

TAKE BACK THE NIGHT
September 22, 2016
Women's Sexual Assault Centre of Renfrew County
Petawawa and Eganville

A year ago today began like any other late September day for most of us. However, only a few hours later, the day exploded into a horror none of us could have imagined, as news of the murders of Carol Culletin, Anastasia Kuzyk and Nathalie Warmerdon spread throughout the community and then throughout the province and country.

All of us have been affected by what happened on September 22, 2015; obviously some far more than others. The community has come together several times to grieve, to contemplate, to heal and to talk about how to move forward.

Today is one more opportunity for us to gather, to reflect and to place what happened to Carol, Anastasia and Nathalie – the actions of Boris Borutski – in the context of violence women are subjected to around the world every day of the year.

I spent a lot of time thinking about what I was going to say today – more, I think, than ever before. And then I spent a lot of time thinking about why I was having so much trouble deciding what to say.

I finally realized that the biggest reason I was struggling so much over my remarks was because I am just so, so, so ANGRY. Yet, this year, in this community especially, I did not want my anger to overshadow the grief that so many of you are still living with every day.

And then I decided that I needed to express my anger; that my rage can be respectful of people's grief; that rage, in fact, is what we should feel when 3 women are killed in one day, when one woman is killed every six days, when women over 15 years of age represent 80% of all police reported intimate partner violence, when 1,200 (according to the RCMP) or 4,000 (according to NWAC) Indigenous women and girls are missing or murdered, when only 3 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults results in a conviction, when a mother kills herself and her child because the family court fails to protect her children from an abusive father, and so on and so on and so on.

I am also angry because still, so often, women are blamed for the violence we experience. I am sick of being told – by popular culture, music, the mainstream media, politicians, police officers, members of my family – that somehow it is the woman's fault when sometime bad happens to her. That children are the “real” “innocent” victims of

domestic violence, as though somehow the abuse their mother has experienced and has attempted to protect them from is not worthy of note; is not as “real” because she is an adult. That she is not just as innocent of any responsibility as her children are.

And I am so very tired of being asked “Well, why did she stay?” “Why didn’t she call the police?” “Why did she go back?” “Why did she go on another date?”

We know the reasons women stay, go back, don’t tell. We have known the reasons for a long time. But women’s voices are still not respected as being the experts, even women as articulate as Jackie Hong, a reporter with the Toronto Star, who had this to say about her own experience of intimate partner abuse in a column she wrote for the paper on March 25 of this year, just a few days after the catastrophic decision in the Jian Ghomeshi case:

“When you’re put in such a position that you feel worthless and vulnerable and weak and threatened, it can feel like the only way out is to just take it and hope it doesn’t get worse. . . . Every time, after the shock wore off, I let the denial set in. I made excuses. . . . Autopilot takes over because you’re confused and shocked and in pain. Get up, dust yourself off, wash your face. Just keep going. Carry on like normal. . . . you start to forget it ever happened. . . . But please, listen to us. Just because our stories don’t fit into narratives of how victims “should” react doesn’t mean we consented. Just because we don’t end the relationship on the spot or run straight to the police doesn’t mean we were OK with what happened. And just because we stayed, it doesn’t mean we were not hurt.”

If we can’t remember why women don’t call the cops, think about what happens to those women who do when the man who abused them is actually charged and goes to trial.

Remember some of the words of Justice Horkins, in his reasons for judgement in the Ghomeshi case. At various points in his decision, he referred to the survivors as “deceptive and manipulative,” as demonstrating “carelessness with the truth.” He said one of them “deliberately chose not to be completely honest with the police.” He claimed there was “no tangible evidence” of the offence. He even faulted one of the women for having become an advocate on the issue of sexual violence.

We have good reasons not to tell. Most of us make our decisions based on what we think will let us best survive and, perhaps, move past the violence we have had done to us.

PAUSE

I almost never talk about my own experiences with male violence. I have a lot of reasons for this, some personal, some strategic, but over the past year I have found myself revisiting my decision to be silent. After all, as an advocate and frequent speaker on the issue of violence against women, I have a ready platform – a platform many women don't have. But how do I use that platform respectfully, in a way that honours all women who have male violence perpetrated on their bodies and souls, so that my story does not become the focus of the discussion but rather just one more story in a never-ending book of women's stories of male violence?

I have not figured out the answer to that question yet, but I am going to say this. When I was sexually assaulted in a hotel room in the early 1980s by a man I knew, a man who was a prominent member of my community, I felt utterly and absolutely terrified and powerless. And thirty years later, thanks to the Ghomeshi trial, it all feels as though it just happened yesterday.

My mother's voice is once again echoing through my head: "Never go into a hotel room with a man who is not your husband." Meaning – This is all my fault.

At the time, once I shoved that voice to the side – not that I ever silenced it completely – I started thinking about how to manage what was happening to minimize embarrassment to everyone around me. Meaning – I knew I could not tell anyone what had happened. Meaning – I had to act like nothing untoward was happening. I had to "carry on." After all, there were bigger issues in play than my safety and emotional well-being and it was my job, because I am a woman, to ensure things unfolded as they needed to.

So, I stayed – I went to the dinner, where he continued to touch me sexually, without my consent. I talked to people, I moved around the room, and it never, never, never occurred to me to say something or to leave.

Do you know what else I thought about through that horrible, long, never-ending evening? In fact, almost the only thing I thought about? How am I going to get my coat back from him without going into his hotel room? It never occurred to me that I could walk away from the coat. Never.

And, for years, I did not tell. Even now, I tell discreetly, as though I am going to be judged and found lacking for the fact that a man much bigger and stronger than me, with more power and credibility in my community, cornered me in his hotel room and sexually assaulted me.

Many of you have stories too – stories of men you trusted and loved who betrayed that trust and love – and many of you, like me, have decided not to tell those stories. All of our stories matter. All of our stories are truth and reality.

I recently read an interesting paper about how the criminal response to violence against women has, in effect, made women responsible for what happens to them. As Lise Gotell, a professor at the University of Alberta, puts it – women who fail to adhere to the rules of sexual safekeeping are blamed for their rapes. Sexual assault becomes, in her words, “something that individual women should try to avoid.”

Well, I don’t know about you, but I feel like I expend a lot of energy every single day doing just that already.

Of course, this analysis can be applied to all forms of male violence against women, not just sexual assault. When a woman is abused by her partner, it is her fault because she did not leave, she did not tell, she did not make a good enough safety plan. When a woman is stalked by her former partner or boyfriend that, too, is her fault. Such irony – we are blamed if we stay and we are blamed again if we leave.

Doing this – making women take responsibility for avoiding violence – also has the effect of obscuring the role of the perpetrator and the state in stopping the abuse.

There is no “bad” victim of male violence because it is never the victim’s fault.

As Justice Marvin Zucker wrote in his decision in the *Ururyar* case (better known to many of us as the *Mandi Gray* case): “Battered women do not enjoy abuse, do not provoke it and do not have psychopathology. Indeed, battered women have no psychological profile (at least before they are abused). Being female is what makes a woman vulnerable to being abused.”

That said, some victims are easier for the criminal system to understand than others. Jennifer Leigh O’Neil is such a survivor. Jenni was abducted and sexually assaulted when she was in her early 20s and, in the past year, has become a public speaker and advocate on the issue of violence against women. In her submission to the Legislative Special Committee looking at sexual violence in Ontario, Jenni had this to say about reporting to the police:

“So, why did I report? We often ask why women don’t report. Maybe asking why they do could narrow in on the necessary conditions for when to participate in our justice system.

Number one, I reported because it was horrible.

I reported because I needed to know that my country could recognize that what happened to me was a crime, because I care about sovereignty and government legitimacy.

I reported because I am a survivor of childhood sexual assault.

I reported because I have family support.

I reported because I have a supportive and progressive community who understand the complexity and relevance of sexual violence.

I have top-end, privately funded healing resources, due to a community member offering me funds.

I'm privileged. I'm white, I'm able-bodied. I'm hetero-seeming, I'm attractive.

I did nothing to earn any of these things, but these attributes allow me more sympathy from the public at large. **I look like a perfect victim.**

I reported because my perpetrator was a stranger. Naming a strange as a rapist or a perpetrator is much easier than naming a community member, a family member, a spouse, a parent. We all like to think that evil lives outside the walls of our homes and familiarity.

I reported because I'm articulate and educated in the field of oppression. It gave me a toolkit to understand my experience and to defend myself against discrimination within the justice system.

For all these reasons, I reported. There are a thousand and one reasons why women don't report and, honestly, all of them are really good reasons."

Where does all of this leave us? With lots of work still to do. But you know what? I am inspired by women – young women like Jennifer Leigh O'Neil, not as young women like Jackie Hong, older women who have the courage to leave abusive men and report their abuse to the police.

Lots to do, but lots of us to do it. We can do it!

Owen Palette: “At no point will I ever give my friend Joan’s version of the truth more credence than the version of the truth offered up by three women. Let’s be clear. Whether the court decides that predatory men are punished or exonerated does not silence the voices of the victims. It does not make victims liars. Whether our culture continues to celebrate the works of predatory men is another issue. It does not silence the voices of the victims.”