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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“LA MAISON DES FEMMES” BY ALICE GAYRAUD

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.



14 female journalists participated in CHIME FOR CHANGE’s second Women Bylines workshop in Paris. Co-hosted by Gucci and the Kering Foundation with support from Hearst Magazines, the five-day workshop provided writers, filmmakers and photographers with intense journalism training and professional mentoring to support the production of under-reported stories affecting women.

When I speak of the Paris suburb Saint-Denis, what do you think of? The band NTM. The number 93. Gang rapes. The Stade de France. Metro line 13, packed in the morning. The RER B1. Police violence. The market. The basilica. No-Go zone. The kings of France, as well. I think each person has quite a specific image in their mind of this stigmatized community to the north of Paris. The rate of poverty there is rising to 30% and that of unemployment follows closely at 20%. For me, Saint-Denis was another world. One located 35 metro stations away from my reality. Far, very far from me. And then, overnight, it became my reality.

The first time I heard people speak about The Women’s Home in Saint-Denis was at the Ministry for Women’s Rights, where I was training. Ghada Hatem. Above all I remember the first time I heard people speaking about her. Everyone agreed that she was a great doctor. That she had, remarkably, dedicated her life to women, in particular those who are victims of violence. Sheltered in our ministerial offices, we whispered that she was brave venturing where life was most difficult. The title of an article written about her read, “Ghada Hatem, les deux pieds dans la Seine-Saint-Denis” (Ghada Hatem, two feet in Seine-Saint-Denis). Ghada Hatem, she who repairs women. Over time, I have found that the phrase suits her very well. We give her that name because she is among the rare gynecologists in France who surgically repairs women who are victims of female genital mutilation. She also helps women who are victims of rape, domestic or economic violence, and forced marriages. She repairs women who are broken, damaged and destroyed. She repairs forgotten women. Her Women’s Home is a place that welcomes everyone. They take care of victims with great professionalism, but above all with kindness and humanity. Women are offered a place where, in the space of a few minutes, or sometimes a few hours, they can allow themselves a moment to forget how precarious their lives are.



Photographer: Louise Condemini

I belong with these women. I have been raped several times myself. And condemned to silence, for a long time. Writing this down is nothing less than a political act for me. Every one of us is susceptible to becoming a victim of violence at any moment. I think for me, that's what becoming a woman is. To accept that, wherever you were born, whether that's in the 5th arrondissement in Paris, in Saint-Denis, or in Guinea, there is a price to pay for being female. I decided to become a volunteer at The Women's Home to meet and to help these women. And also to forget my own story. In choosing others, I chose to forget myself; for relief, and of course, through fear. Through fear of saying the words out loud, making it real, and of not having an alternative other than to face it. I have often thought that I would have liked to have such a place. To be heard. To be understood. That is what I want to do for these women – to allow them to be understood.



Photographer: Louise Condemini

One week after arriving at The Women's Home, I met Léa.* The first time I saw her was at her trial, at Paris' High Court. I had been given the task of keeping her company during the hearing. Léa, at 17 years old, was pressing charges against her brother for physical, moral and sexual violence. She had left her family home a few months before. Since then, she had no other choice but to drag herself between 115 different hotels that were were willing to give her a room for one night, sometimes two. Léa will finish high school at the end of this year. She understands that education is the key to her freedom. She dreams of being free and independent more than anything. So she is trying, as hard as she can, to attend all her classes. When she is not at school, she spends her time at The Women's Home. There, she has found refuge. A place where she can feel safe. Where people listen to her. Where people believe her. Where people even help her. It is thanks to the staff at The Women's Home that she has found the courage to report the incident. Only 10% of female rape victims press charges. She is part of that 10%.

She is terrified rather than proud. However, as I sit with her, for five minutes, on a bench in the Criminal Court, I wish I had her courage. To press charges means taking the risk of not being believed. It is taking the risk of being humiliated. Humiliated once again. Humiliated one time too many.

