

Dear Sisters,

I'm writing this letter to express my profound esteem for your humanity, integrity and courage. From the bottom of my heart I would like to thank you for having created Time's Up Movement. I'm one of you and I give you my total support.

In a world where the woman is still seen by many only as a sexual object and as a lesser human it's not easy to denounce and to be believed. The consequences of our denunciations are devastating. We must face people's judgement, depression, guilt, shame... In most of the cases we lose our jobs and remain alone, abandoned by a cold and insensitive society. I know very well what it means. I myself denounced publicly the abuses I've endured in my life.

Fifteen years ago, I wrote an autobiographical novel "Alberi Senza Radici" (Trees without roots) in which I tell how I have been mistreated and abused by my ex husband when I was 19 years old.

On 2010, in my autobiographical movie "Goodbye Mama", I tell about domestic violence, how my sister and I were emotionally and physically abused by our mother when we were kids.

And on October 10th, 2013, on my blog and on TV, I decided to tell what I was forced to do in order to succeed, how the corrupt system works and how all of us are involved.

I did exactly what you did, Sisters. We have broken the wall of silence just by saying the truth. I read your letter, your words came straight into my heart and I felt the need to share my story with you.

My life has been held back for a so long time. After five years of exile, I feel the force to rise up. You gave me the strength to get my faith and hope back and made me understand that I can't go on living without the awareness that I have to rise up at the same moment and at the same place that I have fallen. So I have to recall and not to delete, I have to speak out and not to die in silence.

The moment that I fallen down was when I stood up against the most powerful man in Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, when I denounced publicly how I was abused by him and how he used italian institutions for his private interests while he served as prime minister.

But let's start from the beginning. I went to visit Berlusconi for the first time on March 12th, 2009, four years before my denouncement. I was successful leading actress in Rai Uno and I always won the share of the prime time. I wanted to become producer and director but no one would have afford me this without the recommendation of a powerful person. That's why I asked Berlusconi to support me. I trusted him as a father, most of the italians trusted him. He was a prime minister at the time but I spoke to him as the owner of the biggest private television and movie company of the country. I gave him the screenplay of my autobiographical movie "Goodbye Mama", my debut as a director, and I asked him to buy the television rights of it trough his media company Mediaset. As an answer he proposed me to have a sexual relationship with him, I immediately refused. He decided to support me anyway.

I produced and I directed my movie, I even received a reward in Venice International Film Festival for the human rights. But at what price! The bills were growing and I didn't want to pay. The advances of Berlusconi became more pressing and I kept rejecting them.

In order to put me on the corner and make me bow my head he rose the mood machine against me. My movie was discredited, my artistic work was questioned, my relation to the power was highlighted, I was marked as the protégée of Silvio Berlusconi so nobody would ever offered me a job. Working with his companies was the only possibility for me.

After three years of trying to avoid his advances I was forced to accept them. I had no choice because I wasn't willing to give up my career built in ten years with many sacrifices.

Our perpetrators pretend that we voluntarily offer ourselves to them making everything seem natural. They tell us: "If you refuse me other two thousand girls are waiting behind you ready to do anything to gain success. You are privileged." And then we look around us and see that the system works like this; a feeling of impotence paralysing us mentally and physically.

You don't realize how it begins, you realize it when you are in the end, when you pour yourself a whisky at eight in the morning instead of the usual latte and you ask yourself: "Where did I go wrong? Where did I lose myself?" Sadly, this is the story of the world. The more you up the ante - the bigger price you have to pay. And I was ambitious, I wanted to become famous, to show my parents that I was talented and they were wrong not to love me.

I was born in Bulgaria on October 1st, 1971, during the time of communism and I observed how an apparently just and fair ideology based on equality could subjugate human minds making them blind and deaf. For this reason at the age of 18, right after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I moved to Italy. I had only twenty dollars in my pocket and many dreams to fulfill. I was happy to live in a democratic country and I thought that by the means of talent and hard work I could achieve any goal. I was wrong.

What happened with Silvio Berlusconi taught me that there exists only one sophisticated corrupt system that is feeding on itself by a simple and clear rule: everyone is bound by the compromise to guarantee the secrecy and the continuity. So I belonged to the system that everyone hated but everyone craved, the system of money and success. I was supposed to be happy but I was suffocating.

When I lived in Bulgaria I had one hope: to climb over the Wall and live as a free woman. Twenty years later there were no walls for me to climb over but I was still a slave, this time without hope of becoming free. I had realized there was no way out, it was a matter of time, sooner or later I'd find myself in a cold hospital bed, as it had already happened in Bulgaria when I was sixteen, after my suicide attempt.

This is why on October 10th, 2013, I decided to publish on my blog the post "The truth will set us free", in which I declared that I no longer wanted to deal with the corrupt and false world I lived in. I needed to get my values and my dignity back, to tell young actresses that it was not worth it, that compromises don't bring happiness. I denounced how I was abused by Silvio Berlusconi and I testified in front of millions of people, on one of the most popular TV Show in Italy, Servizio Pubblico (Public Service), his abuse of power as prime minister.

In spite of my spontaneous statement, no investigation has begun on the harmful behaviour of Berlusconi, neither from the public prosecutors nor the journalists. Worse than this, my blog was closed and the justice machine together with the "regime" media activated themselves to stone me definitively. The whole system immediately closed against me, cutting every opportunity for me to work in the entertainment industry and to develop my talents.

Also my personal safety was in danger. Criminals tried to intimidate me but I was protected by bodyguards and carabinieri. No woman from the Italian show business stood on my side nor follow my example. Nobody defended me, I was left alone.

The good society marked me with the Scarlet Letter, making me feel like a leper that everyone had to avoid, so they wouldn't get infected. The news went around the world, it was a shock for my audience, for everyone who knew me and for the people involved. Nobody expected me to expose myself to that point, it would have been easier and more appropriate to bargain, to blackmail.

My act was never really understood. How could a woman who got to the fame and power decide to give up everything? What was under this? Nothing similar ever happened in Italy before. An act comparable to a suicide. However, I was ready for this. I knew what I was going against and I was ready to die, my only consolation being that I would have died as a free woman. Moreover, in a system that leaves you no choice, choosing to tell the truth is a great luxury.

Then the miracle occurred. Thousands of people contacted me publicly and privately in my social channels to express their solidarity and to denounce the state of no rights they live in. My act gave them the courage to go out in the open and share their hardships with me without shame or fear of being judged. They were convinced I was going to understand them. This filled me with pride and gave me strength to go on. I felt useful to someone.

Hence, on December 12th, 2013, I decided to found the association "Associazione Michelle Bonev" financed entirely by me. I formed a filming crew and I traveled through Italy to give voice and face to the one who had been forgotten by the institutions and the media because no human being deserves to remain invisible. I dedicated all my economic resources to the last ones, to the poor, to whoever is fighting for his rights. For me it was the only way to heal my soul.

In spite of my efforts to forget and start a new life, in 2015 I had to suspend the activity of the association because I fell into a deep depression. The awareness that I would never have had my job again, my only passion, made me feel unworthy and I lost self-esteem. Feelings of guilt and shame stuck me in limbo.

History teaches us that women and men who've tried to move us a step forward in our evolution had lives full of hardships. They were never understood while still alive and they were persecuted, imprisoned and killed. It is therefore hard for a person to embark on the path of truth, knowing how it ends.

Despite this, there are still women and men who undertake this path. We did it, Sisters, we refused to be silenced by powerful men trying to intimidate us.

Nothing has changed in two thousand years for women abused by men. Today even the worst criminal has the right of defence and redemption, while a woman who denounces sexual abuse is stoned by the society without possibility of real defence. Because legal defence is important but not enough for those who will never receive the people's understanding and solidarity. There exist two courtrooms of judgement, one is in the tribunal and the second one is in the public opinion. Every abused woman has the right to be legally and morally defended, so that can be extinguished the prejudice in the public opinion.

For this right of defence I'm here today. I need your help, Sisters! The silence breakers in Italy and even more in Bulgaria are left alone. I'm like a martyr who refuses to die. If I die, the hope of many women will die with me; if I live, many other women will find the courage to break the silence. The courage must never die!

Sisters, let's stand together and unite our voices in order to make Time's Up become a Global Movement. The Old Continent needs a new mentality. You have put the seed of change and have given the strength to many american women to face their perpetrators. It's time for this cleaning process to start also in Europe! Only our bravery can shake the minds that live in ignorance and prejudice through the ages. We are famous and the world is listening to us, so we have a great responsibility towards women who still suffer sexual harassment and abuse in silence. We have a lot of work to do and we'll do it with passion and determination. It's our turn now! Many women fought for our rights before us paying a high price every step forward. This is why we should not step back an inch. The time to lower our heads and suffer in silence is over! We have to continue our commitment to progress and equality of rights until the end. Whatever it takes!

I would like to close this letter with a passage contained in my book, which was essential for my life. "I was born poor and I was a girl full of dreams. They used to tell me I couldn't aspire to anything because there was a regime that wouldn't allow it. And when I answered them that deep in my heart I felt such a strong energy that could have brought me anywhere, they laughed at me. They said that I was not concrete, that I didn't want to see the reality, the one created by their fears. Because the only reality that exists is the one that lives inside of us."

And after everything I've been through in my life, I have the certainty that I will never give up! I will not forget who I am! First of all I'm a free woman, then I'm a writer, screenplayer, actress, director and producer. I don't want to be abused by anyone in order to grow in my artistic career! I want my life and my job back! I have nothing left but my pencil, my dignity and my uncontrollable thirst for justice for me and for all the humiliated and mistreated women in the world. And now, I have also you, Sisters, and I know I'm not alone!

"The secret of Happiness is Freedom, and the secret of Freedom, Courage." Thucydides

Looking forward to meet you, I send you all my love and faith.

Michelle Bonev

Rome, May 29th, 2018