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The Importance of Bearing Witness to Our Shared Trauma

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BEARING WITNESS TO OUR SHARED TRAUMA

Zara Cachepas

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ON THIS INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY, I want to talk about something that is difficult for me.

It is the fact that every woman has a story.

Whether it's her own, her mother's, her friend's, every woman has a story of male violence.

And sometimes, it just hits me how true that is. How much we all grew up in the collective trauma of male violence.

(I don't usually use trigger warnings in my life, but for this post I will say, strong trigger warning for descriptions of sexual assault and violence. I truly don't want to destabilise you, trigger you, or ruin your day.)

Trauma isn't just a bomb going off, or a plane crashing, or any other single event. Trauma can also be cumulative. It can be the years and years of growing up, being told that we have to protect ourselves, that we have to be safe, that we shouldn't look men in the eye at night, that we shouldn't smile at them, so they get the wrong idea. It can be living with the reality that is: you never truly know when you're safe in patriarchy.

It is a background fear. It's something we've accepted as normal. It's something deeply ingrained in our societies. Men will rape. Women will be raped. It's the backdrop of daily life.

How sick is it that we, as a society, have normalised this? Men will rape, women will be raped. Every woman has a story.

We grow up with them in the backs of our minds: this happened to my cousin, this happened to my grandma, this happened to the neighbour's wife, she never came back.

And then we have to grow up telling our daughters these stories, because they have to know. They have to know that we are constantly in danger, they have to know that they need to keep themselves safe, we have to *scare* them into staying safe because their lives could depend on it.

Male violence has traumatised women.

What is it, if not trauma? Story after story that imprint themselves on our minds, that get our hearts racing when we're alone on a deserted street at night.

Do you want to know what really set me down the radical feminist path? What really made me want to centre women, to place them first, above all else? Male depravity. The fact that every woman has a story.

It was finding out my aunt was molested by the gardener between the ages of six and nine. Finding out that when she told her mom, she was yelled at for telling lies. How she was then made to go give the gardener lunch every day, alone, in the garden shed, by way of an *apology*.

I never understood why my aunt slept with the light on until she told me that.

It was finding out my school friends were raped, repeatedly, by their father, who invited his friends over to take part. They were eight and 11 when it started.

It was hearing about my girlfriend's abuse, how her father raped her and made her little sister watch. How her little sister would ask her, wasn't she *pretty enough* to take part?

It was my best friend in grade school trying to kill herself, because she was raped by her boyfriend. How the whole school called her a slut and laughed in her face.

It was the woman in the burn unit whose drug addict husband stabbed her for wanting a divorce. She healed, and went back to save her seven-year-old son. The second time, her husband tied her down and poured gasoline on her.

It was the smell of the burn unit. The smell of burnt flesh that I will never forget. There were no men in the burn unit—men don't get set alight for "dishonouring the family."

It was my friend who taught me what a fistula was, because her mother had suffered one in Congo as a result of rape. It was realising that rape is *used as a weapon of war*.

The final straw was my friend's foster daughter, who was sexually assaulted by her then-neighbour at the age of nine. He invited his friends along. They all took videos and pictures and put them online. They included the *family pet*.

It's the fact that she didn't even know it was wrong, because she'd been abused from such a young age. It's the fact that her (birth) parents called her a slut for seducing the neighbour. No 12-year-old should be left so scarred.

It is the fact that these are just a *fraction* of the stories in my life that scream to me, men are dangerous, men are depraved, women need to be protected. Women need to be listened to. Women hurt. Women persist. Women die.

How do you even put words to such atrocity? Even the words are an injustice in themselves. No words can do justice to the depths of depravity that society exacts upon women and girls.

Every once in a while I hurt. And I cry for women. And I stand back up.

Because if there's one thing I can take away from all this, it's that we are truly connected. There is a sisterhood here. We've all grown up in this trauma, to varying degrees. We all recognise this feeling. And so we are all bound to each other.

It is a deep bond that women have, one that radical feminism helped me name. Not just of trauma, but of the shared experience of growing up, in this body, in this world. The joy and the pain that that brings.

So, it is International Women's Day. And so, my point of writing this is not to lament male violence. It is to *bear witness to women*. It is to take a moment to deeply appreciate and celebrate women, in a way that recognises the reality we face globally. What we go through, how we persist, and how we can take that bond of sisterhood and turn it into a movement that can bring our daughters some peace, so that one day, one day, maybe every woman won't have a story.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Zara Cachepas (a pseudonym) is a 30-year-old Pakistani woman and radical feminist who writes about women's issues. She lives in the U.K. Her work supporting the victims of attempted honour killings has shaped her feminist stance. She remains largely anonymous for safety reasons, but you can find her at *The Blistering Rebuttal* on Substack. <https://theblisteringrebuttal.substack.com/>

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