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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“WHAT MAKES A MAN? A LETTER TO MY SON” BY MIRIAM CRUZ

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.

Dear Son,

The first rays of sun are hitting my window, time for us to get ready for the day. Like every morning, I read the news in bed. Things don't transform overnight do they? There are still nine women killed every day, 270 of us every month, Impunity: 99%. In the media, there are hardly ever more than a few trivial lines about each murder, if that. That is what we are up against. Is it a culture, a system, a political act or pure instinctive dominance? Who knows but the word "machismo" certainly entails it all.

Rather, shall I say that something has changed, but the change doesn't come from them? Machos are still machos and there seem to be as many of them as there has ever been. What is different today is the struggle of women like me and the emergence of men like you. I don't read about people like us in my press review. I drink my steaming cup of coffee; I take notes, cross references, survey social media and think about how to make noise. How to challenge the endemic inertia of the justice system when it comes to defending women in this country?

You have your hot chocolate, you're struggling to wake up, I keep telling you that your screen time is over the charts but you go straight to social media, anyway..

I too was 16 when I learned to use my voice and I even won a speaking contest. At about the same time, I saw how the conventional media, influential politicians and public opinion kept arguing that it was our own fault if we were getting killed, girls as young as ten years-old too. It was because of the skirts we wore, the places we went or the fact that we were out after sundown. Nobody was taking us seriously; by us I mean a good half of this country. The idea that anyone was going to hear from victims personally felt ludicrous. And listening to women in general, a mere waste of time. Now Pubic Window our radio station broadcasts 26 shows, all with a strong gender perspective.

I've travelled the country, speaking in conferences and to the press as if I were standing in the frontlines, on behalf of the hundreds of women who preceded me, walled in a silence that hasn't bothered to justify itself until today.

At that same age, 16, my own mother, your beloved granny, was already married to a man who has been abusing her psychologically for the last 44 years, your grandfather. She was also pregnant with their first child. It's only when I finished primary school that my mother confessed to me that she had never had an education. Instead of going to school, every year my mother went to the fields to cut sugar cane with her family. They had no electricity, television or radio, neither did they have an understanding of what a book can do for you.

I know you love her very much and I wanted you to know that everything she knows today; she taught herself.

You're almost ready for school, you look good. You won't be talking much, especially about my work. When you do tell people, either they don't care or they tell you that I am going to get hurt because journalists get hurt. You'll just be patient and keep your thoughts for yourself. At home, during dinner, we debunk all these damaging myths about what being a man is about, 6 thrown at you by traditional education. I know it's hard for you, son. It's not just dinner table conversation. Believe me, I am aware that without the help of men like you there would be no point in a feminist revolution like mine.

Dear son, I have been your mother, and I have been your father. It hasn't been a choice, it just the way things turned out since your dad passed away. I am not alone 33% of mothers are raising children alone in this country. Somehow, this tells you that things have changed even though our society still looks down on single mothers. And they might especially mistrust single moms with feminist radio stations. It has been so exhilarating leaving my job: 20 years, in public administration. Now I feel more like a civil servant than ever when I provide women with a means to speak out and for the first time ever, own their stories.

You're the one who taught me how to start streaming on the web. Then we went on YouTube and Facebook live. During the first broadcasts,, it felt like our voices were emanating from some otherworldly place, where they had been caught for generations. Remember, when we did this shows about all those disappearing 12 years-old girls? They were lured by pedophile on the Internet and we helped recover them.

We went on the look for people and stories that have never had any access to the media. There isn't a free and fair press in Mexico especially covering women so it's not difficult to find untold stories, just turn to your neighbor. Right next to anyone of us, women are being raped, abused, assaulted all the time and nobody is talking about it.

Your grandmother told me that each time she gave birth to a daughter rather than a son (we are three girls and a boy), my father would beat her up. And when my second sister was born, he actually threw her out in the streets. But she came back holding infancy and pride. Today, he says that if his children are getting anywhere in life, it is thanks to his brain not hers. Thinking about the mental abuse memory she suffers irrevocably hurts me as much as it hurts her. Violence has a way of inviting itself in people's lives, spilling the reach of its traumas over generations.

When we lost your dad, I became both your mother and father. It wasn't easy, but I wanted you to feel complete and today, your struggle compliments mine. It is difficult for anyone to be in touch with oneself. But for a young man in a country that values an ultra-simplistic, testosterone-based definition of manhood, it is brave. And I know you do this, in your own quiet way, but I know you do it every day.

Today, you're used to it, your mom works as a journalist interviewing people for women's rights. I took you to so many meetings and interviews, this is all routine to you yet I can tell you are proud of what we stand for, each in our own way. You have a strong sense of what makes a dignified human being, and it doesn't involve violating women in any way.

It might not even involve gender at all, if it were not for the fact that we, women are trained like elite soldiers when humanism needs to prevail.

You are not certain that people are ready to admit that it sucks to live like a man if being a man means having no feelings. I know you would never confide in any of your friends if something bad happened to you. No way they'll do anything to support me, you say. In their great majority, your 16 years-old male friends believe in being macho, I know, I see their body language, the way they speak and how they refer to women as body parts. You remain quiet; you don't believe you should force them to think differently. Macho means take it, swallow those tears back and clench that heart. That is how you become a man. In the eyes of others at least, you have no idea how they deal with it on their own.

It's time to go now, we'll walk together to the subway, the Federal District already bustling with micro businesses and workers heading towards the city centre. Everyone deep in their own thoughts, alone, thousands of us tuned to our own little world, unable to understand other worlds around us or even take an interest in them. You will never be that man, insensitive and aloof. It isn't necessarily the easiest way to live your life, but it is the most significant by far.

When I speak to your granny about all this, I realize she doesn't understand what I am talking about when I tell her she could be free. I remember her selling chicken at the town makeshift market or making clothes, opening a dinner stall to sustain the future of her children, I especially recall how she spoke to her daughters. The way, she would sometimes whisper to me: “keep going” she'd say “no matter what.” The next thing you know I am going to tell you that she is the first feminist I have ever met.

Thank you for your indignation, my son, thank you for your critical mind,
thank you for teaching me about YouTube and for turning me into a
better human being.

I love you,

Your mom

