

An abstract painting with vibrant colors and bold brushstrokes. The background is a mix of blue, yellow, black, red, green, and purple. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent red rectangular area.

POETRY FOR
SEXUAL AND
REPRODUCTIVE
JUSTICE

SRHM | SEXUAL AND
REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH
MATTERS
MORE THAN A JOURNAL

"Laying the foundations for a future of change"

What has poetry to do with sexual and reproductive health and rights, you might ask. And does it really have a place in a serious, scientific and policy journal?

We often talk about the importance of the evidence base and of empirical data. Empirical evidence is important but it tends to operate on a large scale, often removed from individuals' lives, so that it's easy to lose sight of the human element. Poetry restores direct access to the lived injustices that SRHM is all about addressing.

In this era of fake news, virtual reality, conspiracy theories and pretensions to a meta-verse, it's hard to find one's way through what we used to call fact and fiction. Poetry cuts through all that. Poetry communicates through words hewn out of deep personal experiences. The "evidence base" of poetry is each poet's genuine, unique offering, inspired much of the time by a sense of injustice, but also of the imperative to write the world in this way.

SRHM saw an opportunity. In October 2021, we made a call for poems on the theme of sexual and reproductive justice. Astoundingly, we received 107 submissions from people in 39 countries on all continents, people from many walks of life and many ages. They wrote about abortion, human rights, violence, sexual pleasure, menstrual health, maternal health, childbirth, genital mutilation, sexual orientation, gender identity. It was an explosion of all that people found central to their lives. Some poems express intense pain. Others exude strength and joy. All of them weave their own truths through the language used, the shape and rhythm and spacing on the page.

This SRHM collection challenges us to enter into each person's sphere, without judgement, but by hearing, tasting and feeling the truth of what is expressed. As just one example, Andrea Aguilar Ferro from Guatemala affirms, *My menstrual blood is an anti-patriarchal song... and smells like dignity*¹. Or Mahamuda Rahman from Bangladesh who writes, *My soul spreads her wings with my body in her hand... not a mother, not a mistress, not a piece of land*². How could a scientific or policy paper begin to capture such an expression?

¹ *Rebel Blood* by Andrea Aguilar Ferro

² *My Body is my soul* by Mahamuda Rahman

Our hope is that readers will not only discover and savour the poems in all their diversity, but will also sense how poetry helps to connect us across our diversities and differences. In the words of Audre Lorde, American writer, feminist, civil rights activist:

Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.

We encourage you to read and – if you wish – write more poems for SRHM!

The selection committee

Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad, Poet, Medical Doctor and Sexologist, Norway

Jane Cottingham, Poet and SRHM Trustee, Switzerland

Makhosazana Xaba, Poet and Women's Health Specialist, South Africa

Martha Ryan, Poet and MFA Candidate in Creative Writing, USA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Wellbeing** by Alice d'Aboville, France/USA, 2
- Why can't it just be okay** by Aliye Runyan, USA, 3
- Every other night** by Amma Cynthia Nalumansi, Uganda, 4
- Rebel blood** by Andrea Aguilar Ferro, Guatemala, 6
- Women** by Andrea Ek, Mexico, 7
- The curtain fall** by Anna Stoecklein Lau, USA/UK, 8
- The trials and tribulations of Amina** by Busingye Etesa Martina, Uganda, 9
- Forgive me, Father** by Carmen Barroso, Brazil, 11
- OV, you said?** by Céline Miani, France/Germany, 13
- I am mine** by Darlin Tessah, Ghana, 14
- UNFPA 'Strategic Plan'** by Dawn Minott, USA, and David Sunderland, Switzerland, 16
- My stained skirt** by Deeksha Sharma, UK, 17
- This voice** by Doreen Birungi, Uganda, 19
- For the women who came before us** by Elizabeth Wright Veintimilla, Ecuador/Sweden, 20
- The Bloody Letter** by Eun Joo Lee, Ivory Coast, 23
- Period Pain.** by Francis Muzofa, Zimbabwe, 24
- My word should be enough** by Gladwell Muthoni, Kenya, 26
- Calling from the cracks** by Gunjan Chandhok, India, 27
- Freedom + love** by Haiber Andrés Lagos Lemus, Colombia, 29
- Silence** by Hope Netshivhambe, South Africa, 33
- Re-awakening the Shrinking Blossom** by Ikenna Nwakamma, Nigeria, 34
- Sleepless crying** by Isabella Herrera Gonzalez, Colombia, 38
- Is it worth the wait?** by Jaine Kimu, Zimbabwe, 41
- Transcendence/Trans·sans·dance** by Jamela Law, Singapore/Hong Kong, 43
- Infertile** by Jennifer Blake, Canada, 46
- A Death in the Village** by Jennifer Neczypor, USA/Sierra Leone, 47
- Helen's Choice** by Jenny Sherman, USA, 49

This poem is like me by Jimena Cascante Matamoros, Costa Rica, 51
After the Gag by Juleini Vivien I. Nicdao, Philippines, 54
Three Ululations by Just a Poet, 58
The menstrual elf by Kathryn Anne Hart, UK/France, 59
Flora by Kristine Shields, USA, 60
Call It by its Name by Laura Warner, UK, 61
Taking a risk by LeConté Dill, USA, 63
Outside my story by Lianne Holten & Rosalie van der Wolf,
The Netherlands, 64
Chambers by Lobina Kaniz Kalam, USA, 67
My body is my soul by Mahamuda Rahman, Bangladesh, 70
My Blood by Margot Dupé, France, 71
The Feast by Marzieh Ghiasi, Canada/Iran, 73
on mother's day, our first together. by Megan Spencer, USA, 74
Menarche by Mitch Alcantara, Philippines, 76
A child mourns at her mother's funeral by Najmah, Indonesia, 79
Survivor by Natalia Díaz Zeledón, Costa Rica, 84
I am a Woman! by Nicole Moré Tchiemessom, Cameroon, 88
Can I get tested? by Nyambo Laura, Zimbabwe, 90
Pre-Treatment by Owolabi Bjälkander, Sierra Leone/Sweden, 92
Contraception is not a contradiction by Peace Umanah, Nigeria, 93
What ifs of women's rights by Portia Khanyile Shanduka, Zimbabwe, 94
Dear Lover by Rebian Sharon Atieno, Kenya, 97
The Taj by Roy Jacobstein, USA, 100
Heart by Steph Lum, Australia, 101
Under the Act by Susanna Rance, UK/Bolivia, 102
The rendezvous by Sushma Krishna, India, 103
Am I born to suffer? by Tough Lady, Zimbabwe, 105
As a child by Valentina Ortiz Rincón, Colombia, 107
The Choices by Winnie Madoro, Kenya, 109
Pinky Moment by Zhong-Cheng Luo, Canada, 112

Wellbeing

by Alice d'Aboville

I am blessed and sacred
To be capable of creating miracles
That outlive me

But I am also a soul
Who seeks discovery, pleasure, and glee
I am strong but vulnerable,
Whilst living within institutions built by men
Men who believe that the beat of *my* heart
Isn't as important as that of a group of cells

I fight for reproductive justice
For when *my* body follows instructions
But my soul desires freedom and my world is put at risk
I can keep ahold of the reins
And preserve my own health

Because my wellbeing goes beyond that of a choice
It spans throughout the community that is my sanctuary
The spirituality that is my strength and the access to
Economic and political security

My independence is what allows me to fly
My body is what allows me to thrive
Reproductive justice is what enables me to live
Because "Abortion is Self-Care"

Alice d'Aboville is a French/American young professional working in the nonprofit sector on public health. She has a bachelor's degree in International Development Studies and completed research on the history of reproductive justice in Canada. She is very passionate about reproductive justice and volunteered with the Montreal Abortion Access Project where she also trained as an Abortion Doula. Alice has also spent many years taking fine arts courses and painting. Poetry has recently become a new interest of hers in her creative expressions.

Why can't it just be okay

by Aliye Runyan

Routine
Mundane
Another medical procedure that we accept
Can sometimes be necessary,
Life saving,
Difficult -
But not always.
Not every end to a pregnancy is sad
Some pregnancies end in joyous birth
Some end with grief for what could have been
Some end with a sigh of relief
Freedom to be a parent or not to be
Freedom to choose one's path in life
Abortion is an act of love
Abortion is common
Safe
Should not be an undue burden to access
Why can't it just be okay
The story of abortion is made to be
Black and white
Good vs evil
When it is simply a part of life
Part of a person's reproductive journey
Part of being a human
Abortion is an act of love
Why can't it just be okay

Dr. Aliye Runyan is originally from St. Petersburg, Florida, USA, and graduated from the University of Miami Miller SOM. She did health policy and medical education work in the DC area from 2012-2014. She then completed ob-gyn residency at Wayne State University/Detroit Medical Center in 2018. She now works as an obgyn and family planning specialist in New York. Aliye's career interests include family planning, international public health, reproductive rights, medical humanities and wellness, and medical education.

Every other night

by Amma Cynthia Nalumansi

He snores
like a pterodactyl giving birth,
She ignores
the mosquito bites
the stench from his lack
of a bath
the stinging cold
through the thread bare blanket.

When suddenly,
jerked out of another awkward dream,
he arouses with a scream,
Her eyes shut tighter.

Another magical moonlit night
She is up thinking about money
In no mood to lick
something sticky just like honey.

The thought of another
hungry mouth to feed
is like venom on her tongue,
terrible in flavor,
But she is aware
he won't do her any favors.

Scratching his scanty beard
loudly passing gas,
groans escape his beer
belly,
He yawns in absolute boredom,
glances around the tiny bedroom,
Sharply elbows her back
and she knows she's out of luck,
like every other night
Till Death Do Them Part.

Amma Cynthia Nalumansi was born and raised in Jinja, a town in the Eastern part of Uganda where she is currently completing a high school degree. After she graduates from high school, Amma plans to pursue a degree in law to help fight injustices in her community.

As a passionate writer since she was only 10 years old, Amma shares experiences and opinions about sexual and reproductive justice through her poetry. She finds inspiration from people around her, many of whom suffer from poverty and illiteracy, including the young women who face challenging marriages. In her experience, poetry captures and reflects emotions, and is a medium to share and exchange ideas with different people. She is passionate about building a world where everyone has the power and resources to make informed decisions about their bodies, sexuality, and reproduction.

Rebel blood

by Andrea Aguilar Ferro

My blood is a rebel
She flows without violence
Without bullets
Or fear

My blood kindles new horizons
On the edge of time she paints the world in red
Hugs the little girl
And she talks to the infinite and the ancestors
She flows collectively
Historical
And free

My menstrual blood is an anti-patriarchal song
A red poem
A woman living in freedom
It is my living body
It is memory
It is life
Laughter
And smells like dignity.

Andrea Aguilar Ferro is a Guatemalan menstrual activist and educator, the co-founder of Guatemala Menstruante and Nana Luna (projects dedicated to eradicating the menstrual taboo in Guatemala and enhancing new narratives that contribute to achieving menstrual justice), a feminist anthropologist, and the mother of a daughter. She currently holds the scholarship for the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree on Women's and Gender Studies in the universities of Lodz in Poland and Granada, Spain. Her research focuses on menstruation, menstrual experiences, body experiences, anti-colonial perspectives, feminism, and diverse forms of activism.

As a passionate writer, Andrea believes the relationship between poetry and sexual and reproductive justice is powerful and complex. Through her work, she aims to give space to topics that are too often stigmatized and taboo. She connects emotions with political struggles and invites readers to reflect on their own experiences and perhaps change their narratives around these issues. Andrea believes that poetry is both deeply personal and a powerful tool to unveil collective experiences and voices.

Women

by Andrea Ek

Literature and women
weave rights,
unravel gender roles.

Female eroticism
stiches landscapes of love,
 night cities,
feminine roots.

Suns are not enough
to touch justice
 and loosen wombs,
only literature...
 and women

Andrea Ek is a young writer from Mexico. She is a creator of digital content to promote reading. Her works include poetry that recalls local landscapes and ideology about life. Her contribution to poetic dissemination has taken place through workshops, presentations, public spaces, and digital media in which she has dedicated time to the reading of her personal creation as a great lover of the word.

The curtain call

by Anna Stoecklein Lau

When the curtain lifts
and we finally see it was all an act

will we applaud the show
or begin to replace pretence with fact

my life depends on it
and your life too

for when I suffer
so do all of you

without me you move backward
repress, regress, unwind

with me you move forward
our fates are intertwined

this fight about life
will only end in death

because if he continues to control the show
like I, Mother Earth will take her last breath

we must lift the curtain on the puppet's master
and reveal how his strings hold everyone captor

for when all finally see how he has come to manipulate
he will no longer hold the power to control our entangled fate.

Anna Stoecklein Lau is an American woman living in London, UK. She freelances as a podcast producer and speaker, and hosts her own podcast called The Story Of Woman where she interviews authors of non-fiction books who are writing about our world from women's perspective. Living in a deeply 'pro-life' community for her first 21 years, she has seen firsthand how fearmongering and disinformation can transform pure hearts into inhumane, fanatical belief systems. These experiences have been a determining factor in how she advocates, creates and exists with a fierce passion for reproductive justice.

The trials and tribulations of Amina

by Busingye Etreso Martina

I have light-skinned and dark-skinned daughters,
You know how blessed I was
Just mention what kind of wife
you dream of
So, we can talk of the cows involved!

This is the exchange,
that led to Amina's marriage.
A primary school graduate,
Who will now never again set her eyes on a board,
Besides schools may never open
Therefore, there are no regrets
She is a woman now.

Amina's husband
A toad twice her age
Boasts of marrying one of the
Most beautiful girls in the country
With a belly, almost the size of hers
Yet in hers sits a child
Who kicks to greet his mother

Night holds more than darkness for Amina
Her husband returns straight from the club,
A kilometer away from home
Staggering through the ajar rickety door
Calling out for his beautiful wife

Instead of lips, fists and feet meet Amina's body
Which hurts from head to toe.
Not from labor pains
But the "tough love" of her husband

AMINA!!!!!!!
Where is my water for showering?
Must I remind you all the time to get it?
Every morning you act sick,
But I know
You are lazy!
You are dirty!

You want to start work in the afternoon,
I know your tricks
I AM YOUR HUSBAND NOT YOUR FATHER!

Amina nauseous every morning,
Hurries to get her husband
A basin of water to shower.
Then rushes to the cramped-up kitchen
To make her husband breakfast.
Amina, no one told you,
Your husband is your firstborn child!

Amina wants to start a kiosk
To supplement the food on their table
for she doesn't eat right for her condition.
But what will her family say?
What will his family say?
What will her neighbors say?
What will the village say?
That her husband failed to provide for the family?
She is a woman and therefore she will sit
And wait for the confetti her husband brings,
Whatever remains after he has had a drink.

One year into hell more fire blazes
Her husband is knocked by a speeding car
On his way from the club
Amina is left with three infants
And in-laws that won't sit in the same room as her
Since she led to the death of their son

No source of income but handouts
She will start her own kiosk
Tomatoes to sweets
She will get revenue
To feed her offsprings

Amina's dream of becoming an engineer,
Keeps her pillow wet.

Busingye Etesa Martina is a 19-year-old woman from Uganda. She is currently a student at Mt. St. Mary's college Namagunga in Form Five. Martina loves writing poetry especially because it lets her speak her mind in ways that seem impossible. She is the founder of the Tsunami Of Hope community which is all about building positivity in the world. She is also about to launch her own blog called Unfolded pages.

Forgive me, Father

by Carmen Barroso

Forgive me, Holy Father
because I was so ignorant
I did not know
how to protect myself

Forgive me, Father
because I was so stupid
I thought
it would never happen to me

Forgive me, father
because I was so naïve
I believed
you would take care of me

Forgive me, father
because I was so young
I did not know
how to care for a new life

Forgive me, Father!
because I was so weak
I could not
convince you of my reasons

Forgive me, father!
because I was so powerless
I did not
have many options

Forgive me, Father!
because I was so dense
I did not appreciate
the guilting power of the church

Forgive me, Holy Father!
because I felt so ashamed
I did not stop the priest
from playing with my body!

Carmen Barroso has been in the women's movement since her youth, and has supported movement building throughout her distinguished career, beginning as a university professor and a founder of a women's studies center in Brazil. In the 1990s, she was a director of the MacArthur Foundation, which supported women's organizations in Latin America, Africa and Asia. She retired from her position as director of the Western Hemisphere of IPPF but continues to be active for reproductive and sexual rights, through writing, consulting or serving in global committees of the UN, WHO and UNFPA. When she received the UN Population Award, her speech dedicated it to the doctor who carried out her abortion when she was a student dreaming to overcome the Brazilian dictatorship. She started writing poetry in the last decade and has published some, mostly in Portuguese. "Forgive me Father" was written when the Pope pardoned women who had abortions.

OV¹, you said?

by Céline Miani

It was not that bad
It was not an insult
It was not a swear
How come it still bites?
Menacing, perceptible, somewhere in the air.
It was a sentence, an attitude maybe
No hello, no name, just a body
Which entered the room unannounced
Laid against the wall, arms crossed
And in a detached (and was it mocking?) manner,
Pronounced a few words that were not to be forgotten:
"If you didn't scream that loud it would go faster"
Can it be a violence when it is true?
Cause then came silence and the head was through.
But years later, still hearing the weight of these words
The sting, the wound, the shame and the guilt,
A burden that shouldn't be, a burden of no reason,
And wondering what if, this midwife had not been there,
And (re)searching how, maternity care could be better.

¹ OV stands for *Obstetric Violence*, defined as any form of dehumanizing treatment during childbirth.

Céline Miani is French by nationality but she currently works in the Department of Epidemiology & International Public Health at the School of Public Health at Bielefeld University in Germany. She is a mother of three and a health and healthcare researcher. This poem is about obstetric violence, or the right to respectful maternity care during childbirth.

I am mine

by Darlin Tessah

Even as I sit here,
I sit a human
Not less than you, man,
I sit as a capable woman,
Also able to woo man.

So, this is my proposal;
Do read it and take it as personal
As you would your own business.
I mind mine,
Do not undermine mine.

So, here we go:
Treat me with dignity and respect;
I deserve it simply because I am human,
Not because I should earn it with giveaways;
No! Not at all.
I am no promo nor a jackpot machine.

I see the way you look at me
With those lustful desires
Lurking in your eyes.
I see you salivate and crave
For me to be in your arms;
Oh, I see them all.

All you think about is
To get between my thighs
And desecrate this beautiful temple
With thrusts and spans.

But these desires are inconsiderate.
It is all about feeding your insatiable appetite
Such that you think my body is your entitlement;
Your title deed,
Like a building you bought with a price; no.

I will not be an amusement park
Where you take a walk and pack your balls,
What is it you want at all?
Leave me alone, please.

I will heal from this pain
And aches you have caused;
I will not succumb to thoughts
Of worthlessness and desolation.
Again, I will heal and recover;
Nothing shall hinder this comeback.

My body is mine, and all its features;
I own them.
These beautiful features of amazing artwork,
Carefully sculptured and crafted.
I am a piece of ingenious art, believe that;
A piece of well-knitted compositions.
This is not a superposition;
I am a masterpiece.

Born to Ghanaian parents, Gab-Darlin Mate-Teye (pen name: Darlin Tessah), was raised in Accra, Ghana. He attended Achimota Basic and St. Charles Minor Seminary Senior High schools. In year one of high school, Darlin's poem was shortlisted in the 'I Say No to Human Trafficking' National Essay Competition. He has a BSc. Computer Science from the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration.

A youth advocate with the Children and Youth in Broadcasting (Curious Minds), Darlin Tessah is also an author of a collection of poems titled, Cognitive Drama, launched October 2021. He is also a graduate of the Ghana Writers' Marathon, class of 2020 from which this book was birthed.

His writing borders on life experiences and challenges of the young adult and the fulfilment of potential.

UNFPA 'Strategic Plan'

An acrostic poem

by Dawn Minott and David Sunderland

S is for SUSTAINABLE Development Goals - the Strategy inspires us to strongly boldly go
T's for THE TEN 10-year-old girl - she beckons: build our world back better, so I can thrive
and grow

R is for RESULTS - with partners in 150 countries in which we'll implement

A is for ACCELERATORS - interconnected menu of 6, they'll help us orient

T's for TRANSFORMATIVE - the trilogy of zeros at the heart of all we'll do

E is for ENDING maternal deaths, unmet need, GBV and harmful practice - all are ended too

G is for GENDER equality - rights, choices and changing social norms

I is for ICPD - from Cairo to Nairobi, pushing back the push-back storms

C is for CALL to action - SRHR for one and all! Gathering partners, and building innovative
platforms

P is for PEOPLE - the heart of UNFPA, our Staff and all of those we work with to create a
better day

L's for LOVE - love for me, love for you, love for every woman and girl along our mandate-
way

A's for ACCOUNTABILITY - step by steady step, staying on mission we won't be shy

N is for NEVER. Never shall we cease to try, welcoming surprises till we find that we can fly

Since early 2020 in response to the restrictions in staff coming together due to remote working, UNFPA has been running the 'Arts and Culture Lounge' (ACL). The Lounge serves as a virtual platform in which staff and external guests share their artistic talents as a creative way to engage with the UNFPA mandate through the arts as well as to learn and appreciate the diversity among staff. The UNFPA Executive Board recently approved its Strategic Plan 2022-2025, and the ACL gathered senior management of the UNFPA Executive Committee and staff across different levels of the organization to celebrate the Strategic Plan through the arts. One piece was an 'acrostic poem' penned by David Sunderland and Dawn Minott and recited by 13 Staff ranging in categories and across levels, each delivering a line starting with the first letter to spell out 'Strategic Plan'.

My stained skirt

by Deeksha Sharma

I wore a skirt today morning
Pretty light grey skirt, flowing merrily
Like breeze flowing on a cloudy day, expecting
Some rain showers today, heavily

I got my period a day before
My period date, but that's normal
And I quickly wore a sanitary pad
Adjusting it neatly and proper

But I was so much in love
With my new skirt - light grey
That I was so determined to wear it
And not wear something dark during the day

I went outside to buy some groceries and then
Walked through the park in my view
The breeze was flowing like my skirt
And, there were some showers too

Showers! from my vagina
Not from the rain
Not its soothing water droplets
But painful red blood, this month again

I could feel the green grass around me dancing
Noticing my uterus bounce and shake
So, I sat on a bench for a while
Feeling my blood vessels break

I pressed my belly and wished I could
Teleport myself back home
Oh! this slimy-thick blood
Moving gently like an earthworm

I stood up and glanced at my skirt behind
Damn, a red stain on my skirt
Conscious and insecure I felt
Hoping no one sees this, but there's no dearth

No dearth of people staring at my skirt
Like something they've never seen
What's the matter if there's a stain?
I'll go home and clean

I kept walking swiftly like a car
That lost its brakes in muddy dirt
And I can notice people
Noticing me, my stained skirt

If I close my eyes to the world
The world can still see me
Oh! I need to rush home
I need to pee

And I reached home
My light grey skirt has a new design
Of two big red polka dots
Imprinted so fine

I washed myself, and
Changed my stained skirt
Walking across the room
I opened my cupboard

Thinking now what I should wear, maybe
Something dark to hide any stain
Smiling at myself, I blinked an eye
I took out a pant, it was white again

Deeksha Sharma is a development sector professional, currently working as an Associate Consultant with a Research Consultancy (based in the UK) that is working to end modern slavery. She holds a master's degree in Gender and Development from the Institute of Development Studies, UK, and is passionate about finding creative ways to lead social change and create more happy, conscious, and inclusive communities. Her goal is to raise awareness around pressing development issues and to help create more effective policies that have better outcomes for the individuals as well as for society in general.

Her poem highlights that ending period stigma can lead to improved physical and mental wellbeing. Reproductive health rights are human rights and by upholding these rights, we can help create an environment that is free from shame, fear, and insecurities. Deeksha loves creative writing and poetry and has her personal blog youinverse.org.

This voice

by Doreen Birungi

I roar and I roar with a deep and a silent voice ... voice of a terrified silent woman.
A voice filled with terror!

I roar and I roar with a silent voice ... voice of a silent terrified woman
Tornadoes! Storms! And lightning!
Moving through broken families,
Families of broken women.

Silent voice of a terrified woman.
Mothers and sisters are no more than feathers
Yes, feathers to wipe the dust, dust due to battering, rape, and disempowerment.
Dis-empowerment is no empowerment so don't underestimate
A broken woman who is to maintain an acceptance of being a perfect woman or mother

Voice of a silent terrified woman
From deformation to disgrace
From disgrace to dishonour to debasement
From discomfiture to depression.

Voice of the silent terrified woman
Gender parity is not gender- disparity
Listen! The roaring silence
Are no replacement for women's agency?
Wake up! Respect! Prevent! Respond! Be exemplary!
Yes, I'm talking solutions and ending sexism against women
Ingrained prejudice against women is no foundation of an easement.
And it has to be now.

The Voice of a Silent terrified woman! Yes! Voice of a Silent terrified woman
The roaring voice?
And I would be tempted to be a terrifying woman - the roaring voice of a no-longer silent,
terrifying woman!

Doreen Birungi is completing a master's degree in gender studies at Makerere university in Uganda and works as a gender specialist at Sproutly Support Services (a Women-Consultancy firm, located in East Africa and Nigeria). She is passionate about gender, human rights activism, and feminism. Doreen is also a writer and has published pieces on menstrual health management, on gender-based violence against women in refugee settings, and on men's involvement in sexual and reproductive health during the 42-day lockdown in Uganda.

For the women who came before us

by Elizabeth Wright Veintimilla

"Yo quisiera haber tenido las fuerzas
para decir *algo* cuando tenía tu edad"
I wish I had the strength
to say *something* when I was your age

My mom admires me because
I go to protests
I share my opinion
I built my life the way I wanted to.

It makes me happy to know
she admires me
but I hope she knows
how much I admire her.

She didn't go to protests forty years ago,
but she joins me now.
She didn't share her opinion when she was younger,
but now she defends and protects mine.
She once couldn't build her life the way she wanted to,
but she supports me as I build my own.

Who brought you to the world
Who birthed you
What happened
before she gave birth to you?

It is not my story to share,
but I think that's why
she once said to me,
with a lot of pain and regret

"Yo quisiera haber tenido las fuerzas
para decir *algo* cuando tenía tu edad"
I wish I had the strength
to say *something* when I was your age.

Tell me
what does justice look like
for the women who came before us?

Elizabeth Wright Veintimilla is a gender specialist and feminist advocate from Quito, Ecuador. Having been raised by a widowed mother, she learned early on about the importance of women's autonomy and self-reliance. Her areas of interest and expertise include sexual and domestic violence, reproductive justice, migration and mental/emotional health. She holds a Bachelor's degree from Hampshire College and a Master's degree on Gender, Violence & Conflict from the University of Sussex. She is the creator of Picture Her Story and Me Voy de Casa, and currently leads a transnational feminist co-mentorship program with the Society of Gender Professionals. Ely is currently based in Stockholm, Sweden and recently joined RFSU, an organization that runs projects and programmes to promote access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, both in Sweden and internationally.

The Bloody Letter

by Eun Joo Lee

With the letter F - *fistula* - scarred in my core,
I wonder.

Had I choice to be born wherever,
Had I choice to be a boy,
Had I choice to learn and write,
Had I choice to yes and no,
Had I choice to go see doctor,

Would I still have holes inside?
Would I have heard my baby cry?
Would my life be bloody different?

No wonder.
I wonder.

Eun Joo Lee is a passionate young woman and a business analyst who loves researching and bringing creative solutions to make positive changes in people's lives. Right now, she works to eradicate obstetric fistula and to empower women in Côte d'Ivoire.

Period Pain.

by Francis Muzofa

Pads!

Yes, sanitary pads.

Menstrual tools.

Why is the biological process of woman stigmatised?

Why is period pain tabooed?

Ironically sex is a choice.

That makes condoms a choice.

Menstruation is a law cast in stone.

Which makes pads a need not a want.

Condoms are available everywhere, including rural tuckshops.

Condoms are advertised everywhere continuously.

Condoms are cheap.

Some brands of condoms are free.

Buying a condom is glorified.

Buying pads is stigmatised.

I am not, advocating for the death of condoms.

I am calling for the birth of PADS.

Why can't pads be subsidised?

Why can't pads be free?

Why can't menstrual health be advertised, like condoms?

Why are people not conscientised about menstruation?

Why should poor rural girls use leaves?

Why should they miss school?

Why should they be the talk of the school when they mess a school chair?

Why are prominent woman quiet?

Why are their voices so low?

Why are man not interested?

Don't they have mothers, daughters, and sisters?

Woman is your conscience clear?

Man are you exonerated?

If menstruation was a choice, all women wouldn't choose it.

Remember it's not just physical discharge.

It's a total package.

If you can't stand up who will?

If you can't say it who will?

Be the voice to the voiceless.

Normalise menstruation, God ain't a fool.

Francis Muzofa is a technician from Zimbabwe, currently based in Namibia. He has been a poet since childhood but has deepened his art during the COVID-19 pandemic. He writes poetry primarily on gender issues, climate change and philosophy.

My word should be enough

by Gladwell Muthoni

My heart rate changes,
my diaphragm pushes against my lungs
making it difficult to breathe.
Is it a dream or something is pushing against my groin?
Tears well up in my eyes as I gather courage to open my eyes.
I reach out to check and he pulls his hand away pretending to be asleep.
I shout and everybody is angry I woke them from their sleep.
We still have an hour before reaching our destination.
Shame and guilt fill my heart.
Why did I sleep? I should have sat at the front or maybe next to a lady?
Should I report? How do I prove it?
He changes his seat and leaves me crying.
At the police station the officer smiles as he writes the statement,
selecting what to and what not to include in the report.
I begin to question if this was worth all the trouble.
I leave the station and go on to work
and choose to forget what happened.
I talk to women about their rights but I did not know how to defend my own,
no, I cannot talk about it for they will ask me questions
why didn't you talk about it earlier, aren't you an empowered woman?
why didn't you report it? what were you wearing? questions that will only tear me apart.
I may not have evidence but my word should be enough.

Gladwell Muthoni is a 27-year-old sexual and reproductive health rights advocate and founder of Women for Sustainable Change, a community-based organization in Kenya. Gladwell is passionate about empowering and enabling young people especially women and girls to make informed choices regarding their sexuality through sexuality education and referral to services.

As a youth advocate, she has worked with different stakeholders at the county and national level in advocating for review and development of policies that enable young women and girls' access SRH services including legal and safe abortion. This includes writing poems on different challenges women and girls face. Gladwell has equally been able to train young people on advocacy and offer technical support to different community-based organizations on youth programming.

Gladwell believes in empowering young people to take leadership roles and offer sustainable strategies to address violation of SRH Rights.

Calling from the cracks

by Gunjan Chandhok

Shattered, bruised and battered self,
I want an open sky for myself,
Whisper to the winds, bring me a chance,
Looking in the mirror for a hopeful glance.

I see I am a sexual slave to you,
And that's the fight between me and you,
There is a dark sight when you hold me tight,
Clit slit is my hard plight,
A ray of light is my only flight,
To shout, scream and voice my stings,
Aren't they my human rights?

I bleed when you need,
I silence my dreams,
When you ride on your pride,
My aching emotions are high on tides,
Walls of prejudice are so high,
My clipped wings cannot fly.

In serving you lies my identity,
Cooking and washing defines my fidelity,
My womb chamber lous my fertile treaty,
Cold, numb, beautiful me bejewel my dignity,
Does it not pinch your integrity?

You take my name,
Label my character with utter shame,
All bad are to my blame,
I wonder what is this game?

Praise, raise and embrace a woman,
A daughter, a sister, a mother, a wife,
Above all she is a human life,
Take your knives and rip apart,
Oppressive traditions and conventional parts,
Affection and dedication,
Patience and consideration,
A man becomes a man through compassion.

Gunjan Chandhok is a senior research fellow at the Department of Social Work, University of Delhi pursuing PhD (Social Work) on 'Influence of Intimate Partner Violence on the Reproductive and Sexual Health of Women'. She holds M.Phil. degree from the Department of Social Work, University of Delhi with a core focus on the 'Reproductive and Sexual Health Rights of Young Married Women Residing in the Urban Slum of Delhi NCR'. Ms. Chandhok has authored a book titled "Autonomy over Anatomy: Reproductive and Sexual Health Rights" entailing lived experiences of women seeking agency and control on their sexual self. The book draws its genesis in human rights and sustainable development perspectives. Her core areas of interest are public health and gender issues. A postgraduate in Social Work and a graduate in Commerce, from University of Delhi, she also holds a Master's degree in Gender and Development Studies. She has presented her work at several national and international platforms and has considerable publications to her credit.

Libertad + amor

by Haiber Andrés Lagos Lemus

Original in Spanish

¿Por qué mi forma amar está mal?
el amor es intrínseco en mí,
es mi libertad expresada en abrazos
y mi voz en una explosión volcánica.

Me conocían como "Daniel",
pero mi alma siempre estuvo
tatuada como Daniela;
y ni la frialdad de un mundo anticuado
¡me lo arrebatara!

El veneno disparado por ojos ignorantes
de la diversidad colorida del amor,
del sin límites de sensaciones
y emociones que solo se disfrutan
mejor fuera de una cárcel de madera.

Que, al mismo tiempo me atormenta,
viviendo a la expectativa
de monstruos callejeros que me
quieren arrebatarme mi identidad,
por vagas ideas de ancianos extranjeros.

Con el odio materializado
en pólvora y acero,
y que solo oxida los sueños
de cientos de mis hermanas.

Guerreras sin tregua,
azotadas contra la orilla por evangélicos,
paramilitares y cualquier otro tipo
de cerdo conservador.

Que, en forma despectiva,
demuestran su ignorancia
en palabras como sidosa, rara,
o hasta con emisarios de muerte.

Dejando lapidas conmemorativas,
que me transportan en el tiempo
y avivan nuestras almas en llamas,
galas y fiestas de justicia.

Por ellas, me debo la mayor
expresión de amor
que puede existir y existirá
¡el amor por mí misma¡.

Freedom + love

by Haiber Andrés Lagos Lemus

English translation by Mayerly Lorena Hillón Pacheco

Why is my way of loving wrong?
love is intrinsic in me,
it is my freedom expressed in hugs
and my voice in a volcanic explosion.

I was known as "Daniel",
but my soul has always been
tattooed as Daniela;
and not even the coldness of an old-fashioned world
It will not be taken away from me!

the poison shot by ignorant eyes
of the colorful diversity of love,
of the limitless sensations
and emotions that are only enjoyed
best outside a wooden prison.

that, at the same time torments me,
living in expectation of street monsters
who want to take away my identity,
for vague ideas of old foreigners.

with hatred materialized
in gunpowder and steel,
and that only rust the dreams
of hundreds of my sisters.

warriors without truce,
whipped against the shore by evangelicals,
paramilitaries and any other kind
of conservative pigs.

who, in a contemptuous way,
demonstrate their ignorance
in words like bitch, strange,
or even with emissaries of death.

leaving memorial tombstones,
that transport me in time
and enliven our souls in flames,
galas and feasts of justice.

for them, I owe myself the greatest
expression of love
that can and will forever exist
love for myself!

Haiber Andrés Lagos Lemus is a 27 year old biology student at the Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia (UPTC) who also loves to write poetry. He was born in Puente Nacional-Santander, Colombia.

Silence

by Hope Netshivhambe

There is always an older woman somewhere trying to teach herself silence
Because she was told no one would believe her
So she's not sure anymore,
Not sure if it actually happened
Wonders if maybe she made it up in her mind somehow
Doesn't know how to tell away her bruises
Or the trauma of her memory
There is a younger woman somewhere, learning to inherit that silence
Because she has seen how abused women are treated
She knows she will be interrogated more than her perpetrator
Will be made to feel like she was the accomplice
That she asked for it somehow
That her body is a bait
That her body is his trigger
That her body is a sin
That her body caused a scene
There is always an attempt to explain away a man's deeds
To suggest he was possessed
To suggest it was a demon's doing
To suggest he is a decent man at heart
Forget about a man's apology
Or his remorse; unless it is advised by his lawyer
And even then; notice how much of him it takes, to spit it out of his mouth
You'd swear he's being separated from something dear to him
something he cannot do without
Notice how often women are told to learn "how to dress better"
But never anything to the men on how to behave better.

Hope Netshivhambe is an international storyteller and Voiceover Artist who grew up in Venda, South Africa. She has a marketing diploma from Vaal University of Technology and a certificate in Radio and TV presenting from Oakfields college. She has shared her work in 8/9 South African provinces and has performed at some of South Africa's most prestige Festivals. Hope has been featured widely on radio and television. She is a Co-creator and cast of the award winning short film #WeAreDyingHere, also nominated for best short narrative at this year's Pan African Film Festival(PAFF) in Los Angeles(LA) the film is also the 2021 official selection for the 11th Charlotte Black film festival in Charlotte, North Carolina. Netshivhambe is an Alumni of the "Black Girl Live fellows" under the mentorship of Koleka Putuma. Hope lives by her self coined mantra; "Do what you came for" which speaks of purpose.

Re-awakening the Shrinking Blossom

by Ikenna Nwakamma

For Elo

I

She is now a stranger to herself
She knows no more the shape of her heart
A heart so numb, but familiar with sorrow
So broken as it drifts apart
Ruptured lily, once radiant like an after rain sun
Once aspirant to the great heights
She once felt her arms like wings
Ready to challenge the sky to a race.

Once a lily with allure and blooms
Full in her innocence, full in gaiety
Like pumpkin by the waterside
Her nectar and pollens primed
Waiting the visitation of the butterfly
Waiting for the symbiosis that creates greenness

Lo! It was the Caterpillar, not the butterfly
It was the burrower that went for her core
Invader of the bloom that ruptured her blossom
Taking her nectar in exchange for venom
It was the shrinking of her petals early in the morning

II

Suddenly, the sun ceased to shine in her eyes ...
Radiance choked by yoke
Her night hid with a knife
On her bosom, treasures were plundered
Leaving sorrow, tears and blood.

She bore in her, fermented rabid pleasure
And lesions of forced passages
On her are footprints of a pleasure Pirate with diseased loin
Poor sister familiar with sorrow
With eye sacks drained of tears

Let me tell your tale
And defile the treacherous silence
Let me bear witness to your stripes
... judgment to the mute
Let me bear witness to the death of the sun
And chant the dirge for justice with raised fist

Let the silence break
Let the moon find courage and expose the angles of the night.
Let my words give you strength
In your strength, the bloated egos will deflect.
Let me tell your tale
That silence may know some shame.

III

Suddenly, her innocence dripped off her head,
For she bears on her face the mark of the beast
With heated infirmity in her blood stream
Leaving pains, blames and shame.

Suddenly the Holy Ghost took leave of her...
A virus stricken temple
The pulpit of her salvation, now the fulcrum of her damnation
And the sword of Herod is over her head, proclaiming judgment ...
"Your loose loin kissed rabid pleasures
Your mouth is unfit to praise the lord of host"

Like her master led with a cross to Golgotha,
she walks through the darkness of transgression
Staring at faces once fraternal,
All scornful, none mournful
... a leper in the house of Yahweh
And like Julius Caesar in the face of treachery, she whimpered in silence
"et tu brethren"

IV

I hear you Elo
I feel the silence in your solitude
I hear you, daughter of my father
I see you peeping through the cracks

Thirsting for sunshine
Reject the redefinition of you with a viral surname
You are Elo, the bearer of dreams.

I hear your whimpers; I hear the whispers
Worry not of the inanities of the apocalyptic horsemen
Worry not of the infirmities of your bloodstream
Dispel the disgusts with a bust out of your shrinking blossom
For by your smile and affirmation to greenness
You shall disarm the spineless virus

Drop the gong of the leper, take the branch of the Olive
Show your face to the skies again, and seduce the sun into full shine
Hold my hands, lean on me
For behind your cloudy face laden with a heavy heart
I see the gaiety, and freshness out of suffocated viruses

Let the sun rise again in your eyes
Open your petals to the sun of the new dawn
The scars on your skin are the marks of your strength
Let smile find its place on your face again
And make melodies out of your tale.

Ikenna Nwakamma is a Nigerian with a Master's degree in Public Health (MPH) from the French School of Public Health, Paris France (EHESP Sorbonne Paris Cite), a Postgraduate Diploma in HIV Education and Management, and a Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry. He has over 10 years of experience in program management, monitoring and evaluation, and research. He has worked in development and implementation of international donor funded programs across HIV, Sexual and Reproductive Health, Gender, UHC, maternal and child health.

Ikenna was the President of Creative Writers Association of Abia State University Uturu and had contributed in an anthology of creative writing. He won the art award at the International Conference on Stigma at Howard University in 2016 with his Poem "Suddenly, anointing bowed to the yoke". He is currently the Program Manager for INERELA+ Nigeria and Co-Chair to The Coalition of Civil Society Networks on HIV and AIDS in Nigeria.

Llanto en vela

by Isabella Herrera Gonzalez

Original in Spanish

Me llamas culpable de algo que no vi venir
Me dejas en vacilación, a espera de mi redención,
de mi justicia, de una de no estar segura que exista,
¿Por qué se supone que un injusto vele por justicia?

Me das tu mano en público, para resbalarla en privado.
Crees que el problema está en mí
y la solución es callarme de pies a cabeza,
oprimirme, mientras trato de zafarme de manos que aprietan
incesantemente mis curvas.

Me gritas loca por llorar a mis hermanas,
pero eso no va a detenerme de gritar tus injurias.
Llanto en vela, bajo luces tenues, ambientes secos,
una calle que recuerda la maratón que tuve que iniciar
y mi mayor castigo por perderla fuera satisfacerte sin mi permiso.

De rasgar mis prendas y con ellas mi alma.
Me dejaste sobre el fuego del miedo y la frustración,
mientras vives en luces, vanagloriándote del honor de tus limpios actos,
aunque tengas sangre en las manos y culpa en tus sombras.

Te exaltan por entrometerte entre mis piernas,
Piernas que ahora flaquean, y me señalan por confiar.
¿Se supone qué es mi mayor pecado?

Siento el ardor de tus manos en mi cuerpo marcado
Siento el aire de tus risas sobre mis cabellos,
y el oscuro giro que dejaste en mi vida,
una que no volverá a ser, al menos es...

Llanto en vela, luces tenues,
te observo en la esquina,
con tu sonrisa característica,
y tus ojos bajo sombras

Sleepless crying

by Isabella Herrera Gonzalez

English translation

You call me guilty of something I did not see coming
You leave me in hesitation, waiting for my redemption,
for my justice, one I'm not sure exists,
Why is an unjust man supposed to watch for justice? You
give me your hand in public, to slip it in private.

You think the problem is in me
and the solution is to silence me from head to toe,
to oppress me, while I try to free myself from hands that
incessantly squeeze my curves.

You yell at me crazy for crying for my sisters,
but that's not going to stop me from yelling your insults.

Sleepless crying, under dim lights, dry surroundings, a
street that reminds me of the marathon I had to begin
and my greatest punishment for losing it was to satisfy you without my permission
Ripping my clothes off and with them my soul.

You left me on the fire of fear and frustration,
while you live in lights, bragging about the honor of your clean acts,
even though there is blood on your hands and guilt in your shadows.

They exalt you for meddling between my legs,
Legs that now falter, and point at me for trusting you.
Is that supposed to be my greatest sin?

I feel the burning of your hands on my marked body
I feel the air of your laughter on my hair,
and the dark twist you left in my life, one
that will never be again, at least it is...

Tears in a candle, dim lights, I
see you in the corner,
with your distinctive smile,
and your eyes under shadows.

Isabella Herrera Gonzalez is an 18-year-old feminist activist from Colombia. She has been working for three years in favor of Sexual and Reproductive Rights and non-violence, becoming a volunteer of RedJoven Barranquilla and a young member of the Board of Directors of Profamilia. She is co-founder of the youth organization Voces Colombia and a great lover of poetry and creative writing, which she has used to spread her message and social activism.

Is it worth the wait?

by Jaine Kimu

Can I, Can I not
Thus, a million-dollar question
Its stubborn, very stubborn
No is an immediate answer

Can I, Can I not
I hear wild stories from my peers
Thus, push me to the edge
I hear about teenage sex adventure
It sounds sweet
The urge is killing me
But the STIs
What about HIV/AIDS
The teenage pregnancy
The consequences of adventure
Is it worth the risk?

Can I, should I
It's all on the social media
WhatsApp
Facebook
Instagram
Twitter
A fleek of button
The screen is flooded with pictures
Pictures of half-naked people
Videos are indescribable
Videos full of enticing language
The message is so powerful
Like a magnet which attracts iron filings
I am lured into a trap
I am not alone in this trap
The urge is just too much

Can I, Can I not
Can I make the decision?
Is it the right decision?
Everybody is doing it

Everybody likes it
Everybody admires it
Everybody dreams about it

Is it true that?
Everybody
Everybody, really
Everybody is doing it
The urge is just too much
But I am just a teenager

Unwanted pregnancies
STIs, you name it
HIV/AIDS
Early marriages
School dropouts
Career shattered to pieces
Like a clay pot under a sledge hummer

Can I, Can I not
Is worth the risk
I am not going to plunge in
I am not going to indulge
Lest I bulge
It's worth the wait

Say what you want
Do what you want
My virginity is my treasure
More than a palatial mansion in Borrowable Brook
More than all the money in the Swiss Bank
It is mine
The right time will come
The future, My future is in my hands
My decision, My Future Life Now.
I say no with a capital letter N.

Jaine Kimu is a high school student in Zimbabwe.

Transcendence/Trans·sans·dance

by Jamela Law

In memory of Daphne Dorman

We have come together
representing wavelengths on a spectrum
Brick walls set asunder
I see their faces and their lack of colours

The invaded greets the invasive with a song
The Right and the Left
Who's almighty and who's wrong

They gave us not the seed of peace
even as the exiles' next of kin
Let us ripen to death in life please
We are still dying to be born and seen

Fleeting seconds, floating sensation
Bawling eyes, bellowing silence
I am ready to bid goodbye

The devil did not give us the dice
We were always short-changed
Keys hanging from golden chains
We don't want an empty paradise

Not unlike Adam awaiting life
expulsion from Eden for his lies
His second Disobedience
a chord struck too tense

Memories overflowing at the brim
A rough patch in the brain
choked with growing tumours
Their cold-heartedness gave us
broken hearts with murmurs

Flappers of yesteryear
We shivered and we hid
Perpetually on leashes

but never without faux lashes
We swam alone telling lies
to save the indoctrinated
We waddled to the light
to give my daughter a bid

We keep breathing lightly
to feel alive under the blinding sun
Some thought it better that we die
before we truly suffered life

Our side of thoroughfare declared war
for they only read chromosome dyes
Genes transcribe the distorted lies
and thereupon untrue in our eyes

Complex characters waiting to be found
Profoundest thoughts enfold with breeze
Laces on Cinderella slippers, frolic in the fire
We debuted our dance amidst debris and dirt

White vision lingers on our black lingerie
See me as a beauty and a glory whole!
They think us a struggle amidst mankind
A discord, a dream, unreachable whore
Never to be found or rekindled
a monster then, a crucible now

They race to build scandals to bring us down
like a tailor with his snippers making art
penetrating our rayon stockings
Don't they love mayhem in their icy hearts

They cued a deafening a cappella
to envelop our voice and drown our lust
Eyes aflame with terror of a love
wrought, made in strife over the firewall
We take them in pride and bid farewell

Moving upwards, forward
accusing and being accused
Our misconducted march is
definitely Stockholm syndrome

Lifting our heads, channeling our ears
Sunbeams converge off our sequins
Creating intense refraction and agonizing desire
There will be a sequel underneath
all these hertz
All these hurts

This poem is dedicated to Daphne Dorman, an American transgender comedian and notable friend of Dave Chapelle, who died by suicide in 2019.

Jamela Law is an artist, designer and activist based in Singapore and Hong Kong. She is passionate about issues ranging from politics, human rights, public health and the environment. She believes that Expressive Arts can foster affinity across boundaries.

Infertile

by Jennifer Blake

She sat quietly on the hard chair
Feet together on the floor, large eyes trained hopefully
On me.

In my hands, her results.
Fallopian tubes scarred, blocking the path for her eggs
In their blind quest for life.

Doctor, he broke in,
you must understand. Can she get pregnant?
If not, I need
another wife.

But it was she who did not understand.
His English words washing over her, uncomprehending
and unscathed

Jennifer Blake is an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the University of Toronto in Canada.

A Death in the Village

by Jennifer Neczypor

Written in memory of Hawa Bockarie

A year ago, a Party.

All laughter and sunshine and cold ginger beer
Onyx plaits with bright colored beads at the end
A three-layered cake, frosting and fourteen sparkling candles
Burning oh-so-so briefly atop melting roses.

She never dreamed beyond busy school days,
Final exams and sun-drenched afternoons, studying with friends.

Ten months ago, a Wedding.

A thirty-year-old groom, dark eyes shiny with shy desperation
Her father said yes; her mother said nothing
But six starving mouths thanked her, glad to taste meat again
And the night's sweaty thrusting, thoroughly unexpected, was mercifully brief.

She never dreamed beyond the dancing,
Booming music and a flouncy gown, pinned up, too big.

Five months ago, a Fluttering.

Rolling and tapping and strong-strong kicks
Anticipation punctuating the boiling of rice
And the bartering for onions and the endless washing
A secret swelling deep inside, a roiling ocean of potential.

She never dreamed beyond tiny fingers and plump cheeks,
Sleepy smiles and the pleasant tingling of swollen breasts.

One month ago, a Pain.

Crushing headaches, hazy sight, puffy face
The doctor, his omniscience barring science
Drowned her concerns and sent her home
A ten-kilometer trek through bush and swamp.

She never dreamed beyond the sweltering labor room,
Her husband's praise and the midwife's gnarled, knowing hands.

Yesterday, a Dripping.

Became a gushing, soaked lapa between trembling legs
Hot wetness jarring her from slumber
The neighbor's panicked cry for help, too late, too slow
A piercing stab down low, the drip-drip-drip of pulsing red.

Then darkness, velvet-soft and creeping.
Welcoming.

She never dreamed.

Today, a Burial.

Behind the schoolyard where she once ran free
Hushed prayers, hope interred inarticulate
The air thick with wordless guilt
Silence shattered by incriminating mewls.

Her lashes fluttering in bereft innocence,
A baby half-awakes, aside, alone,
No longer
Dreaming.

Jennifer Neczypor is a certified nurse-midwife and family nurse practitioner from California, USA, currently working as a midwife educator for Seed Global Health in Makeni, Sierra Leone. In the past, she has served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Vanuatu, and has also worked as a midwife in Boston, MA, as well as in international settings including Nepal and Uganda. She is passionate about global health and women's rights, and believes that it is a midwife's job to empower women and girls by providing compassionate, quality sexual and reproductive health care throughout the lifespan. Jennifer enjoys writing, and feels it is important that more women's health providers use poetry and stories to share the struggles, triumphs, and journeys of the patients they are privileged to serve. She wrote this poem in honor of all mothers lost in childbirth in Sierra Leone, particularly the youngest ones.

Helen's Choice

by Jenny Sherman

I don't know the right words to say
so I hug you too long
smooth my rumpled shirt when
you turn away.

the wheel twirls
wet clay whirls
opens round in the bowl of your palms

you work the mass to symmetry
pulling high the walls
the lovely neck

trimming the rim for
a Cupid's bow lip
mouth of a chubby ewer
celadon stained

I pass olives, the blue cheese
offer another glass of wine
which you decline
though you're now allowed.

the wheel whirls
the walls shudder
unfurl, unfold
too wet, too thin, too fast, too

the revolution slows
your hands hover, suspended between
why and
try again
before collapsing the clay

I don't know the right words to say
so I squeeze your arm, mound flour
while you wait for the bleeding to stop
make pasta, fingers slick with yolk.

Jenny Sherman writes poetry, fiction and nonfiction. A former sex education instructor, she now works as an editor for a sexual and reproductive health research organization. In between these roles, she wrote articles on topics ranging from cowboy artists and children's literature to women's health and the environment. She has also volunteered as a writing mentor to young women. She grew up in Minnesota and lives in New York City in the USA.

This poem is like me

by Jimena Cascante Matamoros

*This poem is meant to be read out loud
By shy voices
with broken accents
glued together
by a loving community*

This poem is like me,
like my body.
A bunch of parts
that are not mine.

My body, my choice:
I chant it,
I feel it,
I dance with it.

But, my body
does not belong to me.

My body is full of wounds:
my ancestors',
my own,
my sisters'.

My body
has been torn apart
by a stolen past and
an uncertain future.

My body
is not my choice.
And yet
it's everyone's opinion
that I hear voiced.

My body
is filled with rage,
It's a full dark stage,
It's a wide embrace.

My body
is a broken promise.
I hear them say:
You are the future
yet -wait- not quite, young girl.

My body
takes up all the space
that your hate creates.

My body
will not apologize
For breaking the chain
For escaping from your jail
For stepping on your disdain.

Jimena Cascante Matamoros loves to play with words. She is happiest when facilitating creative spaces and participating in queer activist group Voces Fieras. Jimena is a cisgender, bisexual woman, activist and feminist from Costa Rica.

Matapos ang Duwal

by Juleini Vivien I. Nicdao

Original in Filipino

"All in all, *paglililihi* is a cultural concept about pregnancy that has endured for a very long time. In *Vocabulario Tagalog-Castellano* published in 1887, *paglililihi* translated to *la concepción* or conception. Common understanding of *paglililihi* manifests in many ways: nausea or morning sickness, taking an inexplicable liking to someone or something, and developing extreme cravings for certain types of food . . . *Paglililihi*, moreover, supposedly influenced physical attributes of the unborn baby, as well as influence its personality growing up. The truth, however, is more complicated."

– Gerald Dizon, "The truth about 'paglililihi'—an expert explains", *Philippine Star*

Dahan-dahang lumiligwak ang putik
mula sa aking bibig. Dahan-dahan ko ring kinakalkal
itong bagong-luwal na luwad upang mahimay
kung may buto, hasang, kuko, buhok,
o perlas. Mabibigo ako sapagkat hindi matatapos
ang lahat sa sandali ng hilo at luwa. Sapagkat ito
ang simula ang lahat.

Sapagkat mula ngayon, ang lalamunan ay isa nang mag-aaral
ng dulas. Sapagkat bawat singhap, sisidlan na ng dahas.
Sapagkat darating ang mga araw at gugustuhin kong
tikman ang amag, dilaan ang puyo sa ulo
ng mangingibig, agawin ang sampalok ng batang
hindi naman nang-aalok o ano mang tamis na bitbit
ng mapungay na estranghero, ngatain ang pulseras na iniwan
sa aking ina ng kaniyang ina, higupin siguro ang hamog.
Buong bayan ang manonood. Ngunit
sa paghinga at pahinga sa ngayon, katawan ko
ang magbibigay sa akin ng pahintulot.

Sa ngayon. Sapagkat mula ngayon, hindi na sagrado
ang malamig na sahog ng banyo. Sasangang ang lahat
sa ngalan ng antiseptiko ng klinika, ng sumpa at basbas
ng hagigkikan ng mga sakristan, at sa ngalan ng anghel,
giit nila, ng anghel. Wala akong taglay na oyayi
o hiya, kuna o pagkukulang, ngunit
buong bayan ang hihingi't sasamo:

Ano nga ba ang nais ko? Sa aking nginig sa ngayon, iadya itong sagot. Hindi gatas o alak, kahel o asukal, ngunit nais ko lamang bigkasin: aking dasal, aking laya, aking lubos, aking oras, aking sukal, aking lugod, aking di-mawaring krimen, pagkababaeng akin. Sa darating na mga araw, lahat ng di-mawaring akin.

Sapagkat darating ang mga araw at buong bayan ang hihipo't maghuhubo nitong baywang, tititig at aangkin nitong kabataan. Sapagkat maging tadyang, hindi mag-aalinlangang umusog. Ngunit sa ngayon, habang nakaluhod pa rin ako sa banyo, tahimik ang aking katawan. Sapagkat akin: ang garalgal, ang alaala ng putik na gumagasgas sa ngalangala, ang putik na nanunugat, nambubusal. Hinihipo ko itong mga labi, sinisigurong hindi pa nabubura. Kinukutkot itong pusod at hinaharaya ang ngatngat. Pinipitik ang sariling suso at dinadamdam ang bulok, imbis na banta ng mugto.

Sa sandaling ito ng pag-iisa sa banyo, nag-iisa at sagana pa rin ako. Saksi at salaysay ang dalagang anino. Hindi niya ako ipagkakanulo.

After the Gag

by Juleini Vivien I. Nicdao

English translation

"All in all, *paglililihi* is a cultural concept about pregnancy that has endured for a very long time. In *Vocabulario Tagalog-Castellano* published in 1887, *paglililihi* translated to *la concepción* or conception. Common understanding of *paglililihi* manifests in many ways: nausea or morning sickness, taking an inexplicable liking to someone or something, and developing extreme cravings for certain types of food . . . *Paglililihi*, moreover, supposedly influenced physical attributes of the unborn baby, as well as influence its personality growing up. The truth, however, is more complicated."

– Gerald Dizon, "The truth about 'paglililihi'—an expert explains", *Philippine Star*

Mud spills with slowness
from my mouth. With slowness, too, I dissect
this newborn clay to search
for wishbone, gill, nail, hair,
or pearl. I will fail because everything does not
end at the moment of nausea and spit. Because
this is where everything begins.

Because here, my throat is now a student
of wetness. Because each heave, soon vessel of violence.
Because days will come and I will want
to taste mildew, lick the curl on the head
of a lover, snatch tamarind candy from a child
resentful, or whatever sweetness is carried
by a tender stranger, bite at a bracelet left
to my mother by her mother, perhaps drink dew.
This is what the whole town will watch me do. But
for now as I breathe, my body permits me
my own reprieve.

For now. Because here, the cold tiled floors will cease
to be sanctuary. Everything will reek of the antiseptic
imprint of the clinic, the cursed blessedness
of altar boys giggling, and the angel,
they say, the angel. I have neither lullaby
nor shame, neither nursery nor need, and yet
this is what the whole town will ask of me:

What is it I crave? And for now as I shiver, forgive
my answer. Neither milk nor wine, citrus
nor sugar, I only crave to speak: my prayer,
my right, my indulgence, my time,
my wilderness, my pining, my contentious
crime, my womanhood, mine. For days
to come, impossibly mine.

Because days will come and the town will pet
my waist and strip it of my youth with
their gaze. Because even my ribs will not hesitate
to move. But for now as I kneel
in this bathroom, my body is still. Still mine:
the gravel, the memory of mud that scratches
the roof of my mouth, mud that wounds, mud
that gags. I touch my lips, making certain
they have not yet been erased. I finger my navel
and imagine the gnawing. I flick at my breasts
and feel decay instead of the threat of soreness.

In this bathroom and moment of aloneness, I am still
ample, and my own. A girl's shadow, witness and testimony.
She will not forsake me.

Juleini Vivien Nicdao hails from the Philippines, a predominantly Catholic nation where abortion is completely outlawed and access to reproductive health rights and services is severely limited. She finished her Master of Arts in Social Psychology and currently works as a part-time instructor at Ateneo de Manila University. As a member of the Gender Hub in the same university, she also participates in creating safe spaces, holding gender sensitivity training projects, and responding to cases of sexual and gender-based violence. Her research work involves material-discursive approaches to sexual and gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights. In her undergraduate years, she has also won awards and been a fellow at a few national writing workshops for poetry.

Three Ululations

by Just a Poet

Three ululations for a girl
four if it is a boy
The girl will grow
delicate like a flower
Soft-spoken, "weak"
feminine.

Three ululations for a girl
four if it is a boy
And the boy will grow
Strong-stubborn
A warrior
Masculine.

Three ululations for a girl
Four if it is a boy
Tradition after tradition
Doctrine doesn't change to favour the gender
For years, decades, centuries as the birth of the girl child is half celebrated
Half appreciated as if they're half human
She is delicate domicile, feminine.
Three ululations for a girl
Four if it is a boy
Tradition after tradition
For years, decades and centuries
doctrine demands a boy is celebrated more.
Fully appreciated for being male

Enter the 21st century and my poetry
Here to preach;
The light has the dark as
the sun has the moon
as the male has the female and nature is perfectly balanced.
So four ululations for a girl, four if it is a boy
The girl will grow delicate and strong
And the boy will grow strong and delicate.
Yin and Yang
Light and dark
The sun and the moon
Nature is perfectly balanced.

The menstrual elf

by Kathryn Anne Hart

there are the basics of it
(blood)
trickle/puddle/dot
in cup/tampon/sanitary cloth;
three, four, five days on,
regular cycles
(or not).

it is labour, pre-labour,
and never of love;
a means to an end
whether wanted, or not.
this
is our deal.

softened somewhat
by pills (contraceptive,
morning-after, ibuprofen,
...the lot)
even still, as deals go
(we might grumble)
pretty raw:

no recourse
from those ovaries
crusading the cause
til mission accomplished,
or (misnomered)
menopause.

Kathryn Anne Hart is a gender equality and women's rights consultant specialising in Europe and West Africa. British by nationality, Kate lives and works in France. She is passionate about equality in all forms, but especially women's equal rights, and particularly women's sexual health and reproductive rights, which are so often challenged, ignored, or repressed. Kate has two young children, and when not working she writes novels and poetry, and runs a small charity offering training on gender stereotypes in schools.

Flora

by Kristine Shields

Confident child.
I carried the little bud
just below my breastbone
in that unguarded ganglia of nerves.

Then
your filthy hands
below my collarbones
caused such desiccation.
There is no rejuvenation of
dead buds or dead nerves.
Dry leaves stuck in my throat
suffocating poetry, intimacy, and kinship.

And so
I lay my healing hands on
clavicle and symphysis and sacrum
to succor buds in other girls
in vindication and
to supplant the budding orchid that
you stole from me.

Kristine Shields is a survivor of child sexual abuse. As a result, she is a women's health nurse practitioner with a doctorate in public health, a researcher and writer, and a sexual and reproductive health advocate. Dr Shields is the author of Pregnancy and the Pharmaceutical Industry and The Vulva Owner's Manual on Birth Control, numerous medical journal articles, and the free monthly newsletter, Paddendum. She divides her time between Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and Charleston, South Carolina, in the USA.

Call It by its Name

by Laura Warner

1

The doctor's face: blank as ibuprofen –
and that tiny tune the foil plays when you peel it back to push the tablet out –
that is the pitch at which she controls this conversation.

When she says *benign cyst*, she almost whispers it.
I ask her to call it by its name. I say *endometriosis* –
the slow, heavy humping of it.

She will not move her lips and jaws around it.

I am scrunching pill packets in my palm –
this is the white noise of my uterus.

2

My body records sounds and plays them back to me cat fights under streetlamps claws on
car bonnet fur torn from throat wail my body records these sounds mid-cycle it plays
them in my abdomen so low they may be playing in my legs I cannot hear any distinction
my body remembers the first time I dragged a horsehair bow across the thinnest string of
a borrowed violin it plays it on repeat a finger's breadth below my right hip bone before
while and after I ovulate my body records the sound of paper tearing the gynaecologist's
letter ripped top to bottom played deep inside my uterus when I'm entered from behind
torn smaller and smaller until the last cramps of orgasm settle in my pelvis my body
remembers the school fire bell it rings my ribcage from evenings through nights hidden
parts of me need to bleed but the blood can find no way out scream-pitch the volume
makes me retch.

3

I'm asking the doctor what we do about it,
she is putting her finger to her lips,
pushing another blister pack across the white desk.

My body records sounds and plays them to me –
a fast train passes through a station –

a small child is straddling the yellow line
her fingers are pressed into her ears – I'm asking the doctor
to call it by its name,
and she is offering me this:

some people call it a chocolate cyst.

4

The doctor and I both know that chocolate melts in silence

5

Dear Doctor

My body's soundscape:

- a. is junk orchestra
- b. is not single clean bell
- c. is endometriosis
- d. is cacophonous

6

Listen

and get your mouth around the word.
Call it by its name.

Laura Warner is a poet and PhD student based in the Wellcome Centre for the Cultures and Environments of Health at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom. Her research project, Uterine Poetics, explores lived experience of endometriosis through poetry and poetic approaches.

In this poem, the speaker feels that her experience of ovarian endometriosis is trivialized by her doctor's use of the medical metaphor 'chocolate cyst'. Laura wrote this poem because she believes that the language of sexual and reproductive health is often felt to be disempowering and obstructive by people who live with conditions such as endometriosis. For the author, it is poetic language and particularly poetic metaphor that can challenge and respond to language that disempowers by bringing it into focus, scrutinizing it, and then offering limitless possibilities to reimagine it on one's own terms.

Taking a risk

by LeConté Dill

On the day after

my Birthday

Found out

I was

pregnant

The doctors were

“cautiously optimistic”

because of my levels

Said “Congratulations”

Said to come back

in two days

The day after

is when I learned or

that I heard that

No longer

could I celebrate this month

Not sure

Talking in hushed tones

“Because of my age”

Said they were sorry

Said I could try again, but

I would start bleeding...

LeConté Dill was born and raised in South Central Los Angeles, California, the granddaughter of sojourners of the 2nd Wave of the Great Migration. She remains curious about sojourning, migrations, and landing and launching places and spaces. “Le Conte” literally means “The Fairy Tale,” and likewise, LeConté listens to, documents, dreams, and creates stories of reimagining. She is a scholar, educator, and a poet in and out of classroom and community spaces. LeConté holds degrees from Spelman College, UCLA, and UC Berkeley, has participated in VONA Voices and Cave Canem workshops, and was a 2016 Callaloo Creative Writing Workshop Fellow. Currently, she is an Associate Professor of African American and African Studies at Michigan State University. Her work has been published in a diverse array of spaces, such as Poetry Magazine, Mom Egg Review, Journal of Poetry Therapy, and The Feminist Wire.

Buiten mijn verhaal

by Lianne Holten & Rosalie van der Wolf
Original in Dutch

wat ik het allerlastigste vond
niet zozeer dat ik het alleen moest doen.
dat *ik* koos voor de abortus
en mijn vriend
had daar wel een ander idee over
dat ik hem sowieso al uitsloot
want het is mijn buik
mijn keuze
sloot hem helemaal buiten mijn verhaal
en dat vond ik ook lastig want ik dacht
het is wel iets dat we samen moeten
vond ik wel heel naar
eigenlijk

(Melanie, 31yrs, surgical abortion, the Netherlands)

Outside my story

by Lianne Holten & Rosalie van der Wolf
English translation

I found most burdensome
 not so much that I had to do it alone
I chose the abortion
 and my boyfriend
 had a different idea
I anyway already had locked him out
 because it is my belly
 my choice
locked him completely outside my story
 and I found that hard too
 I thought it is something
 that we should do together
I found it
 very awful
 actually

(Melanie, 31yrs, surgical abortion, the Netherlands)

This poem is based on the transcript of an interview with Melanie (a pseudonym). The poem is part of a research project by Dutch midwife and anthropologist Lianne Holten and Dutch poet Rosalie van der Wolf. They create I-poems from interview transcripts as a way of studying abortion care in the Netherlands.

Chambers

by Lobina Kaniz Kalam

I have four chambers in my heart
The top two chambers are for you
The other two on the bottom
These secrets I shall not tell
So easily to you
As time unfolds its spell

The chamber on the right
Signals every beat
The chamber below it
Just breathes
The chamber to the top left
Sighs anew
The chamber on the bottom left
Keeps my blood flowing through

When this reaches my head
When all I can do is scream
Out your name
I find myself once again

I am but a woman encapsulated
A man's soul trapped inside
A longing for a being
To call me home

I call you my Husband
I call you my Wife
I call you my Lover
In my heart, burning bright

I want and need you
I need affirmation too
From society, my kin, my friends
All must know of you

For this love of mine
Is quite real and true

It is my soul's longing
It is my Choice

It is my Volition
My decision
My life's path and partner
My own family beginnings

Shall I cook you a meal
Of extravagance?
Shall I dowse by body
With Pure Fragrance?

What is love?
And what is longing?
What is parting?

It need not matter
But for the moments of belonging

What if I cannot bear the company of others?
What if all I do is yearn for you?

What are my years in age?
What is yours?

My favorite color is green
And yours is gold

Won't you look deeply at me?
And see the faceted side of me?

Do the lovebirds and butterflies
Make you smile?
Their mating calls and dance
And what they symbolize

For it is a Union of Yin
And it's Yang

It's Universal, this certain pang
In the solar plexus

A knock out

Of wind
From the diaphragm
And lungs

Oh, I have lost love
In the past
And I have cried
Deeply in a plaster cast

Trying to heal
My fractured mind
In this everlasting
Game of life

Like none other
Of its kind

Dr. Lobina Kaniz Kalam, MD has been a poet since 2012. She has self-published two books of poetry titled 'The Fulcrum' and 'Gossamer'. She attended Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, USA, where they graduated Magna Cum Laude with a minor in Psychology. As an undergraduate student there, she took a variety of English composition classes including Shakespeare. Lobina finds inspiration in love, beauty, nature, and spirituality.

My body is my soul

by Mahamuda Rahman

For decades, for centuries, and more –
You call me the holy mother, or call me the whore.
You think I am a property, to buy and sell
Like a cow, or a camel – or a piece of land.

And you secure me with shackles or a wedding band.

Never occurred to you that my body is my soul
Just like yours. And I have a role –
To decide and determine what I want to be
My body, my soul – and just be Me.

You are alarmed by my autonomy. You censor my senses.
You cut me and bruise me, put me under your lenses.
That little transparent box in your head
You want me to reside there, like a shred
My body is my soul – it's not for you to trade.
I am growing out of your box to fly, to explore, to pervade.

Never occurred to you that souls can defy
Cages, confines, containers – no matter how hard you try.
My soul spreads her wings with my body in her hand –
Hear, hear what she says and try to understand –
Not a mother, not a mistress, not a piece of land.

Mahamuda Rahman was born and raised in Bangladesh and now lives in the Netherlands. After finishing a BA and MA in English Literature, Mahamuda started working in advertising and communications. Now, she works with a feminist not-for-profit organisation.

My blood

by Margot Dupé

Not a shot fired
Not a razor cut
Not a knife planted

Yet

Blood shed
Blood spread

And the tears.

No war
No revenge
No weapons

Yet

It flows again.

Not a broken bottle
Not a hit punched
Not a violent push

Yet

Blood shed
Blood spread

And the pain.

No enemy
No battle
No hatred

Yet

Red flashing stains.
Not a knee scratched
Not a harsh burn
Not a bad fall

Yet

Blood shed
Blood spread

And the stains
And the pain
And the tears.

No murder
No death
No violence

Yet

Blood shed
Blood spread

A red ocean at nature's commands.

Blood flow
Blood shed on my legs
Blood stains my underwear

Blood flow
Blood spread on my thighs
Blood joins my hairs

Blood flow
Periods come and go
Blood flow
Endometriosis says hello.

After interning with the French national hotline against SGBV (3919) in high school, Margot knew she had to commit to supporting survivors and ending violence. Since then, she has joined several organisations such as the Center for Gender Advocacy (Canada); organised a youth-led event with the International Planned Parenthood; interviewed SGBV survivors for resettlement with the UNHCR; and supported a grassroots SGBV association to develop in Kenya. Margot holds a Master in Human Rights and Humanitarian Action from SciencesPo. She currently works at UNFPA (the UN agency for sexual and reproductive rights) in Bamako (Mali), where she focuses on gender based violence prevention and response.

Margot was diagnosed with adenomyosis (a form of endometriosis) a year ago and is still struggling to find appropriate care. Thanks to the kindness of women in similar situation she has found support in what feels like being at war against her own body. In other news, the French parliament recently voted to officially to recognize Endometriosis as a long standing disease.

The Feast

by Marzieh Ghiasi

“It is by eating the Other...
that one asserts
power and privilege.”
-bell hooks

I was cut into pieces to be served
as the other. A meal to savor on the
menu of some charter.

I was on a poster, a woman is but
an oyster. Fermented in brine, washed
with rosewater.

Gut me of entrails and took me to the
smoker. Mine was a fast for no sin is
pure as hunger.

Ground the pearl torn vicious from its
cloister. The plates were set for whom
I called my brother.

The table was lined with silver teeth
all in order. Mine is a feast movable
from one land to another.

Marzieh is Iranian-Canadian and is completing her MD-PhD studies in Medicine at Michigan State University. She has spent the past several years informally translating classical Persian poetry. More recently she has been formally invited to perform original works focused on personal experiences of womanhood across time and space in spoken word format (Ten Pound Fiddle Production, Michigan Institute for Contemporary Art/MICA Gallery, The Poetry Room/The Robin Theatre). She is passionate about women's health, and her doctoral research is focused on the epidemiology of women's reproductive health.

on mother's day, our first together.

by Megan Spencer

one morning in december
under the new born moon
i am split open. in the operating room
a scalpel cuts a smile across my rounding belly
i come apart to make a way for you.
i am flesh then vessel then canal, then empty
and just like that we are two.
red wet and swollen faced
you enter the world beneath glaring white light
dark curls slick and sticky like a baby bird
soft bones, ears folded shut.
you too are there in this room
where everyone has a job to do.
when you came your lungs were still readying
and i needed more time to teach you
how to breathe in this sharp demanding world.
i am trying to convince you to stay
how to make you choose this unforgiving place
that snatches up anything loved by black girls
especially black girls themselves.
i am afraid of everything.
you are smaller than anything i have ever loved
or held. barely a papaya in my open hands.
will you swim in the ocean one day?
will you eat salted tomato sandwiches in august?
obsess about the way light moves through water?
will i have time to read you lucille clifton?
there is language and color here
i promise if you wait there is more
than these tangled and infinite wires
and this constant threat of rupture.
there is a sky out there,
i pray your tiny feet grow roots
into this terrifying earth
and not the moonless black night
dusted with stars.

Megan Spencer is a black feminist artist, scholar, and mother. She is a PhD student at the University of California Santa Barbara in the United States, where she studies black feminist ecology, specifically how black women's visual art and literature show us connections between ecological crises and various forms of racial, sexual, and state violence.

This poem was written for her daughter. It reflects on the author's experience of her daughter's birth and the process of coming to understand her precarious entrance to the world as part of a pattern of black women's disproportionate vulnerability to preterm labor and birth. Megan believes that poetry is part of a black feminist tradition of moving between thought and feeling, and has been a necessary aspect of healing from birth trauma.

Menarche

by Mitch Alcantara

I am learning to be a woman.
It entails a lot, I've come to realize.
Only now do I come to know my body-
Like a stranger in the fog, coming beneath moonlight.
How I come equipped with things I've not realized I've had:
Like breasts and lips
And their implications:
The presence of a woman
(I've yet to decipher what that means)
But it is mine-
Or so they say.

Before, I was rough hands that loved to play with mud
And bark
And dead leaves
And all things autumn
-even if there is no autumn in my country-
I guess all things change and withering,
All things elemental- saying good night.
Who does not long to touch good nights?

Before, I was shameless.
Topless with my flat chest and bulging tummy.
Now, they tell me to swallow this wicked shame,
Taught me to hide this womanliness like it was gold because they were after it.
Who I never knew: Wicked monsters, would-be men.
Things like that.
But I never cared for gold
And I had loved to dare my monsters ever since.

It is not them I am afraid of.
It is a different fear:

The fear of newness, of growing into old bones,
Of learning how to first walk again.
With a ruthless grace.

This fear-
It's like learning how to ride a bike:
The nervousness of rickety wheels rolling,

Of you on top of cold metal on a warm day,
Of balance and new things, and shifted weights.
The fear of losing ground because there is something new between my legs.

See, I never knew the slopes I danced with.
Now, allegedly, my ass is a mountain.
And I shook mountains when I danced.
My hips: they are hills that longed and whistled.
At first I was frightened of its music:
The sound of seeds cracking in the darkness.
But now, I accept it.
As it is part of life.

My spine are the sand dunes in Ilocos.
Many would ride down on it.
The wind will kiss them as they do.

This is my body.
And I am taking it to dinner.
Asking it questions bravely
And with an openness that rivals that of a curious child.

I'm beginning to understand its language.
The melodious accent of harsh u's
And sharp e's
And r's that roll-
The cackle of its warrior
Dancing to the rituals of holy blood.
Ferocious and unapologetic of its tenderness.
The high notes of a priestess
In a meadow.
Her warmth a dagger in the silence of brute force.
The baritone of a gardener
In spring.
Blessed with the alchemy of making hatchlings
In the bleakness and the cold.

I take it to the bedroom.
And we talk in front of mirrors.
With the lights on.
With our clothes off.
Unravelling new doors into our temple.
Relearning new verses of old prayers.
Meeting images of God.

Mitch Alcantara is a junior research consultant for public health and public mental health, and a former assistant professor of Psychology in the Philippines. She is not a poet but she loves stories and verses and dabbling in writing and the arts, and deeply believes that creative arts is a necessity for development and rights advocacy because true development work includes soul work too.

Ratap seorang anak di pemakaman ibunya

by Najmah

Original in Malay

Seorang anak kecil meratap di pemakaman ibunya yang masih merah, bertaburkan bunga-bunga yang masih segar dan harum

Telah lama upacara pemakaman sederhana itu usai, seorang pendakwah yang tadi dengan malas melafalkan doa yang juga sangat pendek telah pergi

Rombongan pelayat yang dari tadi asik berbisik-bisik sambil melirik jijik pun telah bubar
Aku menatapnya dari kejauhan, namun ratapnya terdengar karena alam tiba-tiba hening dan takzim

Ibu, akhirnya kau tinggalkan aku sendiri, Bapak telah lama mendahului kita, mungkin engkau akan segera menemuinya..

Aku saksikan engkau ibu istri yang tabah

Engkau rela merawat bapak sampai sisa hidupnya, dengan penyakit yang di deritanya

Padahal, aku dengar dari bisik-bisik yang di sampaikan orang-orang di sekeliling kita

Bapak selalu asyik menemui wanita-wanita di luar sana, saat tidak bersama kita

Kata mereka, sakit itu hukuman buat bapak

Dari muda, kata mereka, bapak berperilaku durjana

Tapi engkau tabah, engkau sabar..

Nak, apa kau mau Ibu menjanda??, jawab ibu membungkam protesmu

Seolah kata "Janda" menjadi hal yang menakutkan bagimu

Ibu,

Tak ada lagi pelukan hangatmu untukku, tak ada lagi senandung menghibur laraku

Bahkan saat penyakit jahanam itu juga menghantuiku

Kata dokter, imunku melemah, sehingga penyakit mengerikan yang merongrong pernafasanku pun mencekam

Aku terkena TBC buk

Penyakit yang bahkan mendengar namanya saja membuat orang menyingkir jauh

Ibu, bahkan aku lihat kau mampu berkompromi dengan dunia yang melecehkanmu

Aku ingat di rumah sakit ketika engkau datang memohon sedikit belaskasih untukku, anakmu

Wajah sinis engkau dapati, bisik-bisik jijik antar mereka mendengking di telingaku

Aku ingin protes buk, tapi engkau menyabarkanku

Kesana-kemari engkau di permainkan birokrasi

Engkau akhirnya protes...!

Kami sibuk, kamar sudah penuh dengan penderita COVID-19, itu yang aku dengar Covid-19 itu apa buk..Lirih ku bertanya

Engkau tersenyum, itu sama seperti penyakitmu nak, Cuma batuk saja.

Tapi aku tahu, perlakuan itu membuat trauma dalam hidupmu
Sampai akhirnya engkau sakit buk..
Ya bapak ternyata tidak mewariskan apa-apa, selain sakit padamu..

Aku tak bisa menolong mu banyak dengan tanganku yang kecil..
Ada om dan tante dari LSM yang membantumu
Membujukmu ke rumah sakit
Tapi engkau menggeleng...Aku takut, jawabmu
Takut akan COVID-19 dan tes COVID-19...
Yang akhirnya kau bawa mati
Meninggalkan aku sendiri...

Aku melangkah mendekati anak kecil itu
Memegang pundaknya dan berkata
Nak, ibumu sudah tenang di sana, dia sekarang telah berjumpa dengan Bapakmu
Anak itu mengangguk..
Ibu Bapakmu pasti Bahagia di Surga
Anak itu menengadahkan kepalanya
Matanya menatapku tak percaya
Mulutnya berkata lirih
Tapi Ibu dan Bapak mati karena HIV...
Aku terdiam...
Langit tiba-tiba mendung..

A child mourns at her mother's funeral

by Najmah

English translation

A little child wails at her mother's funeral, the ground is still red sprinkled with fresh flowers
It's been a long time since a simple funeral ceremony took place
An Islamic preacher who lazily recited a very short prayer has left
The group of mourners who had been whispering about her mother have also dispersed
I looked at the child from a distance, and suddenly her crying got louder when nature was quiet and reverent

Mother, finally, you left me alone
Father passed away a few years ago
Later you may meet him
I witnessed that you are a steadfast wife and mother
You were willing to take care of your husband till his last breath with severe lung disease
I heard from neighbors that my father had extramarital partners when he was not with us
People said his sickness was a curse for my father
From a young age, people said, my father behaved badly
But you were so patient; you were a tough woman
You said to me, "do you want your mother to be a divorcee?" this question silenced my protest.
The word "Divorcee" became a scary thing for you.

Mother, no more warm hugs for me, no more humming to comfort my pain
Even when I also got infected with that disease
The doctor said that my immune system had weakened, so I may suffer from a terrible disease choking on my breathe.
I got infected with tuberculosis.
When people hear this disease, people will step aside from you

Mother, I saw your resilience to compromise abusive actions from others
I remembered in the hospital when you begged for my help, your daughter
You dealt with disrespectful services; I also listened to unfriendly faces and sarcastic words
I wanted to protest, but you calmed me, mom
You were so busy with a red-tape referral system
Finally, you protested.....!
Now, we were busy, yet all in-patient rooms were packed with COVID-19 patients,
I ask you, "What is COVID-19, mom?"

You smiled at me and said it was just like your disease, just a cough.
But I know that the disrespectful health services traumatized you
Until you finally got sick.
Your husband did not leave anything behind, apart from this disease to you (and me)

I cannot help much with my little hand
There are uncles and aunts from non-governmental organisations to help you
Persuade you to go to the hospital
But you shook your head and said, "I am afraid of...."
Fears of COVID-19 and COVID-19 test
Finally, you passed away
Left me alone

I stepped closer to this little daughter
Holding her shoulders and saying, your mother has a peaceful life there; she has now met
your father.
The daughter nodded...
Your mother and father must be happy in heaven
The daughter titled her head
Her eyes stare at me in disbelief at my words
Her mouth said softly
And said, "But my father and mother passed away due to HIV."
I am silent
Then the sky is suddenly cloudy

This poem is based on the true story of an HIV-positive widow who was part of the author's research project on stigma and discrimination of HIV and COVID-19. She passed away in July 2021 after postponing seeking healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. She left behind an HIV-positive daughter.

Dr. Najmah is a lecturer in the Public Health Faculty of Sriwijaya University, South Sumatra, Indonesia. Najmah was awarded a prestigious New Zealand Scholarship for her doctoral studies and graduated from Auckland University of Technology in 2020. She completed her PhD under the supervision of Dr Sari Andajani and Associate Professor Sharyn Davies, whilst looking after her three toddlers. Najmah also has degrees from the University of Melbourne, where she studied with an AusAID Partnership Scholarship, and her bachelor degree in Sriwijaya University (Unsri), South Sumatra. Najmah is the author of four books of Epidemiology and Biostatistics and an editor of three books related to Data analysis and research methodology in Public Health and English camps in Indonesia. She is currently writing her fifth book in qualitative approach and enthusiasm in Feminist and Participatory Action Research. Najmah's research interest is HIV, women and COVID-19. Her current research grant is from Alumni Grant scheme, Australian awards for Indonesia with titled to get tested or not: A project to reduce stigma around COVID-19 and HIV testing in Indonesia.

Sobreviviente

by Natalia Díaz Zeledón

Original in Spanish

Debiste quebrarme cuando tuviste la oportunidad.

Cuando te dije que me vieras a los ojos
mientras llegabas al orgasmo.
La cara del hombre que me hizo daño,
deformada de placer.
El placer de verme rendida, agotada,
mi cuerpo doblado en un capullo.
Nunca fui un cadáver más dócil
que cuando tejí mi propia mortaja
mi silencio, una bisagra incapaz de ceder.

¿Cómo no habrían cedido mis costuras
si tus manos eran máquinas déspotas?

Convencido estabas de destruirme para,
finalmente, conquistarme.
Fui yo quien te colonizó
con mi imagen,
mi sudor y mis pensamientos.

Me exprimiste mecánicamente
como una jugosa pulpa lacia.
Me escurrí por las comisuras de tus dedos,
de tus ojos, de tus labios.

Tu disculpa obsesiva
es una manifestación fantástica
de mi aborrecimiento.

Codicias un mejor lugar dentro de mi vida.
Yo no te maté.

Para vencerte, no habría bastado
con un único gesto de violencia.
Muerto, te habría llevado en la piel,
entretejido con la intoxicante autonomía

de cuando fui una mujer
completamente libre,
gloriosamente ingenua.

Sueño contigo pesadillas.
Te grito y te lloro sin vergüenza.

En la cama
sola
cuando me violaste
sola
cuando no me creyeron.

Mis emociones no son permanentes
como todo lo demás que arrebataste.
Porque si me ordeno gritar
soy yo misma quien obedezco,
no por ser dueña de un dolor absoluto

sino porque estoy viva.

Survivor

by Natalia Díaz Zeledón

English translation

You should have broken me when you had the chance.

When I told you to look me in the eye
while reaching orgasm.
The face of the man who hurt me
deformed with pleasure.
The pleasure of seeing myself surrendered, exhausted,
my body folded into a cocoon.
I was never a more docile corpse
that when I wove my own shroud
my silence, a hinge unable to yield.

How could my seams not have given out
if your hands were despotic machines?

Convinced you were to destroy me
to finally conquer me.
I was the one who colonized you
with my image,
my sweat and my thoughts.

You squeezed me mechanically
like a juicy limp pulp.
I slipped through the corners of your fingers
from your eyes, from your lips.

Your obsessive apology
it's a fantastic manifestation
of my own hatred.

You lust for a better place in my life.
I didn't kill you.

To defeat you, it would not have been enough
with a single gesture of violence.
Dead, I would have carried you on my skin,
intertwined with the intoxicating autonomy

from when I was a woman
totally free,
gloriously naïve.

I dream of you in my nightmares.
I yell and cry to you without any shame.

In the bed
alone
when you raped me
alone
when they didn't believe me.

These emotions are not permanent
like everything else you took away.
Because if I order myself to scream
it is I who obey,
not as the owner of absolute pain

but because I'm alive.

Natalia Díaz Zeledón is a young feminist, writer, and journalist from Costa Rica. She works as a reporter on politics and economics for the University of Costa Rica's newspaper, Semanario Universidad. She was the winner of an honorable mention in the 2018 Pío Víquez National Journalism Award for her work on human rights. In her spare time, she co-directs a feminist literary project called Onvres en escabeche, which was awarded a scholarship in 2020 by the Ministry of Culture, for being a reading promotion initiative.

She edited and wrote for the young women's anthology Mi dolor es una dulzura invaluable (Encino Ediciones, 2019). Previously, she worked for Costa Rican media and platforms such as La Nación and its magazine, Revista Dominical; the English-language newspaper The Tico Times, and the television project Suave un Toque that was second place in the Nuevas Miradas Award from the University of Quilmes, in Argentina (2018).

Among other projects, she has collaborated as an illustrator for the Latin American project FESminismos of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. She is currently a fellow in the Deutsche Welle's Global Media Forum 2021.

Je suis une femme!

by Nicole Moré Tchiemessom

Original in French

Je suis une femme, une grand-mère, une mère, une tante, une sœur, une fille, une nièce,
Je suis une femme, qui est sifflée et tourmentée au quotidien.
Je suis une femme qui stresse chaque matin avant de sortir de chez elle.
Qui ne peut s'habiller sans être étiquetée ou jugée à son désavantage.
Je suis une femme qui subit des attouchements, harcèlements, regards insistant plein de
sous-entendu au quotidien.
Je suis une femme, huée, dédaignée, méprisée, parce qu'elle n'est pas mariée, parce
qu'elle choisit de vivre seule.
Je suis une femme maltraitée, harcelée, violentée, chassée lorsqu'elle ne peut enfanter.
Je suis une femme pour qui le toit de sa maison ne constitue plus un abri.
Je suis une femme qui subit son devoir conjugal au lieu d'en jouir.
Je suis une femme qui est mutilée dès l'enfance, condamner à une aliénation de mon
plaisir sexuel.
Je suis une femme dont l'intelligence est ignorée au dépend de mes formes.
Je suis une femme à qui on a appris à se taire, à baisser la tête, à se résigner..

JE DIS NON

Je suis une femme qui dit NON ;
Je dis non aux attouchements, aux sous-entendus,
Je dis non aux interprétations de mon habillement,
Je dis non aux sévissent quotidien physique ou mentale,
Je dis non au bafouement de mes choix, de ma liberté, de mes décisions,
Je dis non à la réduction de mon image à simple objet sexuel,
Je dis NON NON NON
Je dis non car je sais aujourd'hui que je suis entendue et que j'y ai droit.

I am a Woman!

by Nicole Moré Tchiemessom

English translation

I am a woman, a grandmother, a mother, an aunt, a sister, a daughter, a niece,
I am a woman who is hissed and tormented every day.
I am a woman who gets stressed every morning before leaving her house,
Who cannot dress without being tagged or judged.
I am a woman who suffers daily from touching, harassment, insistent glances full of
innuendo.
I am a woman, hooted, scorned, despised, because she is not married, because she
chooses to live alone.
I am a mistreated, harassed, abused woman who is chased away when she cannot give
birth.
I am a woman for whom the roof of her house is no longer a shelter.
I am a woman who endures her marital duty instead of enjoying it.
I am a woman who is mutilated from childhood, condemned to forego my sexual pleasure.
I am a woman whose intelligence is ignored to the benefit of my looks.
I am a woman who has been taught to be silent, to bow my head, to resign myself...

I SAY NO

I am a woman who says NO;
I say no to touching, to innuendo,
I say no to the interpretations of my clothing,
I say no to the daily physical or mental rages,
I say no to the flouting of my choices, my freedom, my decisions,
I say no to reducing my image to a simple sexual object,
I say NO NO NO,
I say no because I know that today I am heard and have a right to be.

Nicole Moré Tchiemessom is a Cameroonian midwife who has worked for 13 months in Mali with Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) where she was able to intervene in the care of survivors of sexual violence. As a woman, Nicole has suffered from harassment from classmates, colleagues and professors and has been made to feel dirty, misunderstood and abandoned. These experiences have inspired this poem.

Can I get tested?

by Nyambo Laura

When we get to the lab we test for
Starch, blue-black is the result
We test for proteins
We test for fats
All these are tests

Test for coronavirus
Test for tuberculosis
Test for malaria
Test for typhoid
Yes, teenagers can also get tested for pregnancy

I am standing on the threshold
It's like I am between a hard place and a rock
Its predicament
That's indecision
The decision I have to make
I am on the hands of dilemma
I am not alone

The professional and the nonprofessional
The educated and the uneducated
The politician and the voter
The preacher and his followers
The Christians and the nonbelievers
All are suffering from indecision
I am not alone

Shall I, shall I not
I am on a cliff
Just a push it will send me into the gorge
It's a lifetime decision I have to make

Is it necessary to ask?
Is it necessary to know?
Is it necessary to debate?
Is it necessary to argue about HIV/AIDS prevalence?

The taste OF the fruit is in its freshness
If you wait for it to dry the freshness disappears

The taste disappears
It's all because of procrastination
It has stolen people's time the results are often disastrous

The professional and the nonprofessional
The educated and the uneducated
The preacher and his followers
The politician and the voter
The Christians and the nonbelievers
All suffer from procrastination

What are they afraid of?
What is their worry?
With all that we know about HIV/AIDS
With all the overwhelming information
All the evidence
All the misery why
Why suffer from indecision

Today I dare to be different
Different from the rest
No more procrastination
No more suffering from indecision
Today is the day
I have got to be smart

No more influence from my parents
No more influence from my teachers
No more influence from my siblings
No more influence from my peers
I am smart now

This is about my life
This is about my decision
Life transforming decision
Information is power
My life, my decision, my Future Life Now

I am off to the clinic to get tested
No more procrastination
Any company?
HIV/AIDS is real

Nyambo Laura is a teenager girl born from a trainee teacher and a civil servant. She is currently studying at Wadzanai High School in Shamva, Zimbabwe.

Pre-Treatment

by Owolabi Bjälkander

Don't judge me, or my country, or my people.
Of course, I want you to know, most of all understand.
I want you to treat this issue carefully, with some grace, not wrath and prejudice.

I come from a country in Africa, where we perform female circumcision. It is a tradition....

Female circumcision, for you that don't know, involves removing or damaging a large or small part of the woman's external genitalia because of culture or tradition,
It is impossible to describe the pain.
It is done so that a girl can become a woman.

I know that you want INFORMATION, FACTS...
I have these in fact, lots, that I can share with you
But first.
It is important that I give you the background
I want to prepare your thinking, but more importantly,
Your hearts.

I want you to treat us African women gently, with dignity
Don't ask us if we have been circumcised,
Don't tell us that we are barbaric and stupid,
Don't call us idiots, uncivilised.

Don't judge me or my country
Of course, I want you to know, most of all understand.
I want you to treat this issue carefully, with some grace, not wrath and prejudice.

Owolabi Bjälkander is from Sierra Leone where female genital mutilation (FGM) is performed as a rite of passage into womanhood. Owolabi is now a researcher on FGM located in Sweden but working globally. The poem was written when the author started working in the Global North where people were often mesmerised by the topic and expressed indignation and anger, describing Africans as "barbaric and uncivilised". This poem was written for these audiences - the title, "Pre-Treatment", comes from the need to "treat" or prepare the hearts of the listeners.

Contraception is not a contradiction

by Peace Umanah

When I denied my health the best,
I simply died like the rest,
For I was as timid as the bone,
Bleached by the sun.

I was told I was a girl,
The reason I couldn't own a pearl,
So I moved about like a cadaver,
Stitched from head to toe.

Until I was exposed to my 'now',
My 'now' and my 'how',
That's right! tis SRH in love,
The Sexual Reproductive Health family.

Civil to this family,
I dare question some practices of my society,
Why the genital mutilation?
Why can't I come of age before marriage?

Now, I can put up a fight,
Because sound health is my right,
Right to sanity,
And right to sanitary.

Caps, pills, condoms, implants and others, I know,
Protected and safe, my family is now a goal,
Thus, I boldly proclaim that,
Contraception is not a contradiction.

Peace Umanah currently works as a Youth Champion with the A360 Project under Society for Family Health (SFH). Peace is passionate about the sexual and reproductive health of girls. She graduated from Bingham University, Karu, Nigeria with a second-class upper in Physiology.

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.
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.

Dear Lover

by Rebian Sharon Atieno

Dear Lover

I have stayed before

I have been here all this while

We have been held with these vows

Dear Lover

It has been one I Do to another I Don't

For now it is just don'ts and more don'ts

Dear Lover

I have agreed to things before

I have nodded and believed in things before

I said Yes

I said I do before, I agreed before

I said I do before but not anymore

I remember saying Yes

I said Yes but not to these

I didn't say Yes to this madness

Not to this service of punches for breakfast

Slaps for lunch and kicks for dinner

I don't remember agreeing to insults as a way of communication,

Signing my death certificate in the place of our marriage certificate

And when I vowed "till death do us part",

I didn't mean you tear me apart

My "I will do anything for you" wasn't about being dragged in the mud

Being thrown around the house

I have tried but I'm sick from the migraines you cause every time my head is hit on the wall

I am sick from the blows you give me

I am suffocating under this broken jaws

I am sick, so sick, very sick and tired of the red eyes I have from the tears I cry every night after beatings, crying after this sham of marriage

I don't want to wake up with a black eye then wear sunglasses even on rainy days just to cover my dying eyes in the face of your inhumanity

I don't want to apply layers of make up to conceal these bruises

This foundation of lies to hide me from the shame of my washed up dignity

Eye shadow and mascara after mascara to keep the pain in

I don't want to keep a smile face for friends and family just to show everything is okay when I know it's only a matter of days before they are invited to my wake

I don't want to keep walking deeper into this death trap

I don't want to keep lying to myself that you will change

That if I become better you will too
I don't want to keep praying to God to change you from an abuser to a loving husband
I am so tired, everything hurts
And now I am full of regrets for ever believing the sweet nothings that you said to me
For the promises that you swore your life on
I have been saying I don't for sometime now
I have been slowly disagreeing
Slowly taking this marriage apart
Getting my voice out of these pieces you call vows
I hope I am not too late.

Rebian Sharon Atieno is a spoken word artist, an actress and activist based in Nairobi, Kenya. Rebian uses her artistry to advocate for social justice, defending human rights and amplifying women's struggles in the society. She has performed spoken word poetry on various stages including the Usawa Festival, the SWAN Festival, and the Mashujaa Festival. Currently, she is working on a personal project highlighting the effects of marginalisation of youths in Kenya. In this poem, a woman is talking to the lover, explaining all the things she has done to make the marriage work but his toxicity is too much. She is taking her life back by standing her ground - she is not to be silent about the violence.

The Taj

by Roy Jacobstein

They tell you it's a Wonder, a memorial
to love (Shah Jahan for Mumtaz, his wife,
and perhaps, by extension, of all men
for their wives, and vice versa, why not,
even for the very concept of Love,
and not only the Earthly),
that words can never do it justice
nor the glossy photos in the coffee table books;
plus there's the poignant fact
Jahan was imprisoned across the river
by his son, Aurangzeb, just before
the dome was finally joined, and thus condemned
to view the finished edifice he'd never entered
every day those last few years of his long life.
So you show up at 6 AM, part
the burgeoning horde of vendors,
already your sweat-soaked shirt's
glommed to your back, and lo!: shimmering
at a distance, immaculate
white marble and twinned waterborne white reflection
filling the archway with that roseate glow,
taking everyone's breath and yours
as it was meant to do. But they don't tell you
Mumtaz had fourteen children and died in childbirth
at 38, and Jahan had many other wives
who comforted him
and bore him many children
while he held dominion two more decades
before Aurangzeb began to reign.

Roy Jacobstein is an American pediatrician and public health physician working on SRH internationally. His poetry has appeared in many literary journals and anthologies, been featured in Poetry Daily, Verse Daily and "American Life in Poetry: Reintroducing Poetry to America's Newspapers," and included in the textbook LITERATURE: Reading Fiction, Poetry & Drama. His poems have received the Glenna Luschei Prairie Schooner Award; Mid-American Review's James Wright Poetry Prize, and first prize from the American Anthropology Association's Society for Humanistic Anthropology. He has published 5 collections of poetry, including Ripe, winner of the Felix Pollak Poetry Prize and Finalist for the Academy of American Poets' Walt Whitman Award and A Form of Optimism, winner of the Samuel French Morse Poetry Prize.

Heart

by Steph Lum

You can't fix her
Because there's nothing to fix
She's already perfect
But you did change her
You made her into something you wanted her to be
You changed your perfect daughter
You thought her body was not enough
Was different and weird and needed to be changed before anyone could love her
And in so doing
You made her feel that she was different and weird and that she needed to change before
anyone can love her
That her body is not enough, that she
is
not
enough
Thank goodness you can't see how big her heart is
Otherwise maybe you would try to cut that out too

Steph Lum is an Australian intersex advocate, poet and legal researcher. Steph is the founder and editor-in-chief of YOUTH&I, a publication of writings and artwork by young intersex people from around the world and has been published in the Australian Poetry Journal and Not Very Quiet. Steph was previously a co-Chair of Intersex Human Rights Australia and a member of the LGBTIQ Ministerial Advisory Council of the Australian Capital Territory.

Under the Act

by Susanna Rance

You might say I tried
not to cause your life to spark,
but spark it did, it did.

Size of a fingernail
says my mother, showing hers –
to me, you're bigger than the moon.

I walked on that ward
with my own two feet.
Metal took out my deepest core.

After, I screamed the ward down,
parents chased out, screens pulled round.
Voice made things move.

In my dream life
I screamed before, before,
holding you dear.

Waking to the void,
all I knew, all I still know:
right to choose, my right to choose.

Susanna Rance is a writer and academic living between London, UK and La Paz, Bolivia. A sociologist, she received her PhD from Trinity College, Dublin (2003) with a thesis on Bolivian doctors' changing voices and practices regarding abortion and women hospitalised with complications of abortion and pregnancy loss. Since her teens, Susanna has been a feminist and activist on issues of gender and sexual and reproductive health and rights. She participated as a member of Bolivian governmental and NGO delegations in the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development and related events in the Latin American region. Susanna has published widely in English and Spanish on topics including abortion technologies, post-abortion care, women's birthplace choices, users' experiences in hospital emergency services, research ethics, rights advocacy, and qualitative research methods. She is an honorary visiting reader with the University of East London in Stratford, UK.

The rendezvous

by Sushma Krishna

The rays sneak in through the broken ceiling onto her eyes
Up and high, the morning star set to arise
Another day of work and silent cries
Meet Amani, the village girl so nice

She waves a bye to her little brother
To school, off he runs farther
With a bag around his neck
She longs to follow and check.

Deep into the bushes, she gathers fire-wood
Lonely and scared, of men in the neighborhood,
She trusts Jai hanuman will do her good
She could be a fighter, had she understood.

Out from the shed, hears she a cow's mow
Milk to deliver for the houses on the row
Distance long, heavy pot, to walk on toe
She huffs and puffs keeping her head low.

The chapatis on the tawa are ready by noon
Before baba returns after ploughing soon
So are the hauled pots of water- Can she ever get a boon?
A fading song on her lips with a melancholy croon.

The sheep graze on the mountain slope
On the soft grass she relaxes, as an idle lope
The blue sky, the colorful birds, all dreams and hope
Loosens the burden of the tightened rope

The muddy floor cleaned bright and shine
The clothes washed and hung up in a line
Night descends, the moon behind the pine
Coming of age, she is not fine

Her father seems to be in a hurry
A teen's marriage on cards, to not worry
It is the family tradition and a raining flurry
That she cannot defy, all blurry

Learns she, of some changes in gender roles these days
Of women who plan their families with amaze
Of women who lead the family life with a blaze
To her, it is all still a cloud of smoke and haze

She understands these little but all
Seem to stand the test of time for a fall
The wait may be too long, but a bold call
A red-carpet entry for the grand hall

What she needs, she knows not yet
Money, power, beauty, she has to rise and set
It has been a life only of regret
Someone, she herself has not met

The time is now, says her inner voice
She wonders if she has a choice
To stand up for her health and rights
To listen and not put up an inner fight

Amani, now the goddess of aggression
Forcing herself out of oppression
Makes herself an honest confession
It's her decision and no more a submission

Lucky that she was beheld- quite a story to listen
Next morning elsewhere, not yet a conclusion
Awareness in the air, girls must fly with a healthy vision
And stay enabled for their family missions.

Dr. Sushma Krishna is a Medical Doctor, a Microbiologist, and a Public Health personnel from India. The poem, which is based upon the author's real life experiences, describes the life of Amani, the village girl who lives in her innocent dreamy world taking up the responsibility of her family at a very young age. She is completely oblivious and unaware of what freedom is, of what reproductive and sexual rights and justice are for a woman, until one day when she chooses to have a say in her marital and sexual life, seeking freedom.

Am I born to suffer?

by Tough Lady

They made me feel inferior.
I was forced to say uncle,
And buy the idea of being worthless.
It was worse than a suffocation to feel of no use,
A loss indeed they made me appear.
Empty I was,
Yet abnormally loaded with dust of mockery.

Sexually, I screamed bloody murder,
Rape, rape, rape!
You have ripped off my pride and dignity,
devilishly pried me open,
And left me in the lurch vulnerable to all sorts of brutal attacks.
A thousand generations of men feed on my flesh day and night.
How do you expect me to sleep,
When I am working graveyard shift to satisfy a dozen of merciless demons?
With a crying shame,
I have become nothing less than enslaved to dust of mockery.

Can my story ever come to make sense?
Glued to misery, I have become,
My salad days are nothing short of a wipe-out.
I feel every inch of my skin is drawn to a brush with death.
Life has knocked around me,
How can it not be,
when the meaning of hope is lost?
Void inside, yet choked with dust of mockery.

I no longer own myself,
How then can I have someone to call my own?
The world marooned me.
Shattered or scattered, I just feel loosened to ashes.
My own dreams are no part of reality.
Aspirations expired before their birth.
Peace pierced into pieces,
Pain taken its roots beneath,
And proven to be the only portion to taste.
Skeleton! Am I?
Left without recognition to absorb only the dust of mockery.

Life gets in the way, I agree.
Tupac Shakur felt the heinous side of it,
"It's a struggle for every young black man. You know how it is,
only God can judge us."
What has society done in the name of gender equality,
Am I not human enough,
A son of your own,
Brother of this generation,
A husband to a wife I'm not equipped with how to treat tomorrow,
Father of the future?
The question still remains,
Until when do I have to be deprived of my own right in the dust of mockery?

Its never about competition,
But doing your best in the moment,
How then should I do it,
When you took all the opportunities from me?
Is it my identity to be scrapping the bottom of the barrel,
Only to make it to the top?
How many of you are willing to stand up for my rights?
All I am asking is a window of opportunity to showcase the flame eating me beneath.
Thirsty I am,
Starving for greatness is all I do,
Yet limited to dust of mockery.

It doesn't matter what I had to go through,
All that created a hero in me,
And made me realize scars are ornaments of honor.
A warrior I was born, and so are you!
I am tough indeed, I subdue any hindrance to my throne,
Enough is enough! I say no, to giving in and giving up,
inspiration is awareness of your worth molded from the dust of mockery.

Tsungirirai Demetria Kambayo is a young woman from Gweru, Zimbabwe, popularly known by her pen name Tough lady. Tsungirirai is an author and a poet. Her first article, 'The Impostor ' was published in AminutewithTroy 2020 magazine. Poetry is what flows in her veins. Tsungie has published a few poems including 'Lost in the same old wounds' with The Speech Brigade 180 Orbit and 'Tropism' published in The Mt Kenya Times, a newspaper read in over 150 countries globally.

Cuando era niña

by Valentina Ortiz Rincón

Original in Spanish

De niña me cuestioné lo que realmente quería, nunca me gustó el rosa, ni las muñecas, mucho menos, jugar a la cocina.

Siempre estuve atada a lo que otros veían, que el cabello largo, y los zapatos de tacón, que los vestidos largos y un poco de rubor.

Nunca hice lo que quise hasta que fui mayor, ahora mi cabello corto es una bendición y mis botas negras, mi mayor adoración; me convertí en lo que añoraba por pura satisfacción.

De niña me cuestioné lo que realmente quería, ahora sólo quiero salir a la calle y sentirme yo misma, que el viento recorra mi rostro y mi piel, sin que otros puedan juzgarme por lo que decida.

As a child

by Valentina Ortiz Rincón

English translation

As a child, I questioned what I really wanted,
I never liked pink, nor dolls, much less playing at cooking.
I was always tied to what others
saw, long hair,
and high heels, long dresses
and a little blush.

I never did what I really wanted to do until I was older,
now my short hair
is a blessing and my black boots,
my greatest adoration; I became
what I longed for out of pure satisfaction.

As a child, I questioned what I really wanted;
now, I just want to go out
in the street and feel
myself, let the wind blow across my face
and my skin, without others
judging me for what I decide.

Valentina Ortiz Rincón is 21 years old and lives in the city of Cúcuta, Norte de Santander, in Colombia. She is currently a student of Social Communication, and loves the field of human rights. This is why she identifies as a lesbo feminist, activist, and youth leader of Profamilia, working with women in the context of migration on sexual and reproductive rights. She is also a volunteer of the corporation 'Mujer Denuncia y Muévete,' and is also part of the 'daughters of the border' process in partnership with Causa Justa. She is a cultural manager and poet. She has worked in cultural events such as 'Letras al barrio' and 'perfopoesía'; she is part of the literary arts committee, and in her process as an activist and poet, she managed to join two passions to turn her struggle into art. She believes that she can change the world through culture; her dream is to continue motivating girls and women from the border with her poetry to know their rights.

The Choices

by Winnie Madoro

Good or bad, wrong or right?
Right is perceived to be right, but wrong just feels right,
Good leaves our hearts heavy, for we can never be right!
But evil? We do not need to try so hard to prove to the world that we are right,
We join those who are unapologetically wrong, for their deeds are right to our sight.
Choices and Chances,
We choose not to follow belief, we risk just so we can see,
We imprison old-fashioned knowledge and toss away the key,
We bow, to the deeds of the crowd, we bend our knee,
Hail Queen! Hail King! their words of praise our ears flatter,
We swim in wrong waters but to them we matter,
See, choices have choices that have other choices,
That make us think we have options, so we take our chances.

Chance A:

Last night I tried it with him, And it tasted just like you said it would,
Hands touching, lips squeezing, when he finally went in, it felt so good!
I have tried reaching him today and he keeps telling me he is busy,
He must have decided to attend those classes, he never does.

Chance B:

Last month I tried it with him, and it tasted just like he said it would,
The roar from his voice as he drilled me raw kept me begging for more,
He turned me, upside down, he turned me when he promised he had pulled out,
Why then I'm I stuck debating whether to spit or swallow this vomit in my mouth.

Choice A

Last year I tried it and it was as easy as they said it would be,
Just a couple of notes, and I kissed that embryo goodbye,
My body shed tears of blood but that did not matter to me,
My mind tried playing tricks on my conscience, that was already dead,
My nurse was so generous, contracts of privacy do not apply,
Streets filled with details of my act, every whisper hit my back,
My eyes met eyes saying words that caused my self-esteem to die,
School was my hell, burning me up yet never turning me to ashes.

Choice B.

Last year I tried it, and it was just as you said it would be,

Mornings of weakness and nights of terror..
Swollen bellies are beautiful, they carry angels who carry blessings,
Swollen bellies are beautiful, they carry news to feed the village ears for days,
Women will not just sit telling tales of lies, swollen bellies carry proof,
Swollen bellies are evil, they carry magic strong enough to turn friends to strangers,
Relatives to bitter foe, but how else would I know, I think swollen bellies carry wisdom,
No swollen bellies are beautiful, they create an image wide enough to make billboards,
They are the winds of the Harmattan, bringing every hidden sand to sight,
No, swollen bellies are scary, they chase men away,
Men strong enough to lift over 50kgs of weight, while pumping harder, faster,
Breathing and squeezing, and spanking, and, lifting and turning, and sucking,
While commanding to be called 'Dzadzy',
No, these men choose to run away, swollen bellies are harmless,
Or so they say.
Birth.

Choice C.

Last year I tried it, and it was just as you said it would be,
The pit latrine was not large enough, plus I thought it cruel,
So I wrapped him in clothes, though ragged, I wrapped him in love,
And placed him along the path leading to heaven.

Last year I tried it, and it was just as you said it would be,
Went to his father's home, and they were crowning him king,
I thought why not just leave him? our son will be a Prince,
So I handed him the child, and went away to find my peace.

Choice D,

Last decade I tried it, and it was just as you said it would be,
Took my goods to the dogs of the streets just so we can feed,
Many insisted on raw, so I had to constantly get rid of their seed,
It did not take long before my health status got rid off me,
Now my son forcefully takes goods from the dogs of the streets,
I cannot stop him, he might know no morals but he knows he has to feed,
I cannot stop him, for my spirit writes this piece.

Choices and Chances,

We choose not to follow belief, we risk just so we can see,
We imprison old-fashioned knowledge and toss away the key,
We bow, to the deeds of the crowd, we bend our knee,
Hail Queen! Hail King! their words of praise our ears flatter,
We swim in wrong waters but to them we matter.
See, choices have choices that have other choices,
That makes us think we have options ,so we take our chances.
But after making the first choice, do we really have other choices?

Winnie Madoro is a 22 year old Kenyan poet. She has been writing poetry since high school and uses poems to express her deepest emotions. Through her work, she hopes to inspire, motivate and challenge existing beliefs as well as shed light on different aspects of life. She has written over 100 poems and performed in various spaces including the No Glove No Love campaign, Gender Based Violence campaign, Kenya Institute for Public and Research Analysis - event held at the Bomas of Kenya and East Africa Poetic Hour. She is in her final year at Kisii University, having pursued a degree in Human Resource Management. She hopes to publish her first anthology soon.

Pinky Moment

by Zhong-Cheng Luo

I am a silver bird

Love to fly

Oh, my god!

Vividly pinky fleshy mountains

Eastern miracles, rising and falling

Stop me arresting in dreams, breathless

Exhale hard, fly gently more

XXX! All in, lost in heaven

In some Eastern cultures, sex for men likens a flight in mountains. This short poem depicts an exotic happy and healthy sex moment. The first letter of each sentence reads "I love sex".

ZC Luo is an associate professor and scientist at the Lunenfeld-Tannenbaum Research Institute and Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Mount Sinai Hospital, University of Toronto, Canada. He has published 120+ research papers, but is a novice in poetry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

SELECTION COMMITTEE:

Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad, Poet, Medical Doctor and Sexologist, Norway
Jane Cottingham, Poet and SRHM Trustee, Switzerland
Makhosazana Xaba, Poet and Women's Health Specialist, South Africa
Martha Ryan, Poet and MFA Candidate in Creative Writing, USA

EDITOR:

Pathika Martin, SRHM Monitoring Editor

FACILITATOR:

Alex Bremshey, SRHM Communications Manager

PAINTING ON THE COVER:

Jené Stephaniuk ©Unsplash

This poetry anthology was published on 8 March 2022.

SRHM is a registered charity and a company limited by guarantee in England.

Registered charity no. 1040450

Limited company registered no. 2959883

SRHM | SEXUAL AND
REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH
MATTERS
MORE THAN A JOURNAL

Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters
Hamilton House
Mabledon Place
London WC1H 9BB, UK
Website: www.srhm.org