

Our Story

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Forward

Our Story stands as a collective voice for all the women and girls who fight for safe spaces, equality, protection of their rights against violence and abuse. This Journal through six stories women, from different walks of life, aims to provide readers with solidarity and encourages to break their silence and stand up against unsafe spaces and violations.

Once upon a time there was a society which did not let women and girls access education, abused them and treated them like slaves. And today, the same society still continues to violate the spaces for women and girls to access education, personal living, workspace and a social life. Although there has been a great growth in women empowerment, it is unfortunate to see how much the society still struggles to provide safe spaces for women and girls. Sexual, mental and physical abuse are the reality in which majority of the women and girls survive in. We live in a society which is so unsafe to women and girls. It is disheartening to see how abusers and perpetrators get the support and confirmation for their actions in this society, but not the victims. Where is the safe space, when families are not, when friends are not and when the world is not?.

This Journal will share sixfive stories, voices from different parts of the world, where we share our experiences, the needs and the fights to inspire the readers of "Our Story".

I am **Srruthi Lekha Raaja Elango**, Director and Co-founder of Polity Link International. I am also honoured to be the editor of this journal, helping the team bring these stories to you. Many amongst us have remained silent despite the abuse, violence and discrimination we have faced or seen other women and girls face, because we feared, we lacked solidarity and we did not know or have a space to raise our voices.

This journal, through sharing stories of women and girls from different parts of the world, aims to raise solidarity and support to all those who need to raise their voice against such injustice. As the coordinator of this project, I not only feel responsible for this journal but share emotional commitment as a survivor of abuse to share my story and share solidarity to many like me. With many other inspiring women, We present to you "Our Story" - Voices for safe spaces for women and girls.

Ensembles

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Blazing Phoenix



words Abharna Dj
India

Five years back, if I told myself that I would be out of all Oppression, abuse and Trauma and live independently, I wouldn't have believed myself. Looking back at the journey I have been through, makes me feel astonished and surprised that I have made it despite all the hardships. I was born in a perfect family, Dad, Mom and an Elder brother. My parents gave me the best of everything and I would still thank them for the best education that they have given me. Life was trouble-free until I turned 7 years old. But life isn't always easy, my lovely parents decided to get divorced and broke their marriage without a thought about my brother and me. We had to go through a lot of things that affected both me and my brother mentally. We stayed with our mother and she struggled a lot as a single woman to feed and to educate us. She ran into a lot of debt, striving to feed and give the best education in a private international school. As my mother noticed my brother not concentrating in his studies due to these problems she had put him in a boarding school when he was just 15 years. The so-called "beautiful" family slowly vanished to dust.

My mother who was into all of the debts decided to go work abroad leaving me with my grandparents. I felt abandoned and was too young to understand what was really going on. However, seeing all the struggles my mother had faced, I loved her so unconditionally and had huge respect for her. It does hurt a lot as we never got to speak over calls or even meet for about many years.

One day she decided to visit us and permanently stay with us after several years. By then my brother had completed his high school and was enrolled for a degree course while I was in my high school. Thus, we again got the chance to reunite after years of distance, just me, my mother and my brother. However, things didn't go as expected. My mother who parted from her loving husband and kids had suffered alone abroad (Malaysia) where she faced a lot of problems due to racial discrimination, job denials on the basis of religion and was criticised for being alone far from her family. She came back in a completely different mindset which was a peril to my life. She insisted that I get married to a guy whom she had known in Malaysia and had helped her financially and mentally, when I was just 15 (age), despite the fact that he was 17 years older than I was. The torture from then on went from emotional manipulation and threats on the basis of our financial and social background.

Her words included "The astrologist says you are not good at studies", "You have no father and we are not rich enough to afford dowry" etc which devastated me completely was Dowry and the words of an astrologer convincing enough for my mother to be ready to spoil my life? I found it difficult to share it with anyone or even trying to stop her, with the heart of a woman being both strong and fragile at the same time, keeping up all secrets and making sacrifices for the sake of family rather than for herself. She used to emotionally blackmail me and has tried committing suicide nearly twice. I tried to convey all the problems to my father however he never took it seriously and just ignored me. My brother who is more affectionate towards my mother was only worried about her and not about my life.

My mother not only managed to convince my brother but also managed to convince my entire family stating she is the "MOTHER" and can do anything as per her wish for her daughter knowing what's the best for me. I had nobody to help me out. I had a boyfriend to whom I had shared everything and he was aware of all that happening in my life. However when I asked him to help me out from this situation I was shell – shocked by the response he gave to ditch me.

He said that there are **three criteria** that he and his family would look for when they actually select a life partner and those qualities were "family background", "financial status" and "beauty of the girl". And he further pointed out that "I don't have a good family as my parents aren't together", "I am not rich enough to match his financial status" "beauty is okay, but not without fulfilling the first two factors". I never imagined to get such a response even in my dreams from him. It affected me a lot and I went into a complete state of depression.

By that time, my mother who managed to convince everyone, had arranged for the marriage against my will. Even without my approval, they forced me to get married and won in their evil will, where I felt my entire life was collapsed. The man who I was forced to get married to also knew that I had no consent to this marriage. People blamed me and accused me that if I was against the idea of this marriage I should have protested and disagreed from marrying. They told me that we are all in a modern era where there are various child protection acts and laws, helplines to contact and seek help from others around us.

However, society ignored helping me when I begged and pleaded for help. I didn't reach out to the helpline or any laws, because I was afraid of the system and institutions which were ultimately unsafe for women and girls in itself, for example where a girl who seemed refuge under a similar situation was raped by several policemen while on guard. We do have all laws and means for the protection of women and children, however has it really been standard and met its purpose?

The guy after the incident tried to abuse me physically with the very help of my own family where they locked me inside a room with him. I yelled and screamed in a manner that could be heard till the boulevards of the streets. I decided not to give up screaming, shouted and shouted that my family came opening the door telling – "Your shouting dishonours our reputation in the street". I felt like an orphan needing protection, care and wanted to immediately leave the place and think of no one but only me and me only. In that dark moment I realised a lot of things, learnt how unfair and unsafe this world is for women and girls. The next day I flew out of the cage. But for a caged bird not knowing where to go, I went back to my house to see my brother and cried a lot and decided to stay in my grandparent's house. My studies were halted because of this incident, however I pleaded with my father to at least put me in any government school and I continued my studies from there. However, in a few days my father refused to take me to school if I didn't stay with my mother and I was forced to stay with her and she promised that she would never disturb me.

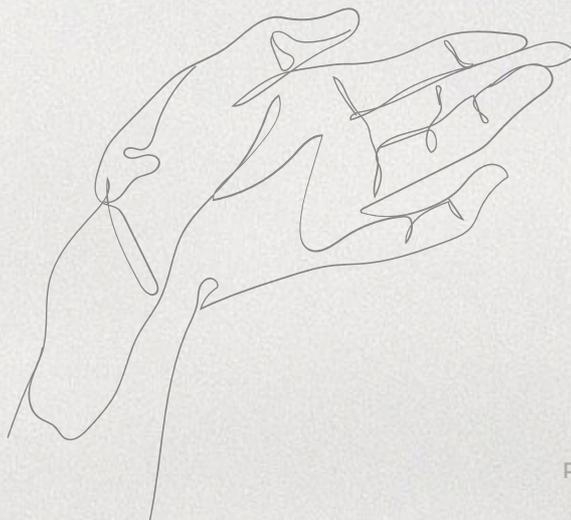
Hardly did I know it was all a false image used to trap me in their evil actions.. She along with the man I was forcefully married to had drugged me to a state of dizziness and kidnapped me to their place, where I was beaten, bullied and assaulted and forced me to stay in this marriage. I somehow managed to inform my father and my grandparents who had filed a complaint and had rescued me. During this incident my grandfather who had taken care of me since my childhood passed away which made me feel guilty for not being able to spend time during his last minutes.

All these incidents did break my heart but not my mindset, it only made me strong and independent. The quote – "It's never too late to be what you want" had driven me in this roller coaster journey, it was the moment when I realised that Education and Strong Mentality and boldness has enlightened my life. I lived my life independently, passed my high school examinations, enrolled for bachelors in French and today working in an MNC and able to fulfil not only my needs but also hundreds of kids in a trust who need care and education. I filed a case on child marriage act against the guy and won the case, declared the marriage as **null and void**.

Life for a woman is not that easy, amidst the unbothered society, uncaring family and unstandardised law and burning passion and dreams and sometimes making all women or girls think at least once in her lifetime as "Why God, why me, why as a girl?" But we need to remember that no one can abuse us or take ownership. Women aren't objects and her rights need to be guarded.

The society still needs awareness and safe space for women despite whatever modern era we are in. There is no force more powerful than a woman determined to rise. Its high time that men need to respect women and not seek any deed in exchange for help, force for anything without consent nor criticise them. Not just men but also the family, especially the parents need to realise that giving birth to a kid does not give any right for them to abuse or oppress the choice and rights of their children. Let women be as they are, as they wish to be.

Through the events in my life, I would like to convey and encourage all women to overcome and fight against any trauma and injustice that had happen to them. Never fear the society and stay in a situation you do not like. Nothing and nobody can stop us. Let us rise. Rise boldly against any injustice to womanhood breaking all stereotypes.



It is not okay

words Srruthi
India

It was not long ago, three years back as an 18 year old I had immigrated to Germany to pursue bachelors in international relations in a very international university with big dreams and a mountain of confidence to create a life I have always dreamt about. As a young woman from a lower middle class family in India, I have suffered very much through my life to access quality education and to set a support system for my life. I am the first generation in my family to be on a flight and the first to explore a career in human rights and international relations. India is a country, where “social security” is still at the stage of building a definition for itself, making all its underprivileged citizens living a life a miracle and especially that of women and girls. Women and girls in India although have grown to access education and opportunities in India, we are still the majority who face enormous amounts of abuse and obstruction of equality. When I left India to find opportunities, to build a life and to come back and give my society all that I dreamt about, all that I had was confidence and aspiration.

As soon as I reached and began an education in Germany, I began working to make a living and support myself as well through difficult part time jobs. Beyond that, I wanted to build a career and contribute to society by trying to make a difference. I started working with the UN Women Germany, helping them establish and run a volunteer body at the university level, which was very difficult to lead as a non white young woman amongst many local and older women, who discriminated and bullied me just because of where I am and who I am. Fortunately, I had a few welcoming and warm women who stood by me and helped me survive this phase with courage. I successfully led the team to organise the first ever youth conference for UN Women Germany in Germany. Following that I was even invited to attend the UN CSW 65 in New York as a part of a delegation from the women’s ministry in Germany through UN Women Germany. My hard work and focus kept me going. At the same time, I also kept a very good social circle with a lot of friends from India, almost everybody above 25 years old, who seemed very mature and safe for me to be friends with. From where I come from (Tamilnadu), we have a habit of addressing anybody elder to you as (male) brothers and (female) sisters, even though you are real close friends with them. One amongst them was a very good friend of mine. He was a person I trusted when I fell sick, when I had arguments at home and to talk to him about anything and anybody.

Around the end of my first year in Germany, when I had to move houses, the German landlord who promised to rent the room, rented it to another person when he found a white student which made me homeless for a few days until I found another room. My friends offered me their place to stay until I found one. I stayed for a couple of days in the room of this very close friend I had mentioned earlier. And one night, he takes all the effort to harass me sexually despite me struggling to stop him. I was in complete shock, nervousness and became speechless. I did not know how to react nor did I know how to protect myself at the moment, because that was the moment when my trust was broken and what I thought was a safe space was no more safe. I found a way to leave the space immediately after the incident and went to another friend’s place of mine. I was in shock for almost two days not able to define what happened and what I had to do. The irony was that I was preparing to attend a **UN Conference on Women’s rights** in a week from this accident, but did not know how to take action when I was abused and was a victim myself. Was I naive? Probably not. I might have been too feminized to accept what happens to me and keep it as a secret inside my very own troubled heart. We women are told that the bravest always keep quiet of their hurdles and keep shining in the face of society. And this was what I was doing, struggling with trauma inside my young little brain and heart.

In a few days, I was not able to hold what had happened to me and shared this incident with the other friends in my circle who were good friends with my perpetrator as well, making an effort to stand up for myself. When they heard what had happened to me, they accused me of being “**too friendly**” with the guy and “**giving him space to take any advantage**”. It was too painful to go through a phase where as a victim, I had to carry the blame for being harassed.

What is the right friendly behaviour to not get harassed, when we see men harassing and abusing children and women of all ages who are complete strangers? What is the right space, where one does not take advantage, when we are in a world where one smile is enough for a man to assume he has all rights on that woman? Nothing is ever ok.

Women and girls are blamed and shamed despite how close or far they are from their perpetrators. They are pushed into emotional trauma, mental and physical health hazards and ultimately social exclusion for becoming the victim to the male dominated world.



After all this, I suffered nearly two years of depression and anxiety, which took me so much energy and time to recover from. There were days when I was afraid to stay in my own body because I was traumatised too much that this body was easy enough for any man to abuse and being a woman was weak. I suppose this was the peak of my depression. With great support from family and friends, and a big struggle alone I was recovering. But I remember my family telling me that it is best kept within me and not to go public looking for justice when I wanted to fight against my perpetrator in court and in public. They were worried, what if society eats me up with blame, that being a victim of abuse was because I was **“too friendly” “dressed attractive”** or **“gave space”**. I wondered, why is society so unsafe for victims to hold the criminals and perpetrators accountable for their abuse and crime against women and girls. My family, friends and everybody who meant anything to me in my life did not stand by me, abused me and continued to blame me, the victim for the mistakes of Men. I grew up in a household, where domestic violence against women was very prevalent. Violence, abuse and trauma did not leave me alone and the women I knew in my life alone. Every woman I knew suffered and So did I. But, unlike the other woman I knew, I did not want to be silent anymore. I confronted, reported and protected me and many like me through my activism.

It does not matter where you live in this world or who is around you, women and girls still lack safe spaces. I was abused by an Educated Indian man in Germany. As a naive Indian woman back then, I had considered Germany a safer country and an educated man more safe and trustable. This was the young me, who saw the world in a very positive way which had no space for evil or believed that any evil will turn good with positive behaviour towards it. Later as I grew out of the trauma, I realised that any world yet, is neither totally evil nor a paradise for women and girls. We are afraid to trust men, friends, people on the streets and in some cases family members too. **Will we be safe with them? Will they abuse us? What if I can not escape?** There exist a lot of safe people, men and women, who work hard to protect us, yet the insecurity the society gives us does not let us trust anybody so easily.

Is it ok to stereotype men and boys as **“Men will be men”**, like **“Animals will be animals”** and to keep them at a distance, where they cannot be trusted? Are men and animals the same? Don't they have the sixth sense distinguishing them from animals to think what is right and wrong in their behaviour morally? **It is not by nature that “men will be men, who dominate and abuse women”**. It is by choice and by character one becomes so.

As young women and girls, we are not supported with the necessary means to protect us from such abuse nor report such crimes. The law is too difficult to get justice and the society too mean to get support. Many men and boys are not taught what consent is and what respecting women and girls are. **The days are over blaming the victims and asking girls to stay inside and safe and the days have come where it is necessary to teach our boys how to be human and respectful to all and especially women and girls.**

None of these hurdles have stopped me from pursuing my dreams. I have worked hard as an independent woman from when I was 18, with no financial or moral support from anybody, building my own future. I am now the director of Polity Link International and the UN Representative of the Women's Federation for World Peace International to the United Nations in Geneva, through which I have impacted and worked for women's rights and safety globally for years. I will continue to voice the need for safe spaces for women and girls, to protect victims from being bullied and blamed and to achieve gender equality. This initiative, **“Our Story”** which I have worked to lead our society to break silence, is one such collective voice against injustice.

Harassment at work or while traveling or at public and private places should not be tolerated. **It is not ok**, when a man forces you to talk with him or he physically misbehaves with you. It is neither your fault nor your behaviour. It is the fault of the man or woman who abused you and violated your safe space.



Malak.



words Nancy Yazbik
Lebanon

Being a teacher was one of the best experiences I have ever had. I was an English teacher, who had experience with all cycles starting with the first grade till the seventh grade here in Lebanon. However, this year was different. Due to the pandemic of covid-19, a lot of teachers were taking a sick leave that ranges from one week till 20 days, and this was a long time, which may create a void affecting students with their education. So, I was called by a school near the place where I live, to be a substitute teacher. I covered for several teachers, even for subjects I didn't teach in schools before, yet taught them in my after-school program that I have established to help students during the economic crisis and the schools that closed their doors because of the pandemic. But this year, not long before I stopped attending school and the teachers I'm covering for came back with good health, something happened that have made me take a decision to be a cause of change in my small society, and hopefully in the world, especially after hearing some of women's rights violations that have happened in a country in Jordan.

Before telling you the story of my student, that affected me and stays in my mind until this day, I want to tell you two short stories of two ladies that were killed in Jordan where one lady was killed by her father, and the other by her brother! Yes, they were killed by who was supposed to be their support and their safe place, but unfortunately due to the mentality of using cruelty and violence to preserve patriarchal traditions and norms they were killed. In a reported case, a man strangled his sister with a phone cord, when he had heard men addressing her as a "slut" with no purpose or reasons. Unfortunately, the High Criminal Court ruled that it does not matter that the defendant killed his sister hours after learning of her "supposed act". The court believed and stated that he was under the influence of extreme anger, which caused him to lose his ability to think clearly because of the "Unlawful act" committed by his sister in the name "Honour crimes" or "Honour killings".

The story of Ahlam, a 30-year-old woman who was killed brutally because of love is another shocking story of how violence against women has become unstoppable. Ahlam dashed out screaming into the street, her father close behind. Bleeding from her neck, she begged her mother, the neighbours or anyone to intervene. That was when her father picked up a concrete block and smashed his daughter's skull in. Then, he sat down next to her body with a cigarette in one hand and a cup of tea in the other as he calmly waited for authorities to arrive. The reason for the father's anger was because I had told him that she was in love with a man, and they wanted to get married. But due to a very patriarchal thought which sees that love is shameful before marriage and that love is only permitted only after marriage. Ahlam's father had beaten making her flee her home for two days.

The law in Jordan fails to protect and provide women and girls safe spaces to live. They lack safe spaces to get education, to access their of choice, to build a life of their will and stay protected. When the family does not protect them, when the courts do not and when the society does not, **where should they go to survive? Why should they run for their lives, just because they live their lives in the ways they wish to?**

Each country has its own traditions, norms, and values, and that's what makes each country different and special. Yet, it is important to know that to preserve these traditions, it's a must to educate people about them, in an open discussion that has neither violence nor cruelty. Only in this way, we assure that our traditions, values and norms are to be preserved because they're loved not frightened of it. Going back to the story I began with, where after approximately two to three weeks of giving English classes to the eighth grade, I was having a coffee on my break in the teacher's room. Suddenly the supervisor knocked on the door, holding a bunch of papers, searching for the Arabic teacher, who was sitting in the room. I could tell she was not okay, she was mad, sad, angry, she simply had mixed feelings. She asked the Arabic teacher if she was the one covering for the arts class and asked the students to draw. **"Yes, I just asked them to draw whatever they want, something they like, or don't like about school or life in general."** Said Sara, the Arabic teacher. Then, they both sat down and started checking the papers with worry and surprise. I could not help but to ask if I may know what's the matter, **"I am afraid there is something wrong, may I ask if I can help with anything?"**. Then the supervisor said: **"Miss Nancy, yes. Please check these drawings, I am trying to know what's the matter and how we can help."** I took the drawings without any hesitation and started checking them, **"I AM UGLY" "NO ONE LOVES ME" "I HATE MY SELF" "TRUST NO ONE"** these were the quotes written on a paper of a specific student. I was shocked as everybody was, for this paper belongs to the calmest girl in the class.

Malak was a bright girl. When I explain a lesson in class, I can tell that she is all ears, focusing with me, she doesn't have side conversations with her classmates, she takes notes and does everything she needs to be an attentive student, yet she was barely succeeding. I went to her class, 8th grade, to have a friendly conversation with the students about the problems they might want to discuss with me regarding their daily lives, hoping that Malak might feel supported and report her problems to me. I began explaining about issues such as bullying, safe spaces, etc. I began focusing strongly on bullying as I suspected Malak to be experiencing it and suffering from the same.

I told the class that

“You are not a strong person if you are a bully. A strong person is the one who offers help and kindness to everyone around him or her. A strong person is the one who is always kind with any one in need and is a person that is always working to be a better person to oneself and their friends. You may face so many struggles growing up, you may feel that no one can understand what you are going through, even if you try to explain yourself, but remember, it is not your fault and that you have to tell an elder person what you are feeling and going through”

These were the words I ended my session with after talking through many personal experiences of what I went through or witnessed growing up, in a school that I went to as a teenager. It broke my heart to see that most of the students were facing problems bigger than what they could handle in such an age such as bullying, violence, peer pressure etc.

Consciously I did not look at Malak too much, but wanted her to know that she is not alone with whatever she is going through. I told the class that

“I know that you haven't known me for a long time, but I assure you I will be here whenever you want to talk. You can talk about anything and it will be confidential.”

I then went back to proceed with my schedule. After I was done, I was having lunch in the teacher's room. Someone knocked on the door and I heard

“May I talk to Miss Nancy please?”

I looked up and it was Malak. I stood up and asked her what the matter was.

“You told us we can tell you about what is bothering us and it would stay a secret. I have this problem that I can't tell anyone about.”

She said, **I took her to a meeting room where no one was there and asked her to tell me what she was going through.**

Allow me first to give you a general idea about our society. We live in a conservative society, where the behaviour of a girl is always expected to be in a certain stereotypical way as designed by social expectations. . A girl is not allowed to go out alone, have a boyfriend or have secrets and much more. She is to attend school, study, then go back home straight and give up all her freedom of choice and expression. We sat down, and I asked her what the matter was. Malak shared

“I have a crush on this boy. Although I have a very conservative father, I just found myself in love with this boy, so we started texting. I told mom about him but she asked me not to talk to him after school or else my dad will get really angry at me. I have done something wrong but there is no way I can tell my mom, even my best friend, I know she will judge me and call me names if she knows.”

So after we started talking, he asked me for a picture, one with a dress, shorts and so on... One day he asked me to send a picture of me not wearing anything. So of course I denied.

He got angry at me, and started talking to another girl with us at class. He was ignoring me and I thought that he hates me now so I decided to send him the picture he asked for. And now he still ignores me and laughs whenever he sees me. I felt worthless, I was shocked, I knew I can't keep that as a secret because I cannot help her by myself. I decided I will do whatever it takes to help her.

Then I told her, **“Malak, It is not a wrong thing to love and to be loved, but love is a different thing from what you think it is now. A person who loves you is a person who wants to protect you, stand by you whenever you need them. The man who loves you can never care about your body or force you to do anything with it. Rather than caring about your feelings and your happiness, he supports you with whatever decision you take and helps you to be a better version of yourself. You are a young beautiful girl; you may not let anyone underestimate you or make you feel you are worthless. A mistake doesn't define you. Actually, if you don't make mistakes this means that you are not a real person, mistakes are what make us learn and grow wiser and stronger. Plus, in this situation you are not the reason for anything. The fault is on the boy and I am very happy that you shared this with me bravely. I want you to know that I will be here for you and I want to help you. I will talk to the principal and we will both help you out.”**

After a very long discussion, Malak agreed to let me share her story with the principal after I assured her that the principal will suspend the boy's phone and that we will make him delete her pictures. I would have wished to share an ending to this story, where the boy was punished and the victim (Malak) here protected from shaming and blaming. But Unfortunately, we are in a society which is very conservative, patriarchal and discriminatory against women and girls where men and their actions are blindly accepted and dominated. Women and girls are targeted, stereotyped and evaluated with certain norms, which is in violation of their human rights.

The school did not take any action, they only promised not to tell Malak's father but will surely have a meeting with her mom and tell her about that. Although our society, in Lebanon, have changed a lot of perspectives towards women, started to give women certain rights, and supporting them more by raising awareness and understanding how big and important a woman's role is in life is, yet there are still some places, especially in countries where education is poor and have dominant patriarchal culture.. Women are equal to men. Women's rights are human rights, this is why we need to raise awareness and educate all people that you are not allowed to hurt, or abuse someone because of your gender. A person's gender should not be the reason why a person should remain silent about their abuse. Women and girls need to speak up and break the silence against abuse. This should start with education and awareness in schools and families.

The Awakening

words Ayra Indrias Patras
Pakistan

Braving through uneven terrain, Saima Abbas has made her way to PhD studies in Pakistan by overcoming several socio-cultural barriers. A 36 years old woman Saima left her home in a village Gujarat when she was 19 years old on the insistence of her mother to discontinue her formal education and seek nursing diploma in another city in order to earn some money to meet household expenses. Saima's father left her mother when Saima was 13 years old and her only sister was 19 years of age. Upon separation, Saima's father had also refused to financially support her daughters' education and other household expenses thereby leaving Saima's mother in utter dismay, desperation and deprivations. With no one to turn to, Saima's mother went to her brothers to seek shelter and food and in return she relinquished her share in the maternal inheritance in favour of brothers.

Saima always thought that the nursing profession was not a career choice for herself due to social stereotypes and cultural stigmas attached to nurses in Pakistan. Unfortunately, women working as nurses are demeaned and derogated. While Saima was in a nursing training institute, she left her training before completion and went back to her village to continue her formal education as she used to dream of going to college, university and become a pilot in the Air Force. She wanted to fly in the air and enjoy all freedoms which are rarely available to women in Pakistan. Her coming back home without completing nursing dashed her mother's dreams and she refused to accept Saima's choice to go to college. Against Saima's will, her mother took her back to the nursing hostel and warned her that she would not be allowed to enter home unless she completes nursing.

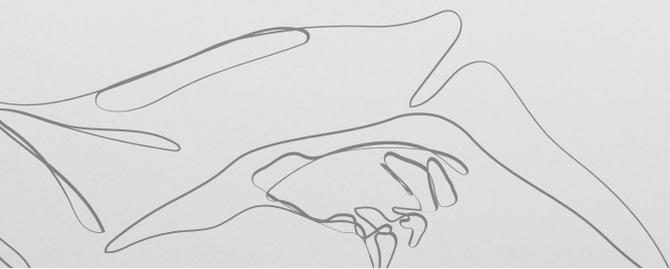
Lo and behold, Saima completed her nursing training with good grades and got a job in a hospital in the city, which is **300 km** away from her hometown meaning she had to stay in a hostel. As the time passed by, Saima had to silently endure discrimination and humiliation by patients, their attendants and senior colleagues, which is a usual experiences many nurses in Pakistan face. Many times, she was ridiculed and manhandled by patients and their attendants too and harassed by male doctors. No support was ever rendered by senior management of the hospital, instead nurses were told not to lodge any complaint against anyone in the workplaces.

Experiencing humiliation every now and then, Saima decided to pursue her formal education along with the job. This decision was not supported by her mother because she wanted Saima to do double duty in the hospital and earn more money to bear household expenses and make dowry for marriage. Going against her mother's will, Saima enrolled herself in a college and signed up for night duties in order to spare some time to attend college in the morning hours. Saima was firm in her resolve to complete her university education, therefore she permanently performed night duties for 7 years and finally sought admission in a PhD studies. During these seven years, she never had a penny's support from her mother and she tried many times to ask for help from her father, who completely refused and rather suggested she go back to village home and marry an illiterate man of his choice.

She recalled, **"As I was progressing well in my studies, my family kept asking me to leave my studies and come back to the village and marry. Once, when I was paying a holiday visit to my mother, she along with my elder sister and maternal uncle locked me in a room for a day and forced me to leave my studies. I had to make a false promise to them that I would come back to them after collecting my luggage from my hostel and finally escaping their trap. She and my relatives abused me and hurled accusations that I was spending a promiscuous life in the hostel and I showed them my education degree but they refused to acknowledge my educational achievements. That day, I decided not to ever visit my family and village"**.

Saima further narrated, **"Living a life on my own in a big city, continuing education and doing night duties in a hospital have always been tremendously challenging for me. I never had financial and emotional support from my family that made my life much more complicated and compounded with unending problems"**.

The only support she drove during these arduous years of life came from her female friends, who used to listen to her worries, encourage her and share good stories of success. Saima was continuously asked by her family and colleagues with a question that when are you getting married therefore she decided to find a man and marry in order to seek emotional support and also to ward off some social pressure. She became friends with a man, who promised her a comfortable life. She shared,



“I was in a relationship for almost one year and we both decided to marry. I asked him if I wanted to buy a car from my life long savings. He promised to help me buy a good car and asked me to transfer money in his bank account which I did. I never knew that another blow in my life was about to unfold. He ran away with my money and switched off his telephones. I lodged a complaint in the police station but I did not get any relief. Instead I had to come back to my hostel room with an emotional setback, empty purse and the stressful thoughts of financial fraud I suffered from him”.

She plunged into depression but then managed to lessen it by getting herself occupied in PhD studies. She said, “I was highly determined to change my career and move from clinical to academic field by leaving my nursing profession, I decided to complete my PhD Studies. However, once again I was warned by my mother to marry a man in my village who was illiterate and jobless. I resisted bitterly and stopped visiting my home town. I was often ridiculed by my colleagues, especially senior nurses, for why I have chosen to enrol in a PhD studies instead of marrying and producing children”.

During the tumultuous years of struggle, Saima fought against all the odds and stood firm in her resolve to complete her PhD studies. Presently, she has submitted her PhD thesis and is waiting for her degree’s approval. She has published her work in international journals and is now looking forward to seeking a job in a university. She was awarded distinction grants for her research publications and participated in academic conferences in several countries. Saima investigated the challenges and constraints faced by nurses in Pakistan and highlighted the contextual factors that force nurses to dislike and leave their profession. She aims to create awareness about the significance of girls’ education and parental support. She has a great passion towards becoming a social scientist and in order to fulfil her goal, for which, she is working hard.



The Story of a Hidden Discrimination under the Collar

words Adebowale Meroyi
Nigeria

Debbie Yelowo's quench for integrity and transparency has led to all forms of discrimination against her career growth over the years. Debbie was born into a middle class family. She is the first child of the Yelowo family. Her parents though illiterate, uphold integrity, transparency, justice and hard work. Debbie's father and mother were small business owners and Christians. They taught their children to always stand up for the truth, to be just, uphold integrity, transparency and hard work. Debbie and her other siblings enjoyed full love and good support from their parents. Debbie's parents love education even though they were not privileged to be educated, so they invested fully in the education of Debbie and her siblings. Debbie went to the best all girls primary and secondary school in the urban city of Lagos, Nigeria. Debbie was academically sound and she soon gained admission to the university upon completion of her secondary school education to study **Economics** at the prestigious **Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria**. While in the university Debbie contested for the seat of Vice president of the student union of her state chapter and despite all forms of hate Debbie emerged the winner and subsequently became the student union President upon the resignation of the president of the union. So Debbie was well known by her colleagues as a young woman that upholds openness, equity, justice and integrity in all ramifications.

Upon graduation from the university, Debbie worked in the private sector as administrator and sales manager. She faced discrimination in salary and allowance payments. She spoke up against this injustice and the violation of her right to equal treatment, for which she was then dismissed from her job. Following this, Debbie went to work in a government research institute. Being a goldfish that had no hiding place Debbie's brilliancy and dedication to her duties were soon spotted by her boss and subsequently she was made to head an entrepreneurship training unit within the institutes, which she took with due diligence. However some groups of colleagues were envious of her stance for integrity, transparency and hard work. Debbie was discriminated against on allowances and other benefits. Despite these discriminations wasn't deterred in carrying out her duties diligently. While Debbie, who worked late on a certain day, was accosted by some of her colleagues and was beaten to stupor, with threat of death if she dared to voice out. Debbie got home and explained the issue to her family and was told not to report the case to the police for fear of death.

But Debbie gathered enough courage and reported the case to the police and the culprit were apprehended and taken to the police station. But without much time the police hastily released the culprit. They told Debbie that there is no visible evidence or video to show the culprits carried out the offense. The police told Debbie that she is a woman, and so she is not supposed to raise her voice to report such an issue. Debbie was depressed but kept on moving.

Not quite long, Debbie was told by her Director in the office that a scholarship opening is available in the Netherlands and that Debbie and her other colleagues should apply. Fortunately of all the six people that applied for the scholarship, Debbie was the only person offered the scholarship for a master's degree. Debbie was elated as she told her colleagues about her scholarship offer, but she could sense their hatred and so she left for the program in Europe facing so much hate from her colleagues. Upon completion of her master's program in Europe, Debbie returned to her work place only to be faced with all sorts of discrimination again. She was not given the same seat she was holding before she left for study abroad. Debbie approached her boss about this development and he simply did not make any amendment. Debbie's junior colleagues were placed on higher seats than her, even though they were less qualified. Again, Debbie approached her boss of her experience and the intimidation she was facing, yet no action was taken. Debbie decided to resign from her job. Debbie then traveled back to Europe and got a job offer with a faith based organisation.

As usual Debbie put in all her best to her new job and she was well noticed by her colleagues as a good hand on board. However, after six month of working with the new job, Debbie observed that her new boss did not uphold integrity and was not following what the government of that country stipulated to be paid for anyone in her level, so Debbie approached her boss about this and the boss told Debbie that they will move up to pay the right salary as time goes on. Even after ten months of working Debbie approached her boss over the issue again and this time the boss told Debbie that they will not be able to pay her the right amount. Debbie felt cheated and depressed for this insincere act.



Her boss said to her; **'You are a woman, this job should have been taken up by your husband. I will advise that you write a resignation letter so that I can employ your husband. If you do not resign your appointment I won't sign your work permit renewal and contract extension'**

Debbie was dismissed from her job by her boss, despite her trying to make her boss understand that discriminating on the basis of gender is illegal and unacceptable. Debbie decided to approach a lawyer to take up her case. The lawyer wrote Debbie's boss and she pleaded that the case be settled amicably out of court with assurance that her job will be restored back to her. However Debbie's lawyer said he is not in support of an out of court settlement, but Debbie being someone who expects people to stand by their words, told her lawyer that they should accept an out of court settlement. But alas, upon withdrawal of the case from court, Debbie's boss went ahead to withdraw her contract and deny her the job. Debbie asked for the reason and Debbie was told it was because she dared, as a woman, to challenge her boss over lack of integrity issues, over non-full salary payments and allowance. She was denied her job because she dared to speak up and also for daring to make use of a lawyer, and this was the reason they refused to renew her work permit. She was told that women are not in any position to demand equality and justice.

So over the years, Debbie recounted various discrimination she has faced from the private sector to public sector and also in the faith based organisation in the heart of Europe.. Debbie concluded that women are faced with various discrimination across the work place and even in the religious quarter under.

Debbie recounted these experiences and decided to stand up to speak for women across Nigeria, Africa at large and globally. She is advocating for the fundamental human rights of women, girls and youth and the vulnerable groups, who are suffering in silence without anyone to hear their stories. Today Debbie is the **Director of a Non-governmental organisation** that advocate against **gender inequality, and campaign for the fundamental human rights of women and girls who are been molested, raped, discriminated against in the work place and denied their rights because of their gender**. Some have been intimidated against speaking out and threatened with death if they dare to speak out. Debbie is just an example of various women who have been discriminated against at the workplace, but was brave enough to raise her voice to speak out despite intimidations. Women need to confront discrimination and lack of equal treatment on the basis of gender. It is unacceptable, illegal and immoral. Silence is not worth the benefits one would get from such a discriminatory job.



The Intimidating Questions

words Sandra Brenyah
Germany

Women make up to 54% of the world's population according to World Bank data. Yet, our gender is in perpetual fight for the recognition of our own rights. Our right to be recognised that we are capable of taking up specific positions in the society, to be equally respected and paid as the male gender etc. Since women's rights are just as important and relevant as human rights, it is necessary they are present in our daily public conversations. Bringing women's rights to the forefront of public conversations is one of the measures to create safe spaces for women. In doing so the prevalent issue of false narratives regarding women as abuse victims can be tackled. I think it is high time that society deals with the two crippling and intimidating "w-questions" which change the narrative of the victim's story by interrogating them instead of the abuser. These "**w-questions**" silence women, especially young women, and as a result they refuse to speak out. The two "w-questions" are: "**What did you do?**" and "**Why were you there?**"

Many a times, when these two questions are asked, the interrogated victim is expected to accept she is partly to be blamed for the abusive incident. The two "**w-questions**" suggest that the victim provoked the violence, irritated the abuser by speaking back or wore "**inappropriate**" clothes which triggered the abuser. Herein the perspective of the narrative is changed, altered, and falsified. Recently, a friend told me the story of a 16-year-old girl who got molested by her stepfather and consequently got pregnant.

He - my friend - was absolutely convinced it was the girl's fault that she got pregnant since she wore inappropriate clothes and hereby seduced the stepfather (**first w-question: what did you do?**). According to this friend of mine the young girl spent every minute of her leisure time at home in her room whilst her mother was absent. By his understanding, had the girl spent more time outside her home she wouldn't have gotten molested (**second w-question: why were you there?**).

A man who is supposed to play the fatherly role in the young girl's life and create a safe space for her took advantage of her and molested her. Yet, here is this friend of mine changing, altering, and falsifying the narrative. Though I succeeded in educating and advising my friend to look at the story from the 16-year-old girl perspective, I wondered how many people are twisting the story of her molestation and unfortunate pregnancy. **Did her own mother believe her? Do her friends believe or shame her?** For us women, it can be challenging to find safe spaces when most of the abuse we face take place in our homes, at places of worship, and schools by trusted friends, mentors, family members or even religious leaders. These places and people that are supposed to be safe spaces for us can unfortunately turn out to be the right opposite.

In conclusion, I would like to encourage every woman who has ever been abused to never allow the two "w-questions" to define the narrative of their story. Whenever they are asked these questions they should object to them, refuse to answer them and educate the questioner about their false assessment. I believe we as a society need to do a better job at creating and maintaining safe spaces for women by speaking more about women's rights. Also, we need to create forums and offer workshops to elucidate people about the silencing, crippling and intimidating effects of the "w-questions". Hereby we can contribute to abused women retaining control over their stories.

"Never stay as a victim else you give your abuser more power over you. Know that you are strong and with time you can conquer every situation you find yourself in."



End Note

Women and girls have suffered longer than humanity could even accept such **injustice**. One's story of abuse and **trauma** is not heard louder enough simply because it is a **story of the commons**, the story of every woman and every family. We have grown to accept such stories as normal human nature, while we should be condemning it, **fighting** it and working against the very possibility of such stories to occur.

We have fought for **centuries** to be recognised, to be respected and to live. Yet, why is this suffocation of abuse, victim blaming, shaming, discrimination and inequality we have to go through. Is the world not civilized enough to stop barbaric treatment of women and little girls?

From those shiny floors of the United Nations to those little households, women's rights are still a debatable matter concerning power, freedom and equality. People must realize that women and girls play a crucial role in the growth and success of their societies. There is no progress if **51% of the population** is **discriminated** against, suppressed and **silenced**.

Governments and policy makers must realize, it is not a matter of their legal obligation, but it is simply a matter of their own stories and how they wish to create one.

You might have not felt very foreign to the stories you read, this is because it is "Our story" - **Our suffering and Our fight**.

Women and girls should one day wake up to a world, which is free of fear of abuse, violence and discrimination. They should be able to walk the streets with **courage** and **freedom** just like the Sun **shining** in the sky no matter what. There should be no second thoughts of having the authority in their own lives to make choices and be **empowered** like any human being is supposed to.

"**Our Story**" should become those stories of our **success** in realising these **dreams**.

To all those who are silenced for unfortunately becoming the victims of mankind's worst trauma, your story is not just yours. **It belongs to everybody and your actions can change everything. And that is how we write "Our Story!"**

Srruthi Lekha Raaja Elango, Women's Rights Activist, Chief Editor, Our Story.





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