gender-based violence

MOVING FORWARD. I allowed myself to accept what happened and that was a turning point in my life. There was no need to cry because nothing would change what happened and so I focused on the future. I used those months to analyze who I was, and for the first time, I saw myself. I would look in the mirror and see an intelligent, sweet and weird girl that I was beginning to like.

NUMBERS **56%** **Toll.** The percentage of women age 15 to 29 who have experienced physical violence according to Ugandan Demographic Health Survey (2016) and 28 per cent of women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime.

I rose from domestic abuse

Solidarity: In commemoration of the 16 days of Activism against gender based violence, Ms **Mary Helda Akongo**, the operations and programmes Manager at Zimba Women, shares her story of abuse, to give hope to every victim and everyone who is passionate about tackling all sorts of violence.

It was a beautiful night in September 2016 with the moonlight pouring onto the earth and its splendour spreading like lovers twisting to the rhythms of a sultry jazz artiste. It was a night when passion enticed lovers' minds to stay silent and let their bodies experience bliss.

I was sitting next to him (let's call him Jake) as I watched Agent X on my laptop, while he shared whiskey with his friend Luke when they came up with an idea to play a dare game. The rules of the game were simple. If Luke failed to down a glass of whiskey in one gulp, I would apply lipstick on him and the same for Jake. The game sounded exciting. Who would not want to see a man wearing lipstick?

Jake and I had been living together since May 2016 when I completed my final year examinations at Makerere University. Then, I still had a project to finish and submit. I also wanted to stay in the city and find a job, instead of travelling 332km to my hometown and sit at home unemployed. During that time I met the intriguing poet Jake, through our mutual friend Luke.

He was intelligent, a reader, a good listener and an excellent software programmer but most captivating was his word crafting skill. I liked talking to him, and I felt like he was the first person who truly understood me. We were not always happy; he drank too much and disrespected me publicly.

You must be wondering why I did not leave. Well, I was young and naïve with low self-esteem.

It did not matter that I was not in love with him. We had beautiful moments together, like that night of the game. Those moments happened once in a blue moon, but I was glad because I thought that I could not have everything.

When Jake failed to take his glass of whiskey, I had to apply lipstick on him and loved doing it. I could hear our laughter resounding through the night.

The second time I had to do it, he warned me not to dare. This, he said with laughter in his eyes and a teasing voice.

"Shaa, what will you do?" I replied, amused by his bantering tone.

"Will you hit me?" I continued.

"Yes, I will," he said.

"Hmm, I can see someone is going to jail tonight, and I can assure you that it will not be me," I responded as I lifted the bottle of whiskey, walked towards him and applied the lipstick.

The fight

In the blink of an eye, I found myself on the far end of the room with my right hip forced into the edge of the reading table and Jake raining blows on my bent back.

Time stopped. Luke froze in the opposite corner. The sound of Jake's blows echoed through the room. My mind clogged and focused only on that spiteful sound. His hands unleashed violence on my neck, face, back, shoulders, and my soul.

After what felt like centuries, I forced myself to hit back. I remembered that I had a bottle in my hand and I hit him with it. He hit back harder and more savagely all the while hurling insults at me.

"I am going to break your hand. I am going to break your hand today," he yelled as he started twisting my right hand. Just then, shock released Luke back into the room, and he came to my rescue.

He pulled Jake away and left me standing there in disarray. Laughter ripped through me in violent waves. I neither had the vigour to cry nor the strength to move.

Questions and regrets started haunting me. How could I have been so gullible? How could I have trusted him? Why didn't I leave when I realised he was a violent person who sometimes got into drunken fights in bars? Why? How?

I did not have any answers, and so I laughed some more as I dragged myself into the bedroom to pack my clothes. It was midnight when I walked out of his house and did not look back.

The eight months that ensued were dark and filled with depression, loneliness, regret, sadness, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The shame, insecurity, and anxiety immensely affected my professional and personal life. I pushed away most of my friends and closed myself off from the world.

Torture

Every day, I rushed back from work and hid in the comfort of self-pity. I jumped at the slightest touch and sound (sometimes I still do) and never settled as I walked on the streets because I imagined someone would hit me.

The PTSD was worse because a month before Jake's beating, I was assaulted by robbers on my way home. The irony is that he had been so angry then because he could not believe that any man could lay his hands on a woman.

I started leaning on music and writing as (sharing with friends really helped), but mostly, I stayed home and wrote or listened to music. I allowed myself to accept what happened and that was a turning point in my life.

There was no need to cry because nothing would change what happened and so I focused on the future. I used those months to analyze who I was, and for the first time, I saw myself. I would look in the mirror and see an intelligent, sweet and weird girl that I was beginning to like. It was confusing but at the same time thrilling.

I realised that my lack of self-worth made me stay with him because he made me feel good with his sweet words. He treated me disrespectfully because I let him do it. The best lesson that I learned is that people will treat you the way you let them.

If you do not stand your ground and decline to be mistreated, they will keep doing it. You have to know your worth and refuse to be treated less than you deserve.

Time has made me stronger, courageous and bold. Of course, I have my moments of self-doubt, but I do not let them define me.

I am also more patient, compassionate, understanding, patient and forgiving. I am not totally over my ordeal, but I have almost beaten it and anyone who is still struggling can also do it. It is ironic that the very thing that was once a nightmare turned into a gift.



EFFECTS

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