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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“TO DEFY HER DESTINY A WOMAN MUST BE HEARD” BY HEIDI BASCH-HAROD

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.



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"How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

Anne Frank, a 14-year-old Jewish girl, wrote these words in her diary over 70 years ago. Hiding from the Nazis in an attic in Amsterdam, she penned that powerful and eloquent call to action. Today, her words seem to gather more meaning by the minute as if she had written them for us and for our time. Our all-pervasive media society, which can be narrow-minded and sensationalist, is constantly exposing an unfair, greedy and violent world. It's also a world in serious danger of self destruction. "Starting to improve the world," like Anne Frank wrote, can trigger a feeling of powerlessness, paralyzed by the sheer magnitude of the changes required to improve said world.

Where do we even start? There are many factors that come into play, such as global insecurity and a fast-paced life. Also, we're not sure our help can make a difference and we're already running the rat race. **But if we did take a step back and took the long lens to look at human history, the verdict would be indisputable: this is exactly the time NOT to quit, particularly when it comes to the human rights of women and girls.**

The path for me to become an advocate for gender equality was forged long before I was even born. It began in the 1930s, in a fishing village in Sicily where my paternal and maternal families were friends. Poverty was the norm then and fishermen used hand grenades to save on bait and tackle. At some point, one of my great grandfathers saved the other when one of the explosives detonated prematurely. A promise was exchanged: as an act of gratitude and enduring loyalty to each other, the families would be united one day through marriage.

When my mother met my biological father at the age of 17, she was encouraged to pursue the relationship because my dad came from that family in Sicily whose patriarch was saved by my great grandfather, and the circle was complete.

Fast forward to the late 1970s. I live in a suburb of Los Angeles, California, where my mother's family settled after immigrating from Sicily via Detroit, Michigan. First, they escaped poverty, hunger and the mafia. Then, it was the frigid weather of the Midwest that kept them searching for a home. **But relocating to the United States did not mean that they had left behind their ways and traditions, especially towards women and girls.**

My mother had plans to study and the nuns at her Catholic high school believed she had potential. Indeed, she obtained high SAT scores which helped her apply to excellent universities. My mother decided on the University of Southern California to study psychology. But after one short semester, my grandfather declared that "educated women make for frustrated housewives," and the tuition payments stopped. As the wedding day approached, he also told my mom that if she was unhappy, she could always come home.

I questioned my mom: why didn't she fight back? She appeared so absent and voiceless, why did she let others make important life decisions on her behalf? My mother only found her voice that night when my biological father became physically violent with both of us, I was four months old. After that, my mother showed up on her parents' doorstep and said "it's either the women's shelter or you let me come home." She had tried to leave before but was told that her place was at home with her husband. She'd go to her parent's home, but her father would send her on her way back to the abusive husband.

This time, she was allowed back in her parent's home thanks to her infant daughter. But when the divorce proceedings started, she was warned against "airing dirty laundry" publically or otherwise, by denouncing the physical and emotional abuse she had been subjected to. So, she remained quiet before the judge. Then, she did the only thing that occurred to her to delay the verdict of joint custody: she nursed me until I turned two. Years later, when I pieced together my mother's story, I was able to fully fathom how doomed a voiceless woman is, she who is abused by partners, family members, and society-at-large.

She who deals with sheer insanity as, regardless of the gravity of the crimes or assaults she is submitted to, and is expected to pretend that nothing is ever wrong. Pretend that her dignity isn't being compromised each time she is abused. Pretend that she isn't being tortured so that everyone can look the other way. Without her self expression how is a woman supposed to pursue her dreams or to even have dreams? Her right to be self-sufficient is stripped away and the voices that might end the perennial cycles of violence are thus silenced.

My mother had her own way of breaking the cycle by instilling in me the imperative decision that I would live to be my own woman. One day, I spoke out against my biological father: for years he had placed me in unsafe situations, leaving me with strangers in unknown places. He neglected me and I no longer wanted to visit him overnight, if at all. She told him as much and made sure I only saw him when I wanted to. In doing so, she let me know that my voice mattered and that the boundaries I needed to set would be respected. And when I showed great interest in school, she campaigned to provide me with every opportunity to excel and go to university, to travel, to work in far-off places, and most importantly to become who I choose to be. **Starved spiritually and intellectually herself, she insisted that I would have limitless access to knowledge and that my education would free me.**

Today, we find ourselves in a strange paradigm in which women enjoy unprecedented rights and privileges (the right to vote, to work outside the home, have a credit card in their name...), while violent abuse of women remain an everyday reality for most and reproductive rights are being challenged all over. Also, **sex trafficking and pornography exploiting women and girls are still two of the most lucrative business endeavors a wealth-seeking person can invest into.**

I feel compelled to commit my work to women's rights as an act of gratitude toward my mother. And for the countless women throughout the world who defy the status quo with their voices and their actions every day. Since women in the media industry are still under-represented, the female lens remains an under-told vision.

I also aspire to challenge the men and women who continue to be complicit in the maltreatment of women, and to all those who deny that violence against women is humankind's greatest ongoing disgrace.

When we connect filmmakers and their works with activists and decision makers dedicated to guaranteeing women's and girls' full access to their political, economic, and civil rights, we build momentum toward a global culture shift beyond political quotas and economic incentives. In doing so, we hope to catalyze the true understanding of the statement that "women's rights are human rights."



