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Single Portrait 1st Prize

Mauro De Bettio | Italy
Caged | Afghanistan



Mauro De Bettio is an internationally recognized photographer and storyteller whose work captures the heart and soul of some of the most remote and complex corners of the world.

Driven by passion and guided by an unwavering commitment to telling the stories of those who often go unheard, Mauro's journey has taken him to places of breathtaking beauty, raw reality, and intense emotion.

Among his most significant works are his powerful documentation of acid attack survivors in Bangladesh, the brutal reality inside Manila's prisons, the stark contrasts of life in Afghanistan, the dreams of ballerinas in Africa's largest slum, the struggles of sex workers in Asia's biggest slum.

His work is a dedication to giving voice to the voiceless and an unwavering commitment to showcasing the beauty and suffering of our shared existence.

In 2021, Mauro De Bettio founded the *Malaika Foundation*, driven by his deep desire to give back to the communities that inspired his work. The foundation aims to support food, healthcare, and create opportunities for brighter futures.

Could you describe your feelings and the situation you were in while taking this photo? What is the story behind the image?

This photograph was taken in Afghanistan, a country where women face severe oppression. The image is a powerful metaphor for the condition of many women: like the caged bird, they are trapped by societal restrictions.

While capturing this moment, I felt a mix of emotions, deep sorrow for the reality I was witnessing, but also a strong sense of responsibility to document and share it with the world. I wanted to create an image that would transcend time and space, giving a voice to those who cannot speak freely.

Can you share some details about the preparation for this shot? What were your purpose, challenges, and techniques?

One of the greatest challenges for a photojournalist today is finding a new, unique idea, an image that will remain unforgettable. The concept of the woman holding a cage came to me one morning as I was wandering through the bird market in Kabul.

An incredible place that immediately captivated me, drawing me back several times. That morning, I was watching a group of men engaged in conversation, holding a cage with a dove inside. At that moment, the vision for this photograph took shape in my mind. Maybe not everyone knows that in Afghanistan, it is strictly forbidden to photograph a woman without permission, even if she is covered by a burqa. I always strive to make the people I photograph feel comfortable before taking a picture, as building mutual trust is often essential for a meaningful image. But this time, I couldn't. That's what made it difficult, for both of us. For her, suddenly finding herself in the spotlight, in front of a camera for the first time. And for me, witnessing her fear and embarrassment.

In particular, why did you choose to submit this photo/series? Does/Do this image/s have any special meaning for you, your carrier and for the main subject of the photo?

I chose this image because it encapsulates the themes I have been working on for years: freedom, human rights, and resilience. It tells a universal story while being deeply rooted in a specific place and time. For my career, this photograph represents my commitment to storytelling through documentary and artistic photography. I believe images like this have the power to raise awareness and ignite conversations about crucial issues.

What do you think is the power and responsibility of news photography? Do you think it is possible to make a difference in the world, in the society we live in, through photography?

Photography holds an extraordinary power, it can shake consciences, generate empathy, and even drive change. A single image can convey what words sometimes fail to express.

As photographers, we have a responsibility to document reality with honesty and sensitivity. Even when facing overwhelming problems, I firmly believe that every image can be a seed that, over time, contributes to meaningful change.