

## **ATTENTION: STATUS OF WOMEN COMMITTEE ON INTIMATE PARTNER AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN CANADA**

I am writing this to you anonymously. I am a Public Health Nurse and have worked with at risk populations for my entire 22 years of nursing. I am also, as are my children, a survivor of IPV.

When I first met my husband, I had recently graduated from Queen's University in Ontario and was ready to begin the next phase of my life. Within the first three weeks of meeting him, he had slapped me during a drunken rage. I somehow convinced myself that this was an isolated incident and that he loved me and would never do this again. I was young, naive and completely wrong. Within a matter of weeks we were engaged. One year later we had purchased a home one hour away from my family, his suggestion and urging, and were married. One year later we had our first child.

Throughout those first few years we had many struggles including financial and were constantly fighting. With him blaming me for everything. We also both lost our fathers to cancer months after I gave birth to our premature second child. Slowly the abuse got worse. First it was emotional and psychological abuse, but when my second child was 4 months old, he pushed me while I was holding him in my arms. I left and went to live with my parents. For only one week. With the promise of change and the constant gaslighting and guilt tripping, he won me back. The abuse as well as his alcoholism got much worse. It became physical but not on my body. Every picture in our house hid our secret. Punches to walls, throwing of furniture, breaking of toys etc. The yelling, screaming, name calling and berating were non-stop and the children, now three of them, witnessed it all. His alcoholism got worse and my underlying health condition did as well. I had surgery which rendered me dependent on his care and that's when the final incident occurred and I left him for good. In one week he had spat on me, thrown a glass at me, broke multiple items in our home, then after another binge, he pushed me as I tried to walk away from him using the walker I was sent home from the hospital with after having major back surgery to the ground in front of my children. I could barely move. I was warned by the surgeon to not fall down or bend in any way yet there I was on the ground in excruciating pain. I survived but knew it was time to leave. Or at least I thought I did.

When I left him the second time, my children were only 11, 9 and 6. They had seen so much and been emotionally abused themselves. Too much to share in this brief but experiences that have caused trauma that they still live with to this day. During the time of our second separation, his alcoholism took him to a dark place. In the summer of 2013, he drove severely intoxicated with our three children in his car and ended up getting a DUI. During that car ride, the children and their cousin were terrorized by his abusive behavior and thankfully, three calls to 911 from by-standers, saved their little lives. But he only received a judicial slap on the wrist and was sent to rehab for less than two months. Once back it only took him less then a year to start drinking again and push his way back into my life with his coercive control and constant gaslighting. After another tumultuous year and my children witnessing more abuse, I left him for the third and final

time in April 2015. I thought we were finally free until our case entered into the Family Court system. It was in this system that I once thought was set up to protect victims and children, that I realized the abuse would further continue and that the only true goal for the court was to minimize how much time we spent in that courthouse to the detriment of my children's overall well-being. The OCL represented the children (I was forced to self-represent as my income pushed me over, by a small margin, the Legal Aid threshold) but truly did not understand nor choose to investigate, even after their father and his current partner were charged and convicted of Domestic Violence, the abuse that they continued to suffer post-separation. As a result, and after five years of countless court orders much of which he chose to ignore, the children, now older, cut off all contact with their father. However, the scars and pain of what they went through for all their lives are now coming to the surface. My youngest now self-harms (since 2019) and was recently hospitalized (after multiple trips to the ER throughout 2020 and 2021) and diagnosed with Developmental Trauma Disorder. She is unable to attend school and is suicidal every day. It will take years to undo the trauma that resulted from the Adverse Childhood Experiences that she went through, if ever. My children are forever changed, as am I, not just by the abuse they suffered and witnessed during the marriage but also the abuse that continued post-separation by their father and the courts.

Therefore, my recommendations to the committee are as follows:

**1. EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV) AND COERCIVE CONTROL SHOULD BE MANDATORY** for all family court judges, lawyers, CAS workers and all people involved in child protection. It must be understood that:

- (i) Psychological abuse is a pattern of abuse. Currently judges, lawyers, section 30 assessors, CAS workers try to separate out individual instances of abuse to deal with one incident at a time, which results in minimizing the experience and masks the full weight of the abuse.
- (ii) Children EXPERIENCE violence and coercive control. Abusive spouses cannot be good parents and this must be acknowledged and parenting plans MUST reflect this. There is much evolving research in Adverse Childhood Experiences to support this.
- (iii) Maximum access for both parents is not always in the best interests of children. Children need to be heard, their rights as per the UN convention MUST be respected and their wishes heavily weighted so as to not put the rights of the abuser ahead of that of the children.
- (iv) Informed consent to treatment must be respected whereby children have a right to decline harmful reunification therapy. Reunification therapy in all forms, similar to conversion therapy, should be banned in Canada.
- (v) Parental alienation must finally be debunked and seen as a tactic used by abusers to silence mothers and children. Mother-blaming must stop.

2. There should be a **UNIFIED FAMILY COURT**, where all judges presiding over cases involving child custody and access have specialized training.

3. Hold abusers **ACCOUNTABLE** for their abuse.

4. There must be **INCREASED FUNDING FOR LEGAL AID**, as well as a different funding model to regulate lawyer's fees for victims of DV. The current family court system is two-tiered, and entirely unaffordable to most DV victims.

5. Please **SUPPORT Bill C-233 (Keira's Law)**. It will save many lives.

6. **INTRODUCE EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS** to teach young girls the red flags of coercive control, so they can avoid abusive relationships and educate young boys on how to treat women with respect. Age-appropriate education on healthy relationships versus IPV and Coercive Control beginning at elementary school level.

7. Provide **FEDERAL FUNDING** to support Public Health Initiatives that provide education and awareness to the public on IPV and Coercive Control and the overall impact on communities as a whole.

8. A Federally funded **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT PROGRAM** for survivors of IPV and Coercive Control and their children. The root of the trauma experienced by survivors and their children run very deep and can affect generations to come. If we are going to break the cycle we need to start at the root and that support can not only be provided to those that can afford fee for service programs.