

My story in my words

Trigger warning: this is a very personal and honest account and contains references to physical and emotional abuse. Please only read on when you feel able to do so, or come back to it another time.

It is hard to know exactly when it all started. I suppose looking back there were so many signs, however, hindsight is a great thing, but also unrealistic. I had a good job and was comfortable within myself and somehow things changed bit by bit without me realising it.

On the second day of my marriage I was told that the way I dressed did not meet his approval. I worked in an office and so smart dress was required, however, even though it was modest, it was met with disapproval. Almost a month later, despite the reassurances that I could continue to work after marriage, I was told that it would be best that I stayed at home and look after my parents. I had siblings and had worked for a long time, so there was no reason for that to change. However, every time I returned from work, I would be faced with the same question as to whether I had handed in my notice. I was in tears as it was totally against my wishes, as I had worked my way up into a good position, one that I really enjoyed.

My workplace did not want me to leave and said that they would keep my post open for a year in case I chose to return. Unfortunately, that did not happen. For the first time in years, I had become financially dependent on someone else and was faced with the daunting prospect of explaining this to my family. Unsurprisingly, it was extremely difficult for my family to understand my decision, however, I had to pretend that it was my choice and for the best. Little did I know that this was the beginning of having to justify and take ownership of decisions that were not actually mine, but were in fact against my better judgement.

Within a few months, I realised why I had been forced to give up my employment. My then husband wanted me to become responsible for a large part of his family. This would be a permanent arrangement and would define my life and my personality for many years to come. Initially, he said that I wouldn't be able to cope and then when I said I wasn't sure if I could do it, I was told that no one would have married me. In other words, I should be grateful that he had married me as no one else would have done the same. To be told this a few months after marriage was a huge blow to my self-esteem, which was slowly being trampled on.

In days to come, everything that went wrong was always my fault. It reached a point that I would no longer say if I was upset or if any wrong had been done to me as I would have to sit with the other person like a child, with my ex-husband acting as judge and jury. His anger initially came in the form of throwing items and then was coupled with verbal and physical abuse followed by the silent treatment. Sometimes, flowers or gifts were an indication that all was forgiven and forgotten from his side.

Problems were never discussed or resolved, life just got back to 'normal' and we would continue where we left off. We would be 'happy' for a few weeks then something else would happen and the turbulence would begin. I braced myself each time we were coasting along, as I was certain that this period was the calm before the storm.

Divorce was threatened several times, even early on and I would sometimes question it, as I thought we wanted our marriage to work. This was met with disgust as I was accused of being desperate and told to have some dignity and self-respect. I recall asking why he hated me so

much and was told that I did not make it easy. It's hard to imagine how I stayed so long with someone who harboured such negative feelings towards me.

Life became a case of walking on eggshells in order not to anger my husband. Over the years, his thoughts became my thoughts, his ideas became mine and I became a shadow of my former self. How someone who was so friendly, generous and helpful to those outside could become so authoritative and on occasions terrifying as soon as they closed the front door, baffled me. The profession that he was in required compassion, empathy and understanding towards the less fortunate, which he exuded in abundance and he was well respected by his colleagues as well as those who worked in his field. He regularly championed great causes and travelled extensively to oversee projects which were widely publicised, yet there was an abhorrent side to him that the public rarely saw.

That is not to say that my ex-husband was never helpful or caring at home or towards my family, however, within seconds, a calm family environment could become one of destruction and terror. It was extremely difficult, not to mention bewildering, to reconcile the two contrasting personalities. However, I later came to realise how common it is for abusers to be well-spoken, charismatic and sociable people. Conversely, these same individuals can be controlling, possessive and manipulative in their private life. Their public persona is so different that abuse victims are often reluctant to report such people for fear of being disbelieved or even ridiculed.

Over the years, I became more introverted and confused, as I saw others who were able to make their own choices and who were allowed to be themselves. Somehow, I knew deep down that this was not how it was meant to be. It wasn't normal to be terrified of one's husband in one instance and then enjoy good times the next. To be punched, shaken and almost strangled by your lifetime companion cannot be deemed as 'normal behaviour,' whatever the circumstances. Surely, one should be able to talk out problems and say how one really feels about situations because healthy marriages should promote discussion, even with different viewpoints, coupled with support. We ought to feel comfortable enough to be able to be ourselves. In all honesty, I can safely say that I was never myself, as I felt I could not be. If ever I was down, I was told that I was not happy unless I was unhappy.

Looking back, I realised that I had to lie to my family, go against what was my better judgement, be the person I hated without realising what I was doing – all this for a person I had only known for a short time. Throughout this union was a constant feeling of unease and anxiety, so much so that I found it difficult to sleep due to the unpredictability of the situation. I was even worried and frightened in case my baby cried at night, as her father had said that he needed to sleep as he had to go to work. Yet, he constantly refused to sleep in another room.

I was told by others to be grateful that my husband was providing for me, yet he would come home to a freshly cooked meal. I also did all the shopping, childcare, took care of the financial matters ensuring all direct debits were paid and would supplement if he got overdrawn. I was made to feel that I needed him, yet in actual fact, it was quite the contrary. Later, I was told that I should have been grateful that I didn't even have to work, yet he was the one who prevented me from doing so. As I reflect on that time, I don't think I could have done any more to make my marriage work. I remember telling my ex-husband, as he left, that even if I had shifted heaven and earth for him I could never please him. In response, he said that that wasn't true.

The end was sudden and my ex-husband's decision. However, when he realised that I was beginning to accept the situation and breaking free, he asked me to return. Although my

self-esteem was on the floor, I was slowly getting to grips with things and so he needed me back in order to complete the job. The technical term for this when referring to abuse is 'hoovering.'

Sadly, I succumbed to his reassurances that we could work things out and was left with the bare minimum. To have your child sit at the bottom of the stairs when she hears that you are summoned, is heart-breaking particularly when she tells you she only did that as she was afraid of 'what he would do to you.' That same child at pre-school age would ask me the time on a daily basis so that she could tidy up as she knew that her father hated things being left on the floor and did not want me to encounter his wrath.

Following the divorce was a lengthy legal process and a huge depletion of my already meagre resources. This provided another opportunity to humiliate me beyond belief and it was grabbed with both hands. As is often the case, the abuse does not end when the perpetrator leaves. In many ways it intensifies and can continue for many years in various forms. I have to say that one who displays dignity during divorce is a rare person indeed. Although, if we remember that Allah is watching us at all times, it is certainly possible. However, in all of this and despite periods of deep uncertainty, I can honestly say that Allah saved us. I have never encountered a divorce situation where children are relieved as opposed to saddened when one of their parents has left. However, this divorce went against the norm in more ways than one.

What followed was the same question being played out again and again like a broken record, especially after it became known that there was some sort of abuse in our relationship. 'Why didn't you leave?' My response has been and will always be the same. 'When you climb into my shoes and walk around in them, only then can you understand my predicament.' No one knew I was being abused. In fact, even I didn't realise at the time. However, unlike many, Alhamdulillah, I am able to tell my story.

It is important to note that if one encounters someone who is in an abusive relationship, the state of mind of that individual is not always what one would expect. Any advice that one may give could be deemed useful to one with a rational mind. However, when given to someone who has endured years of abuse and humiliation, such advice may not have the same effect or meaning. There are so many things that I would have done to change or improve my situation, had my mind been in the place that it is now.

One may ask whether I have healed from all that I suffered? In all honesty, I am unsure whether one heals completely from abuse. Although, I can say that I have learned to live with what happened, however, I have not allowed it to define me. My experience has not only taught me a great deal about myself, but also about other people. Furthermore, it has certainly changed me as a person and impacted my life more than I could have imagined. Having children meant that I eventually had to pick myself up and start again by finding employment, childcare and reaching a sense of 'normality.' Life wasn't without its struggles, but it was nothing remotely like what we had previously encountered, as we now had peace of mind, which is priceless. Recently, a good friend told me that I am close to becoming the person she knew before I got married (only a lot older and hopefully wiser). Ironically, this is the same person who observed how my personality changed during my marriage. I am eternally grateful to her, my family and all those who supported me during this trying time.

Allah tells us to stand up for truth and justice even if it be against ourselves, our parents or our kin. Unfortunately, very few people were prepared to do this as, in their eyes, they had too much to lose. It was also essential that I was deemed as the one at fault.

However, Allah is Great as He says that truth will stand out from falsehood and I can honestly say that it did, albeit only to those who mattered.

Lessons learned

One thing that I have realised having gone through this experience is that if something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't right. On so many occasions I had an uneasy feeling about matters, however, I went along with things just to keep the peace. Going against your better judgement to please someone else is never the answer to your problems.

Try to put yourself first instead of being a people pleaser. This is not selfishness, but one has to consider the impact that things may have on oneself before considering others. I have realised that I have to look after myself, as I know that no one else will be able to do this as well as I can. I now know that I have to be in a fit state myself before I can look after others.

Give yourself time to grieve, heal and then move forward. What has happened has come to pass and is the Qadr of Allah and so eventually we all need to move on and make the best of the life ahead.

If you or anyone you know needs help and support because of suffering abuse or violence please consider some of the organisations below. They are there for everybody.

And following Zainab's advice in her podcast interview, write down what is happening to you, keep a diary or a record of when and what happens. Dates. Times. Triggers. Things that were said. It is a really tough thing to do but can be so useful in helping you see it all more clearly and for if you need to explain it to others any time in the future.

Find your own support among family, friends, people you can trust.
Always have a safety plan in mind. Where can you go? Who can give you help?
You are not alone. Reach out.

Zainab is helping us start a whole series of conversations about issues of abuse. Her story and that of others will all be collated here over the coming months:

<https://togetherwethrive.co.uk/abuse-and-domestic-violence>

Nour

<https://www.nour-dv.org.uk/>

Nour is an Arabic word meaning 'light' and Nour exists as a healing light for sufferers of abuse and trauma. Nour was founded by women from minoritised backgrounds, in recognition that assumptions made about who experiences abuse and the narratives around domestic abuse in minoritised communities are impacting the ability of survivors to come forward and access support.

NHS signposting for help and support:

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/getting-help-for-domestic-violence/>

Women's Aid

<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/information-support/what-is-domestic-abuse/>

National Helpline 24/7 - Tel: 0808 2000 247

<https://www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk/>