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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“THE POWER OF GREY-ZONES IN A WORLD OF BLACK AND WHITE”

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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.



I grew up in Denmark with what most Danes would refer to as an afro. It wasn't an afro, just curly hair. But even in our ultra-globalized world, the nuances of what constitutes race and origin still elude many of us. Identity in a black and white world means that brown girls like me are often not represented. Growing-up, I overcompensated for being different (not blond, not white) and often straightened my hair.



At age 7 in front of my dad's typewriter. He would later document all his travels for me to share with his future grandchildren.



My mom and dad in 1987 in Dahlac Islands, Eritrea. The following year they were evacuated to Denmark due to civil war between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

My parents were divorced and most people assumed that I spent the week with my Western father and my weekends with my African mom who had made her way into Denmark—it was the exact opposite. Mondays to Fridays, I was the privileged, overachieving, mixed-raced girl living in an all-white suburban area. The rest of the time, I was with my dad and turned into a tomboy in overalls who listened to tribal stories, tales about war and pan-African movements. One does not have to come from two distinct races or cultures to be double-cultured; my parents are an example of that.

Also, enjoying two cultures makes it easier to understand a third. Armed with this idea and a background in African Studies I decided to academically investigate the role of female sex traffickers from West Africa to Southern Europe (Ghana to Spain).

In the bedroom of a female trafficker

In the academic world, people were sceptical: I wasn't the first one to try, so I knew my approach had to be different. In Ghana, instead of first visiting the immigration services, UN agencies and all the other formal stakeholders, I went and met people in the trade; the women working the streets, those who had recruited them, the family members of both and everything in between.



Contrary to popular belief, traffickers in West Africa are often not men, but women between the ages of 40-65 years old. Women who represent power and authority and who can gain the trust of a younger woman.

Sex trafficking is often confused with voluntary prostitution. Rather, it's a situation wherein a person is trafficked from point A to point B, after which he/she is forced to prostitute themselves to repay the traffickers who financed their journeys to their final destination (often Europe). **The victims I met in Spain had spent up to 8 years repaying their debts in the streets of Barcelona. This is sadly only too common.** After 3 months, I gained the trust of someone who, in his own words, "knew a lady who sends girls to Europe." They called her Madam and when I first talked to her on the phone to set up a meeting, she laughed and called me 'baby.'

My first meeting was in a street-side shop in the slums of Accra in broad daylight, the streets were crowded and clouded with pipe smoke. The shop was attached to her house which was located further back from the main street. When I stepped out of the taxi, everyone stopped what they were doing to monitor what or who I was going to see. Because although I'm thought of as black in Denmark I am most certainly considered white in Ghana – and this was no ordinary place for a "white" woman to jump out of a taxi. **I asked the driver to wait. I didn't know if I would need a quick get-away but it was reasonable to think so.**

In the shop, again, customers stared at me and all conversations stopped. Through the fenced desk, I told the cashier I was here to see Angelica (cover name). She walked in and embraced me; I recognized her raspy voice from our phone conversation; she had a big smile plastered on her face, with red lipstick, and her hug felt warm and motherly.

For the next 6 weeks, Angelica and I would sit together in the shop once a week to talk about her story and mine, to discuss politics, family and life.

I would bring up the issue of sex trafficking, mentioning women I had seen on the streets or a news article I had read. Sometimes I would hint that I knew she was involved. And as time went on, she slowly began to reveal just how much. By our sixth meeting, she grabbed my hand and took me out the backdoor of the shop into her own house.

Outside her bedroom I could hear women talking, kids laughing and chickens running around. The chaotic atmosphere from the street resembled the ambiance in her compound but Angelica had a warmth that enfolded me. She trusted me now, and I trusted her too.

Eventually, we ended up having all our meetings in the sacred space of her bedroom.

Victim or perpetrator – or both?

As our mutual trust developed, she talked about the multiple rapes endured during her teenage years. She talked about her constant longing for financial and social security in a country burdened with corruption and inequality. She spoke about her relationships with men – both personal and professional during 24 years of sex work.



Some of our talks took place walking the sides of the roads of Accra.

When Angelica turned 42 years old, she understood that her “market value” as a sex worker was starting to drop and she had no education or skills to fall back on. Her daughter had died of reasons that are still unknown to me and had left two grandkids of 3 and 7 years old in her care. **“How am I going to feed them if I don’t make money?” she said, and how was she to make money if she didn’t turn to the only business she knew?**

I felt that society had let her down. Because she was actively involved in sex trafficking, any contact with official authorities would lead to her arrest. And in lack of sustainable, legal exit-strategies, **I wondered how many victims would eventually climb the hierarchical ladder of the trafficking network and become Madams, like Angelica.** After a lot of convincing, Angelica agreed to bring me to an underground “meet-up” between white males and local young women escorted by Madams. This was also a place where unescorted girls could meet Madams.

An association of sex and opportunities

The meet-ups work by independent chapters. Some chapters drink, some have parties, and so on. **The Ghana meet-up chapter does a little bit of everything – with a sexually aggressive twist. Real names are never used; only kinky nicknames such as “Juicy Mango” and “Pearl Necklace,”** It was hilarious to greet people.

I went through a “welcoming ceremony” that **placed me in the middle of a circle, trying to drink with a steel tube around my arm. It spilled all over my face while the circle sang provocative sexual songs.** They asked me where I was from, what I was doing and who had introduced me. I pointed to Angelica without saying her name.

Minutes after the ceremony, a young woman approached me. She wanted an introduction. Meanwhile Angelica, who rarely smoked, was laying back in a beach chair, a cigarette between her fingers. I introduced the young woman who almost kneeled at Angelica’s feet, smiling desperately praising Angelica’s looks, calling her beautiful and successful. Angelica barely looked at her, she kept a facade and so did the young woman. Angelica had to be tough and the young woman had to be submissive; she needed to seem desperate yet respectful. She was clearly going through an informal test to evaluate if she could handle Angelica’s toughness and that of her journey.

The tale of Sylvia, 21

At some point, I met a sex worker we shall name Sylvia (not her real name). She was 21 years old, and when I first met her, she was standing in a roadside-parking lot at 02:00 AM, wearing tight white leggings and a pink fur vest. At that time, she had already been trafficked to London and returned to West Africa twice. Now she was staying in a hostel run by a Madam. **I would come around p.m. to observe her and two other girls getting ready for work. They showered with a bucket and fetched water from a barrel; they did their make-up and hair, and told me about their lives.**



Sylvia's biggest dream, she told me, was to choose a man for herself. She had been chosen her whole life.

The hallways were noisy; girls were shouting and there was fighting. They told me that the Madam would beat girls after work if they didn't bring enough money back. One night, I came to the hostel to see Sylvia. She looked terrible. She had malaria and was not able to work. When she didn't work, she didn't eat either. She had no family in Ghana and the other girls in the hostel were fighting their own battles. Her phone was constantly ringing with customers calling because although she mostly worked the streets she had given her phone number to those she trusted. A phone call came in. A customer was early and was he heading up the stairs. She looked devastated and defeated. Sick with malaria, drained from energy and knowing that in a few minutes she would have to be at her best to ensure the customer would return. She snuck me out

the back staircase, Sylvia taught me about the power of human spirit. She taught me that those less fortunate and with fewer opportunities find strength and resilience where many others would simply give up. Yet, those qualities don't protect women working the streets and, perhaps, even less black women working the streets of Europe.

Being and understanding grey-zones

This journey into researching sex trafficking has been, and is still, an eye-opener for me. Victims of sex trafficking are usually forced into sex work at a very young age. **When they are massively deported back to West Africa from Europe, stigmatization, social and financial exclusion awaits them in their home countries. This is when women turn to the only profitable business they know and the only hierarchical promotion available to them.** I was expecting to meet an exploiting, aggressive criminal, instead, I met a grandmother who has been longing for financial and social security her entire life, **Angelica would have chosen a different life if she could have, but her only chance to end her own victimization was to inflict it on someone else.**