GIRLHOOD
UNFILTERED

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Introducing Girlhood Unfiltered

For those of you that don't know me, I'm the founder of Milk Honey Bees, a charity that supports Black girls, and helps them to flourish. This isn't MY full story. You're about to read a book that reflects the wealth of Black Girl experience and the challenges they are facing. I've been through a lot and survived a lot – like these girls. But essentially one of the biggest transitions of my life has been to become the person I needed for others. I talk about my experience here to give context to the role I play in these girl's lives, and the role they play in mine. But some details and personal experiences have been omitted, to give space to the girls' voices.

One of my favourite books as a child was *Handa's Surprise* by Eileen Browne. Carrying tropical fruits, showcasing exotic animals, and exuding so much colour, reading this book always left me anticipating my own surprise; a world that was rich, vibrant and ready to favour what I brought to the table. My mum

never failed to remind me how just like Handa some children used to walk for miles back home just to get to school. I too felt seen, as I sported my single plaits that sprung up just like Handa's if they weren't secured by my own tropical fruit, my colourful bobbles from the local hair shop.

See, just like Handa, I was a little Black girl with something special to share. But also, just like Handa the presents I brought to the table were often taken from me without permission, and instead of being well-received and favoured were misrepresented and misunderstood.

In this book I will share with you my girlhood and the experiences of many of our girls today. So, sit back, open your eyes, ears and hearts, and take in *Girlhood Unfiltered*.

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Independence is something every little girl craves at some point in her life, but actually achieving this can come with its own unforeseen burdens.

Travelling to Australia at 7 years old with no-one but me, myself and Winnie the Pooh on my back, was my first experience of independence. Going to the other side of the world would be my first adventure. Super-excited, I remember being dropped at the airport by my mum and dad and escorted by one

of the lovely air hostesses to get checked in and board the plane. Whilst aboard, I had my own private bell, which I took full advantage of to call for drinks, answers to my questions and anything else I could think of. I rang that bell so much, the crew eventually ended up turning it off - to my misfortune, as when I needed it most, needed them most, no-one came, resulting in me wetting myself like the baby I really was.

I was so embarrassed.

Looking back, this was my first recognisable encounter with adultification. Davis and Marsh (2020) define adultification as:

'…When notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children. This is determined by people and institutions who hold power over them. When adultification occurs outside of the home it is always founded within discrimination and bias…. Regardless of the context in which adultification takes place, the impact results in children's rights being either diminished or not upheld.'

Despite being a curious, demanding, and potentially annoying child, I was a *child,* nonetheless. I was alone and deserving of care and support no matter how frustrating it got. Whilst this may have

been overlooked on the plane, it sure wasn't once I reached my destination. My extended family in Australia were everything and more. It really was my home away from home. Whether it was being put in pink, puffy dresses by my Aunty-in-Law, or running up and down with the boys, my cousins, I felt all parts of me were fuelled, fed and accepted.

Back at home in South London, life too was good, with friends and neighbours becoming like family and Mummy and Daddy being my best friends. So, when my parents split, I really was not ready. Not only did I not see it coming, but I was not quite sure how to process this new dynamic. As things changed at home, so were things changing for me as a growing girl. As I got taller and my body changed, so did the way people treated me. My cheekiness was viewed as mischief. My child self seen as a giant. My innocence; guilty until proven otherwise. This was yet another experience of adultification, in terms of the treatment I received from others. Due to our culture, it was seen as natural, so it's only with hindsight that I can recognise it.

Entering Year 5, I moved to a separate building, a different playground and experienced my first male teacher. Meeting a teacher like this opened a whole new dynamic for me to navigate. This teacher was everything I was not: white, male, adult and in a position of authority. Whilst I was used to being

reassured from my previous female teachers with nurturing activities and the odd hug or kind word, I sensed a coldness, a disconnect and fuelled by the lack of relationship would play up in his presence. With constant reminders that secondary school was around the corner, that the teacher was right and knew best and my feelings going unchecked and unacknowledged, I began to lose my own sense of girlhood. I remember my chair often being kicked by a boy behind me. I'd tell my teacher, but despite society often deeming boys as stronger than girls, it would appear I was not afforded the same grace. It seemed that in any normal situation we would have been opposite sides of the coin, perpetrator and victim, offender and offended, boy and girl, in this situation we were grouped together based on our similarities; Black, big and typically disruptive and therefore not 'worthy' of any further attention or 'open' to any form of correction, despite the fact we were only 10 years old.

This concept of being a big Black girl did not end at school but was instead reinforced through expressions and remarks typically made in African and Caribbean households. Labels like 'biggy biggy' became my new name, whilst I silently grew more body conscious and grossed out by my changing body; a process that should have allowed me to embrace this next stage of my girlhood but instead felt like a literal weight I had to carry and could not change.

With changes still taking place at home and taking place with me, I tried to protect the version of me I liked often by twisting the truth. One evening after school I was at LatchKey, an after-school club for kids like me, whose parents may have still been at work after school. There had been an American Football Tournament at the weekend, which I had been looking forward to playing in and that I had been talking about for weeks, that I ended up missing because I had to look after my younger sister who was claiming to be "sick". Gutted and totally embarrassed, of course I told them I had played when asked. My team had won the tournament and for those moments I felt part of something good; I was on top of the world. But I was sent to rock bottom when my lie was exposed. I continued to defend my 'innocence', I couldn't come clean now, but the looks on people's faces let me know they already knew I was guilty. I was no longer a cute girl telling porkies, but a big girl telling lies. I saw an escape from what was really going on, but they only saw 'a liar', a trickster, a fraud and in a sense that's who I became.

These are two keys things that I believe are needed in girlhood. It is crucial to have a space to be a Black girl and when you have a place to be a Black girl, it is essential to thrive in it. Although, it is important to realise and accept that not everybody will understand you when you do so. That the one

thing you have got is you. Especially when you are in a place and space where all you have been taught with the other girls is how to be against each other. So, do learn through your experiences to build your own confidence, to understand and navigate your growth. It is about being able to speak up about what you believe and not what you think everybody else is doing. That is why Black girlhood is a very unique experience and nobody's experience should be capped to one thing.

I began secondary school, where I was no longer 'the tall girl', 'the big girl', but now one of many tall or big girls. Everyone had an identity, a persona, a famo and I had to find mine. Having a famo or family at school meant you had olders, 'big siblings' if you like, and other friends that you were affiliated with and had your back at all times. Getting sent out of lesson and put into classes with the older girls put me in a prime position to become that 'little sister' and grow the notoriety I desired. At home, things were getting more and more tense with my actual family at loggerheads over my behaviour, so school provided me a place to feel free, to be seen and garner the attention I longed for.

Cussing teachers, getting into fights, using my height and build to my advantage, the school became my oyster. But secretly, this was just a

shell, a facade I'd slipped into, to work with the narrative given to me to the best of my advantage. Deep down, I still enjoyed reading Smash Hits and PopGirl. Playing football and visiting the library to read about David Beckham. Begging mum for the latest copy of Young Voices and sticking the posters I got from it on my walls. I was a girl split between three worlds, what it meant to be British, what it meant to like sports and to play, and what it meant to be Black. But as much as these worlds intersected for me, my friends and environment didn't make me feel I could exist in all three.

Today, I support young girls to understand that being Black is not monolithic. You can exist however you are designed to, and not how you feel you must, to be accepted or fit in, but at the time this message was alien to me. As I exerted my Blackness for my friends, I also displayed behaviour that to the systems around me fit the 'angry Black woman' stereotype. Constantly in trouble and troubled in their eyes they referred me to a white psychologist. Whilst this may have worked for some girls, this didn't work for me. Again, there was a disconnect, a lack of understanding that kept me guarded up and reluctant to change.

However, I did have a learning mentor: I remember acting out one day and meeting Ms. Murray. Ms. Murray wasn't black. but she was

the first person to ask me 'how I felt' rather than discussing my behaviour as a problem. It's like, for the first time ever, I had a moment to put my act on pause and actually ask myself 'how do I feel'? Struggling to even find the words, I asked her, 'Can I draw it?' She gave me a felt-tip and I told her I'd need more than that. She gave me the pack and I remember bunching red, orange, green, blue, brown, yellow and black in my hand and just going for it. Colour, confusion, a mix of good, bad, ups, downs: ultimately, a messy masterpiece is what I left on the page. That was how I felt. That was my life. Visiting Ms. Murray became a kind of safe space for me, but, out of sight, out of mind – soon I was back to my mischief.

By Year 9, things had hit the peak for my mum, who was now a single mother raising two children. I was staying out late, not coming home and in her eyes 'throwing my future down the drain'. She thought if she could send me to school in Nigeria, it would straighten me out and surely things would get better, I would be better.

And so, like *The Suitcase Kid*, moving from my mum's to my dad's on a Friday after school, I was now being moved to a whole new country, with a whole new school and a whole new way of life. Nigeria had its beauty, but it too was misrepresented by some of its people. This promise of perfection

my mum expected was overthrown by the culture of survival, the hustle that meant 'money talks'. Rather than unravelling the layers that had bound me for so many years, the grip grew tighter as I learnt that to survive and go unbothered all I needed was the Great British Pound.

For the 17 months I was there, I grew further away from my father, the only person I felt could see the real me and instead became more accustomed to a path of destruction. Returning to the UK, he was the first person I wanted to speak to. I called him and we spoke like no time had passed. And like no time had passed, my behaviour remained rocky, along with this idea that I was still 'the problem'. I had even started a new school; probably one of the most notorious schools in Lambeth. Of course, I felt like I was at home at this school, but my behaviour was still spiralling.

At this point my mum felt she had exhausted her options of getting me on the straight and narrow and, as much as I loved her, we still couldn't see eye to eye. I resented her for sending me away. As my behaviour pushed me further away from the child that was full of joy, so did the relationship with my mum. My actions were putting her and my sister in jeopardy, with Mum having to miss work for meetings about me and facing court for my truancy from school. I was affecting her health, the stress of raising me and my sister and worrying

every day about my behaviour was wearing her down.

The systems that were supposed to help us pushed us further apart, telling me one thing and my mum another. The only option my mum could see left was for me to leave the house. She didn't want me to go into care, but she felt that perhaps if I could have my own space and take on that independence for myself, maybe then I would grow up and she could also have a chance of me not being lost to the system. We were both being criminalised by a system that should have supported us, and so this felt like the only way to make the best of a bad situation.

At 15, I was moved to an 18+ hostel on the grounds that I had finished school, and therefore could stay there, as long as I was not in uniform as I had just been placed on early study leave.

This was my time.

My opportunity to stand on my own two feet, do things my way, be the hostess with the mostess I'd always dreamed of. Iced Gems, Party Rings and Space Raiders were first on the agenda. But, from eating the Pick'n'Mix at Woolworths and buying snacks with my pocket money, to having to budget for my own groceries, life got real quick and I wasn't quite equipped to deal with it.

But I was Empress Ebi and Jefferies Rd was my palace and not just for me, but for my people, my friends, my community. It became the space you could come for a hug, a cry, just to chill or even to survive.

Jefferies Rd was in Stockwell and was very close to home. It was just inevitable for me to be who I was there. I knew the area very well as it was a local area to me; that's where it all started. But I don't think it matters where it started, because if it hadn't been that road, it could have been anywhere. The same actions would have been enacted, and we would continue to do what we were doing before.

I took on the role of Brother's Keeper, a term that has been passed down through generations of Black women. It's a feeling embedded in you and led to me naturally tending to the needs of my bros whenever they needed me. Doing what was needed to allow them to survive and thrive in the way I had learnt to. Be it taking what I needed, dipping in and out of shops to put food on our table, or giving them the words to say to a girl they liked, going with them to the hospital, or sitting with them in the police station, I was an advocate before I even knew what the word meant. Society would have painted me a delinquent, a troubled teen, an accessory to whatever was going on in the streets, but I just wanted to be there for my people. In these

guys showing me their vulnerability, I got to offer them strength, allowing me to feel seen and them to feel free.

Whilst Jefferies Rd was my first space, my palace, it also became my first prison. I experienced my first heartbreak, my first raid and a number of other firsts here, that leave it as a memory tangled between joy and pain.

Deemed a safety risk in Lambeth, I was moved back to Peckham. Back to my dad's area, my comfort zone and, in my mind, back on top. It was supposed to be another fresh start but instead just became an easier place for me to exercise my reign. I was known and, vice versa, it was a community well-known to me. It is where being my Brother's Keeper was engrained in me. My dad always used to say, "You've got Peckham in you through and through", because although I grew up in Lambeth I was born on Queens Rd, Peckham. It is where I started.

When I think of my Peckham home, I will always remember the door. At first, I was so excited to be moving to the area, but when I saw the door, my excitement was shot down fast. I was sceptical when I first walked in, fighting flies with every step, asking myself "what is this place?". Going from excited and curious to scared and unimpressed, I remember thinking "I've gone from bad to worse.

This could only be bad to worse". But I soon ignored my scepticism and started to feel impressed and excited, as I saw the double bed that I didn't have before and the little studio of mine. I smiled so happily. It was everything for me. As much as Jefferies Rd gave me my firsts, I had an experience of transition in Peckham in so many ways, especially my transition from girlhood into womanhood. During that transition, the most memorable thing that happened to me was meeting the people that I did.

I got kicked out of college for missing classes, associating with what they termed 'the wrong crowd', my grades dropping and ultimately not giving two hoots. I couldn't have cared less, but a conversation with my dad changed everything. "Go back to education or I will disown you" were the words that became alarm bells in my head. My dad, who had now moved to Manchester, was hearing about my antics on the streets of Peckham. He was receiving calls from his people, expressing disdain at who I had become. His words rang in my head, a wakeup call that I'd ignored from others for so many years. This was my dad and, as much as this life had become all I knew, I never wanted to be forgotten by him.

Life was changing thick and fast, I was moving from teen to adult, and what came next let me

know for sure.

One morning as I went to grab my unicorn onesie, I noticed a leak in my wardrobe. Up until now, I hadn't really been aware of adult problems, but this let me know I had to do something about it. I called the Housing people, gave them my details, and let them know the situation. Whilst they could fix the leak, they revealed they had no log of me being at the property. The person who had worked on my case and moved me had left and not actually passed the casework on. For two years, I'd lived in this hostel, unaware someone was meant to monitor, support, and check in with me. There were notes that had been reported back to my mum saying I was fine and had been visited, yet contact had never been made. On going back to Jefferies Rd, I found heaps and heaps of letters in my name that had never made it to me. Giving the impression I was uninterested or refusing support when I'd actually moved from this place a long time ago. The system that was supposed to protect me had lost me and not even tried to find me.

I had no time to feel sorry for myself. I had a mission I needed to fulfil, so that I didn't lose the only person I truly had left. I learnt from those letters that I was now eligible for a bidding number to get my own place, out of hostels. I had a real chance at a fresh start, a new chapter.

I enrolled at Morley College, this time with a new outlook that I believe ultimately saved my life. Education gave me options and opened up the prospect of going to university. I secured a scholarship to university, moved into a two-bedroom flat, and was on my way to becoming Ebinehita, or so I thought. Though I was beginning to try and wanted to prove myself, there were still seeds of anger and pain that created a push and pull between who I was becoming and who I was known to be. To make matters worse, being placed in a two-bedroom flat meant I was liable for 'bedroom tax' as only I lived at the property.

In this same property, I learnt about sisterhood and relationships. Even though I have grown up thinking and feeling older than I was, this property confirmed to me that I was a grown-up earlier in my youth. With everything happening, I navigated a whole load of firsts and relationships, but in that same time, my godson was born. My godson and my best friend Renita pushed me to make it through college. Renita and I enjoyed life. We enjoyed it very, very well. Even though she's older than me by a year and a bit, looking back I can see we were enjoying ourselves, but there were elements of trauma beneath that. But looking after a teeny tiny baby, especially in a run-down two-bedroom flat, gave me a purpose again. I fulfilled that purpose and I still do. All I did was look after him and nurture his growth like he

was my own. Our stories, though they differ, have similarities that have kept us true to who we are and always would be. Nobody controls where you start nor where you end.

I fell deeper into debt, and nearly lost my home as the council failed to believe that I was going to uni and would be able to pay once receiving Student Finance. The pressure of the situation, the need to make my parents proud, and rediscovering who I could be and was at my core, led me to feel overwhelmed and suicidal.

Getting into uni and things being resolved with the council helped me for a while, but there was still so much going on behind closed doors. Studying Criminology and Youth Studies, we had a module entitled 'Girls and Gangs'. As a result of my Dyslexia, I had the slides printed for me in advance and a chance to flick through and see what was coming up. And that's when I saw her. An acquaintance of mine that the lecturer had decided to make the subject of the discussion. My blood boiled and I erupted with all that was in me. Who did she think she was? She didn't know her. This girl was more than an example. This girl was real and suffering like so many of us and here she was being used to prove a point.

I instantly regretted my outburst, as whilst I didn't regret what I'd said, I was taken back to my days at

school where my actions led to me being removed from the environment I was supposed to learn in. I apologised quickly, but the lecturer told me it was okay. I didn't understand. My actions meant I would be kicked out. Surely. But my lecturer, Dr Tara Young, let me know it was okay to disagree, okay to challenge and critique. Whilst my passion may have got the best of me, this did not make me a problem that needed to be moved.

I was learning something new, something different, and I liked it.

As my studies developed, I reached out to Whitney Iles, a youth practitioner that I hoped to attain some work experience with. Giving her the rundown of who I was and why I wanted to work with her, she told me she knew all about me. That the work she had done with young people had referenced me and my stories. Me? My stories? As I tried to figure out how anything to do with me could even be relevant, she told me that before any work could be done what I needed to do was 'play'. To connect with my girlhood and play.

Third Year of uni saw me go through my hardest chapter yet. I lost a friend, became depressed and struggled. I'd go to Namco to play games with Whitney. I wasn't sure anything had really changed for me as my world seemed to be falling apart

but looking back the seed had been sown. In my learning to play, my healing process had begun.

As I put the finishing touches on my graduation look, I was met by loud banging at my front door. Bailiffs were here for Council Tax. Could I ever catch a break? I pleaded that there must have been a mistake. I was a student; I couldn't owe Council Tax. The system refused to believe me yet again and it was only on showing my tickets to graduation did they allow us to take it up with their superiors. It seemed that even in the good moments, the honest moments, I found myself fighting to prove my innocence and hoping it would be enough.

This narrative is one that I noticed was not just bad luck following me throughout life, but something that others in my community would experience too. I naturally found myself becoming that voice on the streets, that person that used their connections inside the system to make a difference on the outside. This role I had embraced through the community became full-time work. One day, I was supposed to work but I wasn't feeling too well so I ended up not going. That day, in that same area, a young man was killed. Whilst people tried to comfort me, saying maybe it was a good thing I hadn't gone out, I felt guilty. I felt that if I was just there, if I had stayed alert, maybe, just maybe, I could have done something to help him still be here today.

Time and time again, I was told of this young girl whose story was apparently like mine that I needed to speak to. I wasn't really interested in working with girls but was willing to meet. Meeting Disnee was like meeting myself in the mirror. After so many years of being misunderstood it was strange to find someone whose story was nearly identical to mine. In speaking with her, I began releasing without realising. I began healing the girl that I had just locked up inside and tried to move on from.

The first time I met Disnee, I offered to take her to get her hair done. I honestly thought I would never hear from her again, but I did. I genuinely didn't know what I was doing, I just know that when she needed me, I was there and, when she didn't want me there, I was still there. We ate Nando's together, cried, laughed and even at times argued. I didn't know I was recreating a structure for the future. I remember I gave her *Milk and Honey* by Rupi Kaur and one day later she was calling me to meet up. Not only had she finished the book, but she expressed to me how our meetups were changing how she viewed herself, allowing her to express how she felt and giving her food for thought for the future. Could I do this with other girls? Could we start a sisterhood? A girlhood for other girls like Disnee? Like Empress Ebi? Like you?

And so, a space where girls could meet, talk and be seen for who they were, was born. Milk Honey Bees. Whilst it was never specifically for Black girls, it did become a space where a high proportion of Black girls were referred. It seemed that the system took the view that they didn't know how to understand and 'fix' these girls, but that Milk Honey Bees had the answers. Whilst it is true that Milk Honey Bees provides a place of support and understanding, it is not a place for 'problem children' with magical solutions. Instead, it is a safe haven for girls to share who they are, where they're at and think about who they might want to be. Understanding that no two girls are the same, even if their stories may be similar, is vital.

Milk Honey Bees became a safe space for Black girls to be girls in 2018. It became embedded into my full-time job through the charity I had been working with that focused on young boys, Juvenis.

The space we've created is obviously reflected in the essays you're about to read. I honestly find it hard to read about myself, but it's a real honour to hear that I'm seen by this group of girls in a certain light. The feelings that are expressed within these essays are an exact mirror of how I see these girls and of what they've done for me.

For too long our systems have vilified Black girls treating them as women, calling them out for

speaking and making judgements on them for just how they show up. The media alone demonstrates this issue with tropes and stereotypes pushed in film and media. Why was Scary Spice scary when everyone else got to be posh, sporty, sexy or baby? Why are Black women always fetishized or sideline characters in the movies?

Black girls are still girls and deserve to be heard, listened to, and talked to not *at*. Behaviour is a form of communication and is too often misdiagnosed as problematic rather than seen as layered and in need of concern and patience to uncover. Milk Honey Bees works to break these cycles and stereotypes of the problematic Black girl.

I shared elements of my story to highlight how my pain has turned to purpose and the opportunity each and every one of us has to create a change for our girls today. Now it's time to hear from the girls of today.

This book is in three sections: HER. HER stands for Healing, Empowerment & Resilience. These are the three components that come to together to bring you back to yourself and encourage you to put all parts of yourself first. It's an ethos to help Black girls and women remember that healing is not a linear process, and that it can be done individually and collectively, and that growth can be creative and liberating.

In Healing you will read work from Jaala, Maákare, Taliah, Mikayla, Monteyah, Faith, and Shani, covering their journeys of growth through painful times and challenging moments. Empowerment will introduce you to Ivié, Rachael, Luam, Elisha, Deanna and Shay, and will encourage you to find power and agency in their words. And the Resilience section brings Shannon, Aaliyah, Racheal, Ashanti, Parris and Disnee to the table, in which you'll see that vulnerability and resilience go hand in hand. All three of these concepts work together as a whole, and much like the essays within, can't be fully understood without each other.

This is Girlhood Unfiltered.

Ebinehita Iyere, founder of Milk Honey Bees