

* THIS NARRATIVE INCLUDES DESCRIPTIONS OF DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE AND ABUSE. *

The insight component of [Insight Exchange](#) shares a person's **lived experience** of violence and abuse, highlighting a person's responses and resistance to violence and where '**social responses**' were helpful, unhelpful or harmful. This reveals the roles that individuals, organisations and communities play in people's experience of violence.

FRANCIS

I want to highlight that strangulation and sexual assault are not a new phenomenon. These kinds of violence are not something that's come out of the 21st century. It is violence that has been perpetrated against women throughout the ages. When a bloke is trying to assault or kill a woman, he usually goes for her throat, unless he's got a knife or gun or whatever. Usually, he will just go for the throat to shut you up. During the era I was brought up in, it was normalised that if a bloke wants sex, you have to have it whether you want to or not. If you were his wife, you must not ever say "no" to him.

"If you don't let him have sex with you, he will die".

Back in my day, my mum told me that these were the sorts of things you were expected to do. I got the message from my mum that "if you don't let him have sex, he will die". I remember thinking "oh my God, I'll kill him if I say 'no' to sex". I think it was Queen Victoria who had said, "look at curtains and think of England" and the message was to have sex in the dark because you must not be able to see the other person.

My father was a perpetrator of family violence. Growing up I felt like I was in a constant war. I had to try to outwit the enemy all the time and I was always trying to work out strategies that would annihilate the enemy or just disrupt his violence. It was fight or be killed. So, this is how I developed my capacity to observe and my intelligence. It wasn't the kind of intelligence cultivated by going to school. It was an intelligence I developed through having to fight against my father and having to save my mother, day in, day out.

My father said that he used to sleepwalk. My mother told me that one night she woke up and he was urinating on her. He said that he thought there was a fire, and he was putting the fire out. He was yelling "fire, fire, fire, I better put the fire out". She didn't really know if he really was sleepwalking, or he just said that he was sleepwalking as an excuse. Another time she was screaming out to me. I think he was 'having sex' with her and she didn't want it, so she was calling out to me. She told me my father would 'have sex' with her when she was asleep. So, all this sexual violence was something I just thought was normal.

When I was a young woman, there was nobody out there standing up against these oppressive ideas. Because who would have listened to a woman and how she's being raped and strangled? Because "who cares? You deserved it, you wore your skirt too short". So, these ideas were such an enormous burden to have shovelled on you. It was very much like women were collectively being strangled. There was a strangle hold on us and an implicit threat that if we didn't do the things the way we were brought up to do, then there would be dire consequences and we had to just accept it, "that's just life - the way things are".

My ex-husband, Ian, was a perpetrator of sexual violence and domestic violence against me and my children. I couldn't touch him. If I even came physically close to Ian, he would force himself on me

and sexually assault me. So, I just couldn't go near him. I couldn't ask him for a hug because he would just sexually assault me. If I ever just needed that human contact and comfort, that I knew I just had to go to my room and cry my eyes out alone. I had my teddy-bear, and I could cuddle my teddy for comfort. That's what I had to do because I dared not go to him. Christ, his sexual violence was full on, and he afterwards would blame me for it. There were many times in my life that I needed some support, or reassurance but I just could never get that from him. In the foreground of my mind was the knowing that, "I cannot touch him". So, to ensure that I never slipped up, I decided that it was better not touch anybody ever. That was really constricting. It was like I had like this invisible suit of armour around me. I just didn't want to touch anybody for fear and if they touched you that, "oh, God, what's going to happen?" So, to protect myself, I never touched anyone. It was very exhausting.

While were together Ian had numerous affairs. Ian had a kid to another woman and this child was born a few months after my daughter was born. He would often come home from being with other women and he would do different things sexually to me. I don't even remember how I felt about it at the time. But on one occasion while we were having sex, he said to me, "oh, is that enjoyable? If I do it to you like this, I know you'll enjoy it". It was one of the rare times where I was enjoying the sex and so I told him that yes, I was enjoying what he was doing. He responded by telling me that one of the women he had been having an affair with had taught him the specific sexual technique. That was a shock. I didn't want the sex to continue. The enjoyment ended for me. His words were really belittling. I felt disgusting and dirty, and it was like I was being raped by her as well.

He said to me, "I don't care what happens to you".

Most times Ian preferred 'sodomy'. He was constantly doing that to me. He grabbed me from behind and put me in a headlock. He put so much pressure on my throat, that I began passing out. Then he would do what he wanted to do. I have blocked out so much. I 'disassociated' most of the time. I would always think to myself "please let this be over with". Often when he was raping me, I would block it

out. I first learned to 'dissociate' when I was a child. I would have been about seven. When I was a little girl, doctors didn't recognise 'dissociation' for what it was. But that was exactly what was happening. Although doctors didn't name 'dissociation' back then, my doctor taught me to ground myself and pull myself back by reminding myself of who I am and where I am. But even to this day, when I 'disassociate', I don't know that I have done it. 'Dissociation' makes it hard for me to remember. Ian knew that I had 'PTSD' and that I 'dissociated'. I might have been there physically, but he would have been able to see that I had checked out mentally. Once you're not there mentally or emotionally, you're unable to give consent to anything. It's the same with date rape drugs. You don't give consent and you might not know what's going on or what happened to you. Whenever I dissociated, I didn't have a clue as to what was being done to me.

When Ian was finished raping me, he would kick me out of bed. Another thing that he used to do to me was he would get on top of me. He would put his knees up to my throat. His legs were on top of my arms, he pinned me down. I could not move my arms, even though I tried. In this position, he shoved his penis into my mouth. He forced me to give him 'oral sex'. I was choking. I was gagging. I couldn't move and I couldn't breathe with Ian's enormous weight on top of me while he was doing that to me at the same time. He said to me, "I don't care what happens to you". He derived a lot of pleasure out of that. It was all for him. I couldn't do anything. It was another method of strangulation. I thought I was going to die because I couldn't breathe.

My kids, who would have only been between 3 years and 6 years at the time, would sometimes come into the bedroom. Ian would come up behind me and he would start to 'sodomise' me in front of my kids. I remember my daughter Harriet saying, "what's daddy doing to mummy?" Ian said back to Harriet "daddy's tickling mummy". So, he didn't care that it was in front of the kids and my children couldn't understand what he was doing to me.

"daddy's tickling mummy".

Ian abused me on a daily basis. I kept thinking that "I am a decent person, and a decent woman like me shouldn't be subjected to these sorts of things. He should not be doing this to me because I am his wife. What he is doing to me is disrespectful and it's wrong". It really got to me and because it was like he just thought of me as nothing. He did whatever he wanted to do to me. Even though I knew what he was doing was wrong, I had all those the Victorian values in my head, that "you can't say 'no' to your husband". So, I thought "maybe I'm not a woman, maybe I'm not a decent wife, maybe I'm not responding how I should be and maybe I should be enjoying it". I really carried that burden of that self-doubt and self-blame for so long. All the Victorian ideas were confusing and really stifled the kind of responses I could give.

I didn't feel like I could talk about what Ian was doing to me with my friends.

I got in touch with a private investigator to follow Ian so that I would have more information on him for the court cases. I happened to ask the woman that took the booking, "can I just ask you a question because you're an older lady?" She would have been my age back then. She said, "yes, sure". I said, "should a husband be sodomising a wife?" She went, "God, no! You call me again if you want to talk". Her words helped me realise that I shouldn't have been doubting myself. He was the one in the wrong, it wasn't me. He was the one who had made the choice to degrade me.

"Instead of talking about this all the time why don't you do something about it".

After that, I tried to speak about what Ian was doing to me to a few friends. Debbie was a friend of mine, I met her in a women's group. Her first son was born around the same time my youngest. I told Debbie and she said, "isn't it better the devil you know than the devil you don't?" I tried to speak with another woman from the group Katrina and she said, "instead of talking about this all the time why don't you do something about it?" I didn't bother saying anything

more to anyone from the mothers' group after that. I just shut up. I felt particularly dejected after Katrina's response because, she was a schoolteacher. She was intelligent and she would have known that she was basically saying to me "I don't care".

I believe that Ian sexually assaulted my children as well. My daughter Harriet never really got any assistance either even though a school counsellor identified that she had been sexually abused. I was worried about Harriet. When she was about eight years old, she would urinate on the bedroom floor and defecate and smear faeces on the walls. My daughter was demonstrating behaviours that are common when children have been sexually abused. I had to take my youngest child, Sage to a psychologist because he was demonstrating sexual behaviours with his friends. The psychologist said, "Sage has probably been raped or sexually assaulted". The psychologist was specialised in working with child survivors of sexual abuse. Child protection services turned up at my house one day and they said, "we've got our officers up at the pre-school because there's a problem with your child". The child protection worker explained that Sage had touched another boy in the pre-school. The child protection staff asked me "well, has he been assaulted? Has he seen something? Do you

watch porn?" I was 'dissociating' and checking out again, so I couldn't think of anything to say to the workers. The child protection staff interviewed Sage, but nothing went any further. I suppose, the lack of action was because this was back in the early 1990s and there wasn't a lot of awareness about child sexual assault.

“oh, no, not my little lan. lan’s such a sweet boy. I don’t think it’s him. Are you sure it’s not you?”.

Sage used to talk to me about a man in football jersey. Ian and his best friend both wore football jerseys – it was like their uniform. One time one time after Sage came back from an outing with Ian and his friend, Sage was complaining that he had a sore bum. But he didn't say what had happened.

Ian's parents and brothers and sister all knew that Ian was abusive. But Ian's grandmother would say to me, "oh, no, not my little lan. lan's such a sweet boy. I don't think it's him. Are you sure it's not you?" So, I just started to observe and listen to what people had said to me and I realised, "no, that's not right".

I mostly just bottled everything up inside and kept going. One way of resisting all the abuse was to take a stand for my children. I thought to myself, "I can't give those same Victorian ideas to my children. I don't want them to think Ian's behaviours are normal either. Because I know that's all hogwash". So, I decided, "it stops with me". I tried to work out it out in my head. I was weighing things up. I realised "if I impose the ways I had been taught on my children, then I will be a perpetrator to my kids because they will continue on with what I teach them and what they learn from Ian. I realised that I have got to do the opposite of all their abuse and all the Victorian ideas and be proactive about it. I was committed to doing and acting in ways that were the reverse or opposite of Ian's and my father's behaviours.

I was told, "sex was not for our pleasure, not for the woman's pleasure and that we should only have it for the sake of having children. The husband would go elsewhere and that is to be expected". So, when my kids were older and able to converse, I would always sit down and talk with them. I taught my kids that sex is natural, and you do it if you want to and if you love someone. I let them know it's okay to enjoy sex. I taught my kids that they don't have to have sex just because someone else wants it. So, I always had to be mindful of what I said, to reverse all these ideas.

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I would constantly have to stop, think about my reactions. So, it was a very tiring, and at the beginning I would just stop. It might take me half an hour to respond. It was like training. I really wanted to break down the taboos and shame that are still around this topic.

I was with Ian for 19 years in total and then there were another couple of years of custody stuff and all the court cases before me and my kids were finally away from him. There was a lot more to it than just closing a door and walking out of that relationship. People just don't understand the implications and so some people said to me "why didn't you just leave?" They didn't know all the work and preparation that I put into getting to that stage.

I had a mortgage on the house with Ian. But the expectation was that I had to leave, and Ian stayed. Now I live in social housing. After leaving Ian I couldn't work because of my injuries from almost two decades of abuse so I didn't have money coming in. I joined a charity. They had a scheme where an anonymous person sponsors your child and sends them a set amount of money to buy schoolbooks and clothes. I had to resort to the charity and that made me feel awful because I thought I should be earning money for my kids. Ian wasn't paying child support either. For many years he avoided paying tax. So, Child Support said to me "we've got nothing to base his income on, so we still have to base it on the time he was unemployed". But I know he was working a fulltime job all the time. I chased him for years trying to get him to pay for stuff. He wouldn't pay for anything.

“What the hell would you do? You're not going to be in a house that's got all the broken bloody windows and graffiti all over the walls and everything smashed”.

Public housing was a nightmare too. When we applied for public housing, we were only given three choices, three housing offers. I was told that if I didn't take any of those apartments, I would be put back on the housing list again and that I could be on that list for years. I was on the public housing list for about two years before the first house came up. I had to travel out to a rural area with the Housing worker. As soon as we arrived, I thought to myself, "right, surely they are not going to show us this place". All the windows were smashed. Everything was broken including the toilet. The walls had been smashed by vandals and they had written graffiti all over the walls. The Housing worker looked at me and said, "do you want to live here? Because if you don't take this one that's one off your list". I said, "what the hell would you do? You're not going to be in a house that's got all the

broken bloody windows and graffiti all over the walls and everything smashed". He didn't say anything. So, we were down to two options.

The next housing offer we received wasn't much better. Finally, the last offer came round. We had to take that one because there were no other choices. But that place had an awful cockroach infestation. You would open the cupboard door and the cockroaches would come out in the millions. There were cockroaches everywhere, it was filthy, and the yard wasn't done. It was a disgusting place. It showed me how just how little our society thought of me and my kids. When I moved into this public housing place, I just couldn't kick start my life. My children and I became prisoners in the apartment. We had to ring up to get groceries and everything else delivered because whenever we would leave the house, our neighbours spat on us, threw stones at us and yelled at us. People, including Police, looked down at me as though I was trash. I complained to Housing, and they acknowledged "there's a lot of anti-social behaviour in the area" but they did not offer any solutions. I became suicidal. I was ready to kill myself. After everything that had happened to me, I was facing a life in a shocking, unsafe public housing unit. I had just had it.

I think I wrote to the minister at the time and in my letter, I said, "these properties are not the kinds of places that you should send survivors of domestic violence and their children". Public housing and all the poverty were additional further forms of abuse and injustice, but these are not recognised. My kids and I eventually moved to a quieter and safer place – it was still uninspiring and socially isolating, but at least we could live there.

How have I survived all of this? I'm very observant. I'm one of these people that goes outside and looks at a flower a bit longer than the average person. I observe and I try to see something that is not obvious on the surface. I suppose, it's a bit of an enlightened way of observing the world. I watched a TV show recently and I was amazed because on the show there was father yelling at the mother and he was starting to get violent and then a little girl, about six years of age walked in and she brought the father down. This little girl spoke to her abusive father in a way that brought him down. I thought to myself, "yes, that's me". This little girl was only about six, yet she somehow understood and knew that her father shouldn't be treating her mother in that way, and she also knew that something was going to happen, that he was going to escalate. She went in and in her little mind she constructed this sentence and brought her father down. I thought, "that's brilliant". I realise there are people out there like me.

“I have hit my 60s now and I am ready to start talking and ready to make people realise that domestic abuse, sexual violence and the way we treat survivors is not okay and it has to change”.

I don't really know why some people get to go through life and everything's fine, everything falls into place and then there's others like me, that experience pain after pain after pain after pain. The pain of never getting anywhere and never getting anything that's uplifting where you can say to yourself, "oh, I'm so lucky to be alive". I like to think that when you're born your destiny is already chosen for you. Because everyone's put into this world to do something. So, my destiny has been to go through all this injustice and abuse, to understand it and then be able to come out the other side, to keep my ethics and values and to build up others.

I have hit my 60s now and I am ready to start talking and ready to make people realise that domestic abuse, sexual violence and the way we treat survivors is not okay and it has to change. I just try to make things a bit better. I would like to do that before I die so that while my life has been painful all the way through, if I can help other people, then my life was worth it.

Acknowledgement and thanks

Insight Exchange would like to thank the person with lived experience of domestic and family violence who has generously shared their insights for the benefit of others.

We acknowledge that despite our best efforts to assemble with a person a more accurate representation of some of their experiences of violence, we can never fully understand all that their experiences mean to them now or through their life. We understand that no one's life experience can ever be fully represented in language or any other form.

Handle with dignity

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- Keep the copies in an envelope distinct from paperwork and reports
- Explain the importance and value of these accounts before distributing them
- Collect any copies left behind by delegates/participants after workshops

Further resources and support

My Safety Kit is an Insight Exchange resource for any person who at some point may be reflecting on their own relationships and experiences of domestic and family violence. The resource may also have benefits for people who are:

- Supporting friends and family who are (or might be) experiencing domestic and family violence
- Working as a service responder to people experiencing domestic and family violence

[My Safety Kit](#) includes contact details for services across Australian states and territories that may be able to support a person in their next steps. It is available online at www.insightexchange.net.

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