



IF YOU KNEW ME YOU WOULD CARE

BY ZAINAB SALBI PHOTOGRAPHS BY RENNIO MAIFREDI

FOREWORDS BY

MERYL STREEP, ANNIE LENNOX, ASHLEY JUDD, GEENA DAVIS

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Foreword

Meryl Streep

One thing is inescapable in these pictures, and that's the connection that the gaze of each of these women makes with us. It is the frankest, most direct look; the way we look into the eyes of a sister or an intrepid friend. In our daily life we do not normally look, deeply, into the eyes of people we don't know. . . . It's too weird, too hard, too embarrassing; both of us unnerved by the intimacy and challenge of such a connection. But these photographs have a necessity and clarity that achieves that and more. They deliver dignity back to the person who looked at the camera, because we who turn the page and confront, in turn, each of these women, acknowledge each life, its size and importance, as somehow familiar.

The sitter is not robbed of her soul; she has expanded it out into the larger world, where we who are lucky to lock eyes with her, have the privilege to pay attention, give respect, and connect.

The unique approach of Zainab's book is that it has this mission. To remove the woman, the sister, the friend, from the circumstances of her victimization, and give her back her due respect as someone we recognize, someone we might know. This way of looking is with an activist's eye, and an open heart. Empathy, rather than sympathy, delivers these images to us, accompanied by a feeling that we are all in this struggle together. That it's up to us to stay alert to how similar we are, to how much we care about the same things in life. And how it is possible, as women, to find inspiration in lives outwardly different from our own. We are animated by the same dreams: hope for a better future for our children, hope for peace. This transaction, one to one, is how Zainab conceived of the organization she founded: Women for Women International. And it is that immediacy that this collection of photographs, and the stories they tell, makes tangible.

Introduction

Zainab Salbi

The images of women survivors of war, rape, displacement, poverty, and violence have often been confined to only that of the victim. And of course war and violence cause pain and damage bodies and souls, and in that sense, they create “victims,” but the story does not always end there. And, of course, the story never begins there. Those who suffer violence, poverty, and loss live with feelings of pain, but unlike the pictures of them taken as others choose to portray them, they sometimes manage to overcome that pain with great triumph and joy, sometimes they live on tolerating the pain, and sometimes the pain anchors them and defines their identity. In all these scenarios, a person’s encounter with darkness, in the form of war, violence, or poverty, is never a static or finite experience. Rather, it is an evolutionary experience that takes one on a journey of discovery—a discovery of one’s own strength, beliefs, values and dreams, and of love, anger, and hope. War, as a Bosnian journalist once said, shows you the worst acts of humanity and shows you the best acts of humanity all in one moment. And the process of encountering misfortunes, as I have learned in my life, often leads to one’s fortune. Life is an evolving process of discovery, so why, when it comes to the “other”—to women from the so-called “Third World” or the “Developing World” or in conflict zones and post conflict settings—are their images two-dimensional and frozen in the time frame of their victimhood. What if she is not only a victim in her story? What if she is much, much more than that?

That question brought me to this book. *If You Knew Me, You Would Care* is a journey that took me and photographer Rennio Maifredi to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Rwanda to explore women’s stories in their fullest, revealing the layers that often go unnoticed in the telling of their “victim story,” and uncovering the individual woman as she exists as a whole. All interviews were conducted in the spirit of what the Dalai Lama once said in a small private gathering of those who have dedicated their lives to service and social work: “If you can’t respect the people you are serving, than better not serve them,” he told the gathering. This resonated with me so very deeply. Throughout my years of work in conflict and post-conflict areas, delivering humanitarian aid and development programs through Women for Women International, I learned that a vulnerable person may take what is provided to her in times of hardship but that does not replace her need for respect and for maintaining her own integrity

Democratic
Republic of the
Congo





My name is Claudine

I was born in 1975. I wanted to be a doctor when I was young. But I had to stop secondary school when my father died. I was very sad and even angry to have stopped going to school but I had no choice as my mother was sick and I had to work to support her.

When I was 17, I met a young man on Sunday afternoon at Church. He was an orphan just like me and we loved each other. Ah love. I learned that love is a heart disease. We can't help ourselves when it happens. That man was the only man I loved in my life. We had a good marriage and were comfortable enough to have our children raised in a loving environment. But after a few years, he started hanging out with friends and started drinking a lot. Things got out of hand when one day he came home in the evening and started yelling at me and accusing me of spinning negativity on him. He took the pan in which I was cooking beans and he took it outside and threw it. In our custom, this meant, "I no longer want this woman in my house." And he took the lamp that was there and he started beating me and it was the beginning of our separation.

This was the very first time that it happened. But I was bleeding everywhere. The neighbors took me to the hospital and when I reached the hospital, the doctor said they couldn't treat me until I explained how it happened. They thought that it must have been road bandits who beat me so severely. I had no choice but to succumb to the doctors' pressure and tell them that it was my husband who did that to me. It was the very first time I was beaten and the last time that I entered that house.

I learned later that the doctors informed the police, who then went to arrest my husband for domestic violence. When he was released from prison a few days later, he accused me of sending the soldiers to him. He vowed never to share a relationship with me and kicked me out of the house. We loved each other a lot and maybe people, unable to tolerate our happiness, led him to drink and to reject me like this. I was left with my children whom I really love a lot. They also love me. But the problem is that there is no way to provide for their schooling. I was left with very little means when I went back to my family. I had to go to work on other people's farms to earn money to feed my children. It was very hard and I could only send the youngest two to school.



Afghanistan



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My name is Waheeda

I am 33 years old and a married mother of five children. My oldest child is 16 years old. I grew up in Kabul with two brothers and my parents. I was just 16 years old, going about my own life, when a warlord saw me and went to my parents to ask for my hand in marriage. He was 40 years older than me and my parents did not see him as fit for me. They refused his marriage proposal but he never let go and kept on insisting on marrying me. After two months my parents gave up and agreed to marry me off to him. When I heard the news, I went to my brothers crying and asking for their support, to talk my parents into changing their decision about the marriage. My brothers supported me and together we went to our parents insisting that marrying me to this warlord was wrong. My parents were good people and we were all crying knowing that this was not an ideal situation, but they felt they had no choice. They were worried that if they refused him the marriage after all his insistence, he would kidnap me and force me to marry him anyway. They feared for my safety and they felt they had no choice but to agree to protect my honor. I remember crying so much during that conversation. I knew my life was to change forever.

We got married and shortly after, he left me pregnant and went back to the war. He was part of Mujahideen with Ahmad Shah Massoud. A year after my marriage, and shortly after my child's birth, neighbors started talking and spreading rumors that he just took me as a temporary wife and left me alone with the baby. It was up to me to protect my honor this time, so I took my baby girl and went to the province where my husband was living, to be with him.

I needed to stop the neighbors' gossip which was hurting me a lot. When I arrived at his home, I saw that he already had two other wives and many kids with them. His older wives did not like me. I was much younger than they were and they abused me physically and verbally the minute he left the house. I couldn't tell him anything for I knew they would beat me even harder if they knew that I told him what they did to me. So I just endured and continued to have one baby after another while doing all the housework alone and afraid of the other wives. I was like their slave.

Things got so bad that I recently asked him to allow me to go back to my parents and live in Kabul with my kids. He is an old man now, in his 70s, and I am only 33 years old. He let

Enough is enough
with war. We are tired
of war. I was born during
the war and I was raised
in war. It has become
the story of my life and
I am fed up with it. We
want our children to
live in peace and have a
good future. I have had
enough of war.



Rwanda



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My name is Caritas

I'm 39 years old. I'm married and I have two children of my own, a son and a daughter. And I have adopted five more children, because of the genocides.

I was at school when the genocides happened. I had eight brothers. Seven of them died during the genocide. And my father too. Only my mother, one brother, and I survived.

After the genocide, I really didn't feel like doing much. After what I saw, I thought that my life had ended right there. Yes, I managed to survive, but at first I could not bring myself to like the country. But when I started to see once more people I was not expecting to see—when they started to return to me and reenter my life—I started to come around. And, like that, my life got another chance.

Seeing my brother helped turn things around. He had been hit by some bullets and I didn't think that he would survive. I had told myself that I would die alone. But someone helped him and he returned to me. I was very happy and now he is alive.

For a while too, I thought I would never see my mom again. I tried to find her but everyone kept telling me that she had died. Again, I felt like my life had stopped. I didn't get married and I didn't go back to school. But then, one day, after a long search, I managed to find her. It was a miracle.

We were homeless for a while and life was very hard. I found some work and managed to save some money which I used to rent a small house, with just one room, and my mother and I lived there together.

It was during this time that I met my husband at a friend's home. This friend escaped the genocide, and I used to go there to hear his testimony, and my husband used to go there too. We met and got to know each other and started a relationship. His first wife was killed in the genocide. He was my first love. I loved this man because he used to tell me how he escaped the genocide and how he's now surviving and raising his children on his own. And I told you earlier, I love orphans. When I went to visit him at his home, I could see how he struggled with his children. I fell in love with his children and I agreed to take care of them. So we agreed that we should live together.

I had a dream of getting married officially, with a proper wedding, and when I told him that, he refused. And that was our first confrontation. He wanted me to move in to look after his children while he was out looking for a job so he could support them. "We'll see, maybe later," he said. When I said that I would not marry him without an official wedding, he told me, "I know that you love children. I think you should join me in raising these children and later you can ask God for the official wedding."



I even managed to forgive the man who killed my son. He was an old man and found me by asking my neighbors about me. He approached me slowly and asked for forgiveness, and I chose to forgive him because I saw that the killings didn't happen to me only; they happened to many people.

Bosnia and Herzegovina



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My name is Sadzida

And I don't count my years. Just joking. I am 48 and I am probably soon going to be 50.

I got ill in 2005. I thought it was the worst case scenario and I don't like to remember those moments. On my way back from the hospital, a friend of mine told me that an organization, Women for Women International, was on its way. I don't know why but something about it attracted me. Maybe the name, "Women for Women." I don't know really what it was exactly. So, I was coming back from Mostar, and I didn't go home straight away. I went a couple of hundred meters further, straight to the museum, where the organization held their presentation. I heard only half of it; the other half I didn't hear because I was so worried about my health at the time. I had fibrocystic breasts, and when I went to some information sessions about women who actually did have breast cancer, it comforted me because I knew then that I didn't get my worst case scenario after all.

Then I saw women making these baskets. I liked them, but I decided that I could make them better by decorating them. It is really hard work, even hard for a man, but I can do it. Women for Women in Sarajevo saw my determination and so I just started making them. At the time, I didn't really do it for the income; I just wanted to forget about my health problems. And at one point I realized that I had something close to 300 baskets and I had filled the whole room with them. Friends of mine from Austria came and I was supposed to go to the seaside with them. We decided to put all of the baskets in the car and take them with us on our summer holiday. And it took us only half an hour to sell all of the baskets. And to think that everyone had originally said to me, "What are you going to do with all of those baskets?" I was the happiest woman alive. I had my wallet filled with all of these different currencies of the world: dollars, Australian dollars, euros, pounds, everything. I had managed to earn the equivalent of my husband's monthly salary.

And so I decided to share my joy with the women in Sarajevo. So that is basically how I got started. The group gave me a job to educate and instruct 60 other women, to train them to make and decorate baskets. It was my greatest joy when those women started making an income.



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