

Film

Fearless in the face of Nicaragua's abortion law



Alessandra Zeka and Holen Sabrina Kahn/A Quiet Inquisition

A Quiet Inquisition

Directed and produced by Alessandra Zeka and Holen Sabrina Kahn.

Adrenaline Films, 2014.

Screening at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival in London, UK, March 18–27, 2015
<http://ff.hrw.org/london>

"What she wanted is a baby and that's it", assures the husband of Sugein, who has severe pre-eclampsia. He is 24; she is just 13 years old. If her enthusiasm for early motherhood is real, Sugein is a rarity. Every month, obstetrician and gynaecologist Carla Cerrato sees dozens of girls of Sugein's age arrive at the public hospital where she works in Managua, Nicaragua, "full of anxiety, full of fear". The difficult decisions Cerrato and her patients face are the subject of Alessandra Zeka and Holen Sabrina Kahn's powerful documentary, *A Quiet Inquisition*, one of the films featuring in London's 2015 Human Rights Watch Film Festival: Celebrating Individual and Community Efforts to Effect Change.

Another of Cerrato's patients, 14-year-old Virginia, is reluctant to admit she tried to interrupt an unwanted pregnancy by taking unknown pills. She is already infected and medical protocol says to abort to avoid the risk of the womb becoming septic. But the fear in the minds of both patient and doctors isn't one of procedure, but prison, because the law says otherwise.

Abortion is still banned in many low-income and middle-income countries, despite access to safe

abortion being fundamental to the provision of reproductive and maternal health. Meanwhile, in some high-income countries, such as the UK and USA, abortion rights are being challenged by anti-abortion advocates who are pushing for abortion limits to be reduced and access to be restricted. In Nicaragua, where *A Quiet Inquisition* is set, a law to ban all abortion was introduced after the 2006 elections when the leader of the Sandinista revolution Daniel Ortega took the reins as President.

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A Quiet Inquisition tells the stories of women whose lives are placed second to obeying the law of the land. It would have been easy for the film-makers to turn this into a piece of ferocious advocacy; instead, by holding back from passing judgment, they reveal the truth. When women are denied reproductive rights, reality is far uglier than any narrative that the film-makers could have invented.

We meet Delma Rose, 27, who was denied treatment for her metastatic cancer in case it damaged the fetus. Her story led to a public outcry, but the law remained unchanged and she died within the year. Cerrato, who admits she would have recommended chemotherapy had she been Rose's doctor, finds it hard to accept that her peers' fear of the law led to yet another death that treatment could have prevented. "Whoever wrote this law knew nothing about medicine", she says.

Yet Cerrato is fearless. Despite the stringent abortion law and a government determined to ensure it remains implemented, she boldly

orders her team to "use any method" to ensure the survival of the mother over the unborn baby. During the course of the film, we see her administering misoprostol, performing caesareans, and inducing labour in women, knowing full well she is being filmed breaking the law. "Yes", she looks at the camera defiantly at one point. "You can say we interrupted this pregnancy."

Things weren't always like this. The film features distraught mothers of young women seeking abortion who recall a time when therapeutic abortions were legal in Nicaragua. They had been for more than 100 years before the 2006 law came to pass, when Ortega forged an alliance with the Catholic Church and won the presidential elections with the abortion law a clear vote winner. Herself a child of the revolution, Cerrato still reels from the realisation that the same political movement that gave women the opportunity to rise in 1979 also restricted their reproductive rights. She puts the figure at 88 lives lost as a direct result of the law in 2006, the year before Zeka and Kahn began to make their film. No one in the country's Ministry of Health challenges the central government on the abortion law for fear of being fired, Cerrato claims. "Everything in this country is political", she says. "But we have reason on our side."

Ultimately, *A Quiet Inquisition* sets out to shame politicians by highlighting the plight of individual women. One of the many moving confessions in the film comes from Cerrato's male colleague, Dr Zamorra. While musing on how he would react in the event of his own pregnant wife facing complications, he admits, "as a doctor my hands would be tied, but as a person I would decide to act on it differently". He pauses before reiterating, "as a person".

Priya Shetty



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