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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“TRAUMA AT BIRTH: THE TRUTH BEHIND OBSTETRIC VIOLENCE” BY DUNIA VERONA

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



From October 8-12, 2018, 12 intrepid female journalists participated in CHIME FOR CHANGE’s third Women Bylines workshop in Mexico City, led by CHIME FOR CHANGE’s Managing Editor Mariane Pearl. The five-day workshop provided a safe space for writers, filmmakers and photographers to discuss and develop under-reported stories affecting women in Mexico. Participants produced seven powerful pieces—four films and three multimedia pieces.

1 – The Patient

I never thought that eighteen years later, I would still be fighting against it. When it happened to me, I didn't have a name for it either. I knew that I would bring forth children in pain, we all anticipate a degree of it, but I didn't expect to give birth in contempt, let alone violence.

Obstetric violence: these two words don't seem to pair well, people tell me. I agree. Yet it's everywhere. The practice ranges from denial of treatment to verbal humiliations, invasive practices, physical violence, unnecessary use of medication, forced medical intervention. Add arbitrary detentions in facilities for failure to pay, discrimination or humiliation based on race, ethnic or economic background, age, HIV status, gender nonconformity, among other abuses.

This is what happened to me when I gave birth to my daughter.

As soon as I checked into the hospital, nurses asked that I take my clothes off and put on a green gown. They shaved my belly and pubis without explaining why. I laid alone and naked in a bare room for many hours, until someone came, and without a hint of sarcasm in his voice, told me that I was pregnant.

When I finally made it to the delivery ward, I saw other women lying on stretchers, all of them seemed to be in deep pain.

The sharp throbbing from the contractions started its ebbs and flows. Suddenly, right when pain emerged again, at least ten men surrounded my bed and started inserting their index fingers inside me over and over again as if the rest of me wasn't there. I made out that they were students learning how to do a vaginal exam. Their hands moved sharply, and I laid there with my legs wide apart, drowning in pain and shame and anger.

Six hours passed and I started to feel better, my body was adjusting to pain and I found that I could flow with it. I started moving my pelvis in circles while lying on the stretcher.

I felt that inside me the water and the rhythm of contractions announced that labour was at its peak. Suddenly, a doctor came over and, looking at his watch, told me: "Time over, mother, we are going to open you up. Turn around, anaesthesia time."

They tied my hands and legs and brought me over to the surgery section.

I felt everything when they opened my womb and searched inside me as if they were forcefully stirring a cauldron. As if I were a deep cavity at the bottom of which a load had to be extracted no matter what.

When I woke up, I was lying on a stretcher in a hallway and I heard a baby crying close to me. The crying was so intense that I wondered why nobody was caring for the newborn.

Narrative of a happy birth:

I soon realized that it was my own daughter and that she had been crying for several minutes. When I was transferred back to my room with my baby, I unexpectedly ran into my mother. Only a few words came out of me: "I didn't want them to open me" I said before breaking down in tears. From that moment on, I did nothing but cry. My body, my motherhood and my dignity were all hurting at different levels. I felt that there was no piece of me that wasn't hurt, and my pain increased when I realized how my daughter had been abused as well, inside and outside of me.

The violent moments we had just been through kept playing in my head over and over. But the nightmare went on into the night, when we were left on our own. I knew nothing about breastfeeding, my daughter wouldn't stop weeping because she was hungry and I wouldn't stop crying because I was helpless.

Listen here to Diana's harrowing testimony:



1:35

The next morning the cesarean incision was bleeding. With much effort, I sat up and immediately let out a cry of pain. But everyone was indifferent, numbed by the abuse they had experienced themselves and the fact that nobody had paid attention to them. Instead, they laughed tiredly at my vicissitudes as if we were in prison, where the mistreatment of the other inmates is part of the punishment.

In this weary environment where every patient is so anxious to flee I welcomed my baby.

When it was time for us to go, I realized that my feet were swollen but I decided not to say anything. Holding my daughter in my arms and my suitcase over my shoulder, I hid my elephant feet under some baggy pants and left in a hurry. I didn't stop to think that this could be a symptom of a postpartum complication. I wasn't ready to extend my stay; I felt smothered. I could take care of the swelling at home, with the people who loved me. I had suffered enough at the Gynaecological-Obstetrics Hospital “Luis Castelazo Ayala” of the Mexican Social Security Institute.

2 – The Activist

I spent more than a decade hating doctors. I also hated my body. I felt a great aversion to my scar. With its half moon shape, it looked like a malicious smile, or perhaps a sad one, but it continuously reminded me of those days. I began to work at an organization for the defence of women's reproductive rights. **My anger, until then contained, gave me the impulse to take action, and I put all my efforts into breaking the silence surrounding obstetric violence.** Such an ordinary abuse perpetrated everywhere and to countless women.

Simultaneously to my ardent activism, I decided to become a doula to contribute hands-on to the elimination of the torture of mothers in hospitals. I became close to women who lived similar experiences. Our need to share our stories was great and I could see the healing effects of speaking out; I knew it was worth it to encouraging women to raise their voices.

We looked after each other because apart from denouncing human rights abuses we all need a space to heal from the damages they have already caused.

3 – Therapist

Here I want to share with you what I have been only able to express after an intense internal and external work on myself.

This is the damage that obstetric violence caused me:

My sexuality suffered greatly after the violations I went through during my labour and my self-esteem was shattered for a long time after the amateur C-section I was forced to endure. **My fury and pain also took their tolls on my family: I was angry with my mother because she didn't understand why I was hurt. Without realising it, I was also placing a heavy burden on my daughter because of the tragedy her birth had been for me.**

Listen here to Mirella's testimony:



I devoted countless energy and resources to turn this traumatic experience into a cause for growth.

Admitting that I had been hurt, looking directly at the wound helped me channel my experience. Little by little, I managed to abandon the painful memories and allowed myself to engage in the healing process.

This was how I started to accompany other women like me as they built their own healing paths.

We have cried; we have rebelled against the expectations of others and have accepted our own stories; we have released our tissues from medical constraints; we have listened to and recovered the wisdom of our body; we have validated our experiences and the experiences of other women; we have opened up to the joy of knowing that we are **mothers above the painful**. We have regained trust, joy, excitement and sensuality: we have been in charge of ourselves again!

Let us end with the wise words of Laura Rocha then:



1:28

**Mexico has recently added 'obstetric violence' to the "General Law of Women's Right to a Life Free from Violence."*

