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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“THE ABUSE EPIDEMIC HIDING IN IDYLIC FRENCH TOWNS IS FLAT-OUT FRIGHTENING” BY LAURÈNE DAYCARD

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.

Every three days In France, a woman is killed by her husband or ex-husband. Miscellaneous news articles are published in the media. Flashy headlines but little content as the press rarely investigates the nature of these violent acts. Over the course of almost a year, the French reporter **Laurène Daycard** have been looking back on the life of one of the 123 women that disappeared in 2016. By telling Géraldine Sohier’s story, killed on October 12, 2016 by her ex-husband, Laurène Daycard wanted to give a face and a voice to the many victims of femicide in France.

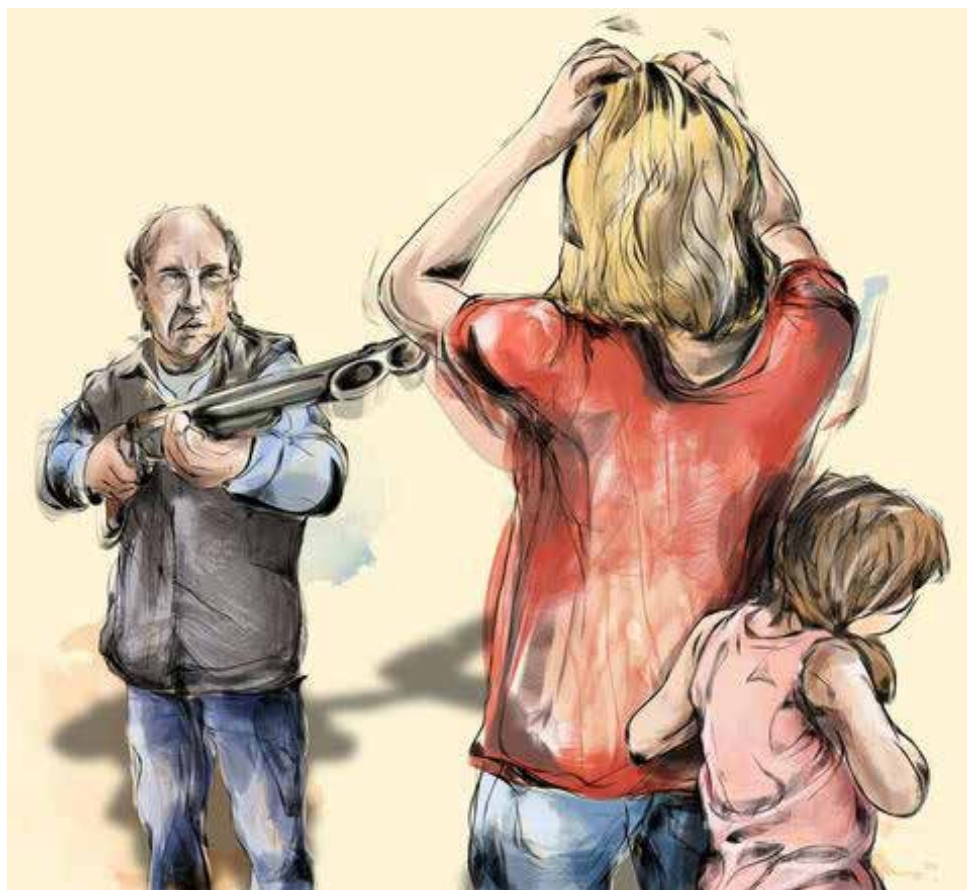
When someone dies, we like to tell stories about how wonderful a person was. In Géraldine Sohier’s case, her loved ones talk about a “bubbly, generous and funny” woman, “someone who brought joy to every occasion” and “only saw the good in people.” On October 12 at 5 pm, Géraldine’s soon to be ex-husband, Éric Gallois suddenly showed up at her workplace. He had a shotgun which he emptied on her. Their 10-year-old daughter was on the scene. Right before committing suicide, Gallois told the girl, “The gun is not for you, it’s only for grown-ups” while her mother was covered in blood. The little girl, now an orphan, was hospitalized for 8 days.

My mother wasn't happy but she always wanted to make everyone else happy.

The murder took place at the municipal library in Villers-Allerand, in the department of Marne. With its ancient stones, its bell tower and war memorial, the village is picture perfect. At the local school, there is only one class for all the children regardless of age and grades. Géraldine, a tall, blonde, 49-year-old woman, was very involved in the local community. That August, she’d taken a part-time job as a librarian. She was pleased because for years she had been going from one small job to another.

At home, she oversaw her two daughters’ educations. She also had two adult sons living on their own. Her best friend often said to her, “You will see, the day you achieve financial independence, you’ll have everything.” Until then, Éric had been the breadwinner of the family,

the hairdresser and started a diet. The day after the murder, the press reported on the story under the heading "In other news..." The regional paper, L'Union, titled its story "Drama in Villers-Allerand." The news agency AFP published a short article on the incident. The tone was factual and they spoke of a "family drama."



Illustrator: Javier Aguilar

The story was recounted like this on various sites, including Europe1, Paris Match, and Le Parisien. And then, it just vanished. Three months after Géraldine died, at the end of January 2017, I took the bus at Reims train station to meet with Géraldine's mother at her home in Tinquieux. My own country is almost an uncharted territory for me as a reporter. I have often travelled outside of France to report on the plight of being a woman in other countries. In Albania, I met women who had been forced to have an abortion because they were pregnant with girls (it's called selective abortion). I also went to the Middle East to find out exactly what it's like to be a woman in the Islamic State of Iraq and conducted some interviews in Turkey regarding femicide.

There, I learned that assassinations of women are most common after a separation or after asking for a divorce. So when I got back home, I started to collect newspaper clippings that reported on these kinds of incidents in France and realized that sadly, it's almost just as common in my own country. That's how I found myself aboard that bus.

Through the window, Reims, 'the city of kings' as it is called, slowly revealed a landscape of grey concrete. An industrial estate, then some residential roads and low-rise buildings, the name of my stop: "Casanova." On the phone, Brigitte became talkative as soon as we started discussing her administrative nightmare. The death of her daughter had triggered an avalanche of paperwork. She needed to become the children's legal guardian, was appointed a public lawyer and had to make sure the girls received their life insurance money among other tasks. "I have so many papers to fill out it's basically like writing a book" she said ironically. But she is not one to abandon the fight. Before hanging up, she gave me her email address so that I could tell her about my investigation. "Each year," I wrote to her before we met, "statistics state the total number of women killed by their husband or ex-husband without any further details. Victims are grouped under one miserable miscellaneous headline. These women need to be given a voice and redeem their individuality."

Brigitte lives in a small white house in a row of identical houses and winter has covered this Reims suburb with a fine layer of frost. As she opens the door, her smile is hesitant but her pink fleece warms the atmosphere. Her granddaughters, her "little ones" as she calls them, live with her. Her husband, who was an electrician, died a few years ago from skin cancer. "His passing has shaped my character," she tells me reservedly. Having previously worked as an auxiliary nurse in traumatology and cardiology, she is now in her seventies and lives off a small pension.

When she invites me into the warmth of her home, her granddaughters had already left for school. "Last night, the eldest dreamed that she saw her dead mother," Brigitte told me, saddened. The girls each have a bedroom, but they can't sleep without each other since the murder. The living room is at the end of the hallway, which is decorated with African figurines. Sitting upon the wooden sideboard is a photograph of Brigitte and her daughter, both smiling broadly and leaning on a village sign that reads "Sohier," (in Wallonia) like their surname. Next is a photograph of Brigitte and her late husband. It must have been taken in the eighties, when Géraldine was just a teenager. "She always had a huge smile on her face. But she was never happy with men. Lately, her character had changed," Brigitte says.

One of Sohier's grandsons, Émeric, joins us. He wants to meet "the journalist." His grandmother, who must be half his height, calls him "my ragamuffin." This 25 year-old has shaved his head, mourning the loss of his mother. He speaks with a hoarse voice.

"I spend my time shut off in my room. Sometimes, I look out the window... but I'm on the ground floor," he says. Émeric is unemployed and lives with his partner and their baby in a working-class neighborhood. "You know, my mother wasn't happy but she always wanted to make everyone else happy. Why would he take our mother from us? Why would he put us through that?"

Émeric never liked his stepfather—not that he calls him that. He doesn't call him anything at all; he says "the guy" or "the other one." One night last year at dinnertime, the two men had an argument. Émeric had made the mistake of writing a text message at the dinner table. "He had a bottle in his hand, he was ready to hit me," Émeric explained, getting up quickly from his chair to re-enact the scene. "Be careful with the furniture," his grandmother rebuffs immediately.



Illustrator: Javier Aguilar

"He was getting close to me and was really angry. I had a knife in my pocket so I stabbed him. It was instinctual, a fight-or-flight moment." Émeric was given nine months in prison, during which time he turned to Catholicism. "I know that today my mum is safe where she is," he says. Brigitte interjects, "Well, she would have been even better here with us."

Géraldine is one of the 123 women who was killed by their husband or ex-husband in 2016. The State only started to keep records for these violent deaths from 2006, from which point, at least 153 women had been killed by their partner or ex-partner. The violence that existed before the murder, and the consequential effects it has on the victims' families is never reported. Sometimes, journalists even write about these stories in a very blasé manner. The feminist blogger, Sophie Gourion has listed them on her Tumblr account under the title "Words kill," for example, "Pissed off in Paris: Partner kills wife and throws her in the trash," could be found on Le Parisien's website this summer. In May, the magazine 20 Minutes published a story titled, "Morbihan: Drunk Man Throws Wife Overboard."

They invoke a "crime of passion," as if putting a bullet in your partner's head had anything to do with love. When I broach the subject with my various relatives and friends, they often respond with, "men get killed as well." And they do. In 2016, 34 men were killed by their partner or ex-partner — one every 10 days. Among the 28 men killed by their official partner (wife, civilly partnered), at least 60% of the victims were themselves violent, which leads us back to question the roots of male violence.