

I am a survivor and witness of Domestic Violence/Family Violence and Child Abuse.

I was born in Poland in 1970s. I came to Canada, Windsor, Ontario in 1989 as a political refugee. I was only 15 at the time. My parents were political activists in Poland and my father was a political prisoner during the Communist Regime. For his involvement in Solidarity, a grass roots movement in Poland, he was sentenced to 5.5 years in prison by Polish government, faced tortures and abuse, heavy fine and loss of civil rights. That left my mom raising 3 kids all on her own, and led us to apply for political refugee status in Canada. Facing political persecution, abuse, imprisonment, censorship, being denied education were just few of the items listed when applying for political asylum. Canadian Government accepted our plea and we came to Canada in hopes of having a better life. We were granted a landed immigrant status upon arrival and our hearts were filled with hope.

But from the minute we landed in Canada we knew our lives were not going to be easy. The stress caused by language barriers, difficulty finding jobs, financial stress and facing isolation, combined with the PTSD and intergenerational trauma, all led to years of abuse and violence in my house.

Upon entering Canada, our family was already in financial debt to Government of Canada for the cost of plane tickets. That debt carried a heavy interest and my mom who was left to pay for it, never ever recovered from it financially.

When we came to Canada, we were placed in a temporary social housing with other refugees and put on social assistance. My parents had few months of financial support from government (I believe it was 3 months back then) and were told to take ESL classes at a local college and start looking for a job. But without any means of transportation, not knowing the city, not being connected to any social support system, that proved to be very challenging. My father after lots of struggles ended up finding a job in a local automotive factory in Windsor, Ontario. It took my mom a lot longer to find employment but she found a job as a housekeeper in a motel. My parents had to rely on public transit to get to work and public transit in Windsor, Ontario was substandard. Sometimes a person would wait for an hour or so for a bus. Since my mom's work started very early, buses did not even run at those hours, so she would endure walking for 2-3 hours to work every day in freezing winters or hot summers. Since the government support ended at that time, my parents struggled to put food on a table, while trying to save up money for an apartment or possibly a car to get to work while making barely minimum wage.

When we finally found an apartment, my parents were so happy. We lived in the social housing downtown Windsor. To get to our new apartment we all walked in the heat of the Summer with our suitcases in our hands. We couldn't afford a bus, so we walked. It took us few hours. When we opened the apartment, it was small. Only 2 small bedrooms for a family of 5. Over next few weeks of moving, few people from a local church (I am sure my mom tried to reach out for help), brought us few pieces of furniture and used clothing. I was so glad I attended Catholic School where uniforms were mandated. However even wearing a uniform I stood out and while using my broken English I was often told to "go back to my own country" while trying to communicate. That type of discrimination was even more prevalent for my parents.

Life was so hard and both of my parents struggled. My father started drinking and the violence began. My father was an alcoholic and abused my mom back in Poland but when he became a political activist

and during his political imprisonment, he promised my mom that he will change. It wasn't long upon our arrival in Canada when the abuse started again. All the fights always were about money, food, not having enough, seeing my mom covered in bruises was a daily occurrence. Her nose broken multiple times. Life was so tough and paying rent became difficult. My mom applied for income based social housing. When we got in, we were so happy. Having the rent decrease meant we could afford more food. We moved to the unit on Jos Janisse Ave in Windsor, Ontario with few of our suitcases and few old furniture pieces. The housing had 3 bedrooms 3 and a basement, but we soon discovered it was infested with mice. My coping mechanism for all the stress was waking up very early in the morning, when it was super quiet, and eating a dry bowl of corn flakes (milk was a luxury), while trying to doge mice who were very active during that time. We could not afford traps and when my mom brought it up with the social housing unit, my mom felt as we were shamed for being "dirty" and not taking care of the place properly, which was definitely not the case.

The money troubles and abuse kept getting worse and worse. My father kept drinking. My mother's mental and physical health was declining. My father belittled my mom verbally and emotionally. When he finally saved up money for an old car, he often refused to drive my mom to work and made her walk instead. This stress and struggles, also translated to violence from my parents towards me. I often went to school with bruises. But being a good, quiet student, no one asked ... One time when I came to school with a bruise under my eye, my English teacher pulled me aside to see what happened. An accident in the gym was my excuse. No one ever questioned it. I never brought lunch to school, so during lunches I hid in the hallways and studied. My mom always told me that the way out of poverty is education, so I studied and I studied hard .... It wasn't easy, when there was no food, or when our home was not a safe space to be...

But ultimately the hardest thing that happened was in December 1994. It was Christmas and my mom borrowed money from someone to buy groceries so we would have a good holiday. She travelled on the bus to a Polish Deli and bought us Polish sausages, bread, sweets. When my dad got home from work and saw that my mom splurged on the food, and that she borrowed money he got really angry. I ran to my room and closed the door. My mom was beaten very badly. Hours passed and then there was silence. I went downstairs to check up on things, and I saw my father entering the kitchen. He opened the fridge and pulled out food that my mom bought and started eating it. My mother got really upset. She got this food for us kids and she just received the beating for buying it. I saw her raise a voice at my dad to put the food back in the fridge. I will never forget the look in my dad's eyes. I saw him grabbing a knife as he ran after my mom. I froze in place. My mom was running. I saw my younger brother run after my dad. My father threw the knife at my mom. I saw the knife in the air and I will never forget my mom's scream. My brother pushed my father and as my mom put her hand in front of her face, the knife went right threw it. My brother grabbed my mom and took my dad's car key and rushed my mom to emergency. I ran to my bedroom and locked myself in. When I saw the car pulling in late at night, I saw my mom with her hand all bandaged and my brother helping her through the door. I can't recall where my father was at that moment. My brother told me that they asked what happened, and my mom told the doctors she cut herself with a knife while cooking. I went to bed and the next day got ready for school.

I don't recall how many days, weeks, months passed before my mom called police. All I remember that I got home from school and my mom was sitting on the chair and told me my dad was arrested. I remember the fear and shock... What was going to happen to us. With my father being the main provider, we just lost the income. I started crying... My mom took that as a sign that I felt sorry for him, which wasn't the case. She got really upset with me.... In the evening there was a knock on the door a police officer and a woman who was a social worker entered our house. They sat my mom, my brother and I at the table and began taking statements. (My sister did not live with us at that time anymore). I was so upset I remember I could not say a word. I remember the police officer told me to pull myself together. There was coldness and judgment ... I felt so much shame as I looked at our empty house, with all the old/broken furniture, with mice running around... I saw how they looked at us, how they judged my mom's broken English, our house... I always imagined them getting in a car, and exchanging words such as "look at those dirty refugees who don't speak English, what would you expect"... There was no comfort, support ... Quick statement from my mom and from us, the social worker put some pamphlets on the table and they left. There was no follow up. No check-ins. No support given. And honestly after how we were treated, I don't think any of us (my mother or us children) would have trusted the system anyhow. My father was arrested and that was the last time I saw him for a long time. This caused more anger in him towards my mother...

Soon after my mom suffered a mental break down. She came home to tell us that she was fired from her job as a housekeeper in a senior home. My mom sounded paranoid. She began having hallucinations. Years of abuse, the attack, being mistreated by police, and losing her job pushed her to a mental break down that she has never recovered from. I remember the fear in my eyes and tears ... What was going to happen to us... How will we pay rent, buy groceries...? My mom misinterpreted my fear for standing up for my father... I suggested asking for help, going to Social Services and getting some kind of support. My mom got angry. She recalled how badly she was treated by the Social Services Workers and said she will not be begging anyone for money.... Few weeks later, an eviction notice appeared on our door. We were being evicted from Social Housing; housing developed to help those struggling. There was no consideration that we were poor, my mom was Domestic Violence Survivor, Survivor of Poverty and Civil War in Poland, that she was a single mom who almost lost her life at the hands of my father, no consideration that she had a mental breakdown, that she lost her job... It all came down to money. No rent meant No housing. There was no empathy, no intervention no help. Few days later again I came home from school only to find all my belongings scattered on the ground outside. My mom in her paranoia, envisioned that I collaborated with my father, and threw all my belongings outside. Without a car, without a phone I walked over to a stranger's house and asked to use their phone. A friend from school who had no idea about my situation came to pick me up. I did not want to explain. There was so much shame ... From that point on I couch surfed until I saved enough money to put a down payment for an apartment. School was very time consuming; I began my engineering studies at University of Windsor. I used my scholarship money and money from babysitting to pay for the security deposit on my apartment. It was a studio apartment, very small, no separate bedroom, just one room with kitchen and small bathroom. It costed me \$535 (that was the 90s .. I am not sure if I would be even able to afford housing if this were to happen in current times). With the security deposit down, I had very little money left. I had no furniture, no utensils, no plates or cookware... Buying these necessities meant often not being able to afford food. I lived on 3 for \$99 cents packets of no name brand noodles and bullion cube. My daily diet included dry no name brand cornflakes for breakfast, apple for lunch and one pack of noodles for dinner.. But rent time, I even had

to cut that down. I kept living like this until I graduated university. I studied so hard. I received NSERC scholarship and other awards. I graduated top of my engineering class. While tutoring and helping others for free, I often heard them say "Your life is so easy" ... It wasn't. I never shared my story out of shame.

My mom and brother ended up finding a tiny 1-bedroom basement apartment and my brother fully supported my mom while he went to school. My mom obtained minimal free legal aid and was able to get a divorce. There was also a restraint order placed on my dad. The court made my dad pay a tiny spousal alimony. Something that he raged about for years until my mom died. Many times, he threatened to stand outside my mom's apartment and kill her so that the payments would stop. My brother often gave him some money to calm him down. Money, he needed for alcohol or gambling. My father was a functioning addict. An employee of the month in his factory month to month. He received a Cross of Freedom and Solidarity from the Polish Government that he accepted at the Canadian Embassy for his political advocacy and his fight against democracy in Poland. In society view he was an upstanding citizen.

In the meantime, my mom's mental health started declining. One day my brother called me and told me to come over. My mom was sitting watching static on tv. She was convinced that someone implanted something in her brain and was tracking her. She also envisioned a parrot following her and mocking her thoughts and words. My mom ended up at one point in psychiatric hospital and was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder. She was found by police walking in her pjs in the middle of the night during winter. Seeing her in psychiatric hospital was difficult. She was confused. Medicated and strapped to bed, made her even less trusting of the "system". After she was released, there was supposed to be a follow up. Social worker was to do visits at her apartment. That never happened. I am not sure if she did not open the door, or if no one ever showed up. My mom kept living unmedicated for years to come. She refused to get help as she was scared of being told she is lying. She was scared to be strapped to bed. She was scared to talk to doctors, social workers. And I could not even mention police without setting off a panic attack. The way my mom was treated was without compassion and empathy. It was hard for her to articulate the abuse with her language barrier, and hard to even talk about the abuse without triggering an episode. Her thoughts troubled her. She often called confused about what year it was, paranoid and puzzled by bizarre visions and thoughts. ... The only thing that kept her happy was seeing and hearing about her grandkids.

My mom died recently of cancer, November of 2021. The last few days I spent with her all she talked about was the abuse. She kept apologizing for getting a divorce, trying to explain that she could not live like this, and she asked me to forgive her. She kept having flashbacks of the abuse even in the palliative center she was staying at and I had to educate the staff about her status as a Domestic Violence Survivor so she would get an appropriate care. This broke my heart. My mom was a Domestic Violence Survivor but she was not Surviving or Thriving in years after she left my dad. My mom died living in poverty. She never accepted social assistance, and lived off a small pension. She was a very humble and kind person and she loved her kids and grandkids tremendously. The system needs to change so that victims of domestic violence do not go through what my mom had to go through.

These are my recommendation for changing the system

1. Domestic Abuse training and Trauma Informed Care for all systems that are supposed to protect Domestic Violence Survivors – Police, Social Workers, Lawyers, Mental Health Workers, Hospital Staff, Children’s Aid Society etc
2. Comprehensive and Accessible legal aid that assures that the Domestic Violence Survivors get appropriately compensated so that they do not lose their housing. Spousal alimony, however can put the Domestic Violence Survivor at risk for retaliation and attack or even femicide. So the Domestic Violence Survivors especially cannot rely on it for safety
3. Governmental Financial support for DV survivor and children for a period of time to lets them get back on their feet. No women or child should ever require to go hungry or homeless.
4. Free and Comprehensive Mental/Social/Emotional Support that is Trauma Informed and Destigmatizes Domestic Violence and Does Not Shame the Survivors.
5. Affordable and Appropriate housing for Women and Children and Pets who are escaping domestic violence. More shelters are definitely needed, but shelters are a temporary solution. Affordable housing that is supplemented by government for single parent with children must be accessible. In times where rent cannot be made, a DV survivor and children should NEVER EVER BE EVICTED FROM THEIR HOUSING.
6. Language Translator and Community Based support system. If a DV survivor has a language barrier, a free translator should be provided, as it should not be children’s responsibility to be their parent’s translators during DV investigation, court proceedings or follow ups.
7. Training and employment services for refugees and DV survivors to empower them, help them acquire essential skills, training and jobs.
8. Livable Wages - no one should ever worry about choosing food over housing or feel threatened with eviction.
9. Comprehensive and Adequate Support for refugees and community-based approach that helps with resettlement.
10. Debt forgiveness plan for Domestic Violence Survivors, to help them get back on their feet.

Domestic Violence Survivors and their Children carry the scars of the abuse for years to come , from depression, anxiety, PTSD, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts/attempts or suicide.

I am a survivor, a child of a parent who was a victim of Domestic Violence and Victim of the System that offered her little to no protection or support .... The system failed my mother. I was able to study hard, and obtain high education. I myself obtained Masters’ Degree in Mechanical Engineering and had a successful career. The trauma however still haunts me. I suffer from depression, anxiety, PTSD and I have had suicidal thoughts in the past. I am now married with children and I acquired and continue to seek trauma care but I feel as an educated person I have a privilege to access it. I carried the shame of the abuse for years and it affected my relationships. I am currently in long term relationship and have two beautiful children but the trauma still haunts me. Telling my story is part of the healing but I feel a true healing will not happen until I see changes made in the system. There are Women like my mother across Canada struggling to escape abuse, struggling to survive, struggling to find housing, provide food and necessities for themselves and their children. There are children who go to school hungry who are traumatized for life.

My mom never received the required help to help her thrive to reach her potential as a woman or a mother. I don't want her story and her life to go in vain. I will continue to tell the story not just to heal myself but to change the system that is so broken, that traumatizes and retraumatizes Victims of Domestic Violence and Their Children. Feeling of Safety is the foundation for Success in Life. But when women escape Domestic Violence and still cannot find safety (affordable housing, food, support), the abuse continues, the trauma continues. So even though my father threw the blows at my mom, he was the one that broke her nose, bruised her, attacked her with the knife... , the system that failed her afterwards caused as much damage. Just as much as I want my father to be accountable for the abuse, I want the same accountability from police, social workers, government.

The time when domestic violence is the most lethal is when the person is trying to leave. But the perpetrator is not only the partner but also the system that fails the woman by not providing her with the necessary safety for herself and her children. And that is something that needs to change.