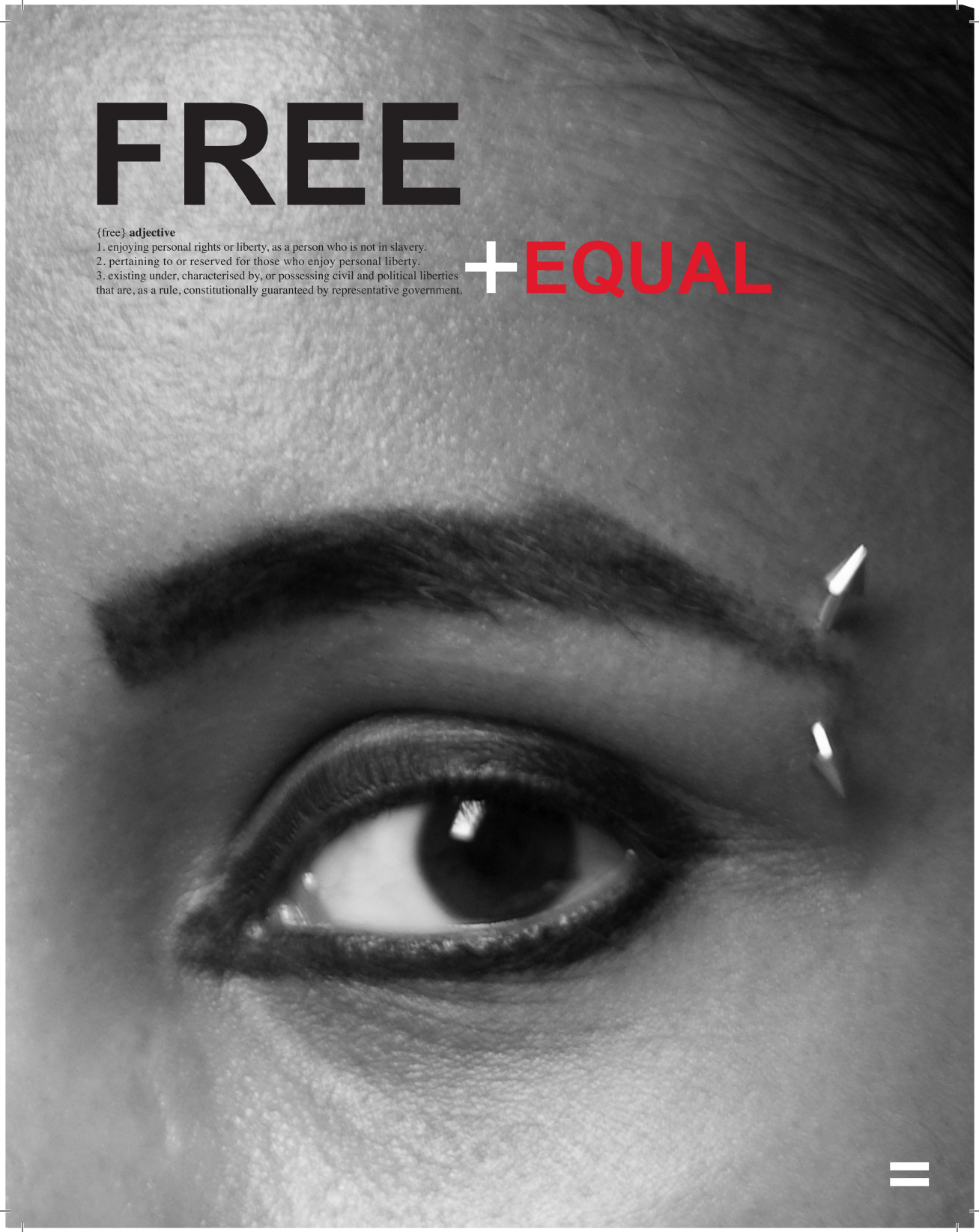
FREE

{free} **adjective**
1. enjoying personal rights or liberty, as a person who is not in slavery.
2. pertaining to or reserved for those who enjoy personal liberty.
3. existing under, characterised by, or possessing civil and political liberties that are, as a rule, constitutionally guaranteed by representative government.

+ EQUAL



crea

INTRODUCTION

Some stories disappear. They get lost in the din of mainstream narratives, oft-repeated tales with expected beginnings and unsurprising endings.

Some stories rarely get told.

These are those stories. The tales of transgressors: sex workers who refuse shame, disabled women who refuse silence, lesbians who refuse invisibility, gender migrants who refuse categorisation or opt to choose their own. These narratives have been shaped by a refusal to accept marginalisation as the status quo; they intentionally interrupt accepted wisdoms with their stories of beauty and survival.

These are our stories. The stories that are rarely heard, the narratives that are so thoroughly invisibilised because of the complex ways in which they defy dominant societal and gender norms. In myriad ways, these narratives force us to question traditional wisdoms about right and wrong, possible and impossible. These images speak of opposition, of challenging dominant perceptions of who we can and cannot be, what we can and cannot do, and who we should and should not love.

These stories are a testament to the power of storytelling, of speaking up, of speaking out. They ask that we question our complicity in unequal systems, that we refuse our support to normative societal norms. They encourage us to envision more inclusive communities, and to commit to building them anew. In times of oppression, marginalisation, and everyday inequality, these stories demand that we still hope. That we act. That we resist.

I have trained as a model, but every time I go to an audition for different fashion shows, they say the same thing. I have been told that I have all the qualities that they require but they don't select me just because I'm transgender.

My dream is to be a catwalk model, but I don't think I will be able to do it in Nepal. So I'd like to model abroad. There are transgender women who are successful models in America, Brazil, and Japan.

Anjali Lama
Lazimpat, Nepal

I'm a transgender man and a human rights activist.

I was suspended from the police because I was having a relationship with my boss' sister. I am fighting in court to be reinstated in my job. If I win my case, it will give me status. Also, I hope it will encourage other transgender people to open up in their jobs.

There are about 500 transgender men in Nepal who I know about. Often they work in the army or police; as they have short hair, they are not obvious.

I think it's important for the young community to have job security and be safe. I have faith and trust that this can happen.

Raaz Husen
Kathmandu, Nepal

I am the first transgender woman to be elected in a general convention in the Nepali Congress Party. I achieved that by working hard, being dedicated, and pressurising the political parties and the media, and I've got the support of my family and friends.

I'm encouraging all the youth to come forward and have a voice, be part of the political process to build a stronger nation.

Bhumika Shrestha
Kathmandu, Nepal

I'm a transgender man and an LGBT activist, doing documentation, reporting, and advocacy with the Blue Diamond Society. Since the Blue Diamond Society started in 2001, we have seen a lot of change. Now, more people are starting to accept transgender men in our society.

I believe, as with heterosexual people, we should be able to live with dignity and respect with the person we love, with freedom. I hope that it's achievable by working at the grassroots level and making people aware of these issues.

I ask that people give moral support to this goal, so that others can lead their lives happily, and with freedom.

Bhakti Shah
Kathmandu, Nepal

I'm a transgender woman, and I've been an activist with the Blue Diamond Society since 2001. Since then, there have been so many changes, including acceptance from my family.

The most important thing is to break the silence.

The family pressure to change ourselves puts a lot of mental pressure on us. Blue Diamond Society has support and peer groups, so that we get the opportunity to share our feelings, which really helps with our mental health.

In Nepal, there is no service for gender reassignment surgery and hormone therapy. We are working towards this. At the moment, transgender women use contraceptives for their hormones.

Manisha Dhakal
Kathmandu, Nepal

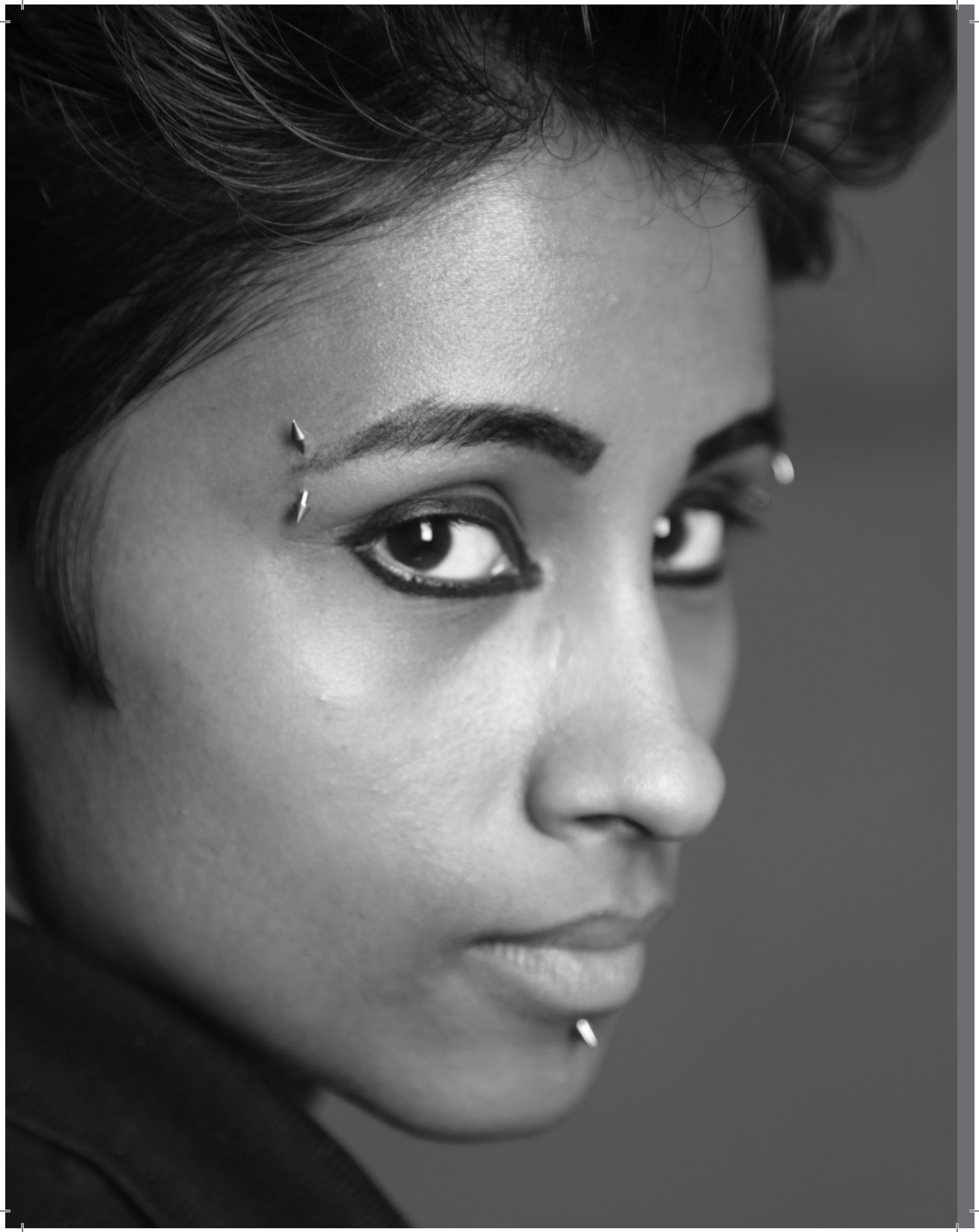
I have met hundreds of women from all walks of life in the last 36 years. There were opportunities to have a close look at many of their lives—their internal feelings, love, desires, and dreams. There have been women who love women mentally, physically, spiritually, and in all senses. Some of them are married, with husbands and children; some are divorced; a few have grown older, but did not get married by choice; and some are being forced to get married. All these *shamopremee* (same-sex loving) women, irrespective of their marital status, live hard lives in Bangladesh, where same-sex love is a stigma, is not discussed openly, and where strong negative attitudes towards sexualities other than heterosexuality prevail. They suffer from identity crises, having no spaces for sharing and support.

One of my friends who lives independently by herself started, in July 2007, the first-ever woman-loving-woman group in Bangladesh, named *'Swaprova'*, which means self-lighting. Since then, the group has been meeting at her place, where they can express themselves freely, share their life situations, and extend support to each other.

It has been observed and experienced that it is extremely difficult to overcome the social barriers, norms, values, and attitudes, where no recognition or support—neither from the family/society nor from the State—exists. Most of the group members fear to be visible and break the silence.

We need to strengthen ourselves, to raise our voice, and to be in public for our cause.

Fatima Khanam
Barisal, Bangladesh



I consider myself lesbian, but it is a paradox for me, because I have alter egos and they have different needs, play different roles, and are different genders. If you go to the root of the human psyche, the soul has no sex. If a person reaches the understanding of who their soul is, then that's when the balance comes in. Balance means different things for different people.

I'm a voluntary peer counsellor for the LGBT community in Pune. It's a small city, so we don't have a big activist movement. We believe in bringing the straight people with us. I think that if you start excluding people who aren't in your community, you create your own discrimination.

What works for us is that we're the younger generation, so we're not seen as a threat. But, we are doing it really slowly, because it's difficult. We are just human, like everybody else.

Reshma Valliappan
Pune, India

Being from Pakistan, as a woman with a disability, I experience four times the discrimination.

I don't think disability is a challenge. I think it's just a different lifestyle. We need to advocate for ourselves and be involved at every level. We need to identify the women who are our potential leaders and grow their capacity, so that they can become agents of change to raise their voices and be heard.

It is very helpful to network, so we can know each other, see what others are doing, and learn from each other.

Abia Akram
Islamabad, Pakistan

I'm a woman with a disability and great courage, a disability activist and advocate. I became visually impaired in 2000, before which I was a sighted person. I've been discriminated against by my family. I was confined to four walls. With the greatest difficulty, I came out of the house. I started all over again—I learned Braille, a special computer system, and I got an employment opportunity.

When you're a woman with a disability, you must come out and empower yourself, become independent, not be confined to four walls. You must educate others and create awareness, so that other women with disabilities can do the same.

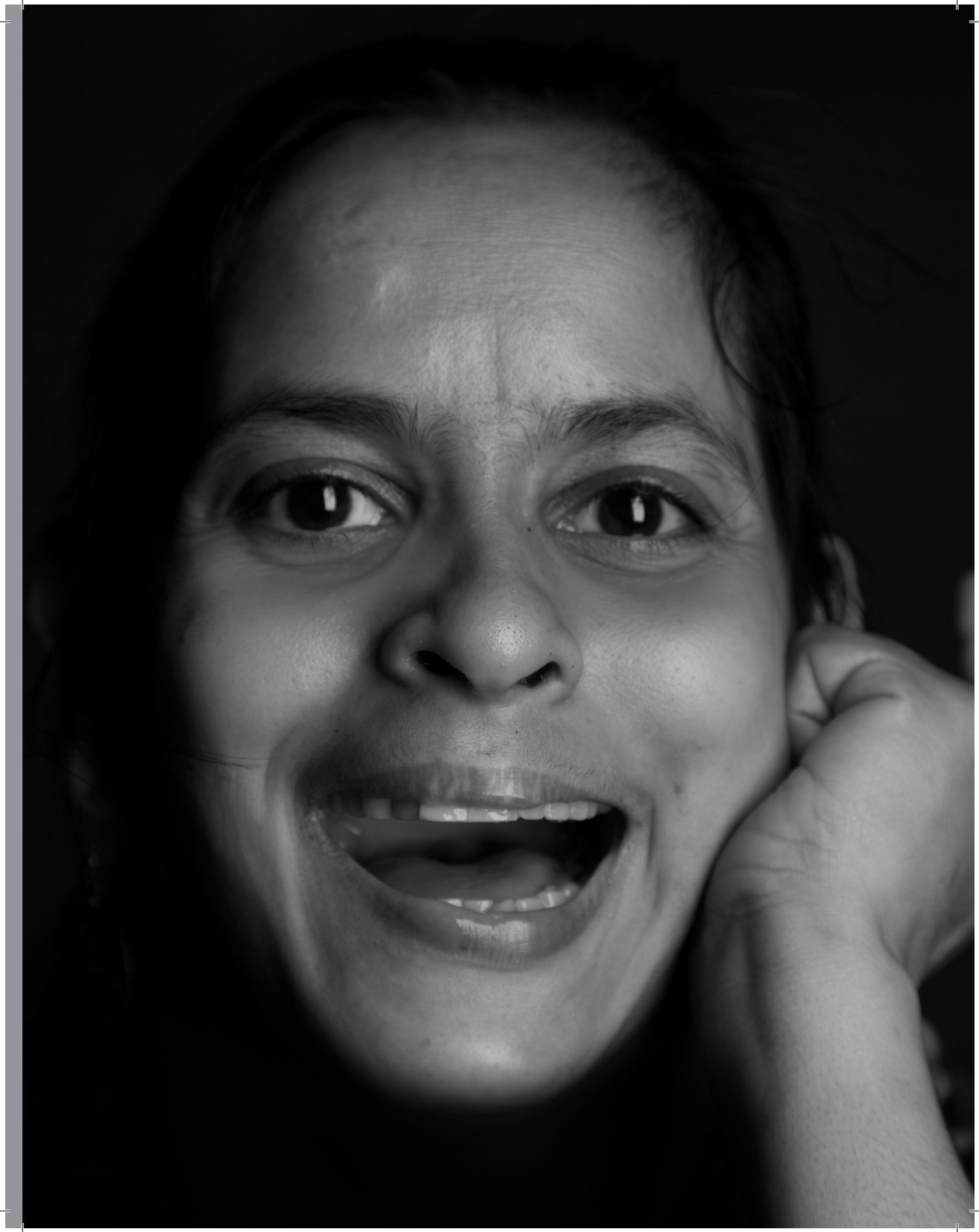
To change the world, you must change yourself. We must change our attitude from sympathy to empathy, from dependent to independent, and from closed to open. Just give us a chance–it will do a world of good for us, so we can be loud, proud, and passionate.

Manique Gunaratne
Rajagiriya, Sri Lanka

I'm a woman with a disability and a disability rights activist.
We are at the margins of the margins.

I have a vision to make the disability movement join with the women's and LGBT movements. We have different issues, but we are all marginalised, and in that way, we are all the same. Disability is a cross-cutting issue.

Jeeja Ghosh
Kolkata, India



I'm schizophrenic, the marginalised amongst the marginalised. I've been part of the mental health system in India since 2002. Women with mental illnesses are not seen as human beings.

Living with a mental illness allows me to deal with pain now and then. That's where art comes in. Art does not limit you. It acts on your psyche and on your soul level. You don't need words to explain.

In the workshops I run, people paint their pain. We are all so different, but art is the one thing that makes us all stop and silently look at each other and understand—that we are sharing everything, just the same as each other. Our pain is just the same, immaterial of what our experiences have been. Art will trigger experiences for you, and it may be difficult to deal with. But, it's getting it out and that's the first step of recovery.

Reshma Valliappan
Pune, India

A few years ago, I went to a police inspector to report an incident, and he would not take my complaint. I said "am I not human?" He said that because I'm a sex worker, I'm not a citizen of this country. I'm not even a woman.

Shabana Dastagir Gavandi
Nippani, India

I am the coordinator of a collective for sex workers, called VAMP. I have been working there for 20 years. We do a lot of work with women, men, and transgender people.

The collective has been a great support for me over the years, helping me through many challenges.

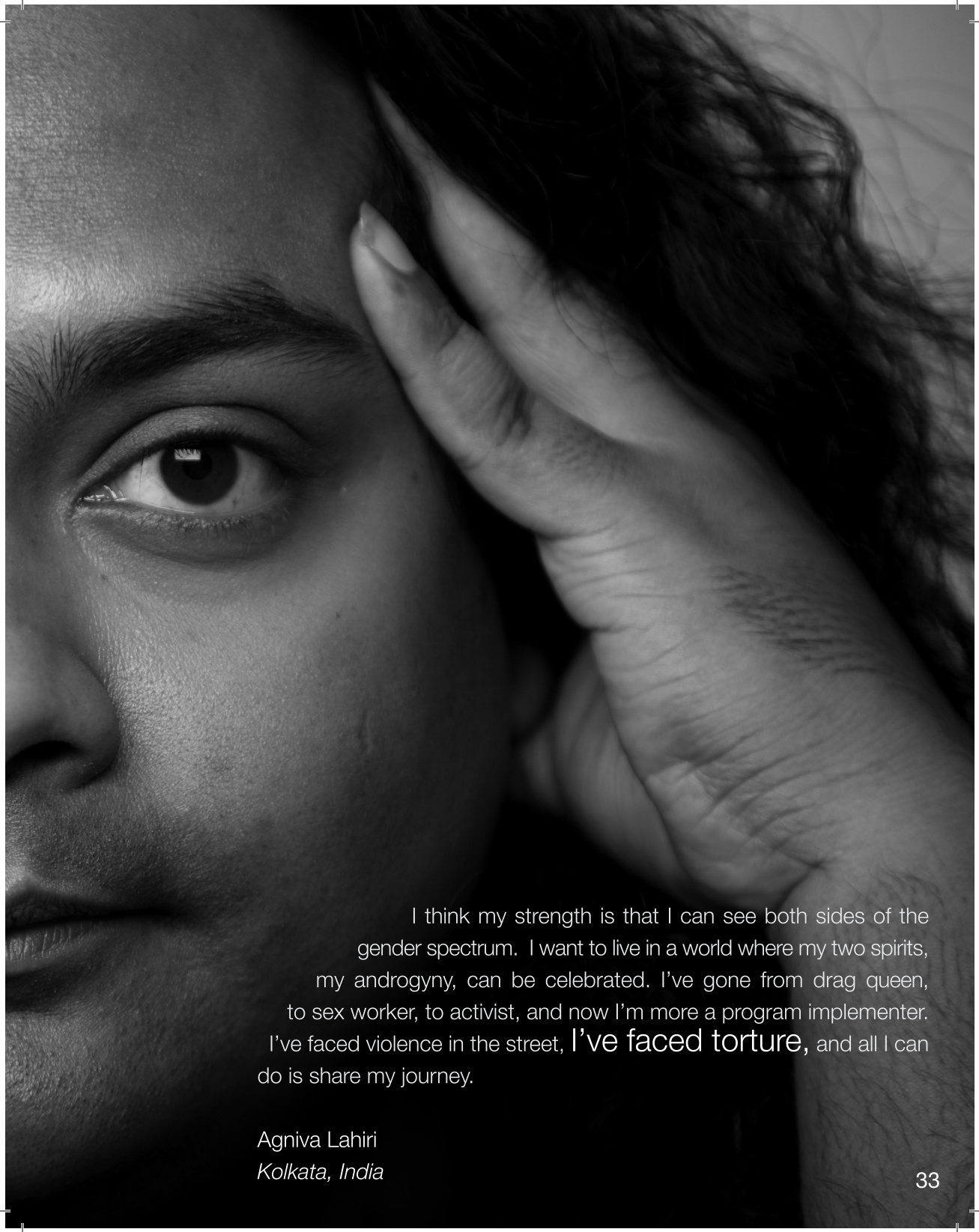
We have suffered so much. We work hard, so that the young ones don't have to go through what we had to.

Durga Pujari
Nippani, India

We have worked at VAMP for 20 years. The strength of the collective is huge, and it has meant that we get to know what is going on and we can do really good work.

We work hard to make sure that girls under 18 are not doing sex work.

Shabana and Durga
Nippani, India



I think my strength is that I can see both sides of the gender spectrum. I want to live in a world where my two spirits, my androgyny, can be celebrated. I've gone from drag queen, to sex worker, to activist, and now I'm more a program implementer. I've faced violence in the street, I've faced torture, and all I can do is share my journey.

Agniva Lahiri
Kolkata, India

Anjali, Sophie, and Manisha
Kathmandu, Nepal

Speak Up, Speak Out!

This booklet represents part of CREA's ongoing commitment to challenge social exclusion and to end violence against women and trans persons. Women are often excluded and marginalised, and denied participation, leadership, and services because of their race, class, gender, sexuality, marital status, religion, ability, and other such reasons. We understand social exclusion to be laws, policies, and practices that discriminate against people who transgress societal norms of gender, sexuality, ability, profession, and so on, by excluding them from accessing the full extent of their sexual and human rights.

Ending violence against marginalised communities necessitates naming experiences of exclusion; speaking out about various forms of violence and about the ways in which such violence is complicated by and interacts with marginalisation.

The stories of these individuals alter and resist mainstream narratives, and ask that we do the same. What, then, should our resistance look like? As individuals and communities, how can we begin the process of dismantling structures of oppression? Where can we start?

Read your daily newspaper and look at the ways in which narratives around sex benefits for married heterosexual couples, about the forms and boxes that need to know your gender, about the elevator that does not exist, and the staircase that is the only bridge between the ground and the top floor.

Pause the next time you hear the word "whore"; every time someone says "poor thing" in reference to a trans person, a sex worker, a lesbian, or a disabled woman; when someone you know says, "That is so gay!"

Speak up the next time you hear a joke about disabled people—you can change

to exercise control over one's body and life, and have the freedom, the power, and the support to demand sexual and human rights. It means being able to exercise these rights to their full extent and not be discriminated against in law, practice, or policy–making.

Count Me IN! is a multidimensional programme that works with girls and women, and with civil society organisations to increase their access to power, knowledge, and pleasure, and to decrease their experiences of violence and discrimination. Count Me IN! began in 2008, as a three-year South Asia and Central Asia project, supported by the Dutch Government's MDG3 Fund. The project focused on the ways gender inequality is manifested, such as violence against women; huge

laws and policies are shaped. The study included both qualitative and quantitative research studies in the three countries. Over 1600 lesbian women, female sex workers, and disabled women participated in the quantitative surveys, while 157 participated in the qualitative study. Known survivors of violence were purposively recruited to the qualitative studies. The research findings were supplemented with interviews with service providers, policy analysis, and a detailed review of the existing literature on the subject. Based on this, policy recommendations specific to the situation and context in each of the three countries were formulated.

Some of the key findings across the three countries are as follows.

Lesbian women reported violence at a number of specific periods in their lives, particularly when they "came out" (openly acknowledged their sexual orientation). In addition to these event-associated periods of violence and stigma, the women reported instances of ongoing trauma. These include the trauma associated with continuously having to hide their sexual orientation or having to live "two lives"—one as lesbian women and another as outwardly conformist heterosexual women. They also reported high levels of social exclusion and outright discrimination from employers, landlords, and others. Despite these levels of violence and discrimination, the women had low levels of care-seeking, mainly due to the fear of increased stigma. A majority of them reported that they had been forced to change their place of residence or had been unable to rent accommodation within the past one year.

- Over 70% of the women surveyed in Nepal reported violence, over half of which occured in the past year. Psychological problems, including tension, fear, and suicidal thoughts, as well as physical problems, also commonly arose as a result of the violence that the women suffered.

Sex-working women reported high levels of ongoing and past violence from a wide range of perpetrators—sexual partners, clients, pimps, employers, brothel managers, police, family members, and the wider community (neighbours and others). A large number of women reported violence as starting in childhood (particularly sexual violence perpetrated by male family members and neighbours). On occasion, these experiences of abuse acted as a 'trigger' for young girls to run away from home, which, in turn, increased their levels of vulnerability and risk of exploitation. Most of the women reported being denied health services at some point

in the past. The children of most of these women had been expelled from school.

- 82% of the female sex workers interviewed in Bangladesh reported extremely high levels of violence from a variety of perpetrators. Over 70% of the women reported psychological problems and suicidal feelings.

Women with disability experienced regular and ongoing discrimination within their communities. Such discrimination varied from public comments and insults to institutionalised violence, leading to women being unable to access education, jobs, or other forms of societal support. Families hid disabled daughters away and arranged marriages with whoever accepted them. Within marriage, women reported cases of neglect, punishment, and abuse from their spouses.

- In India, 59% of the unmarried women surveyed had experienced violence from their natal family members, friends, and neighbours, and 54% of the ever-married women had faced violence from affinal family members, natal family members, friends, and neighbours. Additionally, 78% of the women who faced violence had experienced severe mental distress as a result of violence.

Organisations working on issues of marginalisation and exclusion in South Asia

Bangladesh

- Naripokkho
  naripokkho@gmail.com
- Sex Workers Network of Bangladesh
  swnob2002org@yahoo.com
- The Centre for Gender, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS (BRAC)
  www.bracuniversity.net
- Dhaka International University
  www.diu.net.bd

Nepal

- Blue Diamond Society (BDS)
  www.bds.org.np
- Center for Research on Environment Health and Population Activities (CREHPA)
  www.crehpa.org.np
- Forum for Women, Law and Development (FWLD)
  www.fwld.org
- Nepal Disabled Women Association (NDWA)
  www.ndwa.org.npw
- Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC)
  www.worecnepal.org

India

- Action Plus: A Coalition for Rights, Education and Care in HIV/AIDS
  http://www.pointofview.org/about-us/Networks.aspx
- Association for Women with Disabilities
  www.awwdindia.org
- Bapu Trust for Research on Mind & Discourse
  www.bapucamhindia.org
- Center for Development Initiatives
  www.cdiindia.org
- Indian Institute of Cerebral Palsy
  www.iicpindia.org
- International Services Association (INSA-India)
  www.insa-india.org.in
- Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action (LABIA)
  www.labiacollective.org
- Nalamdana
  http://www.nalamdana.org/
- The Naz Foundation (India)
  www.nazindia.org

- Point Of View
  www.pointofview.org
- Pratyay Gender Trust
  pratyaygendertrust@yahoo.co.in
- People Like Us (PLUS)
  www.pluskolkata.org
- Sahayatrika
  sahayatrika@gmail.com
- Sruti Disability Rights Centre
  sruti.darc@gmail.com
- Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha (SANGRAM)
  www.sangram.org
- SAMPOORNA, A Network of Trans Indians
  sampoornaindia@yahoo.com
- The YP Foundation
  www.theypfoundation.org
- TARSHI
  www.tarshi.net
- Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC)
  www.durbar.org

Pakistan

- O (Organisation for the Protection and Propagation of the Rights of Sexual Minorities)
  www.pprsm.org
- Aahung
  www.aahung.org
- ASR Resource Centre
  nskhan1946@yahoo.com
- Aware Girls
  http://awaregirls.webs.com/
- Strengthening Health Education Environment and Development Society (SHEED Society)
  www.sheedsociety.org

Sri Lanka

- INFORM
  inform@alt.lk
- Equal Ground
  www.equal-ground.org

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"I would like to thank all those who participated with bravery and generosity. I was very honored to be invited by CREA to photograph and interview the inspiring people in this booklet. The experience was a privilege, and these amazing people opened my eyes and touched my heart. This continued my connection with CREA, who had previously contributed to the launch of my book *Assume Nothing* in New York 2010."
—Rebecca Swan

Free and Equal is a testament to our storytellers, to the 15 narrators who have shared their stories and lives with infinite grace. We are grateful for their immense trust in allowing us to glimpse and capture pieces of their daily realities. Through their conquests and challenges, heartbreak and hope, they allow us to envision communities that may indeed be free and equal, for each and all of us.

This publication would not have been possible without Rebecca Swan, who has imagined and guided this project from beginning to end. Her extraordinary portraits and interviews allow us a previously unimaginable relationship with narrators we have never met, and histories we are hearing for the first time. Rebecca is a multimedia artist and author who has published three books in 11 countries. Her work has been exhibited in galleries and museums in Australasia, Europe, and America. *Assume Nothing* celebrates gender diversity, and is a book, an exhibition, and a film made by Kirsty MacDonald.

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