

LEAP

FALL/WINTER • 2019/2020

LOUD • EMPOWERED • ACCEPTED • PROUD

WRITING A NEW
REFUGEE STORY

DEAR LADY LIBERTY
Open your arms

A BETTER WORLD
Let's create it





Writing a New Refugee Story: 2018 participants in The Stories We Tell, The Voices and Faces Project's testimonial writing workshop, alongside RefuSHE and Voices and Faces Project team members in Nairobi, Kenya.

Editorial Advisory Board:

Christa Desir
Anne K. Ream
R. Clifton Spargo

Founding Design Direction:

Nobuko Nagaoka
Javier Otero

LEAP Volume 3 Art Direction:

Tom Grosspietsch

Special thanks to:

Our extraordinary partners at RefuSHE as well as Sue Crothers, Bill Gee and Manaaki Foundation for their generous support of this project.

Mail us:


LEAP
The Voices and Faces Project
47 W. Polk St. #170
Chicago, IL 60605

Email us:


leap@voicesandfaces.org

Find out more:

voicesandfaces.org

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Cover Photo: The School of RefuSHE.

LEAP3

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DEAR FRIENDS

What does it mean to be a refugee today?

In an era when borders are closing, nationalism is rising, and politicians and pundits from across the globe talk endlessly and unsympathetically about refugees, it too often means that the story being told about you isn't being told *by* you.

This is particularly true for the refugee women and girls whose lived experiences are rarely reflected in public conversations about human rights. Gender discrimination being the cruel constant that it is, they are often marginalized within an already marginalized community, rendered voiceless, faceless, and invisible.

The extraordinary young refugee women who gathered at RefuSHE in Nairobi, Kenya to take part in The Stories We Tell – The Voices and Faces Project's immersive testimonial writing workshop for survivors of gender-based violence and other human rights violations – are changing that, one powerful, purposeful narrative at a time.

During our first-ever Stories We Tell workshop in Kenya, participants from across the African continent came together to do the work of witness. They discussed world-changing testimonial writing from across history and social justice movements, took part in a series of real-time writing exercises, and talked candidly about the changes they hope their testimonies can create in their communities.

In the poetry, stories, spoken word and creative non-fiction that emerged from our time together – work you will discover in the pages that follow – these young writers are using their voices to tell a new story about what it means to be a refugee. Their words take us painfully close to all that they have lived through: war, genocide, statelessness, human trafficking, the destruction of their families and communities.

Yet despite – or perhaps because of – their experiences with injustice, our Stories We Tell writers are demanding to be heard with voices that are both truthful and hopeful. No one should have to be as resilient as these young women have been. But that resilience is also part of what makes the writing you are about to encounter so extraordinary.

According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, by the end of 2018 over 70.8 million individuals were forced to flee their homes. Included in that number are over 29 million refugees, over half of them children. In 2019, forcibly displaced populations remain at a record high.

Behind statistics like these lie millions of refugee stories. You will find only a tiny number of them in these pages. Read them for what they are: beautiful, complicated, heartfelt dispatches from the front lines of the refugee crisis, written by a fierce and proud community of African women. But see these stories as something larger: a window into a world in desperate need of our compassion and, far more importantly, our action.

Anne K. Ream R. Clifton Spargo
Co-creators of The Stories We Tell Testimonial Writing Program

» No one should have to be as resilient as these young women have been. But that resilience is one of the reasons their writing is so extraordinary. «



DEAR READERS

My friends and I, African refugees in Nairobi, have the same story but different beginnings and endings.

We have been sexually abused, we have gone to bed hungry, we have suffered emotional pain. We are girls who have had to look after our own children, whose fathers we often didn't know and could not name. We have struggled with these problems so much that we cried ourselves to sleep on most nights. We were often confused. We didn't understand the strong and insulting language that people speak about refugees. We appreciated and loved our host country, Kenya, but we also always missed home.

What The Voices and Faces Project did for us was different from anything anyone had ever done for us. We knew each other by our names, but none of us really knew what united us. The Stories We Tell writing workshop helped us reveal our true identities and realize that we are all survivors, united by the common circumstances of having been through horrific trauma. Each of us has experienced events that came to define our lives, events that we did not ask to be a part of but were forced into. Yet each of us survived.

The Stories We Tell writing workshop helped awaken our inner confidence and develop the skills to write our stories. It helped us become women of strength, power and kindness. Hearing words and poems and the magnificent roar of others in the workshop who have survived violence was uplifting. Together we could unearth the bright light that the darkness of trauma had buried within our hearts.

No longer would we stand by and let what we had experienced define and limit who we are. We are stronger together than when we are isolated and alone. Our voices, no longer soft and weak, became like the roar of a lioness protecting her cubs.

Voices and Faces Project founder Anne K. Ream said to us, "Change is a chorus, not a solo." The Stories We Tell writing workshop and its magazine, LEAP, unite us as survivors and give us a platform to use our stories for change.

If you are a refugee girl or woman, you will be reading LEAP to gain confidence and learn to believe in yourself and to turn the poison of your past into medicine. If you are not a refugee, you will have the chance to listen to the stories of refugee women and girls who dare to use their voices to change the lives of their families, their friends and the communities they live in.

The cold of the world has touched the hearts of many refugees. We hope that they will hear the girls in LEAP saying: You are not alone. We are here with you, ready to help you take the leap that can change your life.

Chantale Zuzi
The Voices and Faces Project's
2018 Stories We Tell Cohort at RefuSHE

A BETTER WORLD

My better world is now
In this room
because I feel loved, safe, powerful
I feel that I can do more.

In this room people want to hear my voice and see my face.
When life feels safe, I can let things go.
When I feel safe, I sometimes don't feel anything ...
I only want to close my eyes and think that life is beautiful.

I see my better future and not the past.
I see my dreams coming true.
I hear my voice going into the world
and the world listening to me.
My better world is a world where I can dream.
My better world is in this room.

By Gyslaine

THE HUMAN CONDITION

My pained eyes contain the universe
its mirrored multiplicity
packed into a hollow body.
I reflect the many in my arms.

Open my eyes.
Let there be light.
Closing, they shut me in a coffin.

You cannot find peace by avoiding life.

By Aline

ACCRA, GHANA

Gifty and Joy liked to say, "One for love, many for money!"

They had a shoe collection like Imelda Marcos did, lined neatly along one wall of their simple sparse room at the Hotel de California in the Adabraka neighborhood of Accra. A traveler's hotel, popular with tourists from around the world with its dingy charm, 1930's British colonial architecture and reasonable rates, the California was a great place to start a new life. A ceiling fan in their room was extra and happily paid for. Two narrow, foam-mattressed single beds, a well-swept concrete floor, two suitcases set up on the floor along one wall as "closet space."

Joy and Gifty had come in with the most recent tidal flow from Nigeria to Ghana; the one driven by more stable politics and economics and familiar English and Pidgin, drifting across Benin and Togo into the arms of what they hoped would be well-paying expats and locals in a growing metropolis. Gifty was an experienced seamstress back home, but couldn't wait to plan her wedding, be married and teach primary school back in Nigeria. Joy was hoping that her fiancé would help her to become a nurse.

They began at the Kilimanjaro Bar, a hot-spot for Nigerian sex workers and expats to hook up. I was their shadow for three months. We lay on their motel room floor, giggling about breasts and beauty and bodies and penises and romance and faux romance and pick-up lines.

They were hopeful entrepreneurs, wide-eyed planners and dreamers who slept curled around one another like birth sisters, twins embracing away the cash transactions and indignities of first-time drunkenness and the men who used their vessels as repositories for their own disconnected loneliness in a place thousands of miles from a sense of Home.

Lighter was better, they told me and each other. I watched as they experimented with bleaching creams from China with no instructions or warnings in English or any other local language. Their faces and necks and arms became blotchy with chemical burns from extended applications. Their eyes dimmed with nights of insults and injuries, the exchange they endured for dreams that receded little by little with the ebb tide back across the borders.

The shoe collection for a time remained immaculately kept, polished and neat. Their colorful wraps and skirts and gowns stayed impeccable, hand-washed in buckets, line-dried, lightly starched and iron-pressed, and hung brightly on wire hangers on a taught string between two nails, across the wall above their shoes. But their bodies in three short months became transfigured receptacles of disdain for loneliness, for misogyny, for desperation, for hatred, for everything anti-love.

One night, I was walking along a roadside dirt path to meet a friend at a Lebanese-Italian pizza joint in Osu, a well-heeled neighborhood that had a western-style grocery store. I hadn't been able to find Gifty or Joy for about three weeks. Their room and their shoes had disappeared.

Out of the darkness, lit only by peripheral passing headlights and the tiny kerosene lamps made from condensed milk cans with shoelace wicks on several street food and cigarette vendors' tables...out of the darkness came Joy. Her eyes were glazed, her face nearly unrecognizable, her left arm askew, healed as a broken arrow pointing towards a different future. A man who didn't want to pay, she said. A white man. He had beaten her. She had fought. He had thrown her out of a moving car near Labadi Beach.

I held her tightly for a long time against my own daughter, now growing in my belly just six months. "Tears are for children," she said, trying to adjust her fractured posture. "Children cannot endure a woman's work," she said, "I'm going now. Ochina, wai, tomorrow."

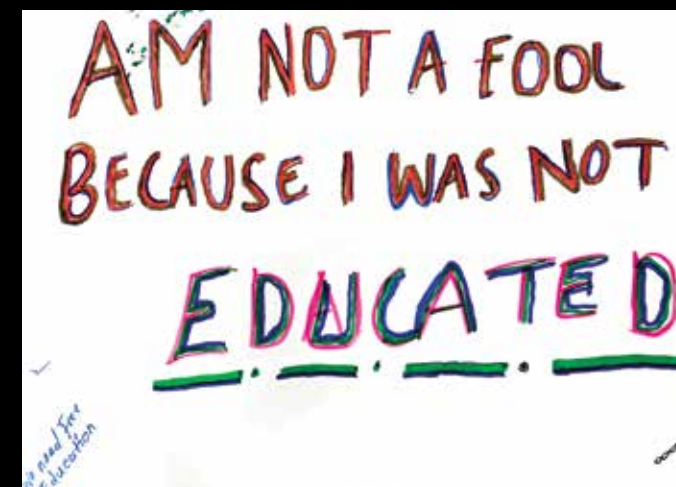
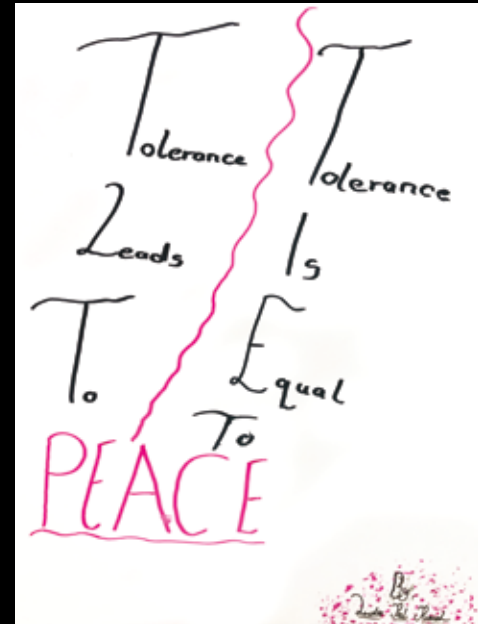
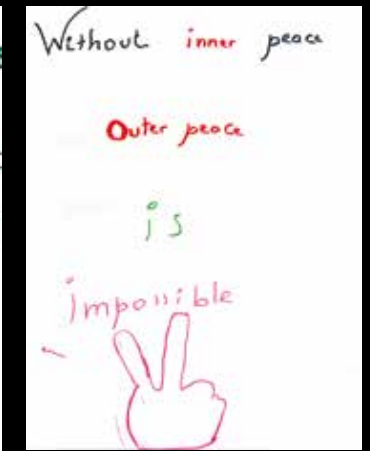
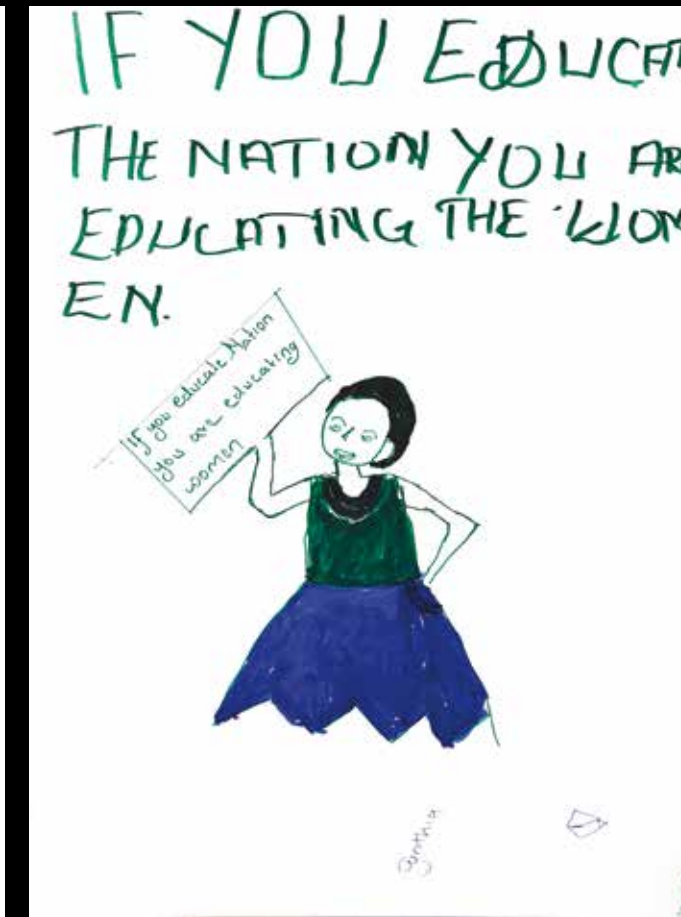
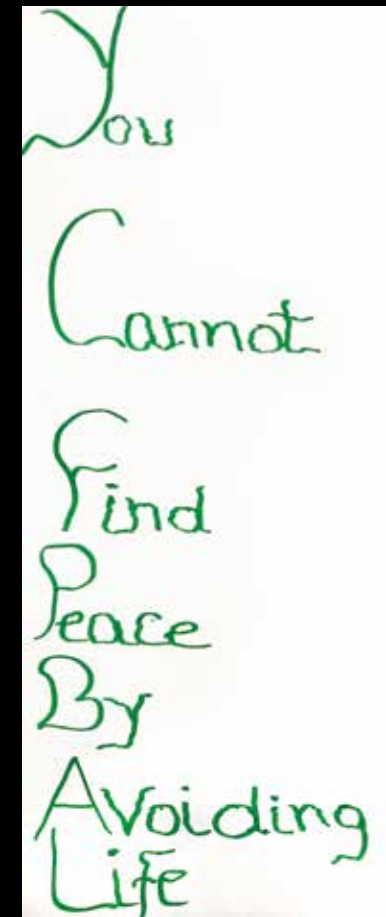
She was 18. I didn't see her again.

*By Heather Ragan Kwakye
in honor of victims of human trafficking.*

SAY IT LOUD

WE'RE PROTESTING AND WE'RE PROUD.

Sometimes you can send the loudest message with just a few well-chosen words. During The Voices and Faces Project's Stories We Tell testimonial writing workshop at RefuSHE in Nairobi, Kenya, our workshop leaders asked our 2018 Cohort to put their hopes, dreams, and demands into words. The end result: these protest posters. To download, print, and share, visit voicesandfaces.org/LEAP/PROTEST.



WHAT IS WAR GOOD FOR?

Everywhere around me
the battle scene was harsh.
Bodies lay scattered on the ground
and there was the nauseating stench of blood.

I can hardly see.
Smoke blinds my eyes
as I look around.
My heart sinks
and then fills with sorrow.
I want this battle to end.
I need this battle to end.

The sound of gunfire hurts my eardrums.
Piercing, killing, taking lives.
The images and feelings
scar me for life.
This is the place of death.

And I try to keep hope.
The hope that all this might end
and I might start smiling and laughing again.
The hope that there will be no corruption
among our leaders.
The hope that people will learn
to spread love and not hate.
The hope that I might hear children playing
and laughter in my neighborhood
one more time.

I am trying so hard to keep hope.
I can still hope that we will one day live in a world of
peace, love, joy and happiness
instead of the world of hate, sorrow and tears
we know now.

By Linda

TRIBE

As the night approaches
we stand united, protected, heard.
The ice and steel of silence
is pushed away
as the warmth of acceptance
is reflected on our faces.

We remove from the fire
the sharpened stones
of our common pain.
Witnessing, validating, honoring the cost required
to reach in and grasp our wounds.
We are making an Ebenezer
of our life stories
a pile of precious stones...
a marker to serve as a testimony
to those who have yet
to find
the strength
to speak.

And when the task is complete
we collapse onto the grass
(which has been softened by our tears)
and curl up into the safety of each other's backs.
Forming a separate memorial
that lives and breathes
and can finally
sleep in peace.

*By Sarah Sullivan,
in honor of survivors everywhere.*

NEVER SENT LETTER

Hi, lovely Daddy,

There is no need to ask you how are you doing in that heaven where God decided to take you. You can't imagine how I miss you, Daddy. The world and life are no longer the same without you, Daddy.

Every time I remember that you are no longer here with me, I can't hold my tears in because I never imagined living this life without you.

Daddy, there was one day when you promised me that you will always be there for me, but now where are you, Daddy? I'm all alone. I'm having a hard life without you, Daddy. But I remember I once promised you something: That whatever will be, that whatever challenges me, I promised you I will always be strong and never lose my hope.

And I won't, Daddy. Today again I promise you that I will always be that girl you wanted me to be. I pray for you every single day and you will never be out of my heart even for one second.

Your beloved daughter,

Gyslaine

IF A CHILD MAKES A MISTAKE

"Why though why did I do that. I would have just stayed at home quietly doing my duties as a wife. I get myself into so much trouble that I can't bear knowing that I am a new bride to this village. I did that only for the people of this village to be proud of me. How will I face the village and the family? I am figuring out a way to apologise to them but I don't know how to do it...Oh God please help me through this, it wasn't my intention to do that. Mother please forgive me I was not thinking straight, I don't know what came over me that made me do this...if a child makes a mistake it's the parents' duty to forgive them.

By Joan

DEAR LADY LIBERTY

I respectfully acknowledge that your arm is likely quite tired.

Holding up the flame of freedom, truth and justice is no small feat. In fact, it is an enormous responsibility. I do understand how difficult that burden can be as there are, in fact, days when I have not been sure that I could fit another tale of violence and victimization into my own backpack. I could not figure out how to hoist it onto my shoulders and sally forth into the world.

So I get it, I really do. But, come on. No one told you to demand the tired, the poor, the huddled masses. That is on you. You said, and I quote, "Give me." So we gave. The tired. The poor. The huddled masses. The wretched refuse. The homeless. The tempest-tossed. Those yearning to breathe free. And now you seem to want to give up. Or worse.

Not only do you want to let your arm down, turn off the light and shut the door. You seem to want to put on a blindfold. Or worse.

You want to use your torch to shine the very light on those tired, poor, huddled masses so that the vibrant, rich and rugged individuals can root them out and push them down. If it were only migrants, or only communities of color, or only people with disabilities, or only those who identify as LGBTQ, or only Muslims, or only women, I might be able to listen to you, to hear your position, to have a dialogue.

Or maybe not.

But, really, this wholesale institutionalized structural hatred and violence against all but the very few whose cloaks of privilege allow them warmth and protection leaves me reeling and questioning the very ground beneath our feet.

I get that your work is hard. I get that your arm is tired. But my heart is too heavy and my fear too great to let it just go.

So, Ms. Liberty, I hereby offer my arms to you to help you hoist the lamp back up to its proper place, as a guide for our nation. Please, consider my offer in the spirit in which I make it, with humility and the courage to return to our collective roots.

Yours,

Rebecca

Written by Rebecca Singer, in honor of refugees and immigrants.



Illustration: Jamie Hu

» Your arm is likely quite tired. Holding up the flame of freedom, truth and justice is no small feat. «

A NEW FAMILY

One day a member of my family called me from the country saying, "Come, live with me." I arrived at her house and slept there for only one night before that family member kicked me out. She said, "You must leave." She did not say why. Then I was on the street, crying and afraid, asking myself, "What am I going to do?"

A stranger saw me crying so much that I could not stop. He and his wife took me into their home and treated me like their very own. This couple had been married for several years and all of that time the wife wanted very much to give birth to her own child. For the first two months I was there she tried but could not get pregnant. After two months, God heard the wife's prayers and blessed her for her kindness to me: she found out that she was pregnant and gave birth to beautiful twins.

All thanks to God for giving me this new family and may God continue to bless them.

By Bedeste

MY BODY IS MY EVERYTHING

My body is my everything,
the source of my inspiration.
Sometimes when I look into the mirror
I am inspired by my body.

My body is my everything,
it makes me feel comfortable
when I get to do whatever I want
or to wear any clothes I feel like wearing.

My body is my everything,
it makes me proud
because I like it sometimes too much.

My body is my everything,
It's a luxury private jet
carrying my spirit to safety.
It's the best and sweetest gift
that I have ever been given.

My body is my everything,
Every girl must understand this,
she must feel comfortable in her body.
All girls must love the way they are.
Big ones or small ones,
they must keep the body clean
and take care of it.

The holy spirit lives
in the clean body.

By Agnes

MY LIFE STORY

It all started back when we were in our country, South Sudan, 2013. When my people were fighting because of tribalism and because they wanted the presidency. Many people were killed, most of the children became orphans. We were in the house when it started. They came to people's houses to kill the parents. My mother and my father escaped because they were about to be killed by the other tribe. Men came into the house making noise, knocking on the door, hard. By that time my cousins came and we were all in one place, scared for our lives.

By Nyanjuok

SILVANA'S WISH

They called the girl Silvana.

She was a very poor girl. Her parents died when she was young, and she didn't know what she would do. She never did know what she would do. She made a wrong decision about her life because she didn't have an education, though she wanted one badly, and because she was sleeping on the street.

She became a sex worker. One day she went to a room with a man and he asked Silvana, "Why do you have to do this? Why do you have to be this way?" She said it was so that she could one day live a normal life, that's why. She told him that she had no choice.

Then the man asked her if she wanted the world to change.

She said she wanted a better world, not only for herself but for others, because she was not the only child who had to sell herself just to feed herself. "The first thing I wish," Silvana said, "is for education to be free all over the world." The man nodded. "The second thing I wish," Silvana said, "is to help all the street children have a future." The man nodded again.

Once she started, Silvana could not stop wishing. She wished that the people of the world could help the needy, the refugees, those running from war. She wished for the hospitals to be free, so that the sick could be treated. She wished for a world where all people would love each other. Then she thought of her own situation and she wished for a world where people were treated like human beings, a world where every single person had rights.

The man was silent as Silvana wished. He had nothing to say.

"I wish for a world where children are a blessing not a curse," Silvana finally said. "A world where men would stop raping young girls."

Then the man became afraid, because he saw the power that was in Silvana's heart. And he became afraid, because he saw the darkness that was in his own.

By Bersherb

WE BECOME ONE

I live in a place where there is corruption and hatred

The world today is definitely no paradise.

I tried to stop the corruption

Only the more I tried, the stronger it became.

There is hunger, abuse, poverty, and danger

Every day we kill each other, people shedding blood, raping, killing.

The world may never be perfect

But people everywhere can try to make it better.

Imagine a world that makes you want to live there

A place where there is love, kindness, honesty, peace.

Imagine a world full of laughter and smiles

A place where hate, corruption, violence and theft are old vocabularies.

Imagine welcoming the holy spirit into the world

Could we ever love each other like brothers and sisters?

We may speak different languages

But all of us should want to live in peace.

This is the world I live for

This is the world that together we can create.

By Cynthia & Sunday

SO SHE DID

“Why did I do that?” I said out loud. It was the worst idea ever. Now I had to go explain myself to everyone back home. What will I tell my mother and father? What if they get angry at me? I am only five minutes from home now. I have been sent back to my village, cast out by my husband’s family. God please help me, I think.

I am going home.

The first person I see is my father sitting under the big tree next to his hut. “Good evening, father,” I say. “Good evening my daughter,” he says. “I am so happy to see you. Where is your husband? Have you come together to visit us?”

“No, father,” I say. “I have come home to stay because they have chased me away from my husband’s village. I did not mean to annoy everyone! All I ever wanted to do was please everyone. I thought I would dig a bigger hole in my village than anyone else had. I thought I would have earned a lot of admiration for working so hard. I thought I was right to stand out, but maybe it is better to stay back.”

I believed I could, so I did. And now I must come home.

By Linda

MY BODY, MY WORLD

Photo: Natalie Naccache for Art Works for Change

My body is precious.
My body ain't a toy.
I want to feel good about myself
about my body, my color, my origin
and where I come from.
See me the way I am.
Whether fat or skinny
people should love me.

In my mind I see a peaceful world
with no conflicts, no violence
or anything else that is bad.
The poor and needy people get treated
just the way the rich are treated.

In the world of my mind
I do not allow racism and hatred.
Wars, conflicts and violence
are not accepted in my world
but I let every loving human being in.

By Joan

MY WORLD IS YOUR WORLD

I live like me
I live with everything
I do what I want. I work when I want.

It's green like Eden here in my world.
In it you are free like a bride
Like a bird in a tree.

There is no bucket that runs like a Shooting Star.
We don't see a river full of blood.
There is no crying, but laughing.
We don't hate instead of loving.

My world, it's your world.
My thing, it's your thing.
I'll be there for you. You'll be here, you'll be for me.
Together, we are power.

By Signen

» I'LL BE THERE
FOR YOU.
YOU'LL BE HERE
FOR ME. «

LEAP

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**The stories we tell can change the world.
And changing the world is what LEAP is all about.**

LEAP is a publication of The Voices and Faces Project, an award-winning non-profit storytelling project. This youth-driven literary journal features works written or inspired by teen girls who have taken part in The Stories We Tell, The Voices and Faces Project's immersive, two-day testimonial writing program for survivors of gender-based violence and other human rights violations. **LEAP Volume 3: Writing a New Refugee Story** showcases writing from or inspired by our 2018 Stories We Tell workshop participants at RefuSHE, the first and only organization dedicated to refugee girls in Nairobi, Kenya. To find out more about bringing The Stories We Tell to your community, or to support our scholarship fund, email testimonial@voicesandfaces.org.

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The Voices and Faces Project
47 W. Polk St. #170
Chicago, IL 60605

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