

Quebec, March 31, 2022

Dear Committee Members:

Subject: Brief to the Standing Committee on the Status of Women

I am submitting this brief as part of your study. I ask that you keep my identity confidential for my children's safety and mine.

I am a woman in my late 40s with a bachelor's degree and a permanent job in the federal public service. I was in a relationship with a man I have known since elementary school, and we had two children. I am described as intelligent, empathetic, introverted, sociable and anxious. I have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, which is understandable because not only am I a victim and survivor of domestic violence, but I come from a dysfunctional family.

I am living proof that domestic violence is intergenerational. The behaviours, unspoken words and coping strategies are at the root of the problem.

I grew up in an environment that was psychologically harmful to children. I was housed, fed, bathed and cared for, but I was still left to fend for myself. I was traumatized at the age of 4 by a series of sexual assaults. I kept it all inside me. I was pretty, kind and respectful. I was always a top student and surrounded by good friends.

This facade hid an immeasurable distress. I developed the dysfunction of wanting to please at all costs. I was never shown or taught what boundaries are or, more importantly, the right to say "no."

When I came of age, I felt safe being in a relationship with a childhood friend. I found him possessive and jealous, but he was in control and I felt that no one could hurt me when I was with him. It was while watching an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, in which a police officer provided the web address for a questionnaire to find out if someone is in a toxic relationship, that I understood my situation.

I never had any bruises or witnesses, but my partner controlled our finances and my physical appearance, and dictated who could be part of my social circle. He would have angry outbursts, and I lived in constant fear. One day, I told myself that I didn't want my son to think that this is how a woman is treated, and I didn't want my daughter to think that she has to accept being treated this way by a man. I called a women's shelter from my office at work, and the woman on the phone told me to secretly pack a suitcase for me and my children, hide it in the trunk of the car, withdraw \$100 from my bank account and go to a phone booth with my children to call her back for the secret address of the shelter.

I couldn't do that. My spouse had control over our only bank account. I was the only one looking after the children and I never left the house without him. Everything the woman asked me to do would have raised suspicion and increased my fear. I couldn't file a complaint with the police because I had no bruises on me. It was my word against his.

When I initiated the breakup, he started therapy to try to keep me. I resisted. We weren't married, so he controlled the division of all our assets. For a number of years, we had an

“amicable” shared custody agreement allowing each of us to have the children every other week, but I wanted a formal document. He always refused mediation meetings. We ended up in court not once, but twice. He refused shared custody, wanted full custody and support payments. He continued his bullying and wore me down. I burned out, quit my job and moved to another area. I was accused of abandoning my children, but I knew that was the only way I could be free to be their mother.

I have been in therapy my whole life. I am proactive in my personal growth and healing. This man used my family history against me, as well as my temperament as a submissive, compliant, insecure, anxious and kind woman. I wanted to protect my children, and he took them away from me. He never complied with the two shared custody rulings. I pay my child support each and every month, but I don't see the children. It appears that they don't want to see me. I suspect they are victims of parental alienation.

I feel that Quebec's family law system is totally inadequate for this type of problem. I would like to use my experience to help improve things, but I am afraid of how this man would react if he were to find out that I want to tell my story. He says that I would damage his reputation and defame him.

Recommendation 1

Use the school system and the media to educate young people about self-respect, respect for others, and the dynamics of intimate partner violence.

Recommendation 2

Create a code for taxi services to pick up women and girls free of charge when they need to flee from an abusive situation, and ensure that they are taken to a safe place free of charge for as long as necessary.

Recommendation 3

Increase the number of shelters and contacts for women and their children.

Recommendation 4

Include a question on income tax returns and on driver's licence and health card renewals.

Recommendation 5

Reform the family law system based on the experiences of women and children.