



## Silent Scream by Henriëtte van Gasteren: A Cry that Breaks the Silence

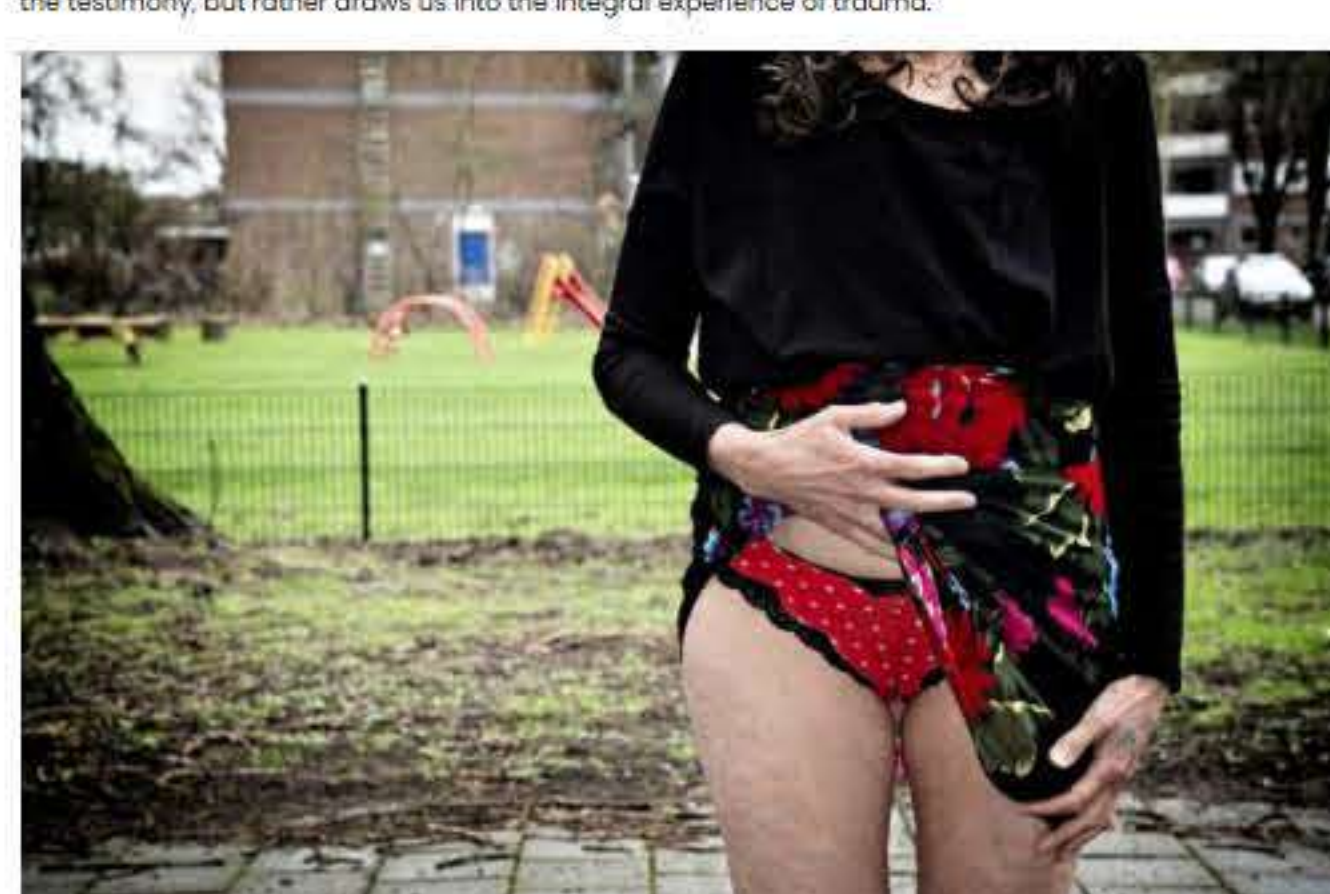
Art has the power to uncover realities that often remain hidden. With *Silent Scream*, photographer and writer **Henriëtte van Gasteren** raises her voice against the taboo of sexual abuse, turning every page of her book into an intimate space that invites reflection and action.

This project is born from a personal story and is nourished by multiple testimonies, both from victims and perpetrators. By gathering and shaping these accounts, Van Gasteren aims to spark a broader social debate and, in doing so, contribute to a profound transformation in the way our society confronts the trauma of sexual abuse.

The *Silent Scream* project began taking shape with the story of the author's own daughter, Krisli, who was violently sexually assaulted during her university years. This incident awakened in Henriëtte an intense desire to understand, to confront the darkness she herself had experienced in the past and that her daughter was now also living through. From that moment, she felt a need to create something capable of breaking the spiral of silence, shame, and guilt that so often isolates victims. Conceived as a chronological narrative, the book introduces a wide range of experiences: young men and women who suffered abuse in family settings, adult survivors denouncing aggressions from their past, and the voices of perpetrators who, in various circumstances, acknowledge having overstepped the intimate boundaries of others.



One of the most striking aspects of *Silent Scream* is the photographic return of victims and perpetrators to the "crime scene" or the place where the assault happened. With camera in hand, Henriëtte invites each participant to revisit that space, once filled with pain and powerlessness. The result is images that move us through their honesty and distress faces that embody raw rage, regret, or the longing for justice. At the same time, these portraits are interwoven with texts and interviews that explore the full complexity of the emotional experiences felt by all involved. Consequently, *Silent Scream* does not remain on the surface of the testimony, but rather draws us into the integral experience of trauma.



Singer and TV presenter Angèle Groothuis, upon reading about the project and seeing the photographs, stated emphatically: "The images and testimonies grab you by the throat. This work deserves a book." For her, the evocative power of every word and every image Van Gasteren includes is undeniable. Former museum director Rick Verschuieren likewise underscores the essential human value and urgent social importance of this endeavor, noting that "all these silent screams make the afflicted pain—and society's distress to helplessly witness, shedding light on the enduring labor around openly discussing sexual abuse." Both perspectives converge on an essential idea: this is a crucial book, arriving at a historical moment when discussions about sexual harassment and abuse are increasingly relevant.



Another voice that highlights the impact of *Silent Scream* is Mariëtte Hamer, the Dutch Government Commissioner on Sexual Misconduct. Hamer contributed the foreword to the book, stressing the importance of giving visibility to survivors' accounts and praising Henriëtte for also allowing perpetrators to share their experiences. Hamer emphasizes that it is not enough to repeat the statistics—more in two women and one in five men will be victims of sexual assault at some point in their lives—but that we must humanize these figures so that society feels empathy and commits to the cultural transformation that is so desperately needed.



Within the pages of *Silent Scream*, we find the account of Tessa, a woman who was abused by her grandfather starting when she was a baby, and who later suffered ongoing sexual assaults in her adolescence at the hands of teachers and acquaintances. Her life was characterized by hospital stays in psychiatric centers, self-harm, and a relentless struggle to find a reason that would keep her alive. Sadly, her story confirms the existence of a destructive cycle fed by silence and worsened by the lack of supportive networks or timely justice. Nevertheless, Tessa and others featured in the book also illustrate remarkable resilience and the search for help, be it through deconstruction therapy or the steadfast support of a partner and friends.



Meanwhile, the story of Gijsa Timmermans shines a light on the reality of religious manipulation and sexual abuse within a sectarian environment. As a teenager, she was recruited by a German community where she was immersed in a dynamic of power and isolation. Years later, through extensive self-reflection and therapeutic work, she was able to identify as "rape" what the group leaders insisted was merely "work of conjugal life." Like Tessa, her healing process involved acknowledging that the abuse left lasting traces on her identity, while also motivating her to share her story in order to warn others and reclaim her own sense of worth.



On the perpetrators' side, *Silent Scream* offers insight into a dimension that is frequently overlooked in the public conversation: what does someone who commits sexual abuse feel, think, or experience? Some perpetrators in the book share the circumstances that led them to cross boundaries—childhood abuse, personality disorders, growing up in violent environments—while others show indifference (that the abuse left every act of aggression, there is a human dimension that cannot be resolved through legal punishment alone. A broader approach is needed, one that includes prevention, emotional education, and comprehensive psychological support.



Photographer and author Henriëtte van Gasteren confronts the complex reality of portraying both victims and perpetrators. In her narrative, she does not judge or condemn; instead, she opposes each story with a sensitive perspective, aware that understanding the phenomenon is not about justifying or absolving anyone, but about showing how sexual abuse can arise from a multitude of social, psychological, and relational factors. Her main purpose is to break the silence that protects abusers and silence victims, while also urging our society to handle this issue with greater responsibility and humanity.

*Silent Scream* is not an easy read, but it is a necessary one. Its pages, filled with heartrending testimonies and striking photographs, confront us with the urgent need to open our eyes to a problem long concealed by a culture of silence. Moreover, the project extends beyond the printed page: it includes a traveling exhibition that brings these portraits and stories to public spaces, from police stations to art galleries, seeking to reach all kinds of audiences and remind them that each person can act as an agent of change.



The positive and supportive responses that the book has received—from well-known performers, public officials, and ordinary people who see themselves reflected in these stories—confirm that society is urgently calling for honest discussion. A discussion that, more than pointing fingers, can lead to solutions and prevention measures. It is up to educators, lawmakers, and citizens at large to turn the call of *Silent Scream* into concrete steps for reducing the alarming statistics surrounding sexual abuse.

Ultimately, *Silent Scream* reminds us of the imperative to see the individual beyond the "victim" or "perpetrator" label. Through her camera and her words, Henriëtte van Gasteren lays bare the emotional weight each person carries and opens a door for truth and understanding to emerge, even amid so much darkness. As readers, we are left with the responsibility not to look the other way, and to join forces in building a culture of respect and equity—one that does not tolerate complicit silence or indifference.



Silent Scream

HUMMERGASTEREN

ISBN 978-90-69794-4-7

BUY IT NOW