

**Feature Address on the Occasion of Orange the World: End Violence Against
Women**

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Martin Luther once said, “Courage is an inner resolution to go forward despite obstacles; Cowardice is submissive surrender to circumstances. Courage breeds creativity; Cowardice represses fear and is mastered by it. Cowardice asks the question – is it safe? Expediency ask the question – is it politic? – Vanity ask the question is it popular? – But conscience ask the question Is it Right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because it is Right.” End quote.

The social plague of gender-based violence is something we all wished never existed, the reality, it is here! It walks in our communities, it has found comfort in many homes and the threat of fear has silenced the majority of its victims. It uses coercive power to incapacitate and instil fear, it weakens its victims psychologically, physically, economically and academically and strips them of dignity, and it blatantly violates human rights and undermines one’s ability to experience a healthy and productive future. Because of its heinous atrocious acts

societies often prefer that victims remain silent, for in using their voices they unearth the bowels of evil within families and societies and often they are shamed for using their voices. Acts of gender-based violence are not isolated, they affect families, communities and societies, and it hinders the development, productivity and advancement of nations, and adds to the national debt. There can be no sustainable development or peace if women and girls are not safe, included at all decision-making levels and are actively engaged in the process of change.

The family has often equated with sanctuary a place where individuals should feel safe, loved, protected and accepted, however, evidence shows that it is also a place that imperils lives and perpetuates some of the most severe forms of violence against women and girls. As a former victim of severe emotional, physical and sexual childhood abuse and a victim of rape in my early twenties and a survivor of spousal abuse I stand before you this evening as an advocate, a thriving survivor, and a voice not only to speak about my experiences with pain and indignity but to also speak about what it cost us to survive.

There was a time when shame was all I knew because my perpetrators shamed me and then society judged me, there was a time when my experiences with childhood abuse, rape and spousal abuse caused me to question my own reality, however, the accepted norms of society gave me reasons to be silent. The abuse which I endured was not by my choosing, what was by choice was me deciding to break my silence

and ask for help and support; support to survive, to live, to reclaim my life, my identity, support to pursue educational opportunities and to be given the opportunity to become independent, economically empowered and to be part of the process for national change. In deciding to break my silence one of the hardest things I had to accept was the fact that the abuses were not my fault, the fact that society often blames the victims and the fact that perpetrators work assiduously for society to forget victims, make them irrelevant and silence them. Judith Lewis Herman, in her book 'Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror' stated the following "In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defence. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalisation.

After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself, and in any case, it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail." End quote.

However, victims are ever grateful for opportunities like these where our voices and experiences are not only heard they are also validated and allows us to become part of the process for change. My first experience with abuse began when I was around the tender age of six and a half seven and continued until I was fifteen years old. No child should have to live their life in fear, no child should have to fight mentally to stay alive, no child should find comfort in pain because pain is all they know, no child should have to make lies their foundation, and no individual's first sexual experience should be one of force, identity theft, striped innocence and pain As a child I experienced the pangs of hunger because food was often used punishment, often times I had to stand to sleep because lying down was painfully unbearable after receiving one of my normal physical beatings from my step-mother where she used the fan belt which marinated in stale urine. I know what it feels like to have school friends shun you because there was an odor emanating from your body all because as a child I made a conscious decision not to take baths or brush my teeth for a while hoping and praying that the stench would deter the sexual predator who violated me repeatedly, unfortunately, not even that saved me. I know what it feels like to open an empty gift box Christmas morning and the emotional pain and shame led me to fabricate an excellent story to share with my friends about the fantastic Christmas gifts which I received. The severity of the

abuse which I endured as a child certainly tainted my life and set me on a self-destructive path.

I lived through a time of extreme chaos, trauma and violence but I survived. Was I alone in this abuse? No, I was not as my brother had to also endure severe abuse and he found solace in running away, as that was his cry for help I was not that brave. However, every time the police were called in and he was found, they would give him an obedience beating one by one. Because they never took the time to investigate the reasons why they asked the right questions because all they saw was a beautiful well equipped physical structure and members of society who were honourable public servants and who contributed to the development of the community.

Abuse undermines and destroys lives, I know what it feels like to be choked by a husband then put on a dainty dress and go to church and smile and I also know what it feels like to live in a house with a husband who is also bearing his demons of childhood abuse. What many fail to realise is that victims often find each other on this journey called life and they connect on a level which persons on the outside cannot understand or imagine because they are looking for something familiar something like home while trying to escape home. I know what it feels like to say NO! And for a brief moment have your power taken from you through rape. Today, I stand here to share a summary of my story with the hope that it may ignite

individuals and organisations to do more, to say more to act more. I stand here to speak about societies call and clamour for victims like myself and those who have and are experiencing violence daily to break their silence. While we put out calls for victims to come forth, while we push for laws to be changed, advocate for policies and legislations to be approved and implemented, while we clamour for the passing of the national gender policy which is critically needed, while we work to educate others about CEDAW, and while we push for an independent human rights institute with a research department which is past overdue, and while we advocate for changes in the judiciary which process re-victimizes victim's and while we push for the implementation of a comprehensive training package for the police and other military personnel's we have overlooked the victims struggles to survive after abuse.

When I say we have overlooked the victim's struggles, we have overlooked what it cost for service providers and grassroots organizations like the one I represent and other organizations who work twenty-four hours sacrificing everything they have to support victims, we have not counted the cost for victims to continue with mental health and medical care, we have not counted the cost for victim's when it comes to home allocation, as a victim seventeen years ago my home was destroyed by fire today I am still awaiting the allocation of a home, we have not counted the cost for victims to be educated and the ease of access to

tertiary education as GATE only absorbs the academic institution tuition cost, we have not counted the cost to educate victims who never completed secondary school or those who dropped or pulled out of primary school, we have not counted what it cost to support a victim daily.

We have not made provisions for victims to access some employment which can enhance life, and we have not counted the cost of working with victims to help them to become self-sustainable, We have not counted what it cost to help a young girl who had to drop out of school because she became pregnant, and pregnant by whom? Most times it is someone four to six times her age and through acts of violence and incest, we have not counted what it cost to work with victims to aid them in becoming productive and independent, nor have we not counted the cost of poverty which abuse may cause. Somehow, even after abuse the victim is always punished and imprisoned by society through stringent bureaucracy while perpetrators are allowed to live free, accepted and normal lives. However, we have strengthened the red tapes when it comes to funding civil society organisations, advocates and helping victims after abuse to reclaim their lives, we have somehow popularised the following words “not aligning with our organisation's plans or this area is not in our mandate and oh! Our budget for this year has already been utilised” Yet, the same utilised budget would find the funds to sponsor a concert to bring in a popular artist. As advocates, our cause is certainly not a popular one but

we can make it popular by being relevant. I share this example with you, recently The University of Cantabria courtesy of the City Council of Santander Spain granted me a scholarship to attend a one week training programme for the IADB Emerging and Sustainable Cities Initiative, the training was in the area of "SUSTAINABILITY OF CITIES: THE CHALLENGES OF FISCAL MANAGEMENT AND GOOD GOVERNANCE" in their offer letter they stated that they realized the important connections between sustainability and women's issues. However, every government ministry and city corporation I approached for airfare assistance said one of the following: "what does gender-based violence advocacy have do with governance or emerging cities we cannot see that connection, we have no money the treasury empty, or this does not help our organization" in great shock I listened and looked and sadly realized that as a nation we have not yet made the connections between sustainability women's issues and life, everything that we do as families and communities affects the sustainability of the nation directly and indirectly. A city must become sustainable for it to become competitive, a city which is sustainable is able to create more jobs and this is the only way you are going to break the cycle of poverty and inequality, sustainable cities offer personal safety, equality and security for all. And to have sustainable cities we need healthy women and their full participation in the process. Ironically Trinidad and Tobago's capital was chosen by The Inter-

American Development Bank the IADB in 2011 as a pilot project for their Emerging and Sustainable Cities Initiative (ESCI).

In closing, while we encourage the victim to break their silence and leave remember those decisions are life or death decisions, it is not enough to say “Leave, get out or break your silence” We must also have mechanisms and systems in place which encourages those decisions and fully supports the victims. We need to effectively work to develop transitional housing communities, create financial funds to support victims, provide academic scholarships, and push for job security and innovative job creation incorporating green entrepreneurship which will open doors for economic stability, sustainability and independence. We need to effectively work with grassroots organisations as well as with the established organisations from within civil society as grassroots organisations are most often times a victim’s first point of contact. When victims decide to break their silence with the right support and mechanisms in place it can lead to sustainability, without support it leads to poverty, economic deprivation and homelessness. We need to have strategic disruptive thinking which changes the way in which government serves and protects the citizenry. And we need to use our voices, pens and technology to advance change as we cannot continue to embrace society’s benefits and remain with archaic thoughts, processes and actions. We need to prevent, reduce and eliminate violence in all forms against women and girls at all

cost, and we need to always remember the atrocities which endanger the lives of women and girls globally, but more so we need to never forget those of our sisters young and old who died while trying to survive. And we need to act because it is the right thing to do. Today, I beseech everyone here to act because it is right, support because it is needed and invest financially because it will be a strategically wise move to protect our future. “If I can use the debris of my life to make a change, save a life work for a better future for women and girls then what happened to me was not in vain.” –Sherna Alexander Benjamin.