

I stayed in an abusive relationship for 11 years because I didn't know it was abuse. I thought IPV was getting hit or being yelled at and none of those things ever happened to me. (1a&b)

The chronic gaslighting, threats, and coercion negatively impacted my health, my finances, and my social connections. Since our separation, the legal system has contributed to, allowed for, and participated in similar abusive behaviours that ultimately have been far more harmful to me than my time in our relationship was.

At the start of my relationship, I owned a condo in Vancouver. I was 24 and had purchased it with money I had saved up working at KFC. By the end of our relationship my ex and I had 4 properties. He makes \$300,000+ per year and I make around \$30,000/year.

Now, 5 years into our divorce, I have no properties and am \$100,000.00 in debt.

During our relationship my ex gained and kept control over me by isolating me, keeping control of the finances, and once our daughters were born, by threatening to 'take them' if I left.

I remember being screened for intimate partner abuse by doctors and midwives with each of my pregnancies. Always the focus was 'are you being hit?'(2)

If I had known what was happening to me was abuse, I would have left. During and after our relationship ended, knowing something was 'wrong' I pursued counselling, read books and attended seminars, all of which recommended *I* change. No-one ever told me what gaslighting is, or about its effects, or that it's abuse. (3)

Since our first court application we have had many many hearings, 2 mediations, 1 parenting evaluation, 2 divorce coaches - both of whom 'fired us' after only a few months of working with us due to my ex's incessant, unreasonable, demanding emails and circular arguments that go nowhere— and a parenting co-ordinator.

My legal bills run between \$1000- \$12,000 per month. (Keep in mind my annual net income is \$31,000.) (5)

A large part of our dispute is him wanting 50/50 parenting time - despite the fact that I have always been the primary parent and that for 2 years after he left he saw the children in a very limited capacity. Despite his abuse and alcoholism. Despite my children clearly telling counsellors, social workers and parenting evaluators of the abuse they experience.

By paying for a parenting evaluation, he was able to get a report stating that 50/50 parenting time is recommended, despite the evaluator witnessing violence in the home during her evaluation. Her report states " Some domestic violence is present in the home, but not enough to merit a concern for the children. I find that a 50/50 parenting schedule would be best for the children. "(4)

My children now spend half of their time at their fathers house where they are not allowed to bathe. Sometimes food is restricted as punishment. They are routinely yelled at, dragged by their arms and locked in rooms. They are told "Your Mom is a bitch!" They watch as their step brothers are locked outside in the snow in their underwear. They routinely don't have shoes that fit, or winter coats. They are made to watch while their childhood stuffies and books are burned in front of them. They are held under cold showers with their clothes on. They are wrapped in blankets and pinned to the floor.

When they or I express that they don't want to go to his house, he accuses me of 'alienation' and then yet another 3rd party is called in - costing us tens of thousands of dollars. (6)

The other big piece of our dispute is his income and how much support he should pay. Within 3 months of us signing a separation agreement, he claimed he was earning less than he had and that he should pay less than what we agreed to. He is self employed and can 'create' his own records of income and expenses as necessary. In the 5 years since our separation, he has failed to provide proper and complete financial documents. This has not been addressed by the courts in any way. (7)

At our last mediation, after 3 years of threats of trial, he finally agreed to pay \$3 less per month. As a family I estimate we spent \$50,000 on mediations and court fees for him to save \$3 every month. There is nothing in the legislation that will hold him accountable for this.

(1a) I suggest a nation wide advertising campaign educating people about IPV that *isn't* physical.

(1b) I suggest that classes on IPV and all the different forms of abuse be taught in all schools to every student grade 2 and up.

(2) I suggest that this mandatory screening of pregnant woman include information about coercive control, manipulation, gaslighting and projection.

(3) I suggest making trauma, and IPV part of all counselling and psychology programs.

(4) I suggest that a standard and process for parenting evaluations be created and a way to hold evaluators accountable be created.

(5) I suggest that Legal Aid be better funded so low income people can access real help - not just the 20hrs that it provides now.

(6) I suggest that each and every person working in the family law system be educated and then made to do 'brush up' courses every 2 years on domestic violence, coercion and control and power imbalances, financial abuse, and mental/emotional abuse. Bill -233 would be a good place to start.

(7) I suggest new legislation that penalizes any litigant who fails to provide financial documents if they are the ones applying to pay less.

(8) I suggest that coercion and control be made criminal offences so that when I call the police are (again, for the 5th or 6th time) I would be able to press charges on him when he comes to my door and tries to break it down.

(9) I suggest that in BC only judges who *want* to preside in family law cases do so, rather than judges who specialize in other areas of law having to serve their mandatory time in family law courts.

(10) I suggest that programs such as the NSRLP receiving much more funding so that people with low incomes can learn how to represent themselves, and learn the basics of the court system so they can make better informed choices.

(11) I suggest MCFD be better funded and that all social workers receive training on IPV that *isn't* physical and trauma responses to abuse.

Thank you for reading my story and suggestions.