

Saly DIOP' Story

Remarkable story- Saly's true story

My story begins in a remote village in rural Senegal, where I was irretrievably maimed in the purity of my innocence. A 3 month old baby, brutally stripped of the essence of her femininity, never to flourish as nature intended. I had no say in my fate, no one to turn to, no lawyer to take my defence, no jury to hear my plea, no one to fall back on, no voice to speak up and no audience to be heard. For crying out loud, could someone tell me what I could have done to resist this barbaric ritual of female circumcision?



Humble beginnings

I had a modest upbringing within a family deeply rooted in African traditions, with my father's two wives and all the complications that could entail. Day in and day out, I watched my mother endure hell on earth and the suffering that polygamy brought to our family. It is within this same conservative and traditional environment, I witnessed all my cousins from west African origin, being forcibly and illegally married in France as outlandish as it may seem. Most of these girls were underage, some as young as 12, yielding to barbarism of the tradition and others, celebrating the birth of their first child before they even reached the age of consent. Could someone tell me how these young girls were able to resist forced marriages?

The courage to say NO

However, when came my turn at the age of 15, I said No in the blink of an eye. I refused to be subgeded to the determinism of my situation and to follow the path imposed on me by my family environment by standing up against my loved ones and taking the risk of isolating myself from my community in order to be free to choose my life: a life that I managed to build, which suits me and which allows me to express who I am on a daily basis.

Living in a « difficult neighborhood »

I grew up in a so called « rough » area where failure seemed to be the norm and what was expected of us. Like most young people from my neighborhood, I have faced discrimination and precariousness. I felt many times these feelings of rejection and worthlessness when I was constantly turned down for jobs due to my post code or the foreign connotation of my name. I was subjected to those numerous routine police checks, sometimes of a degrading nature, with invasive flash lights and misplaced comments. I was conditioned to believe that I could only succeed in sports or music. Hence, my dream was to become a rap star, because subconsciously, it seemed impossible to be anybody else. I have gone through many psychological upheavals in the face of the constant dilemma that forced us to choose between our country and our origins, society's values and our parents', without any role models to identify with.

Overcoming challenges

Since I was a little girl, I relentlessly looked for ways to make myself heard, through rebelling, standing up to certain traits of the tradition, rapping, fleeing the country, and being heavily involved in the community. Today, I found myself a deputy mayor, delegated to the youth of a city of France, without either attending those elite schools or passing by the breeding grounds of political activism. I am extremely proud to be an elected representative of the Republic for having the best podium and a voice to speak up. In addition to contributing to the education and the development of the youths, I see every day in their eyes, a glimpse of hope and admiration.

Then, a whirlwind of events took place, the 2015 terrorist attacks in France left many of us in shock to see such atrocity in my country. However, for me, it was a double whammy, the terrorists were homegrown, young people from neighborhoods just like mine who have made the choice to be against the homeland. While there is nothing to excuse such contempt for life, I knew how easy it was to fall into despair when you live and witness the violence in those neighborhoods. I felt responsible and I wondered what I could have done to help, as a young woman, as member of the community, as a French citizen and an older sister to these young people who are dangerously drifting away to make sure that never again the country mourns the victims of terrorism.

So, with everything I've been through in life, the obstacles I've encountered, my downfalls and what I've overcome, I vow to share my experiences via a book.

My book Imani, published by Michalon edition is the work of my life as well as the symbol of these new generations. It raised issues that touch us all and go beyond the French borders. It is a moving document, where many worlds coincide, a leap into the heart of African ancestral traditions, of violence inflicted on women, the identity crisis of young people from minority background. It is unmistakably an account of a disturbing truth that will transport you into the soul of African traditions.

Because just like me, every year, against their will, millions of little girls are butchered between the legs : their clitoris sliced off, for some the small lips also shredded to pieces, and for others, to top it off, the big lips and their flower sewn with a needle without any form of anesthesia.

Because there are millions of them, like my cousins and childhood friends, that are forced into marriage and can neither protest nor refuse, without risking being disowned, abandoned, rejected, abused, burned alive, beaten, stoned or killed.

Because more and more young girls and boys fall into this vicious cycle of violence. Some even go so far as to commit a terrorist attack in the name of an illusion that they believe is right and will restore a certain equality, because they are given few or fewer opportunities and too many doors are shut in their face.

Because I have always had that inner voice which compelled me to create the Imani association and organize the show "[Elles en scène](#)" to convey the following message « Let's unite our voices so their cries do no longer fall on deaf ears ».

To achieve this, we need a motivated and powerful fraternity of women, or better said, a « sorority » which will bring about solidarity, on a grand scale. Because I am convinced that if each of us gave a little of our light to illuminate those in need, we could actually make a real change to the lives of those less fortunate and give new and better dreams to our little girls !

Author: Saly Diop