



Griffith Journal  
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GRIFFITH JOURNAL  
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## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE: TODAY I SPEAK OUT

ANONYMOUS\*

*This is a first-person narrative on the lived experience of a domestic violence victim. The author wanted to write about her experience to provide an insight into why women remain in domestic violence situations. It is her hope that others will realise how the system fails the victims, it is her hope that sufferers will gain courage and it is her hope that a holistic framework of support is developed. Today she speaks out!*

I was a victim of domestic violence many years ago and, although the physical scars left me a long time ago, the indelible imprint created from the fear of living in such an abusive relationship remains today. Despite the ensuing years of healing and counselling, every time I hear about another domestic violence situation, the scars are reopened and once again, I begin to question why. Why has the system failed them? Why didn't someone realise what was happening? Why didn't the system recognise the situation? Why didn't someone step in when the victim couldn't speak out? Why didn't the victim know how to leave?

Yes, I have placed emphasis on those surrounding the situation, because it truly is not as easy as the victim telling the perpetrator to leave them alone. It is not as simple as police involvement to break the cycle. It does not just stop because a person receives assistance from a shelter. The devastation created from a domestic violence situation permeates the core of a person's existence and, therefore, must be managed holistically.

I could paint a horrific picture of domestic violence by telling of the countless times he beat me with his fists, kicked me when I was laying on the ground whilst pregnant, and the implements he used to beat me. However, although this is very painful to remember, I have decided that breaking the cycle of abuse requires a shattering of the myths perpetuated by ignorance. Therefore, I have decided to speak out, not to paint a picture of terror, but to let people know that domestic violence is real and it can and does happen to many of us, irrespective of age, race or social status. Furthermore, society's approach to domestic violence is flawed.

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\* The author is known to the *Griffith Journal of Law & Human Dignity*.

Domestic violence to me is so much more than just the actual physical violence. It is the all-encompassing fear that enveloped my daily existence and rendered me into a lifeless shell, too frightened to do or say anything in case I provoked an outburst. As a woman with four young children, I believed that I couldn't survive without him. The constant denigration from being told that I was fat, stupid, ugly, and a slut, cumulatively made it even harder to reach out and eventually scream, "*enough*".

Sadly, leaving a domestic violence situation is hard and, when faced with the ignorance entrenched within our society, the decision becomes complex. I reached out to the police who ignored my pleas. I found myself within a court system without any support and I was constantly told that I was bringing shame to our families. I am not sure if society's approach has changed much since 18 years ago and as the news is filled with horrific stories about this, I would suggest that it has not.

This was not the marriage I had always dreamed of. On my wedding day, I had pulled up to the church in trendy Balmain by a horse-drawn carriage. I was wearing a designer gown worth thousands; my engagement ring, a solitaire diamond, cost even more and the wedding reception became the envy of all my friends. So, how did I end up finding myself the victim of domestic violence and that the only solution was to escape to an area far away from everything that I had ever known?

It had truly begun as a dream come true. I had married into an affluent family who bought us a home for a wedding present and we laughed together about our honeymoon baby — our first child was conceived within weeks of being married. When did it change? How did my dream of living happily ever after, change into something so ugly? I married when I was 23 and the signs of abuse became apparent early on. At first they were subtle, and eventually, as his words and actions had beaten me into submission, they became more obvious. I ended up having no faith in myself. My self-esteem had become non-existent and I ultimately believed that I deserved to be treated this way.

He found fault with my friends, so it became easier to stop seeing them. He started to dislike my appearance. If I said something he didn't agree with, he told me that I was stupid. Eventually, I was to blame for the stress of his job, the problems associated within his family dynamics, the financial and emotional struggles of having four young children and the list continued. In hindsight, the fault really lay with him — his inability

to accept any responsibility in his life and his inability to cope with his gambling addiction. My problem was that I didn't know *how* to leave.

At first, there were always the apologies — the flowers, the promises, the gifts; but soon, the cycle began to change. The apologies became less, and the abuse began to outweigh the promises. I remember my eldest at the age of six ringing up the police in tears, sobbing to them, "Daddy is hitting Mummy" and although it broke my heart, I didn't know what I could do. Leaving a domestic violence situation takes a strength that one does not possess as a result of feeling worthless and so the cycle continues. The look of disdain on the policemen's faces, said it all. They were young and obnoxious, and they would say things that didn't assist me and were inappropriate.

I remember I had a little bag packed for when things became really bad. It was ready so I could jump into the car with my four young children and escape, but I would invariably find myself driving around for hours and hours, just sobbing, not knowing where I could go. Eventually, I would find myself back at the family home, because the fact was, I didn't have anywhere to go. Apart from one refuge, which had an extremely long waiting list, I felt too ashamed to ask anyone for assistance. I was lost, frightened, confused and felt so alone. My friends were long gone. They were part of the inner-city crowd. They were the thinkers and the artists and perhaps my husband thought that they were a threat to our union. As a woman who had never finished high school, he gained his strength by reinforcing the fact that I was an uneducated idiot and needed him in my life.

As I said earlier, domestic violence is derived from more than just the violence. In my case, it was also about control. As his wealthy parents had bought us a home when we married, he had told me that I would not get a cent if I left him and as someone not well versed in the area of law, I believed his threats. I did not know that I had a choice. Yes, you can question why I did not leave in these types of circumstances, but I lived in hope. I did not want to fail at my marriage. I had grown up in some mythological dream that women must be married and provided for, and I had become scared of being alone. I was frightened of becoming a single mother. More importantly, I did not have the self-worth to leave. In many respects, I had started to believe that this was all I deserved.

One of my saving graces was getting cancer. After I woke up from the surgery, my selfish, abusive husband was nowhere in sight. So, terrified and alone, I waited for the results

and sobbed to the nurse as I tightly held her hand. That moment in time will never leave me. I have never felt so alone in my entire life. My cancer may have been removed that day but something else had started to grow — *hope*. Perhaps my closeness to death had made me realise that I only have this one life to live and suddenly, I decided I needed more. It didn't happen overnight, but what began that day, was a fight to live. I started working out at the gym and as I pushed weights, I started to gain an inner strength. I also initiated counselling in the hope that I could work through my marital problems, and I began to see that I deserved more.

It was also around this time, my ex decided that we required extensions on our family home and it was through the support of a complete stranger that I found, for the first time, the objectivity I required. He was one of the builders, a kind and elderly gentleman, and he told me that I truly deserved more. Yes, a complete stranger looked at the holes in the doors and walls, sat me down and told me that the violence would never get any better. This was the cold, stark reality I was required to hear and he was right. I felt that I finally had someone on my side. That was all it took — a stranger's kindness. So, coupled with my newfound inner strength from working out at the gym and the reality of my situation being presented to me, I found a little belief in myself and I moved into a house close to the children's school and took out an Apprehended Violence Order ('AVO').

I would love to say that this was how it all ended, but it did not. Despite the AVO, my ex continued to come around and assault me. In fact, that piece of paper only aggravated the situation. Every time the police came around, to them, I did not appear as a victim. You see, not many people will ever see me in tears and many years of abuse had given me a tough façade, so, the police weren't convinced that I was a victim. I remember relaying this to my counsellor and she pointed out that I appear as a strong, independent woman and they were expecting to see a certain type of victim as depicted in domestic violence advertisements. I was being judged for not acting in a certain manner. My landlords had also heard about the abuse and threatened me with eviction. The nightmare was becoming worse. I had minimal support and I was being treated with disdain by society.

Eventually, I did lay charges. Abusive men can be rather charming. I stood there watching him tell people that it was actually him, not me, who was the victim, and people believed him. The builder who had helped me was accused of having an affair

with me and breaking up our family and, as the “loving father of the year”, my ex claimed that he missed his children and was heartbroken. I was in a quandary, I wanted my children to have a father and as he came around begging me for forgiveness, I was the one who ended up feeling like the perpetrator.

This was also the time when his family began to collude with him and the frequent phone calls from his mother and her partner began. Now, as people started to see the breakdown of the family unit, many believed his stories of my infidelity. Despite the years of abuse, he was deemed the victim. It would appear that all those years of keeping the abuse quiet, went in his favour. As much of the ensuing violence surrounded his refusal to pay child support, I saw a counsellor associated with Centrelink in the hope that she would sign a piece of paper exempting him from paying. He would come around throughout the night abusing me for wanting his money and, as I begged this woman to sign the paper, she told me that he should take responsibility for his children and she refused to sign. I recall walking away thinking to myself, “it’s okay for you to have these values, but you aren’t the one met with a dangerous situation as a consequence to standing on your soapbox”. I felt hopelessly alone and confused.

As the violence escalated, it became obvious that my safety could not be assured. I had been driven off the highway a few times as he chased me. He would turn up at all hours of the day and night to abuse me and I was left with no other choice but to put the plans in motion to leave everything and go as far away as possible. Upon finding out that I was planning to leave, my ex ordered mediation via the Family Law Court. He became verbally abusive at the mediation and, as the two mediators escorted me to the safety of my car, they told me that I had to leave for my own safety and to get as far away as possible. As we arrived at my car, they informed me that I couldn’t repeat this in the courtroom. I became confused; they had witnessed the abuse, but they could not assist me. Once again, I felt alone.

I signed over the house to my ex to avoid prolonging the abuse further, packed the children in a car and moved as far away as permitted. Since I lived in NSW and the Family Law Courts only permitted me to move within the state, I moved to Northern NSW. Despite the domestic violence being witnessed by those associated within the system, he was still in control of my life because we shared children together.



As he had controlled the finances for years and I had signed the house over to him, I applied for a house through the Department of Housing. Despite telling them my situation — I had four young children between the ages of two and seven and I had left a domestic violence situation — I was asked if I would move to Moree. Upon telling them that I had moved close to a friend for emotional support, I was told that I obviously was not desperate enough to warrant housing and would be placed on the waiting list of seven years. I remember feeling like the earth was crumbling from beneath me. I had left an abusive man, I was learning to be a single mother, my finances had changed dramatically since I had left him and I was now facing a situation where my rent was costing as much as what I was receiving through Centrelink. I felt in some ways that I was being punished for leaving. I had gone from being a homeowner with money, to becoming reliant upon social services and desperately trying to make ends meet. The shame I felt, for asking a service to assist with my electricity bill, was compounded by the worker being the parent of one of my children's friends. Suddenly, the stigma associated with being a single mother had begun.

Unfortunately, the abuse did not end when I moved as the phone calls continued for many years afterwards, but what did change, was how I handled it. Despite the huge upheaval associated with leaving, within a year, I enrolled in a higher education facility to complete my High School equivalent and I consequently won a scholarship to study law and psychology. I started to see my self-worth, I started to give my children a healthier environment and things began to change. In many, many ways, I had to become empowered to make the abuse stop and that takes time, effort and support. But there also must be more awareness and there must be more domestic violence services provided for women to find that glimmer of hope and to follow it through.

Initially, to people looking in, they really had no idea what was happening within the family home. I did not want it to be true. I did not have the strength to leave. I did not know what I could do and, as I was ashamed, I never told anyone what was happening, but there were signs if you looked closer. At first, I stopped interacting with my friends and I certainly never invited people over where the holes in the walls and doors were obvious. I stopped doing many of the things that I had done prior to being married and, if anyone saw me, they would have noticed that I didn't engage in my usual manner. I had withdrawn myself socially. The neighbours would have heard the screams and seen

the signs of physical abuse. Many times as I walked past, the neighbours' gossiping would stop until I walked far enough away, and they could resume their discussion. My ex's best friend had pulled him off me a couple of times, but even he never offered any support.

The fact is no one wants to become involved apart from an occasional call to the police. Society wants it to remain behind closed doors. A couple of years ago, I witnessed a man verbally abusing a woman at a local car park and I stepped in and asked if she was okay. The car park was filled with people who walked past and, as he turned his anger towards me, they possibly felt justified in their actions but I refused to be frightened. I wanted to make sure that this woman was safe. I am not saying that we should be as forthright as this, but surely, instead of burying our heads in the sand, instead of judging the people involved, we must learn to reach out and ask, without judgment, if this person is safe.

The system requires reform as well. The police did not believe me because I did not act a certain way. The woman associated with Centrelink refused to make my situation easier because she felt that all men should have to pay for their children. The Housing Department told me that I should remove the only support network available, and move to some isolated town. The Family Law Court mediators witnessed the abuse but did not want themselves associated with the only good advice I had received. The only refuge available in my area had a lengthy waiting list. People wanted to judge me, and gossip about my predicament, rather than help, and the lawyer could not understand why I wanted to take less than my entitlement.

I do not like to use the word "victim" when discussing my life, but I *was* a victim. I was a victim of domestic violence. I was a victim of a system that failed me, and I was a victim of societal expectations. As a society, we must approach domestic violence holistically. We must remove the stigma attached to abuse. We must provide the resources to ensure that women are supported through each stage of domestic violence. Lawyers must be aware of the delicate situations they are dealing with. Social workers must realise that standing up for women's rights, is not necessarily as clear-cut as announcing that a man should pay for his children. The courts should have more access to support people for those involved. Perhaps, the police should be taught to approach the situation differently. More housing should be provided to assist those in need. Together, we must provide a caring and supportive environment that nurtures the victim and gives them hope. I *was* a victim of domestic violence and today, I speak out!