

Attention: House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women

I am writing this as one of the lucky ones. I haven't been a victim myself directly, but I've watched too many beautiful, caring souls who mean the world to me have years of their lives taken by emotionally abusive partners. The path of destruction these abusers leave behind is felt for generations. I'm now 36 and finally working through the trauma, but I can't say the same for many.

My Mom was a young mom living far from her family when my parents separated. She didn't finish high school because she got pregnant with me. She came from a broken home and accepted certain behaviour from men because it's what she knew and witnessed growing up. She was a stay-at-home mom with 3 kids. When my parents separated I remember her desperately trying to figure out the logistics of how she would afford an apartment in town to keep us in the same schools and with our friends. Being in a small town and not being able to drive she didn't have a lot of options. We lived with my grandparents (Dad's parents) while she tried to figure things out, but obviously that was an uncomfortable option for her. I'm not sure exactly how long after she met my stepdad, but he unfortunately managed to convince her we could all go live with him to make things easier for us.

That's when any trace of normal childhood ended for me and my siblings. There were good memories too, but I look back at what I didn't quite understand then and I cringe. My Mom was an amazing person. She always did what she could for her kids to give us a good life, but that selflessness would not save her. My Mom never had a lot of self-esteem. She was always complaining about her looks, her lack of accomplishments and never felt good enough. My stepdad was quick to agree and point out more flaws. She always envied working Mom's. I think she knew deep down the only thing that was keeping her from freedom was a job. She sold Avon and had other odd jobs she could do from home, but it was never enough. Looking back, I'm pretty sure that is the only spending money she ever had for us. Anytime she brought up the idea of a job or getting her licence she was ridiculed and reminded of her place. Who would cook dinner and take care of the kids? She couldn't drive, she'd probably end up killing us all. She didn't have an education, who would hire her? All her insecurities were used as leverage against her for 16 years until he finally left her and we got our Mom back. The abuse and mind games never stopped, but the moment she got a job and had an income her whole outlook shifted. She didn't need him anymore and she knew it. I hadn't seen that side of my mom in 16 years. She unfortunately passed away a couple years later and never got to fully enjoy her newfound freedom and grandchild.

It's unfortunate that I know my Mom's case isn't uncommon. I've witnessed it again and again play out in the lives of other family members and friends. It's not a problem only suffered by one gender, but society makes women an easy target as it's the first to convince them they are not worthy of a different choice. We live in a society that spins the same narrative and restricts women's growth by constantly making them jump through hoops and live up to unachievable ideals while the men are already decades ahead and act as they please with little to no consequence. When a woman grows up and doesn't value herself it's easy for a man to convince her she doesn't hold any value. Society has already taught her that and his words echo what she already believes to be true. It never starts with abuse. It all too commonly starts with toxic masculinity. It starts with finally finding a partner who gives you hope for the future. Someone to share a life with, someone to be there to work towards goals with, the promise of a better life. They don't recognize the red flags because they've been taught to ignore them their whole lives.

After years of failing everyone's expectations you finally find security in someone. You have hope for your future, only to have them repeat the skewed reality you've tried to convince yourself otherwise of. It cuts so much deeper when it's somebody you love and trust telling you the words you've hoped were not true about yourself. These are the scars of emotional abuse. You come to believe you are not equipped to provide the level of false safety and security you are currently living for your children. Once you get past the mind games of knowing you deserve better society fails you by making it unattainable. It only ever begins to end when one woman finally recognizes her own worth and manages to overcome all the barriers put in her way. Generations of women and families are affected before one woman will finally find the courage to start the long, lonely battle not only against her husband, against societal norms, against the justice system, and often her family and friends. But that is only the beginning of her success. The hope lies in the future generations when they are supported and loved in a way that allows them to

grow and heal and pass down a different legacy. So much more needs to be done to make this process less humiliating, terrifying and traumatic, not only for the mother, but for future generations.

We need to raise our daughters to be strong and independent, so they know when they are not being valued and have the strength to walk away. We need to raise our sons to know that another person's strength does not diminish their own. We need to have support in place in schools for children who do not get this privilege at home, so they can find the strength within themselves to forge their own path. We need a solid education system that empowers and supports children through all grades. It needs to teach consent and provide understanding of all genders as equals. Our children need to understand their emotions and be taught how to regulate those emotions with positive coping skills to set them up to be good people who can develop healthy relationships. We need awareness of trauma and the negative impacts of societal norms. Our kids need a safe place in school with understanding teachers. They need mental health resources that extend to their family members. We need to heal the roots if we want them to flourish. If these kids are growing up in broken homes, they need to know that it's not their destiny to repeat. They have the power to do better than what they stand witness to.

Once these parents are brave enough to see past the delusions and lies they're being fed and they realise they deserve better, the problem becomes how. They are met with so much uncertainty and overwhelm in an already volatile situation. How do they provide for their kids on their own when they've only ever put their families first and backburnered their educations, their careers to be at home with their kids to ease the burdens of childcare for the family? How do they secure childcare and pay for childcare when the costs and availability are the very reasons they're home in the first place. These are issues not only faced in abusive relationships, these are very real struggles facing women all over Canada. If you're financially struggling already in a two parent household the thought of throwing it all away and starting from the bottom for your mental health is not a choice. It's risking absolutely everything for your family and not knowing if anything will work out in the end. It feels like you're risking your children's livelihoods that you've fought so hard to protect all for the sake of something society and most people don't recognise as worthy: your mental health. It's choosing a different kind of poverty, uncertainty and fear. It's not a choice women want to make, it's a choice they have to make because they're left with no other choices. Please give them choices. How do they prove themselves to the rest of the world in front of judges and social workers when they can barely convince themselves they're worthy over the words of their abusers? It's bound to get so much worse before it gets better. Everyone knows that. They've all heard the horror stories. Their abusers know the stories well. How will they mentally survive for their children when they already feel the weight of the world on their shoulders and they know it's about to get worse?

For many women, their spouses hold the power of money over them. Unfortunately in our society money is power and it buys security. Money is a roof over your head, a safe place to stay, food on the table and a fighting chance to finally prove yourself to the world. There needs to be a financial safety net and support. Resources are great, but the thought of having to prove emotional abuse after years of having to prove everything and believing all your problems are in your head is daunting. They need someone on their side to reassure them that they are capable of creating a better life for themselves and their children. IN a perfect world, someone to help them navigate the legal system, find housing, secure a job. I can guarantee you all my Mother and so many other women would have needed is that initial first and last months rent and some reassurance that her children would be safe and the pieces will come together. All they need is a chance to prove themselves to the world that they are worthy. Give them financial security and a little guidance and they can handle the rest.