

What ifs of women's rights

by Portia Khanyile Shanduka

What if I was not female?

In a normal social setting

Who would be their reason for gender-selective abortion?

Who would be their reason for gender-discriminative socio-cultural norms?

Who would be their reason for gender-based violence and exploitation?

Who would be their child bride victim?

Who would be their rape culture victim?

What if I was not female?

What if I was not female?

In a humanitarian crisis zone

Who would be their shield in the war?

Who would be their target for abduction and ransom demand?

Who would be their economic survival tool in the refugee camp?

Who would be their sex-slave, and transactional sex object?

Who would be their child marriage and forced marriage victim?

What if I was not female?

What if I was not a resilient female?

In a post-war humanitarian crisis zone

What if I did not brave the attempt to escape from abduction?

What if I did not survive the fainting in all-night escape run carrying unborn and born baby?

What if I did not dare repeat escape attempt after being caught?

What if I did not survive the corporal punishment and detention after being caught?

What if I did not survive the repeated pregnancies and childbirth without health access in the bush?

What if I was not a resilient female?

What if I was not a resilient female?

In a post-war humanitarian crisis-zone

What if I did not survive the domestic violence in the bush from one forced marriage to another?

What if I did not survive sexually transmitted infections and other violation effects without health access in the bush?

What if I did not survive other infirmities in my vulnerability in the bush?

What if in my starvation I stopped breastfeeding or dumped my baby in the bush?

What if I did not survive starvation in the bush with my unborn or born baby?

What if I was not a resilient female?

What if my resilience was in vain?
What if I did not find social support after my escape?
What if I did not get my right to health access back in the war-torn town?
What if the national army guarding me in the garrison also violated me?
What if I escaped from the bush to other violation again in the refugee camp?
What if my community elders also hindered on my rights access?
What if there was no independent MSF for my health rights access in the garrison?
What if my resilience was in vain?

What if my resilience was in vain?
In a post-war humanitarian crisis zone
What if MSF did not offer comprehensive international sexual and reproductive health package?
What if MSF did not initiate social advocacy for my rights access?
I would not have accessed right to emergency health care on arrival as an escapee.
I would not have accessed right to health care in the community long time after escaping.
I would not have accessed my other rights coordinated to other sectors by MSF advocacy.
What if my resilience was in vain?

What if my resilience was in vain?
What if my community did not enhance nor promote my survival?
What if my community stigmatized and discriminated me for being a survivor?
What if I remained a victim of violation of my rights forever?
What if my family and stakeholders perpetuated violation of my rights and victimized me?
What if I was condemned and judged after escape for seeking medical abortion or contraception?
What if only a male family member must consent for my sexual and reproductive health care?
What if my resilience was in vain?

What if I was not a resilient female?
What if my future marital prospects were doomed because I am an abuse survivor?
What if the condition for my marriage was a favorable virginity test and pregnancy test?
What if my pre-war husband rejected me on my return from forced marriages in the bush?
What if no one wants to father nor adopt my babies I escaped with?
What if my husband in this zone wants me to make 20 babies to replenish the war-torn population?
What if once a victim or violation of women's rights always a victim?
What if I was not a resilient female?

What if I was not a resilient female?
Who would live to tell the story of women 'human' rights?
Who would tell the untold stories of female sexual and reproductive health rights?
Who would tell the story of women stripped of their human rights?
Who would challenge the SDG 3 Target of universal health access?
Who would stand to challenge the term 'access'?

Who would stand to say 'NO' and 'STOP' to denying women their human rights?
What if I was not a resilient female?

I am the resilient female surviving for the right to universal health access.
I am the resilient female surviving for the right to universal health access.
If it depends on my reaching health care not health care reaching me, it is not access.
I am standing for those females who are still victims and not yet survivors.
I stand for all females being violated till they access their women 'human rights'.
I am the resilient female standing, declaring . . .
Women's rights are human rights too and must be availed.

Portia Khanyile Shanduka is a feminist advocate for girls and women's empowerment, a humanitarian worker, and a sexual and reproductive health and rights activist. She works as a midwife, researcher, teacher and counselor in sexual and reproductive health issues.

Portia was born in Zimbabwe and has worked in Lesotho, South Africa, Nigeria and India where violence against women is normalized. She has witnessed abuse against her mother as well as endured her own. As a midwife and counsellor, she is constantly faced with women's experiences of discrimination. This poem is based on her work experience as a Midwife Activity Manager for Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF)'s sexual and reproductive health project in Nigeria.