. They called upon all progressive forces to support women and men in their struggle against obscurantism.

Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLURL) joins NPNS and the French branch of the World March of Women in calling on civil society to acknowledge the grave danger posed to women's freedom of movement and expression in societies that protect the rights of religious fundamentalists to impose their cultural world-view in public spaces. There are warning signs of fundamentalism aplenty in Europe: the promotion of the so-called Islamic veil; the targeting of anti-fundamentalists such as the well-known Algerian journalist, Mohamed Sifaoui, who received death threats; intimidation of young girls in the suburbs who refuse to conform to a dress code; formal prohibitions on certain professions, (artists, journalists, writers, hairdressers, beauticians), under threat of violence.... As women who have witnessed the escalation of violence in their countries of origin where political leaders have failed to curb attacks on women's rights and other fundamental liberties by Islamists, we have learnt to interpret the tactics of extreme right political forces working under the cover of religion.

Do the authorities intend to continue closing their eyes to these threats, acts of brutality and murders as well as to the profound contempt shown for the rights of individuals and women in particular? What level of impunity prevails in France that fundamentalists dare, in the heart of Paris, to attempt to burn an actress alive? This case is not the first of its kind in France; the list of crimes keeps growing longer. Where will it end?

The Network Women Living Under Muslim Laws calls on the French authorities to send out clear signals to fundamentalists that they cannot terrorise women or men, in the name of religion or culture, with impunity. Immigrants must receive the same protection as all other citizens of the Republic, and be given guarantees that their fundamental rights will not be curtailed or denied to appease cultural relativists. The right to liberty is non-negotiable!