

# Sonia Garro

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Liberty, social justice, solidarity: these are the expressions among which pioneer, honor student and graduate, and rebel Sonia Garro grew up. While she's young, her attitude comes from the education she received. Or, wasn't it the case that being revolutionary meant being against discrimination, poverty, illiteracy and tyranny—as her teachers used to say?

When Sonia was born, in 1975, one could be almost anything in Cuba except religious or a political dissident. Going to mass or baptizing a child was sufficient enough reason to lose one's job or get expelled from the university; having a family member in prison due to political reasons or one who lived in the United States were reasons for being excluded from certain jobs or careers. Yet, Sonia's family did not have those problems. At least, their religious practices were private and discreet, they had no family members outside of Cuba and their political ideas, if they had any, matched those of the established order.

Yet, in 2012, things had changed; there was no longer a Socialist camp, people knew that dogs in the United States really didn't bite dark-skinned folks, Cuba's new president (since 2006) fomented a culture of debate,



*Sonia Garro*

and Communist Party militants could be religious or not.

So much change produced an extremely important event. The Pope visited Cuba for the second time, and Sonia, a noted civil rights activist and promoter of wellbeing and development in her community, for children from infancy and older, wanted to seize the moment to make a statement to the Pontiff on behalf of political prisoners and citizens'

freedom. When Pope Benedict XVI arrived on March 26<sup>th</sup>, Sonia was already behind bars.

Despite the President's call to freely discuss Cuba's problems, Sonia Garro was assaulted at her home by Revolutionary National Police (PNR) and State Security Department (DSE) anti-riot forces on March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012, shot at with rubber bullets, and taken amidst blows and vulgarities. Concomitantly, her husband, Ramón Muñoz, was thrown onto the street from the roof, where he had taken refuge, as he screamed out against the regime's brutality.

In a country where freedom of thought is a crime and having dark pigment is a misdemeanor, perhaps Sonia Garro has been marked due to skin color. It served to prevent her from personally attending her graduation ceremony and receiving the diploma she earned by dint of her talent and effort, this because the 'photo might get ruined,' as the government functionary in charge of the ceremony told her. Prior to this, her marriage to oppositionist Ramón Muñoz caused her to be terminated at her job.

Yet, these scenes of racist violence are not all that this young Cuban mother has had to endure. After a year of illegal imprisonment, she remained in jail without ever having a trial forced to live in inhuman prison conditions solely for being an African descendant woman and lover of liberty. If Cuba's judiciary were independent, and not part of the country's police apparatus, this young woman would have been tried and even released a long time ago.

The systems itself creates marginality when it pushes people of color to silence, social isolation out of fear or because they do not know their rights. Thus, they express their

frustration and unconformity with attitudes and lifestyles deemed dangerous.

However, this is not the case with Sonia Garro and her husband, whose problems with revolutionary justice stem from their struggle against political and civil injustice. This has nothing whatever to do with common crimes.

At the PNR School they teach young recruits that most criminals have dark skin. This proves the racist nature of the daily arrests and assaults on human dignity that are institutionalized in the Penal Code—with its legal conception of "social dangerousness."

The Manto Negro Penitentiary for Eastern Women where Sonia Garro is currently held—without having committed any crime whatsoever—is also home to hundreds of black women who have committed crimes, propelled to do so by the conditions a *machista* and racist society lacking viable options for escaping marginality imposes.

Sonia represents a difference. Afro-descendent women do not have to engage in prostitution, alcohol and crime. Her work with children in communities neglected by official institutions earned her hatred on the part of the police, but other activists will follow her path, because Sonia taught them that one cannot be fearful, even if you are shot at with rubber bullets and tossed off a roof, if what is at issue are rights.

It is possible that she may finally be released on parole, let her out due to illness or, simply, set her free without ever being tried, perhaps revealing that this was nothing more than a political vendetta, and that the government, the Party, and the police do whatever they please with the people. What about the courts? They are awaiting instructions from the top.