

Creators of Justice Awards 2023

HONORABLE MENTION

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The weight of being a woman in Uganda

by Esther Amito

Being female is like a tap that can be turned on and off at anyone's convenience. How many times do you walk on the streets of Kampala and don't see any act of inequality? Things seem better, that's what most people see and say. Why are we blind to obvious facts?

I remember a conversation I had with this particular boda guy on my way from the school I teach. Well, our conversation drove us to a particular element that caught my interest, women riding bodas disguised as men. He told me of having seen women ride bodas to earn a living just as men do. I was fascinated with this evolution but then got sad when he said, "I don't think anyone would take that ride if they discovered it's a woman riding it," his reason for thinking so was that women are cowards who cannot take Quick decisions in front of a situation involving an impending accident (boda boda men ride so crazy in Uganda). Females are believed to be slow and delay in making decisions. What can be as heartbreaking as this? To realize that women interest-

ed in riding bodas have to dress up like men just to feel acceptable and picked up by passengers. Until when shall we continue to think that women are incapable of making clear decisions? Don't we admire a world where women are free to do what they want and care about without the fear of being questioned, ignored and demeaned? All I am asking for is a little bit of freedom which we supposedly think we have.

My beautiful lovely mum, currently advocating for my female rights whenever we are in the house and talking about work, men and family, is a 56-year-old woman who believed that a boy cannot in any way be compared to a girl. When I was growing up, whenever I complained about her not giving my brother the same house chores load as mine, she would tell me that he was a boy and that I shouldn't compare myself to him. From childhood, I always wondered why things were not fair and I didn't have the guts to speak, I believe I can do that better now. My brother, Mama's only handsome young gentleman, grew up to be different, he does chores at his place.

Are we baby machines that probably everyone thinks that our role is to build a clan for whom God knows? I dated my boyfriend for four years and we did not want to have a child then, but I got about five men who claimed to be his friends telling me to give him a child- that I have taken long to do so, actually, my boyfriend was not in a rush, but now I am a happy mother to my adorable- most amazingly beautiful little girl, not because of the pressure to give my boyfriend a child, but because I decided and he too decided. A couple of months ago I lost a childhood friend of mine (May He Rest in Peace) to hepatitis B. Now what was so interesting about his wreath was that people felt so sad and concerned about the fact that he died young and with no child. They blamed his girlfriend for not giving him a child. This is a world where a woman can easily

be blamed for silly small things by society such as not giving birth to children or for a particular man.

I am a friend to men, I just love conversing and associating with them. When I graduated, my male friends and some females, as if they have the same mind, told me to get married since I was done with education and there was no excuse for me to continue staying at my mama's place. I was furious at how they thought, but then I told myself it's how they see "us", a girl should study, graduate and get married. Now, what is the use of girl education? Is it to empower us, to give us skills, or to prepare us for marriage? We sit in the same classroom with boys and we are all intelligent beings, why then drive us to a path that we may not want? After education, females should decide, not be decided for by society and its expectations, but we are the society, and we can change. God believes in new beginnings, he saved from the floods for a new beginning

We are a source of happiness to our families and the people who love us. It's unbelievable that even today, in our villages, females are considered a bad-day maker when they are the first thing a man encounters early in the morning. We all know the tradition among the Baganda, and some tribes, that if a man meets a woman as the first thing when he commences his journey, he should go back to his home because that would be an automatically bad day. How do you feel if you become a reason for someone's bad, and why is this still applicable yet we make the men happy? Our sacrifices, love and affection make them happy; they blossom like the lilies in the mountains and shine bright like the caramels on a sunny day. No wonder the saying, "Behind every successful man is a woman". Yes! We can change tradition.

I love the initiative of our president, His Excellency Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, he has given power to women, not power to feel like a man, but power to hold leadership roles in our country, not just small leadership roles- our Prime Minister, Speaker and Vice president are women, and this shows that women are much more capable like men. But there is more to do, I look forward to a Uganda that sees the worth of women, a Uganda where women do not have to give to get, a Uganda where women are free to ride Bodas, a Uganda where it is not the woman's fault when anything happens to a man.

We should not only talk about girls and women, let us talk about our boys. Neglecting them has hiked theft, drug abuse and other vices. A friend of mine rides a boda and he is a father to a sweet little princess, he recently told me that his girl is growing so fast and he needs to work hard so he can provide for her to avoid her going astray. I asked if he had a boy, and he said "no" but went ahead to say that boys do not need as much attention, protection and care as girls do. And this is what most of us think when it comes to the boy child; they need our protection, love and care as much as girls do. If we continue this ideology, our boys will loosen. This injustice will slowly kill them, force them to make terrible tragic choices and we shall have monsters for brothers, friends and sons, and the fight will be for nothing, because we need boys who feel the urge to be better, who see how equal their parents love and care for them, this in turn will create a force to change masculinity as defined by the society.

Masculinity and my boys

We all know the feeling that comes with the word boy: strength, power, leadership, toughness, health and intelligence which all add up to what we think masculinity is. Its world stands at a

distance and watches us mislead and destroy our boys, we define it as being strong, powerful, untouchable and unbeatable. This is the problem, Our boys fall prey to this ideology, We raise them to feel and own masculinity and not act masculine.

I am a teacher, one time we were conversing and arguing about random topics and suddenly a teacher reprimanded a female teacher for calling her young handsome son sweetheart, he felt so disappointed that the teacher was raising a crybaby and a coward instead of a man and a boy. That the mother was not preparing her son for the world. His view is that a mother should not call her son sweetheart because it will make the boy weak, and timid and will not be able to withstand life. He added that it's okay to call the girl sweetheart. (I wonder why they smile and feel overwhelming joy when their wives and partners call them sweetheart. They should say no.)

We restrict and limit our affection for the boys in the view of grooming them and making them masculine, they are human and deserve our love as much as our girls do. We raise them to believe in a society that sees showing love as a weakness, we then produce heartless, reckless and careless men who disrespect women and above all beat them up, the society allows beating of women and men cannot be guilty whatsoever. A few men show affection but most boys and men repress their true selves leading to pretence in front of women and society just to prove that they are meeting the demands of society. We should not ask ourselves why there are more men in prisons and more boys in remand homes than there are women and girls. According to the New Vision report published on 23 July 2023, out of 2000 prisoners, only 9 per cent are ladies and 91 per cent are males. There are 155 boys and 3 girls in the Naguru Remand home. The murders on the streets and the burnt-to ashes bodies are usually men's. Why? We have pushed our boys and men to accept the burden of society, themselves, family and their women which is awesome but

when the boy does not have the means and the strength to carry the weight, what happens is that they become thieves, robbers, and murderers. In our classrooms, we teach them to feel intelligent and not be topped by a girl with the common phrase "How can a mere girl win you? " "Science subjects are not for girls" yet we are born different and with different capabilities, the future is feminine because we are killing boys today.

Recently I had a conversation with a man who told me his son does not need as much love and attention as his daughter. Where does he expect his son to get the love and attention from? To be loved and distracted, they seek attention through grievous crimes and actions. Men love their mothers because they find love, solace, acceptance and courage from their mothers. After all, the mother doesn't judge him and expects less from him.

"Be a man" is a phrase I often hear in my neighbourhood and streets, this phrase is associated with being tough, showing bravery and strength, the opposite is "ladish" and feminine. We forget that every child boy or girl is born with the natural ability and capability to be strong and weak at the same time, to feel vulnerable and overwhelmed, to love and be kind. Why take humanity away from our boys? Why do we impose traits on them, this is killing them and neglecting this will leave the boy child lagging. As we uplift the girl child, which I always do because I see that we have not achieved and we shall not achieve our agenda if the boy is left behind, the boy and society's norm are the centre of our fight. Let us redefine masculinity to ourselves and society, and also redesign society's norms of how a boy should be. When the boy child accepts and appreciates the natural masculinity, not the imposed one, he will appreciate the woman and the natural law. The English dictionary defines masculinity as pertaining to the male sex or gender. We are promoting animosity every time we define masculinity to our boys.

Lessons from the darker side of life

by Sujit Bhar

Around the stifling stench of the ugly, black waters of a canal, euphemistically called Adi Ganga, or the Original Ganges, in south Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), a few kids tied their loincloths tight and jumped in for a swim. My friend and I tried to stop them, “the water is too dirty,” we warned, but by then they were swimming in sheer joy. They had completed their evening ‘classes’ with us, and before their mothers get down to ‘business’, this was a short break.

That was a little distance in memory, with winter settling down in Calcutta in late 1999. My friend Sukalyani and I had followed Father Xavier, a humanist and a missionary, on a trip to a local bordello. I, a journalist, Sukalyani an entrepreneur, wanted to see what we could do.

The objective was to see how we could help in bettering the lives of the children of sex workers, under constant threat from several quarters outside the narrow, winding alleys: society used them, and then issued bans; the police threatened, and extortion followed; schools weren’t willing to take them on their rolls fearing social repercussions and local goons were always around for the juice. The children had to be kept away, somehow cocooned.

That day turned into six long years of our organising an informal school inside the red light area, making friends, understanding how life works inside those forbidden walls and how children still could retain their childhood, organising health camps with free medicine and some more.

Our objective was twofold. First, of course, was to give the children some basic education, instil some basic values and the second was to try and understand the overall picture of the existence of a brothel within a residential area, cheek by jowl with a busy market and a popular Kali tem-

ple. We needed to know how society deals with the ‘problem’ of prostitution, how does it absorb the presence of brothels within city limits, often near their homes and how do the people view those from the ‘other side of the divide’?

The six years taught us many things. Among them is the fact that the ‘normal’, as we see in society, isn’t normal at all. If you are a deeply social creature, too aware of your religious and social attributes, you may not even want their existence acknowledged within the family. You may want to believe they just weren’t there. This is the farthest point from enlightenment, and simple education may not have any effect on this anomaly. But sex workers are there, always have been, and will be.

Once you have accepted this as a fact of life, it becomes easier to assimilate within your mind the nature of such existence, and then ask the question ‘why’? From this ‘why’ will emanate other questions, such as ‘so how can we help’?

General social involvement in such acts is a strange mix of an assumption of social responsibility and guilt. As we settled down in our classes, we got offers from people in society, friends and acquaintances eager to make a contribution, wanting to teach. That was good news, till many said they were okay to teach, provided classes were held at some place outside the red light area. They were the ones who wanted to attain Nirvana away from where God lives. This cannot be organised.

What we learned was that the first step towards being part of this process is accepting the reality. And the reality is that sex workers are human beings too. As a recent order of the Supreme Court of India says, they are as much so, as our own families. That is the truth of humanity, the unfor-

fortunate 'divide' that had been created, forcefully, through the ages, when deprivation of humanity and of wealth dealt inhumane blows to some unfortunate people, some girls who could not defend themselves, or had no one to fight for them.

At that point, if you are serious, you realise why 'they' are 'there', on the other side of the 'divide'. It is 'our' fault. Yes, we are the ones who have refused to defend them, refused to accept their fate as a situation that needs correction. We are the ones who should become proactive, bear the burden of proof. We are the ones that should teach our young ones to be respectful, appreciative of the plight of sex workers.

The government does not care, either. In India, sex workers are not even acknowledged as a species, as a class. Officially, there are no sex workers enumerated during the ten-year censuses. They are mostly classified as beggars, something the sex workers hate. They live, they earn, they want to pay income tax and they want to be properly included within society. This enrages them, and they told us so. Sex work is not illegal in India, but soliciting is. Which means you can eat, but you are not allowed to go to the market to buy the food.

The government is as much a human construct as society is. As it built itself, ground upwards, many anomalies had been included in society, many obscenities, abnormalities and unjust causes. Those were the outcomes of the force needed to create a group of like-minded people. The issue of like-minded means not just people who naturally think alike, but those who have no option but to. If you think a little deeper, they are sometimes 'like-minded' just because of the definition of the target and not necessarily because all agreed on the how it should be reached.

Intellectual slavery has been around for ages, and that is one primary reason why the caste system has survived in this country of Lord Ram, the Hindu God, for millennia. That is why, in India, inequality started with birth. That is why even after birth inequality was often forced upon some luckless lass and thrown to the other side of the 'divide'.

We accept poverty and untouchability and sex workers in the manner we tolerate cockroaches; unavoidable evils. That should not be so. We need, sometimes, to step across the line, across that 'divide' and visit our sisters and understand how they live. How they have been denied their rights, but still live, how they are the modern leper colonies of our minds.

That was the perspective, the prologue to our experience of six years, before we had to give up, as money ran short and our personal professions started demanding more time. Yet, in those six years, we learned that these children were as much like our own, like any fun-loving child from any other family and that even the filth of the Adi Ganga could not tarnish their joys.

We also realised that none within that forbidden area was scared of the 'outside', none with obsequious bows, none ashamed of their parentage.

The most astounding example of this was when one sex worker sent in four of her children to our class. It was okay, till we got to know the siblings' names – Kamal Mondal, Aftab Mondal, Biswajit John Mondal and Khusi Mondal: Four children, three religions. We were curious, quite academically, but never showed any extra urge to get to the root of the 'mystery'. The truth came to light as casually as the children would deal with each other, when their fathers visited. What we found really admirable was the absolute ease with which each accepted the other's religion – and their respective fathers – and we wondered if this was a textbook case for reference and ap-

plication in our so-called ‘civilised’ world. There must be a lesson somewhere in this, for social scientists to ponder, for the world at large to see solutions in.

The bigger surprise was in the boldness of acceptance. There was no desire to suppress information, and no trace of shame. The honesty of it all was unbelievable. That we got to love the kids a great deal – and they, us – is another matter, quite unrelated to this essay.

It was interesting to note that while film stars Shah Rukh Khan and the Amir Khans and the Aishwariya Rais of the Bollywood world held the kids in rapt attention, they were also watching Born Free and Animal Planet. Even if they had to be taught the generations in the Mughal Empire, they were pretty much aware of the Ramayana’s nuances and many stories thereof as also of Jesus and nativity, and basic teachings of the Koran. Religion catches the fancy quickly, especially when you are looking for that last straw. There is a universality of reaction in this. Of course, such knowledge came from their mothers, and even their fathers (as I said, in most cases they knew who they were, and many visited them often). It was also knowledge assimilated from ageing sex workers, or the Madam of the brothel. It was a sobering experience – a sub-culture, as we call it, that accepts and adapts the world into its own little sphere. Probably that’s the only way they could survive anyway.

The basic purpose of this essay is to point out how warped our ideas are of a sub-sect of society that we would rather forget, yet a sub-sect that many among us forcefully created. We can take lessons from them, that will only be good for us, living in a cruel, divided world.

Hue: Embracing the Past, Nurturing the Future

by Nguyen Thi Dieu Quynh

Lost in thought, the taxi driver's voice pulled me back from my daydreams. "Why so lost, young one?" he asked with a gentle tone. "Oh, I just returned from studying far away, so I'm a bit emotional!" I laughed and replied with a local accent.

The road stretched ahead in the sunset, cars passing leisurely, people chatting without haste. My heart thumped with joy as I returned to my homeland, the place where I grew up for 16 years - the dreamy city of Hue.

Hue, an ancient city in the central region of Vietnam, is one of the most captivating destinations in the country, blending priceless cultural heritage with breathtaking natural beauty. With a history spanning over two centuries, this city preserves numerous valuable cultural relics, especially the Imperial City of Hue - a complex of imperial relics recognized by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage site in December 1993.

Vivid colors adorned sturdy walls, magnificent gates, grand palaces, and serene lakes. Despite enduring historical upheavals, these structures still exude elegance, creating a tranquil and sophisticated ambiance in the heart of the city.

It's so peaceful, strangely poetic, from the landscapes to the people. From the gentle, reserved smiles of Hue girls wearing conical hats as they ride bicycles along the streets, to the elderly women selling cakes to tourists - Hue makes anyone who sets foot here slow down, speak softly, and contemplate more.

Honestly, I've only been away from here for two years, yet I feel like it's been a decade. "How amusing," I chuckled to myself.

When I was young, I never thought I would leave this place. I imagined studying here, working, having a small family, leisurely strolling with friends, and living a stable, uneventful life. But life isn't as simple as a dream. A sudden event took my father - the pillar of our family - away when I was still young. I started to worry and think more about my future, which led me to leave this place.

In truth, due to its coastal location, this place has harsh weather and is prone to flooding during heavy rain. The local people are hardworking, resilient, and sincere but struggle to accumulate wealth. The cost of living here matches the people's lifestyle - reasonable and affordable.

I still remember a scorching day in September 2021 when the college acceptance letter arrived. Mixed emotions overwhelmed me - joy for my efforts paying off, and sadness for the high cost of education.

Walking under the shade of trees along the street, I sat on a stone bench, contemplating how to proceed. I yearned for knowledge and wanted to immerse myself in it. The university I got accepted to was in Ho Chi Minh City - the largest city in Vietnam and a future metropolis. It would be a place where I could grow and see the world beyond my comfort zone.

As the sun shone brightly until sunset, an old man with a gentle face approached and asked, "May this old man sit here?" I smiled and said, "Of course!" I gave him a seat and both of us remained silent, lost in our thoughts. Without saying much, we seemed to understand and share each other's emotions.

Suddenly, the old man spoke, "Young one, you seem to carry a difficult sadness." I smiled softly, "Perhaps."

"You have beautiful eyes," he said, gazing toward the setting sun. "Bright eyes, yet tinged with sadness. Your journey ahead may encounter many difficulties, but if you give it a hundred percent effort, so you won't have regrets later, then there is nothing to worry about."

"Remember, whether you go forward or backward, Hue will always be your home, a place to shelter you when you're tired," he added with a compassionate tone.

I didn't respond, and it seemed he didn't need an answer. Why do my eyes feel a little teary? Maybe it's because of the strong sun today, I thought.

We both sat for a while longer, and then I stood up. With a bright smile, I said, "Thank you."

Walking back home, I saw my kind mother, and I said with determination, "Mom, I know studying will be tough and costly, but please give me a chance. I won't let you down."

A month later, on a gloomy day with no sunshine or rain, the city seemed to bid farewell to its young one, sending me off to a faraway place. When I'll return, no one can tell.

I held my mother's hand and said, "I'm leaving now." I grabbed my suitcase resolutely and headed to the airport. There was lingering, there was reluctance, but I knew I would never regret it.

In the modern city where I had to study for four years, everything was new and unfamiliar - tall buildings everywhere, friendly people, a vibrant and bustling environment with a mix of cultures from different provinces, creating a lively, noisy, and vibrant atmosphere.

I'm not saying that Hue isn't friendly and developing. But its essence, deeply rooted from the old imperial capital, made the people in Hue gentle, poetic, sweet, comfortable, and carefree.

Starting a new life in this city came with its challenges, as there were no relatives or family here, just me alone. Luckily, I had some friends from my hometown, which made me feel less lost.

One memory I'll never forget is my first night in the dormitory - my first time being away from home. The room was tiny and cramped for four people, with only a bed and a table as my personal space, while the rest of my belongings were piled on the bed. I couldn't sleep that night; I kept tossing and turning, wondering if I could do it, how my future would be.

In this modern society, everyone is striving to succeed, and the pressure from society and self sometimes made me feel like collapsing...

Returning to reality, I walked on that tree-lined road once again, the scenery unchanged, except for the absence of the old man who used to sit on the stone bench. I'm not the 16-year-old girl I was two years ago. I stand here now, reflecting on everything that has happened in these past two years.

I've been through a lot, truly. Working hard with my studies, from morning till evening, from spring to summer, from autumn to winter. Crazy about part-time jobs, trying to keep up with the fast pace of the times. Those experiences have shaped the person I am today - someone who lives with no regrets, strong and resilient.

A short essay on starvation

by Cristina Mihailescu

I am obsessed with food. In the back of my mind, my memories of starvation linger, making me stock my fridge and cupboards with edibles, even though no famine or lockdowns are expected.

It is still a miracle I am not overweight...

Yesterday, waiting for a friend from abroad, I tried to find vegan restaurants in my town, Brasov, Romania, and to my unpleasant surprise I found out we only have very few of them. I looked through the menus of the best restaurants to see if they have some vegan dishes and I could hardly see a few. What is the choice vegan tourists have when visiting my town, starvation? This reminded me of my own hunger games...

In 1984-1988, the last and worst years of the Communist regime, when I attended university in the capital city, Bucharest, food was rationalized so that everyone had half a kilo of bread per week, and half a kilo of meat and 5 eggs per month. In addition to these, one could barely find salami, sardines, margarine or simple pastry in the food stores. As a student, the canteen used to give us a kind of soup that only smelled of chicken but never contained any, boiled potatoes (potatoes saved our lives, we, fortunately, had plenty), some boiled sardines, noodles in a mixture of milk and water...Even the pizza that could be ordered in some restaurants had carrots and sardines on it. It is a wonder how we survived on jam, margarine, potatoes, and local fruit. I refer to the people who had no connection to the Party or food shops. Those who worked in groceries and restaurants, together with the high-ranking Party members, were lucky to even get some oranges or bananas for Christmas without having to wait in line for hours. Oh, the memory all the

people of my age have of waiting days on end for a kilo of green bananas to ripen on top of the cupboard... The students were skinny, not even a single one of my colleagues was overweight back then. We survived on biscuits and apples but were not allowed to complain. God forbid a single word escaped our mouths, even the walls had ears and punishment was terrible.

Back in 1988, when I became a teacher in Communist Romania, one simply had to go to a job that could be anywhere in the country. The alumni had to choose, in the order of their final graduation marks, teaching jobs scattered all over the country. Once chosen, the job had to be kept for a long time. This would seem ok if it hadn't been for the fact that those jobs were 99% in the countryside, far away from one's home.

I was fortunate to have a good final grade and was able to choose a village that was only 75 km away from my hometown. But nobody knew what was expecting me there. In Romania, there are several areas where the inhabitants are of Hungarian origin. Despite the Romanian name, the village I had chosen was such a place where nobody knew my native tongue. And I mean nobody, except for the headmaster who could only have a simple conversation.

I do not blame them. They only heard two hours of the official language on TV every evening, those who owned a TV set and cared to watch the Comrade's speeches, the documentaries that emphasized the achievements of the Party and...ten minutes of cartoons. They had no motivation to learn Romanian since they could learn everything in their native tongue up to university. After high school or university studies, everyone returned to the Hungarian-speaking areas, so there was no need for them to know Romanian or any foreign languages. Nobody could leave the

country as a tourist except to other Communist countries and even this was very difficult if one wasn't a Party member.

When I got there, I knew no word of Hungarian. I had to live there, renting a room in the house of an old lady who couldn't understand me when I asked for a glass of water. I repeat, there was no ill will, nobody had anything against me, they simply didn't know the language. Consequently, I learnt theirs, as fast as I could. I made a pact with the children, I would teach them my language and they would teach me theirs. It worked very well, in a year we could have long conversations, and even when sometimes each of us was speaking in their language, we could get along perfectly.

Learning the local language proved to be my escape from starvation. In addition to the ratio of the monthly half a kilo of meat, my poor father saved his for me for the Saturday evenings when I went home. But for the rest of the week, I only had bread and jam for the mornings, a vegetable dish made by the landlady for lunch and...biscuits, canned sardines or jam for dinner. I was a bag of bones. I cried myself to sleep during the first months. Those autumn months were the worst in my life. We had to go to the fields and harvest potatoes. Even kids as old as 10 had to harvest the crops till the end of November. At least they had meat sandwiches from their parents, I only had jam. But at the end of these months, everyone befriended me and when we returned to school, the teachers started feeding me during the breaks with whatever goodies they had. All the locals, peasants and teachers, were hard-working people, having rich households full of farm animals. Whenever one of them cut a goose or a pig, I was brought a little bit to taste. And I have to say Hungarian food is wonderful; no wonder I was the only skinny person in the area!

Now life has changed me much, I am far from skinny. Though a vegan diet doesn't look scary to me at all, I still cook delicious Hungarian recipes and look back with nostalgia. And this autumn, 33 years after I left the village due to the Revolution, something fabulous happened to me, the kind of miracle any teacher dreams of: one of those kids wrote to me on Facebook, saying they all missed me and they were grateful to me for teaching them!