



Senior Prize Winner - Katherine McIndoe, age 18, New Zealand
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“To boldly go”: a letter to the lost girls

To the lost girls,

My name is Katherine. I'm a girl, just like you. I have grown up in New Zealand, and I go to university. Ever since I was little, I have had this feeling that I can do whatever I want to do, that my future is not my fate but something that I can choose. I see no obstacles, only opportunities. No one can force me to do anything that I don't want to do, no one can tell me how to live my life. I am my own person, and I am happy.

Your lives have not been so lucky. For you, there were no opportunities, only obstacles. No excitement at the idea of an unknown future, only hopelessness. You have suffered more than I can possibly imagine, and the difference between us? None. There is only a similarity: we were all born girls. For me, it's just part of who I am. For you, it was a death sentence.

This is a letter to the lost girls of the world. I'm writing to the girls whose lives are taken as babies because their families don't want a “useless” female child. I'm writing to the girls whose childhoods are taken from them in the form of trafficking, forced prostitution, and forced marriage. I'm writing to the young mothers who die all too frequently in childbirth, whose deaths are preventable and pointless. I'm writing to the girls who are denied sustenance in times of hunger, while their brothers are given the scarce food. I'm writing to the girls who are beaten in their own homes, and whose governments don't recognise their right to safety. I'm writing to the women and girls who die from HIV Aids, contracted after they are sold, coerced, and tortured into the sex trade. I'm writing to the girls who have acid flung in their faces for perceived insubordination and faithlessness, and to those who douse themselves in gasoline and set themselves on fire to escape institutionalised domestic abuse. I'm writing to the silent girls, the voiceless girls, the lonely girls, and the lost girls – and there are more every day.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen told us in 1990 that over 100 million women are “missing” from the world, and today, 2 million more vanish every year. Throughout Asia, the ratio of men to women is disproportionately high (in Pakistan, for example, there are 111 men to every 100 women). This sort of disparity belies biology and reason, given that in many places women are proven to live longer and healthier lives. There is a huge gap where, logically, millions of women should be. But they are not there. Where do these women go?

The simple answer is that these “lost” girls go missing because of gender discrimination. Every year in China, 39,000 baby girls die before the age of 1 because they are denied the same medical attention as baby boys. Sex-selective abortion, too, is a common practice that contributes to skewed sex ratios. Globally, maternal mortality is responsible for the preventable death of one woman per minute, and widespread trafficking of women and girls also robs communities of their women. And for those who make it through early childhood, normalised rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence await many girls as they grow up – for example, 21% of South African women are raped by the age of 15, while a woman or under-age girl is raped every 20 minutes in India.

This is “gendercide”, an undeniable, calculated attack on the women of the world, and it needs to be addressed. Undoubtedly, the only way that humanity can address it is if we “boldly go”. This requires us to display something abstract and intangible – courage. Courage, to me, is at the crux of any true societal change, because problems like gender inequality are not easy to solve – they require us to be bold enough to ask difficult questions and to acknowledge awful truths.

The fact that so many girls are being lost to gender discrimination is utterly wrong. Every once in a while, when the world’s leaders come together, the “gender issue” is raised, and these statistics are read and sighed at. Undoubtedly, nearly every person who reads about the preventable death of babies or the sexual assault of young girls is disgusted and saddened, and rightly so. And yet strangely, gendercide – one of the most shocking, widespread, and fatal examples of discrimination in history – is not front page news every day. It takes a particular incident, like the horrific rape and murder of a woman on a bus in New Delhi in December 2012, to raise international interest. So the problem is twofold: firstly, women are treated as inferior all over the world, and secondly, this violent form of discrimination is so commonplace and ingrained that it is enormously difficult to make society see it as the emergency that it is.

In the face of such inertia, what we need is courage, passion, and a willingness to confront unflinchingly things that we would rather ignore. We can’t be measured and reasonable, and we can’t drag our feet, claiming that a problem of this magnitude demands distant solutions decades down the track. We have to be unreasonable, we have to be angry, we have to be uncompromising, and we have to be bold. The time has passed for incremental, unhurried development: there is a need now for courageous action. We need to go boldly in the face of those who accuse us of naivety, shout down all those who laugh at our idealism. Yes the “gender issue” is ingrained, multi-faceted, hugely problematic – but that is precisely why it must be addressed urgently. Frankly, I don’t think that it is naive or ignorant to suggest that we hurry up and start fixing it.

There are some bold people endeavouring to do just that. Maria Bashir, a prosecutor in Afghanistan, goes boldly in the face of death threats to herself and her family in order to fight corruption and the degradation of women in the country she loves. She fearlessly prosecutes those guilty of crimes against women, day after day, because she knows that courage and a single-minded refusal to back down are the strongest possible tools in the fight against institutionalised discrimination and violence. Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani schoolgirl shot in the head by the Taliban on her way to school in 2012, exercised her right to education and continues to do so with bravery and pride, showing the world that she is not afraid and her voice will not be silenced. Edna Adan, a lifelong advocate for women’s health, campaigns for the abolition of female circumcision and pours her own resources into the maternity hospital that she built in an area of her native Somaliland devastated by civil war. She fights for safety and adequate healthcare for girls and mothers because she refuses to accept any violation of women’s bodies and the preventable death of so many women. She is unflinching and uncompromising, and her courage saves lives. These women truly epitomise what it is to be bold.

One hundred million women are missing, if not more. Millions of women who did not have the chance to be bold, who can no longer raise their voices in bravery and defiance. However, it is not these women – those who are the victims of violence or assault or trafficking – who are not being brave enough. It is the rest of us, those who have the opportunity, education, and freedom to use our voices without fear of persecution and

violence, who need to be bold on their behalf. We need to be bold so that they, and we, can live in a world where girls don't need to be so brave, where there is no gender discrimination for us to fear.

I'm sorry that the only thing that separates you and me is luck, an accident of birth. I'm sorry that you were not cherished as the extraordinary girls that you are. I'm sorry that there are hundreds of millions of you, and I'm sorry that your numbers continue to grow.

The poet Carol Ann Duffy wrote about a poker game between some tough women, figures drawn from history and literature. She describes how, even as these women played their game and made their moves, standing behind each was "a line of ghosts unable to win". You and your predecessors are these ghosts, these women standing behind us as we hold the cards. But it's time that you won. It's time that your silent screams were heard and acted on with the courage they merit. It's time that we go boldly, so that you are the last girls to be lost to your families, communities, and the world