



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2005 Volume I: Stories around the World in Film and Literature

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## Whose Voice Is It Anyway? Using Film to Teach Voice

Curriculum Unit 05.01.04  
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### Introduction

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I have the privilege of teaching 7th grade English for the third year. I have found that students at this age, particularly of the demographic that I teach (socio-economically challenged and predominately English Language Learners) struggle with fluency and confidence in writing. Part of their difficulty is with the concept of "voice". Voice is what makes one author's work different from that of another; it's what gives that extra sparkle to a piece of writing. Voice is that certain something that distinguishes good writers from great ones, and it is what is gaining importance among standardized tests nationwide. I believe that an awareness of "voice" is a concept that will help learners improve their own writing while recognizing the strengths and weaknesses in the writing of others. Learning to recognize it and helping learners develop it, however, is indeed a challenge. It is the goal of this unit to reverse this struggle by using film to strengthen students' awareness of voice, thereby improving their own writing.

### Rationale

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It is not a surprising observation that students today readily receive visual information through movies, computers and many other stimulating technological devices. I believe that we can use that to demystify the writing process for our students by using this to develop their awareness of voice. When we finish this unit, students will have reinforced their knowledge of elements of fiction, they will understand better how stories work in both written and visual texts, and will have developed their ability to "listen" to the voice of written and visual texts which will strengthen their own ability to use and alter their own voice in their writing.

I've recently gained new perspective on struggling readers: everyone is a struggling reader, depending on the text. For instance, a repair manual for any electronic gadget is cause enough for even the avid reader to struggle. So, the issue isn't so much *what* we struggle with as much as providing the *strategies* that will guide students through those struggles. Most educators recognize the connection between reading and writing. Good readers usually make good writers. Similarly, if we can improve one, the other will usually improve. It is my hope that this unit will do two things to begin to help students beat their struggle with reading and writing.

First, the difficulty that written texts may present will be removed initially while we are strengthening our thinking skills. We will be addressing a visual text instead of a written one which will remove some of the hindrances that usually accompany the written word in a classroom of diverse learners. This will allow us to attend primarily to the *story* itself (Don't worry! This unit does eventually require students to apply the skills that we learned and applied with visual texts to written texts.). Second, students will use the "safety" provided by the accessibility of a popular film to strengthen cognitive and comprehension strategies that, once learned and practiced, will help them become independent readers of difficult texts thereby, also, improving their writing.

I am concerned with helping students attend to the voice that is present in nearly every area of their lives. They hear the term used a lot in school, but its import can be lost on them because they aren't aware of its presence in advertising, magazines, and film. These are media that don't usually threaten students like other forms of literature. Why not use these authentic examples to tune their ears to this trait that is present in their everyday lives *and* in all good literature? They must realize that there are authors of varying kinds that all have a message that they want to convey; their particular voice is crafted so that this attitude is most successfully shared.

Many people seem to approach movies as passive observers receiving something from a passive creator--the director. In reality, every visual text, like every written text, is carefully crafted by its author. If we can help students recognize the presence and types of narration in movies (perhaps the form of story that is most common to them), we can focus their attention on the distinctiveness that a particular text carries; that distinctiveness is called *voice*. Indeed, students often feel the presence of a narrator through devices such as music, voiceovers, and camera angles, but we must help students recognize these things and how they affect how they view a particular scene. The thinking skills that students develop in this unit can be easily applied to other genres.

Consciously understanding how stories work is a valuable part of a learner's education. This foundation allows them to see how traditional forms are manipulated and rearranged to suit an author's purpose. Though generally students are aware of the presence of the story ( *fabula* ) and the plot ( *syuzhet* ), they are not aware of how these elements guide the spectator's narrative activity (Bordwell, 57). The plot structures how much and when certain elements of the story are revealed. A director makes choices that govern how a story unfolds, how it is revealed to the spectator. These choices alter what a spectator is likely to feel. In doing so, he creates what some theorists call *le grand imagier*, the master of images. This "master" operates as a "fictional and invisible personage who chooses and organizes what we shall perceive" (Bordwell, 62). This artistic figure behind the work is like Wayne Booth's "implied author." In other words, there is a voice that is guiding the perceptions and meanings that a film's audience receives. There is an alternate view of narration in film that characterizes narration as a set of signals that help construct a story. This view acknowledges that there is a viewer, but not a "giver" of a particular message or theme for a given film. Regardless of the theory, there is a connecting belief that a spectator does leave a film with particular feelings or judgments based on the way that the director chooses to reveal the story.

This unit gives students skills in critical viewing and provides an alternate way for students to "respond to literature." This is a skill that is essential in the development of critical thinking and is gaining increasing importance and weight on standardized tests nationwide. Using the seemingly unassuming nature of film helps students become more open to this process. Once this skill is developed, students will be able to apply their knowledge to other forms of "literature" with a deeper understanding of how they, as the author, are much like the director of a film carefully crafting their own voice to suit their purposes.

This unit will be about 4 weeks long and will begin by establishing vocabulary that they will use throughout their academic careers. First, we will introduce the elements of fiction (characters, setting, plot, etc. and the other characteristics of what "makes" a story). It's convenient that what makes a written story is similar to what makes a story on film. I want students to see the similarities of "story" in its written and visual forms. Once this basic vocabulary is established, a brief overview of the elements of film will give students the added tools that they need to begin their analysis. The two films that I have chosen ( *Pay It Forward* and *The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun* )are advantageous because they are parallel in that both feature children who sacrifice themselves in some way for the betterment of others.

## Essential Questions/Enduring Understanding

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We are well aware that things just make more sense when we understand the "why" behind what we are doing. As students progress through this unit, special emphasis should be placed on these essential questions and enduring understandings. In other words, students should be VERY aware of the goals of this unit to make their learning more meaningful and purposeful. I have found it helpful to have these posted for the duration of the unit and to periodically review these with students.

Students will address the following essential questions:

- 1 What is voice?
- 2 How does one recognize voice?
- 3 Why is voice important in writing?
- 4 How does voice change with author's purpose?

Students should complete this unit with the following understandings:

- 1 Stories have a structure.
- 2 Good writers recognize that structure, are able to recognize their own voice and manipulate it to suit a purpose.
- 3 Writing is more influential and powerful with the careful crafting of voice.

## Lesson Overview: Weeks at a Glance

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You may find the following list of key terms helpful as you plan your personal course of study: characters, setting, plot, exposition, rising action, falling action, climax, resolution, theme, conflict, point-of-view, narrator, motivation, mise-en-scene, lighting, shot, props, focus. Below is an overview of the flow of the unit, followed by a more detail description of what should be done. The Supplements section at the end of this unit will be of

use to you as you and your students progress through this unit. I have included when to use each one.

During the first week, we will familiarize ourselves with the elements of fiction and the elements of filmmaking. It is during this week that we will compare these 2 versions of storytelling. Students must understand that while voice is used in both forms, ironically it may be more easily recognized in film because of certain sensory characteristics (lighting, shots, etc.). I think that at this point students should be told that they will learn to develop the voice in their own writing as we apply ourselves to analyzing film for the way that voice is used there. Eventually students will develop skills so that they can recognize the (often) more subtle ways that an author uses his voice in written stories.

Next, we will apply our knowledge of the elements of fiction and filmmaking to analyze an American film that is relatively familiar to students. The relative familiarity of a popular film will make the identification of these basic elements more accessible. Once we have a firm understanding of these basic elements, we will then choose a few scenes from the movie that we have just watched and analyze them using Supplement 1. We should reinforce the fact that this is the foundation for developing their own voice. We will then analyze different scenes to see what the filmmaker's voice may have been trying to say to us.

At this point, the basic concepts should be getting more solidly engrained in students' minds. Now, we are ready to remove the comfort of familiarity to truly assess how well students understand this concept of voice. To that end, we will begin our process of analyzing a foreign film. We will build the background knowledge necessary to view and analyze a foreign film. Special attention will be given to the issue of "sameness" of teenagers in American and Senegalese cultures. This will give students a basis for connecting with the characters in the film that we will be watching.

Next, we will analyze a short film from the country that we have chosen. During the analysis, we will pay close attention to the child's perspective on the plot; this will make the analysis more focused and may allow students to find more connections with the story than they may have originally thought possible since my students are about the same age as the character in the movie. During this week, it is important to emphasize the connection between writing and "story": all good writing is interesting and fluent (like a movie), not stale and formulaic. We will apply our knowledge of the elements of fiction by identifying them in this film. Students will be challenged to listen for the voice of the film. Supplements 1 and 2 can be used here as they are or with modifications. Ideally, this should function as independent practice of what we have been working on previously.

### **Guided Practice: Film One**

We will use the context of this first film as a guided practice of recognizing the elements of fiction and the elements of film. For this part of the unit, I suggest a film with a child as the main character. A popular film like *Pay it Forward* is easily accessible and is so contemporary that students will "get it" without the added complication of a foreign or less modern film (For other suggestions on what to view for this first film, see below.). Watching the movie in its entirety with a guide sheet (Supplement 1) will reinforce the vocabulary that they have learned. Questions include:

- 1 Who are the characters?
- 2 What is the setting?
- 3 What are the major conflicts and what type are they?

The second step of this guided practice will be to now look at the elements of film-making. It will be most effective to choose several poignant scenes from the movie ahead of time and have students watch for specific elements. We can begin with characteristics like mise-en-scene and lighting. Ultimately, we will pay particular attention to how the filmmaker has focused our attention on specific situations and characters. The concept of voice can effectively be introduced at this time. Supplements 2 and 3 can be used now.

The following activity can be an extension activity for students who are ready to move on. Not only does the film have a voice (a clear attitude that the director wants to share with the audience), but each character has a distinct voice that helps carry the film's themes. By looking at *one* scene from the perspective of several characters (these can be inanimate or real), students begin to experiment with the ways that voice can change. For instance:

- 1 What would you be thinking if you were character A in this scene? Why?
- 2 What would you be thinking if you were character B?
- 3 How are those two perspectives different?
- 4 Which one has the strongest voice in this scene? Why is that so?
- 5 How has the filmmaker orchestrated both voices to convey a tone all his own?

### **Independent Practice: Film Two**

We will use the context of a second film to strengthen students' analytical abilities and then to demonstrate that knowledge in meaningful writing. Once we have established a foundation for students, we can remove the "crutch" of familiarity that a popular, American film provides to many of our students. They are now ready to apply their skills to a foreign film.

A concentrated amount of time should be spent building students' background knowledge of the country from which they will view a film. Basics such as geographic location, language, and rudimentary cultural awareness will not only broaden their view of the world, but will make the film more readily accessible.

The structure of the analysis of this film should mirror that of the first one. In other words, students will begin with a complete viewing of the film after which they should comment on the elements of fiction that they noticed as they watched; you can use Supplement 1 again. Then, students will analyze the particular elements of film-making that the director used. Supplements 2 and 3 can be used again in conjunction with the following questions.

- 1 What indications of *hope* does the director provide?
- 2 Where is your attention focused in this scene and why?
- 3 What is the director saying in this scene? How do you know?

Now students are ready to be shown a scene in the movie, and asked to describe the voice in that particular scene. They must give evidence to justify their explanation. I have not included a supplement for this activity, but at this point, students should have completed Supplements 1, 2 and 3 twice (once with each film), so they should be prepared to complete this assignment without the guidance of a worksheet.

### **Putting It All Together: Practicing with Written Text**

Now, students should be given the opportunity to apply their awareness of voice to other forms of literature. They should be given 2-3 samples of young adult literature each with varied voices. These can be either fiction or non-fiction. Students will then be asked to identify the voice in each of the samples and to justify their answers in a written assignment. I have found that selections from Teen Ink are very engaging and provide excellent examples of student literature. The magazine is published monthly and online at [teenink.com](http://teenink.com) and features all writing and artwork strictly by teens. What a resource! Supplement 5 can be used to guide you and your students through this process.

This unit focuses on giving its participants the tools to understand and analyze story and how it is portrayed on film and to use that understanding to intensify their own writing. Upon completion, students will be able to think and write critically about film (story) which will strengthen their ability to write about other forms of literature, a major objective in the middle school English curriculum.

## **Film Lists**

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- *Pay it Forward*

- The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun

## **Bibliography**

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Beers, Kylene. *When Kids Can't Read What Teachers Can Do*. New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2003. This is a must-read for all middle and high school teachers. It provides immediately useful and practical strategies on helping students become independent readers. It provided the inspiration for some of the classroom activities.

Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, Press, 1985. This textbook is probably not appropriate for younger students, but excerpts could be used successfully with older students. It provides invaluable explanations about *how* films tell stories. There is a special section dedicated to specific genres (detective, horror, etc.) that you may find useful.

Corrigan, Timothy. *The Film Experience*. Boston: Bedford, 2004. This textbook can provide educators with vocabulary, viewing techniques and strategies and other information that will greatly help as you use film to teach your students. It provides more information than you will use for this unit, but the first few chapters are especially valuable as it relates to this particular course of study.

*La Petite Vendeuse du Soleil*. 1999. Accessed 24 July 2005. [www.newsreel.org/films/petiteve.htm](http://www.newsreel.org/films/petiteve.htm)> An in-depth look at the film selected for this unit. This site provides the information I have included here as well as links to other helpful sites.

## Supplements

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My goal has been to make this unit as user-friendly as possible. To that end, I include these supplements to be used during the unit. Because of our own formatting restrictions, they are not as fancy as you may like, but the bones are good and provide a solid foundation on which you can build to "make it pretty." Also, depending on the needs of your learners and your own instructional style, you may not need the sentence starters or as much structure as I have included here. I figured that it would be easier for you to take things away than to do the opposite, though you may find the need to add more anyway. I have structured these so that students will be developing strategies (summarizing and using the text to support their judgments) as they progress through the unit. Ideally, at the end, when you use the final supplement for the culminating assessment, all of this scaffolding can be removed.

### Supplement 1

Reinforcing Vocabulary

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Use this sheet to help reinforce the vocabulary that we have learned and to help you keep track of the story.

1. This is the setting of the story:
2. This is a description of the film's mise-en-scene:
3. These are some of the major characters in this story:
4. These are some of the minor characters in this story:
5. This is the conflict in the story:
6. This is the plot of the story:
7. This is the story's resolution:

### Supplement 2

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Summarizing and Recognizing Author's Craft

Film Name:

Director:

## Scene 1

- Review of the scene :

In this scene \_\_\_\_\_ wants \_\_\_\_\_ but \_\_\_\_\_ so \_\_\_\_\_.

*What I am watching for in this scene:*

- In this scene, I am looking for how the author/director \_\_\_\_\_.

- These are ways that he accomplishes that: \_\_\_\_\_.

## Scene 2

- Review of the scene :

In this scene \_\_\_\_\_ wants \_\_\_\_\_ but \_\_\_\_\_ so \_\_\_\_\_.

*What I am watching for in this scene:*

3 In this scene, I am looking for how the author/director \_\_\_\_\_.

4 These are ways that he accomplishes that: \_\_\_\_\_.

## Scene 3

- Review of the scene :

In this scene \_\_\_\_\_ wants \_\_\_\_\_ but \_\_\_\_\_ so \_\_\_\_\_.

*What I am watching for in this scene:*

- In this scene, I am looking for how the author/director \_\_\_\_\_.

- These are ways that he accomplishes that: \_\_\_\_\_.

## Supplement 3

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Recognizing How Voice is Crafted: Where is your Attention and Why?

Directions: As you watch these next scenes, pay particular attention to how the director focuses your attention on certain aspects of the film. As we watch together, look for ways that he makes you ignore certain things in the scene, while paying extra attention to others.

## Scene 1



The author director wants me to notice/think about \_\_\_\_\_. I know  
this because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### **Scene 2**

The author director wants me to notice/think about \_\_\_\_\_. I know  
this because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### **Scene 3**

The author director wants me to notice/think about \_\_\_\_\_. I know  
this because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Based on what I have learned above, these are ways that an author/director focuses my attention on a particular character or aspect of the story:

### **Supplement 4**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Read the short selections that you have been given. Remember as you read that EVERY work has a voice. It is your job as the thinking reader to be aware of what it is! We have been listening for the voice in film. Let's see if we can identify it in these written selections. This is a guide to help your thinking so that you are ready to do this on your own!

#### *Selection 1*

1. This is summary of this article:

\_\_\_\_\_ wanted \_\_\_\_\_ but  
\_\_\_\_\_ so \_\_\_\_\_.

2. I would describe the voice the author uses in this piece as \_\_\_\_\_. I know this because  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. The author wants me to notice/think about \_\_\_\_\_. I know this because \_\_\_\_\_

*Selection 2*

4. This is summary of this article:

\_\_\_\_\_ wanted \_\_\_\_\_ but  
\_\_\_\_\_ so \_\_\_\_\_.

5. I would describe the voice the author uses in this piece as \_\_\_\_\_. I know this because \_\_\_\_\_

6. The author wants me to notice/think about \_\_\_\_\_. I know this because \_\_\_\_\_

*Selection 3*

7. This is summary of this article:

\_\_\_\_\_ wanted \_\_\_\_\_ but  
\_\_\_\_\_ so \_\_\_\_\_.

8. I would describe the voice the author uses in this piece as \_\_\_\_\_. I know this because \_\_\_\_\_

9. The author wants me to notice/think about \_\_\_\_\_. I know this because \_\_\_\_\_

**Supplement 5**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Culminating Assessment**

Directions: Now it's time to practice what we have been carefully learning. You will be given a group of articles. Once you have read through them, read and complete the following. Complete all answers on a separate sheet of paper.

Remember:

- Stories have a structure and a voice.

- Good writers are able to recognize their own voice and manipulate it to suit a purpose.

- Writing is more influential and powerful with the careful crafting of voice.

Step 1: Choose an article that you like from the group that you have been given.

Step 2: In one well-written paragraph, summarize this article.

Step 3: In one well-written paragraph, describe the author's purpose. There are many "right" answers to this question, so be sure that you prove your answer from the text.

Step 4: In at least one well-written paragraph, describe the author's voice in this article. Be sure to give examples from the text that support your feelings. Be sure to explain how voice helps purpose.

Step 5: Choose at least 3 excerpts from the article that demonstrate your description of the author's voice.

Step 6: Choose one word or phrase that characterizes the author's voice in this selection. Supply a word/phrase to complete the sentence: "The author's voice in this article is...." For your answer, I expect an adjective like *brash*, *gentle*, or *romantic* . This sentence will go on your display that you will create in Step 7.

Step 7: Create a visual display on a file folder with the above written assignment. A sample and a rubric are below.

### **Example for Culminating Assessment**

(image available in print form)

Rubric for Culminating Assessment

(table available in print form)

## **Appendix A: Implementing District Standards**

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Though these standards are taken from the English Department of New Haven Public Schools, you should be able to easily cross-reference these standards with those in your district.

### Viewing

Students will develop strategic viewing skills by interpreting and constructing meaning from visual resources while demonstrating strategic viewing skills that ensure success in viewing. Students will demonstrate visual comprehension by predicting, answering questions and summarizing.

### Writing

Students will demonstrate strategic writing behaviors before, during and after specific writing tasks including developing confidence in writing and viewing themselves as effective writers. They will also compose essays,

stories and other writings which focus on various cultures while participating in authentic writing experiences that respond to both written and visual texts.

## Reading

Students will learn and apply comprehension strategies that are demonstrated by independent readers. These strategies include clarifying, summarizing, recognizing, connecting to prior experiences, and understanding author's purpose

## **Appendix B: Building Background on Senegal and Film Selection**

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The following will be helpful as teachers prepare students to watch the Senegalese film "The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun." Remember, at this point, students are trying their hand at recognizing voice. To really evaluate their understanding, it is important to choose a film that is unfamiliar to them; for this, foreign films are most convenient...except when they aren't. Depending on the resources that are available in your area, it obtaining this particular film may not be feasible. In that case, another film can be substituted, as long as it lacks the "familiarity" of contemporary, American film.

### Film Synopsis

This film is ideal because at forty-five minutes, it can easily be shown in one to two class periods. Sili, the main character, is an orphaned street girl who decides to sell "The Sun," the government's newspaper, in order to make ends meet. With this decision, Sili demonstrates her own determination and also opens herself up to the ridicule of the other newspaper boys who consider Sili to be an intruder on their territory. Ultimately, Sili gets the job and is able to celebrate this and other successes throughout the film.

### Key Themes

True to the film's strongest theme (the question of equality among the sexes), Sili is initially met with suspicion when she first seeks a job. It is at this point that she utters what has been called the "key phrase" of the film: "What boys do girls can do, too."

Other themes include how one can overcome adversity (Sili doesn't let her handicap handicap her.), the affect of poverty on children, the value of education versus learning (book knowledge versus street knowledge), the presence of sun and its implications (the representation of joy in color and activities; remember also the title of the film and the newspaper that Sili sells), and the power of government to affect the people (Remember that "The Sun" is the government's paper.)

### Background on Senegal

Senegal is a Francophone country located in West Africa. Dakar, a major area, is also the film's setting. Wolof, is a popular dialect, while French remains the official language. Senegal is made up of a variety of ethnic groups including the Wolofs, the Pulaar, and the Sereres. Islam is the predominant religion among these people who are mostly fishermen or farmers, with peanuts being its primary export.

The arts have flourished in Senegal for centuries including the ancient technique of sand painting and glass painting, a very specialized art that dates back to Senegal's Muslim heritage. A favorite Senegalese activity includes gathering around the town's griot (a combination storyteller and historian of sorts) for music and dancing. Contemporary dance companies are flourishing in Senegal which is home to the Kaay Fecc, an international festival of dance.

If you can, accessing the following site and sharing it with your students will provide some much-needed visual weight to their experience of Senegal. The photographs at the following site are breathtaking: <http://www.africaguide.com/country/senegal/culture.htm>

## **Appendix C: Children in Senegal**

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This section is especially important as we want to make students aware of their connection to other children in a completely different part of the world. Though there are some obvious differences, many of the issues that these children face are not so different from the ones American children face. Providing students with this information will also make Sili's struggles and triumphs make more sense.

There are many orphans in Senegal as a result extreme poverty and due to the AIDS pandemic. As recently as 2002, a horrible shipwreck left countless children orphaned and alone. Over half of the Senegalese population (51%) is under the age of 16. The country has suffered the effects of illiteracy as barely a quarter of the students who are actually able to enroll in school actually complete their studies.

Many children are forced out of their homes to become "street children" because of difficulties at home. These challenges can range from death in the family to child exploitation. Once they leave the family unit, these children often migrate to urban areas where they must fend for themselves.

According to government statistics, nearly all street children are addicted to some sort of drug (usually glue or marijuana) and an overwhelming majority (71%) have faced violent abuse. Of those who survive the malnutrition and poor health conditions, many are forced into prostitution. Below are some is a glimpse of their life in their own words:

"I am attracted to the practices of begging and stealing on the street as they help me get money to buy food. Taking drugs allows me to sleep whatever the weather."

"I do not want to stay in the hospital. I want them to give me back my baby, but when I call for her, they tell me I am nothing but a street girl."

"I live to honor my family, buy my family was killed and no longer exists. What values do you expect me to have now?"

"Here in the street we have total freedom. There are no rules. I take drugs when I want; no one tells me to go to bed or to get up at a certain time...there are no constraints that exist within a family."

"That man, who is a friend of my family, who had supported us and even built our home after having lived in a hut, it is with him that I first had sex" (Street boy and victim of a pedophile).

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