A Former Refugee, Now a Fearless Champion for Women

By Aneri Pattani  June 20, 2017 11:20 am

This year’s winner of my annual win-a-trip contest, to take a student with me on a global reporting trip, is Aneri Pattani, a freshly minted graduate of Northeastern University — and a future star journalist! We traveled by Land Rover, (briefly) motorcycle and foot across Liberia, and here is Aneri’s first article from our trip. More posts are forthcoming, and Aneri is also interning for The Times’s Science section this summer, so look for her articles there as well. – Nicholas Kristof

Mae Azango does not regret a thing. Not exposing practices of female genital mutilation that had been shrouded in secrecy for centuries. Not revealing a sex trafficking scandal that pitted government agencies against her. Not even publishing articles that elicited death threats and forced her to go into hiding.

“I never regret it,” said Azango, a journalist at FrontPage Africa, an investigative news website for Liberians and members of the Liberian diaspora. “If I had to do it a second time, I would do it even more than I did the first time.”

As an aspiring journalist visiting West Africa for the first time, I was amazed by Azango. Growing up, I always thought of American journalism stars as my role models. (I’ve read and watched “All The President’s Men” multiple times.) But Azango is a reminder that there are incredible reporters persevering in other countries, where they often earn less renown and income while facing much greater risks.
A bold journalist who never apologizes for doing her job, Azango has exposed countless cases of corruption and human rights violations in Liberia during her 15 year career. When we met in the Liberian capital of Monrovia, her fierce personality struck me immediately.

Her most provocative work was a series on female genital mutilation, first published in 2010 with subsequent pieces continuing through 2012. The practice, which involves using a knife to cut off part of a girl’s clitoris, is considered a sacred ritual by many Liberian tribes, and a human rights violation by much of the Western world. Although the ritual has been widespread among Liberians for years, it is an unspoken rule that no one discusses it. Prior to Azango’s work, even the government avoided the politically sensitive subject.

During our trip, I saw that reality firsthand. When I asked women about “female circumcision,” they immediately clammed up, and I was forced to move on. It was an untouchable topic.

Azango’s daring to expose this taboo sparked fervid outrage and brought death threats upon her, her then 9-year-old daughter and FrontPage Africa. Some even threatened to cut her genitals to teach her a lesson. Azango was forced into hiding for three weeks, switching towns regularly so no one could find her.

Characteristically, she continued to report on the subject anyway. Azango doesn’t let pressure from the government, judgments from society or the challenges of being a female reporter silence her.

“When I’m angry, I don’t fight,” she said. “I put it on paper.”

This works because Azango has the backing of a brave editor, Rodney Sieh, who was held in prison and under house arrest for three months in 2013 as a consequence of reporting about corruption.

“Whether it is female genitalia mutilation or the plight of prostitutes, Mae has been willing to capture the attention of a nation that ignores these sensitive topics,” Sieh said. “Her body of work with FrontPage Africa represents our vision of not just speaking truth to power, but also bringing the plight of the ordinary to light.”
Azango’s passions arise in part from the injustices she faced as a refugee more than 20 years ago.

She was just 18 years old when civil war broke out in Liberia and rebels killed her father. Like hundreds of thousands of other Liberians, she was forced to flee the country for safety. She took refuge in Ivory Coast, where she was treated like “less than a second class citizen.”

When she accidentally bumped into a local man on the road, he spat in her face and called her a dog. “It was like dropping from grace to grass,” she said.

The bitterness from that period never fully left her. Upon returning to Liberia, Azango found vulnerable people – slum dwellers, market women, young children – enduring the same traumas that she had experienced.

“When I saw no one was talking for them, I decided to go into journalism,” she said.

This mission has led her to tell the stories of drug addicts struggling to find rehabilitation programs, market women brutalized by the police and children raped by sexual predators. Her passion for representing the voices of marginalized people bubbles over from her words to her energetic hand gestures.

Her stories are often controversial, and she receives plenty of backlash – which is just what she wants.

“Journalism is there to create a debate,” Azango said, a fierce look in her eyes. “Once you debate, change will definitely come.”

That was certainly the case with her story on female genital mutilation. After Azango’s articles published, the once taboo subject was suddenly being discussed on the radio and in international news. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, as well as the Ministry of Gender and Development, were forced to get involved, formally banning the practice for the first time in Liberian history.

In a separate series, Azango reported on the business of selling Liberian girls to Lebanese businessmen and shipping them into sex slavery in Lebanon. The articles
earned the ire of government officials who either had not discovered the practice themselves or were complicit in it, Azango said. It also spurred protests in Liberia and resulted in the government rescuing more than a dozen girls.

It’s work like this that keeps Azango in journalism.

“There’s power in the pen,” she said. “If I can use this pen, I can shape the future of my country.”