Breaking the Silence

Stories of Violence, Courage and Resilience from Women and Men on Curaçao and Bonaire



More than 90 per cent of those who took part in a study in the Caribbean Netherlands see violence against children, young people and women as a major problem in their communities. Just over half say that child sexual abuse is widespread. According to the researchers, these findings are also relevant to Curaçao.

What laws and international treaties define as violence against children and women often goes unrecognised as violence on the islands. In this book, eleven women and men from Curaçao and Bonaire describe their experiences of sexual violence, child abuse and violence in intimate relationships, and how these experiences have affected their lives. By breaking the silence, they challenge the normalisation of violence.

When people around you see something as normal, it can seem less serious. One woman says, 'No, it's no less serious. It's worse. The community makes something that isn't normal seem normal. Even though it isn't normal.' She sees how this leaves girls frightened and confused, unsure what is normal and what isn't. 'Nobody sees that.'

What a community considers normal or acceptable can have far-reaching consequences for people's lives and development, especially when they are young. These two realities are at the heart of *Breaking the Silence*. The book also looks at the historical and present-day circumstances in which violence arises and takes place.

Only when we break the silence and put violence into words can we recognise it and curb it.

The book is an initiative of Fundashon NOS T'ei Pa Otro – Veilige Veste Kòrsou. It was published by Caribpublishing – SWP Publishers, Amsterdam.

Jayden, Rosangel and Mimi's stories are three of eleven portraits in *Breaking the Silence: Stories of Violence, Courage and Resilience from Women and Men on Curaçao and Bonaire*. Below is an abridged version. Their stories help us recognise violence, talk about it and intervene. Breaking the silence is an important step in 'Building Safer Communities Together'.

Jayden’s story



At eighteen Jayden sexually abuses a boy from the neighbourhood

Jayden is a *Yu di Kòrsou*, a child of Curaçao. He wants to break the silence around sexual abuse. He is six when the abuse begins. Two older sisters use him to explore their own sexuality. They are eight and twelve years older than he is. ‘I was a toy to her. I had to satisfy her sexually. She used me to find out what she liked.’ The abuse escalates and later involves penetration. His sisters continue to abuse him until he is nineteen. An older boy from the neighbourhood also abuses him.

‘By the time I was six, I already knew what it meant to get an erection. It was too early. Of course you get erections sometimes as a child. They just happen and then go away. But this was constant. It *had* to happen.’ His body has to respond to someone else’s needs. He has to do something he is too young for. ‘It’s the older person’s need, not the child’s. It was what my sisters and the boy from the neighbourhood needed. That’s when you’re using someone. A child doesn’t make a conscious choice. You don’t even know what it is.’

At home, alcohol abuse, constant tension and violence shape daily life. With his sisters and the boy from the neighbourhood, Jayden experiences tenderness, attention and a sense of familiarity. The abuse becomes intertwined with closeness and feeling loved. Jayden senses something is wrong, though he can’t quite put his finger on it.

‘He was eight. I was eighteen.’

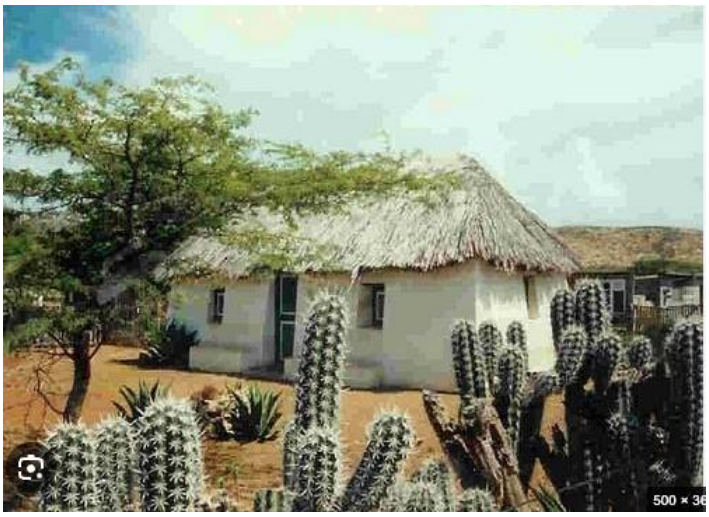
At eighteen, Jayden himself sexually abuses a boy from the neighbourhood. ‘It was normal to me. It had happened to me as a child. I didn’t see it as wrong back then.’ Still, something feels wrong. ‘My mind started racing. Hang on, what’s happening here? Why does this feel right? I felt torn.’ Just as Jayden is about to penetrate the boy, he stops.

‘I have to go to the police and turn myself in. I have to do something. That boy needs help. I need help. This isn’t right.’ Eventually, Jayden turns himself in. He wants it to stop. He asks for help for the child and for himself. He also believes he should be punished. He is released after three months in prison. The guilt stays with him. ‘What I did wrong still haunts me.’

Jayden is now 35. The abuse still affects his life. He can no longer connect love and sexuality.

Jayden’s experience of being abused challenges the familiar picture of fear, coercion, physical violence and immediate revulsion. Sexual abuse can also begin subtly, with attention, affection and the feeling of being seen.

Rosangel’s story



No kiss. No hug. Nothing.

Rosangel grows up as the seventh of twenty-two children. ‘My mother had two family record books. You can register twelve children in one book. With twenty-two children, you need two.’ Her father has forty-three children. ‘We don’t even know if that’s all of them. Sometimes we think there are more. How could that happen? Before my father became a bus driver, he delivered water. people didn’t have water or electricity at home then. He went from house to house. Maybe that’s why. He had a lot of doors to knock on.’

Her father drinks every day. He beats her mother and the children. Sometimes he beats them and drives them out of the house, and all the children and her mother have to sleep in the goat shed. ‘I was scared. We were all scared. Whatever he said went. We could never ask my father anything. Nothing. My mother didn’t ask questions either. He was always in charge.’ What hurts Rosangel most? ‘They never said “I love you” to us. Never. No kiss. No hug. Nothing.’

Later, Rosangel’s husband abuses her. ‘I thought it was normal. Just like with my parents.’ The violence gets worse. ‘Once the corner of my mouth was torn wide open. Everything hurt. The inside of my mouth felt hot.’ She describes what else he does to her. ‘He forced a bottle into my vagina. I thought, “This happened to my mother too.” For the first time, I understood her.’

One day, her husband comes home with men she doesn’t know. He wants to trade her for drugs. Rosangel refuses. She is beaten, drugged and raped by three men. Only later does she discover that she is pregnant. She doesn’t know who the father is.

Years later, one of the men finds her son on Facebook. He asks who his mother is and whether she lived in Groningen. He sends her son a plane ticket. A DNA test confirms that the man is his father. Her son is still in touch with him and with his three half-sisters. Rosangel has never told her son how he was conceived. ‘I’m glad I have my son. He’s grown into a lovely young man, but it should never have happened this way.’

Rosangel fled to a women’s refuge. Now she works at a refuge for women and children herself. During peer supervision, she has to give her opinion. She still finds that difficult. ‘We didn’t ask questions. You didn’t contradict grown-ups. You didn’t have an opinion. I’m doing my best, though. I want to learn.’

Rosangel sees how violence has affected the next generation too. ‘I see a lot of violence in the lives of my brothers’ and sisters’ children. My own children have had to deal with it too.’ Her daughter is now divorced. ‘She wants nothing more to do with her ex. She doesn’t want another relationship with a man. I’m at peace with that. She has some peace now. No man to abuse her or rape her.’

Mimi’s story



‘Why did you push me so far that I did this to you?’

That’s what Mimi’s husband asked her when he took her to hospital. He had hit her with a chair. The wound needed seven stitches. Yet he blamed her.

When Mimi read her portrait, she cried. For the first time, she saw all her experiences together on paper. What she and her children had lived through for thirty-one years had a name: intimate terrorism, or coercive control.

Other people mostly saw the incidents in isolation. The blow with the chair. Her report to the police. The pills she took when she saw no way out. In court, her husband used those pills to portray her as ‘completely mad’.

The control was there every day. ‘I had to ring when I left home. I had to ring when I got somewhere. I had to ring when I was on a break. I had to ring when I left work and when I got home again.’

He checked her underwear and examined her internally to see if she’d been unfaithful. He didn’t want her to cuddle her babies. The live-in nanny had to bond with the children. He kept telling her she was mad and needed to be admitted to hospital. ‘After a while, I felt like I really was going mad. I wasn’t myself any more.’

Mimi kept working and studying. In finance, people valued her for her knowledge and her work. The work kept her going.

When she reread her story, she said, ‘So it really did happen.’ Together, those events formed a pattern. And that pattern had nearly cost her her life. ‘I’m learning to know and love myself again. I’d lost myself.’