

Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence in Canada

I write because I am unprotected from, and continually oppressed by my ex partner. To be so in Canada, where I grew up singing, "the True North strong and free!" I long for what I sing, but it is an old lost dream.

What people in power don't understand is that the abuse does not end when you leave. You don't "escape" if you have children.

I am an intelligent independent woman born and raised here. UBC graduate. I chose a partner who I believed was responsible and an upstanding citizen. I thought I chose well. I dated for a year before marrying, I stood up for myself, I looked for red flags. If it can happen to me, it can happen to any woman. This is not an issue of stupidity or low self esteem or an issue only for immigrants.

The term "domestic violence" is inaccurate. It is assumed to be "domestic": inside the home. So when you remove a woman from the house the violence ends. This is the furthest thing from the truth. The violence doesn't end, because the definition of violence is flawed. Violence is primarily seen as physical. A punch, a beating, a burning, rape. The things you can "prove". It ignores emotional, mental, and psychological violence which are equally damaging.

When the man you marry becomes a trained law enforcement officer, he doesn't have to hit to dominate and control. He has training to control by his posture, his words, how he brags about his firearms training and pins you in "take down" positions when angry. Control is how he corners you and interrogates you for hours, or drives the car into oncoming traffic while yelling at you. How he humiliates you in the bedroom, or laughs at you when he pushes the stroller towards oncoming traffic and then denies it after. He controls you by pinning you to a wall and holding a fist 2 inches from your face. Can you prove these things? Does he give you time to pull out a camera and record it? No, you never know when he's going to do it, because it's interspersed with "normal" behaviour. No one will ever believe you.

"Did he hit you?" Says the counsellor. Says the pastor.

"No", he didn't have to hit. I knew better. Knew the ways to get small. Be quiet. Submit. They didn't know how he would make me pay for talking about him. How crazy he could make me feel when he told everyone it was just a communication problem. How he claimed I was abusive when I tried to stop his abuse. How his friends were cops, so I never called the cops.

"Well then it's not abuse and there's nothing we can do. You should leave if you feel unsafe."

Leaving is NOT the solution. Even if you "leave", he is within his rights to continue to email, text and call you. All he has to do is say, "I want the kids" and he gets you and them. At least when you stay, you can protect the kids, or makes sure he doesn't abandon your toddler in a parking lot. You only leave when you are so broken you can't protect anyone, you shake when he enters a room, you can't sleep and keep getting sick. After you finally find resources to leave the abuse doesn't end. He follows you at children's events and traps you between cars at exchanges, and holds your door so you can't leave. He follows you with his car, and tells you he will bury you in a legal battle if you don't do what he wants. His family spreads rumours cutting off your friends and supports. He refuses to create a schedule or plan visits with the children so that he can make you jump whenever he wants.

Ultimate control.

“Just stand up to him”, says your lawyer.

You do. You insist on a schedule, and supervised exchanges. He launches a legal application of parental alienation. Hundreds of pages of accusations and lies. You can prove that his lies aren't true, but it will cost you \$100k to untangle this and a week in court. You can't afford it. You can't even afford the time off work to sift through the hundreds of texts and emails because it's been years of navigating him and he never stops controlling your time. Your kids need you. They have special needs and appointments. You can't read more of his awful words.

You ask for help. “Just give him what he wants” says the lawyer.

You try to explain that you're scared of him, and don't want to do exchanges with him anymore. “Has he hit you?” comes back the response. “No”. Then you have to keep going.

You ask for help again. You call a supervised exchange service. They ask if you have a court order. You say no. They ask why friends won't help you. You explain he is an officer of the law, that he refuses to keep a schedule. They tell you that they require a schedule, and don't want trouble with him either.

You can't file a restraining order because he hasn't assaulted you. Even if you get a peace bond it only lasts a year, and will make him more angry and unsafe. If he loses his job because of it, you lose child support. You have to co-parent and communicate regardless.

His coercive control gets worse. He traps, berates and interrogates your children, so much that they repeatedly come home with their hands shaking. He hits one of your children and you call the Ministry. The Ministry says it's likely nothing, and tells you to “get a boyfriend” to distract yourself. He later grabs your child by the neck and pins them to the wall. You call again, and the ministry interviews the children in front of their dad. Asking them which parent they like better. The kids come home shaking. They have special needs. They both said nothing because, “he'd take it out on us later”. The Ministry tells you that unless he locks them in the basement or puts a gun to his head they can't do anything unless the kids speak up.

You want it to end, but it doesn't. He breaks his girlfriend's ribs, but she is too scared to talk. He moves 2 blocks away from you. The police tell you not to leave the house without your phone fully charged, but their response time is 15 lengthy mins if he shows up. You file an application with the Crime Victims unit to get financial help with security cameras, but they dismiss it since they don't see a crime. You can't run away with the kids, because he can charge you with kidnapping. You can't travel because he won't sign the kids passports. You can't block his messages or he'll claim parental alienation. Court would bankrupt you. You're trapped.

So I ask, how can I be free? Coercive control is psychological violence. Where is the justice? And how does anyone with fewer privileges even stand a chance...

Solutions:

- 1) Educate front line workers (counsellors/pastors/police/ministry/crime victims unit) on coercive control, and how domestic violence does not accurately describe the damage and psychological impact of coercive controlling behaviour.
- 2) Understand that you can't “escape” by leaving if there are children. Coercive control must be recognized by law as a crime and psychological violence.
- 3) Remove barriers for legal costs, provide free resources to keep you safe at exchanges, help you organize paperwork for court, cover the costs of loss wages at work, and childcare. Without this, who can afford to get safe?