I spent 15 years in an abusive relationship. There was psychological, emotional, and some physical abuse. The longer I stayed, the harder it seemed for me to consider leaving, not just because of the children and house and finances, but also because once I had let so many things slide like physical assaults, it seemed like I would just accept anything. My scale of what was acceptable behavior seemed to change. After the 1st time he threatened me and pushed me, I told people. I went to the transition house. Children Services got involved because my son was in the car sleeping at the time. When I chose to go back to him, all of this intervention made it difficult. People couldn't understand why I would forgive him and think he might change. So after things cleared from that incident, I was very hesitant again to tell anyone or get agencies involved. Each time he was scary and threatening, I would feel frozen to do anything because in my mind I would think about how if I call the police, I have to be ready to leave permanently and not take him back. Often in that moment I couldn't know for sure I was strong enough to do that, so I was scared to act. Each year that I continued to accept these behaviors, I became less assured of myself and my own reality which only contributed to my ability to seek help outside. I remember one early morning argument when my young daughter was sleeping in the same room, he put me in a choke-hold and when I got free, I ran out the back door to the deck outside. I was standing there with just shirt and underwear, paralyzed to do anything. Interestingly, I don't even consider the physical assaults to be the worst part of that relationship. It was the mental anguish he put me through. The constant accusations, threats, brainwashing that went on is what was the most unbearable to live with and the most long-lasting trauma.

The causes of intimate partner violence including toxic masculinity, specifically in teen relationships:

I wasn't a teen in my abusive relationship, but I will speak on toxic masculinity. My abusive partner had toxic ideas of masculinity. He used to call my son a baby la la if he cried. He would use terms like sissy and boys don't cry. He had distorted discriminative views on gay relationships. He viewed women as their sexual parts. He constantly made reference to "tits, pussy, ass". He felt that he had a right to grab my body anywhere anytime and I didn't have the right to deny him sex without being verbally abused. He was addicted to pornography. He felt this right to be the man of the house who we all should be listening to and obeying even though he refused to work and contribute financially. My son who was exposed to this toxic masculinity and abuse is now a 21 year old with significant problems. He too has had abusive relationships where he is the abuser.

Examine ways to improve supports and protection for women and girls who are living in unsafe environments

Some things I think might have been helpful when I was leaving or considering leaving would be more education on coercive and controlling relationships. Because most of the physical abuse in my relationship happened in the earlier years, I had a hard time believing that I was abused. The transition house I attended was definitely supportive and made me feel believed, but I think questionnaires need to be created that ask specific questions to determine this kind of abuse. Things like "Can you make independent decisions without worrying about your partner's reaction? Does your partner interrogate you about where you went or who you spoke with? Does your partner sometimes follow you to see if you are where you said you were going? Does your partner check your phone for evidence you're cheating? Specific questions are needed because coming out of a controlling relationship has you feeling so confused about everything that you don't even know you are abused and sometimes that person has even made you believe that you are the abuser. These questionnaires need to be used by

courts and judges as well. Right now it only seems to matter if you're in physical danger and have recent proof of that. When I was trying to leave, I was denied a protection order because the judge said that all of the things I had mentioned were too far in the past. After this happened, I felt like maybe my relationship wasn't abusive. Maybe I shouldn't' leave. It was like being re-victimized at a time when I needed to be empowered more than anything. I think recognition that coercive controlling behavior is actually the most dangerous, and then questions to look for that would help significantly.

identify ways to eliminate barriers facing women and girls seeking to leave unsafe environments, such as the financial, social and other factors preventing them from leaving:

I think that transitions houses are wonderful, but they aren't enough. What would be wonderful to see is an actual secured apartment building for women leaving domestic violent relationships. This could have security, but it could also even have the social resources like social services, community services, transition house services, childcare etc. The apartments could have subsidized rents.   Another major barrier is the family court system. I stayed in my abusive relationship for 15 years for the most part because of the fear of having to send my children to my abuser half of the time or worse that fear that the abuser will be successful in gaining primary custody and use the children as pawns to continue to abuse me. The courts have made some wonderful strides in recognizing domestic violence, but women need to feel confident that they aren't going to lose their children, or have to put themselves or their children in danger after they leave the relationship.

Last, I do think Canada needs to criminalize coercive and manipulative behavior. It doesn't fix everything, but having consequences for engaging in those behaviors might deter some. It also helps women to feel more confident about leaving the relationship and I think that's important. For me, it has taken 3 years to start to really appreciate that I was in fact abused. When I first left, I wasn't sure that my relationship was really abusive. I was confused. I believed the things that he had told me about myself. I think every bit of confirmation back that what someone did was wrong validates and that's important.