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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“THE SOUNDTRACKS BEATING GENDER VIOLENCE” BY JUDY CANTOR

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.



In Spain, over nine hundred women have been murdered by their male partners or exes over the past fifteen years. 150,000 women have reported physical abuse in 2017 alone. But if headlines keep denouncing gender crimes, they are also reflecting how women are now speaking out and taking the streets in unprecedented ways.

On International Women’s Day, March 8, 2019, hundreds of thousands of women demonstrated, and a reported 5 million observed a 24-hour general protest strike in Spanish cities.

But a month and a half later, on April 26, 2019, the country was once again faced with its deep-seated machismo. One that still shadows the laws in a society that has struggled to fulfil its promise of democracy stated in its 1977 Constitution written after the Franco dictatorship that lasted for thirty-six years.

That day, a regional court returned a ruling on the gang rape case known here as La Manada (The Wolf Pack). During the San Fermín "running of the bulls" festival in Pamplona in 2016, five young men were charged with sexually assaulting an 18-year-old woman. It was a widely publicized affair that incited general outrage and spurred many young women to protest for the first time.

The five friends in the La Manada case were convicted of sexual abuse and were sentenced to 9 years in prison. But the court of judges found them not guilty as charged because a cell phone video one of the men made while the other four had sex with the victim, showed that she closed her eyes and did not scream. When the verdict made headlines, one judge's comments went public: the young woman lying prone in the building lobby where she was accosted was enjoying "sexual acts in an atmosphere of revelry and delight" along with the men, he said, claiming that "The Pack" should be cleared of all charges.

Spontaneously, thousands again flooded into the streets in cities across Spain.

"I am indignant," the singer and songwriter Rozalén says the next morning. We are at the offices of Sony Music in Madrid, where, before the court verdict, we were meant to talk about her song "La Puerta Violeta." "There have always been feminist songs," she adds. "But now is when we really need them."

In the symbolic “La Puerta Violeta,” Rozalén describes drawing a violet door on a wall, and escaping from “a grey monster” into a green field, declaring “I need to turn the key and not look back.” As soon as the La Manada decision was returned, posts about “La Puerta Violeta” and links to the song and video as well as images of the lyrics mushroomed on social media.

“I am playing this song today because of everything that has happened... Listen to it and above all, listen to the words.”

“There is no violence in what I’m saying, but it really hurts to listen to it,” reflects the 31-year-old artist, who opened the stadium concerts on her last tour of Spanish cities with ‘La Puerta Violeta.’ “I drew a door and I was freed. I imagined I was on a pirate ship and hoisted the sail- for me it was like pure freedom.”

Her inspiration for the song came from personal experience. “I was being humiliated by my boyfriend. It wasn’t physical abuse, it was emotional. I couldn’t see it.” **At university, she was studying psychology—gender psychology in fact. She knew the theories, but “it seems like until something actually happens to us we don’t learn”** she tells me.

When Rozalén writes ‘a sad girl looks cautiously at me in the mirror,’ that girl is herself. But when she sings about ‘ghosts that whisper into the nape of my neck,’ she’s talking about the women who came before her. All those who have died, and others who lived through so much repression. **All the women who have sacrificed their lives so that we can have rights. The ones that we may sometimes forget.**

The Spanish government’s District Attorney’s Office has been tracking victims of gender violence since 2003. Seventy-one women were murdered that year. Official attention was finally cast on a problem that had ascended from the subject of neighbourhood whispers to frequent fodder for the television news. “It seemed like suddenly so many women had fallen,” recalls Bebe, whose song “Malo” brought widespread attention to the issue of domestic violence at the same time as it became her signature. “It was summer, I was with my family, and we were watching TV while we ate lunch. I think there had been three women who died in one day. I went straight to my room and wrote the song lying on my bed.”

"Malo" is a graphic chronicle of one woman's victimization by her husband, set to flamenco clapping and turntable scratching. In a hoarse voice that ascends from a weak protest to a rebel yell, Bebe goes from begging her aggressor to stop to plotting her revenge: "Bad, bad, bad, you don't hurt the one you love...stupid, stupid, stupid, don't think you're better than women..." she sings in Spanish. **The line "every time you call me puta [whore] your brain gets smaller" has become a classic refrain in Spain's war between the sexes.**

"Before I wrote the song I had never stopped to imagine the pain," says Bebe, stressing that the lyrics were not based on personal experience. (After it came out, one of her aunts was killed by her husband). "Malo" was included on Bebe's 2005 album *Pa' Fuera Telerañas*, winning her a Latin Grammy for Best New Artist and song that year: "Malo" was nominated for both song and record of the year.

"There was such a strong reaction from a lot of women who have been abused, and that's still happening," Bebe says. "Even children of women who have been abused come up to her for her hug and to say thank you." She recalls an encounter in an airport with a woman who ran up to her, pressing a ring into her hand: "She just said, 'it was my mother's I want you to have it.'"

After “Malo,” Bebe wrote “Ella,” a song with an upbeat tone, comprising a list of empowering affirmations.

“Today you’re going to learn the world is just for you, no one can hurt you,” Bebe sings. “You’re going to learn that fear can be broken with one slammed door.... you’re going to be the woman you feel like being.”

Now 39 years old and with a young daughter at home, **Bebe is especially concerned by the latest figures on gender violence in Spain: the ages of both aggressors and their victims are getting younger.**

“We’re talking about adolescents, girls with their first boyfriends,” says Bebe, “Things are not going well. Kids are drifting away.”

When asked to name the causes behind Spain’s domestic assault and gender violence statistics, she immediately replies: “Education. From the time they are very little we must teach them to respect others, to know that you can’t hurt people who you love and you have to keep repeating it when they are teenagers.”

“In Spain we have this persistent macho culture,” she adds. “It has deep roots, even if sometimes we don’t recognize that. She stresses the importance to be aware of what she calls the **“micro-machismos”** small everyday deeds that slowly take away our freedom. Like having to give explanations when you go out with friends. Or having your phone taken away. Teenagers make up a large part of Rozalén’s fans. “Social media is doing a lot of damage in that respect. A girl sends someone a photo of herself naked and she’s given them a weapon to attack her with.”

The singer often visits schools, where she talks to classes about self-respect, relationships and social issues. And, of course, she plays her songs.

“We need anthems,” Rozalén stresses. “I don’t know if music can change the world, but it definitely can help. Music makes us reflect, and change comes from some sort of inner reflection. Music is always there, the soundtrack behind it all.”



