

16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence

25th November to 10th December 2020



#notallviolenceisphysicalorvisible

I met him when I came to England to visit my sister; and when I returned to Nigeria, he got in touch. He was very nice, warm, caring, had attention to detail and gradually it came to feel like this was the type of person I wanted in my life, to build a future with. I felt a connection that we could care for each other.

In hindsight, I can make some connections (with DA) now, because this person appeared above expectations, beyond the 'normal'. He was overly pleasant, very apologetic, even when I was taking my work stress out on him. I think this led me into thinking he was someone I could lean on and feel safe with. It was a long-distance courtship, but he was attentive and accepting to a fault, though, he was also invasive wanting to know everything about my history.

The courtship was on and off for 3 to 4 years and when he travelled over sometime, (we were from the same country), I noticed that he seemed like a 'know it all', dictating what I should do, even though I was in my late twenties. I had led an independent life, and this person came into my life, dictating what I should/should not eat even when I bought the food with own money. At the time, the excuse in my head was that this person cared about me and not to add on weight. Thinking about that, I have never been the type to throw caution to the wind with food. At a gathering, he openly said "Go easy on that butter", right in front of everyone and I felt that was uncalled for. I did not really think too much about it though, that it was anything out of the ordinary.

We got married in my home country and I came over to join him in the UK but started seeing the cracks 6/7 months down the line. The difference was so massive, he switched from that attentive, caring person to a domineering and controlling one. When I first arrived, I had some money of my own, but we spent it doing activities together – I was fine with that. At a point, he did not want me to relate with even my sister, through whom he got to know me. I was not working, and it became worse as my immigration status depended on him.

I finally got a job about 10 months after arrival in the UK, having applied for multiple jobs. He had insisted we open a joint account from the start, but that never happened since I wasn't working, and this gave me the 'window' to see exactly who I was dealing with.

Not all violence is physical or visible; control and manipulation is abuse too.



He offered no support toward adjusting to living in this country and things started adding up to let me see who he really was. There was a particular incident where I felt I had to stand up to him. I couldn't get anything right, I couldn't dress right, I couldn't cook right, and I thought what does he want from me? I had lost touch with myself, trying to make the marriage work by trying to please him.

There was nothing I could do to please him. He started comparing me to his ex-wife, saying that was how the ex "started" and that was too much for me. The physical violence had not started at this point but there was an occasion when he raised his fist and I made it clear that if he hits me, I will call the Police. He punched the wall and threatened to destroy me if I called the police. The reality of what my marriage had become dawned on me. I gave up everything to be with him, I resigned my job and left my daughter from an earlier relationship, who was meant to join us soon as I settled. It was traumatic because marriage is a 'big thing' in my culture, the woman is considered a failure when a marriage fails.

However, I stood up to him because I'd had enough, he said I should leave and return home. I really considered the option but I had no money to buy a flight ticket. The marriage had broken down at this time, but he would force himself on me, I felt boxed into a corner, because I had no one to help me, although I never thought it was rape because we were married.

The dynamics of the relationship changed when I found out I was pregnant; he started pressurising me to have an abortion. He said as things were not good between us, I had to "do away with the child". As a Christian, abortion is never an option. I realised how 'boxed in' and vulnerable I was, when I started feeling really pressured to agree to his demands. He said he could not afford to have a child. He made me believe he would have to pay hospital bills. I never realised at that point that healthcare is free in the UK. Back home in my country I would have had to pay. I became desperate at this point; I had no money to raise a child by myself and I was trying to get a job so I could get some money to return home to my country. I was pushed to the edge.

He took me to the GP and then the hospital, on both occasions the doctors asked to speak with me alone because they could see he was controlling. The professionals asked me what I wanted, and I told them I did not want to abort my baby, but I felt I was losing my mind over the trauma of it all. The GP told me I should not be forced into doing anything I do not want, yet it didn't really click with me. The consultant also said that I didn't have to do it; he said this is England, not Africa, and nobody can push you into doing something you don't want to do. He said if I wanted to keep my baby, I should go take care of myself and that I would pull through.



As soon as I walked out, he was waiting at reception and asked me when it would happen and I told him I was not doing it; he walked out and that was the last time we spoke until I had the baby 7/8 months later. I found a job a few days after and that was my saving grace. I worked five to six nights a week and only came home to sleep in the day when he wasn't there, that was the escape for me. If that hadn't happened, I don't know how I would have pulled through. When I had the baby, there were some difficulties, I was due to have a C-section and there was nobody I could talk to, I didn't even tell him, we were like strangers in the same house; he didn't attend any appointments with me.

The day I had my baby, I asked my sister to stay with me, even though she lived in another town. However, a few days before the date, my ex found out that I needed a section; someone at the church had told him. When he saw the baby, he appeared to be full of remorse and said he wanted to start all over again. I thought that's fine, but this phase only lasted about a week; I later realised he was not remorseful at all.

There was an incident in the car, the verbal abuse was so bad that I got out of the car, while in motion with my son still in his car seat. This was only a week after the birth, I had totally lost it, cars were swerving around me and the baby, it was like I was watching a film, I was totally disconnected. I managed to cross over the road and sat on a wall as I was no longer able to hold the car seat. He drove away and I eventually took a taxi home. He carried on verbally abusing me, I could not handle it with concentrating on the little child and being in pain from the C/section wound. I thought there was no way I could survive it on my own and thought that was going to be the end of me. But I found a strength within me, my child and my belief in God gave me the strength to survive.

When Health Visitors came, he would sit in the room and give me the look daring me to say anything to them. At that point I became fearful and felt threatened and worried that he might harm my son. After my maternity leave, I got a better job and the support I got from the workplace empowered me. I remember a day when I was going to work and saw a poster about DA, it suddenly hit home and became reality for me. That's when I realised what was happening to me; the fear had stopped me processing things until now. It dawned on me that I was being abused and I wondered what I could do about it. I had a wonderful manager at work, I was crying one day and she pulled me to one side and got it out of me; her response was lifesaving. She was very supportive, allowed me to make my own decisions, saying she would support me whatever. At that time, I didn't have my leave to remain, I was still on a spousal visa which was due to run out so I was totally dependent on him. I didn't know that if there was DA, I could apply on those grounds for leave to remain in my own right.

Even when it got to the point where my manager got me to talk to a support organisation, they did the DASH but said it wasn't high risk and so I didn't meet the threshold for immediate support. At this point, I felt there was nothing I could do and that I had to continue as it was. At the point when my son was close to 2 years, we went to Nigeria to visit family. As the time came when we were due to return to England, I had a nagging fear within me, a forbidding fear that I was going back to something terrible.



I returned home, he had removed everything from the flat, there were no lights or heating, the flat was cold. I tried searching for the cards for the top up meters, they were not there. I contacted a friend, and she came, and I used her phone to call the providers who topped up the meters so we could at least get through the night. On my way to work the next day, I took my son to the childminder and she told me that my ex had cancelled the contract; I burst into tears but she agreed to take him for the day.

After work, I explained what has happened with my ex etc. The childcare costs were about £1200 a month but when I was with my ex, he was getting childcare support, so we had help with the costs. I only earned about £1800 but I had to do it, it was the only way to be able to buy food and survive each day.

I went from one charity to another, trying to get advice and support; I tried to get a free 30 minutes with a solicitor to no avail.

There was no support, we only came to the attention of Social Care when we moved out of the flat. I found out that he was coming to the flat when I was at work and going through my stuff; he had a key to the flat and it was in his name. I had started locking the door of my bedroom and taking the key to work with me. I got home one day; he had been in the flat to change the lock to the guest room. I became very fearful for my life, sensitive to sounds and was having trouble sleeping. I moved furniture behind the bedroom door at night-time to feel safe.

At work the next day, I told my manager and she encouraged me to report to the Police. When they attended, I explained things to them, when I told them that he had been forcing himself on me, the officers said that was rape. At this time, it dawned on me that a crime had been committed against me. The Police said they were going to call him for questioning because I didn't want to press charges. I just wanted to be out of the situation and be safe. The Police asked me what I wanted to happen, I told them I had a job etc, I just needed somewhere affordable to live. The Police referred us to Social Care and the case was heard at MARAC but I had no lasting support from the MARAC process.

On the evening I finally left, I was a block away from the house with my son and I saw lights on; I started shaking with fear and thought that if I went in the house, it would be the end of me. I rang a lady from church, and she let me come over, we were there about a week or so and we left when she needed the space. My son's childminder offered us her box room which we shared with her two children when she discovered I slept out in the open with my 2year old son. The room had a bunk bed, the childminder's 2 children had the top bunk, my son and I had the bottom bunk, at least it was a place to stay.

I try not to remember the trauma of it all. I felt that my son had done nothing in the world to deserve what had happened. The experience has given me the push to succeed and to help others, nobody deserves to go through what I went through. While going through it all, I never felt that Social Care looked at what my coping mechanisms were. I hope that has changed now so all social workers would look for the strength in victims of DA, it was my inner strength that gave me the drive to leave him.

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Shortly after we moved to live in the childminders box room, my son had his 2yr Health Visitor visit and when she saw the sleeping arrangements, she said it wasn't suitable, so she referred it to Social Care. As this was the second referral, they got in touch and DA services also offered support. Social care got in touch with my ex and asked him if he was going to support me to get a place; he refused and told them I had abused him financially, even though he never supported us while we were with him. Social Care believed him and he told them to take my child off me if I could not support him and return my son to him; the day Social Care told me this, I cried blood.

I asked if they would take me child off me and give him back to an abuser? They said that he had told them there had been no abuse since I was pregnant, so I asked them what I did wrong? I told them that all I have done was try and protect my son. They told me to go and talk to my ex and come to some agreement? I asked them - how is this possible when I had fled from him in fear for myself and my son. When Social Care became involved, everything got much worse, they said they could not offer me any support. They gave me options to either have my son live with my sister or they place him in foster care.

I could not believe it; this was only 4 years ago! Nobody told me what my real options were, nobody told me what support was available. I was really pushed against the wall as the services were against me. The Police rang and told me that I should go to court, that I should give recorded evidence. I said I didn't want to have anything to do with him, I just wanted to move on. A Police Officer said to me that I only went to the Police so they would get me a place to live.

At this point, I was in a hotel and Social Care said if, by the next day, I didn't have a place to stay, they would take my son off me and hand him to my sister. I informed them that my sister worked full time and she wouldn't have the time to care for a 2year old. I asked them what I had done wrong, I hadn't made any life choices that would put my son at risk, I wasn't a drunk, so why can't he stay with me? This conversation took place over the phone, I had just had enough. My phone powered off and when I picked my son up from the minders I just 'disappeared' since my contract at work had ended on same day.

When SC couldn't find or contact me, I think they panicked and contacted the Police who began searching for me. They contacted my sister and they started calling all the people I knew in the city. They contacted the friend I was with and then turned up at 3 in the morning. I told them that all I had done was try and protect my son.

The Police Officer wasn't there to judge me and so I told him my story. The Police Officer asked to see my son and they saw him sleeping, he was fine. The next day, Social Care dropped my son and I off at my sister's house and left us there; the Social Worker told me to contact CAB if I needed any support/advice.



A few days later local Social Care staff turned up saying they received a referral raising concerns about my parenting, that I was not putting my son first. They needed to do an assessment and I told them everything that had transpired. They went back to their manager for advice. I was also visited by a Sure Start worker who knew what my options were; she had been through DA herself and she could relate with my experience. That was what helped me.

She told me what all my options were and that was how I ended up in a refuge in Sheffield. My life is good now, I was in the refuge for 7 months and they helped me sort everything out.

In terms of advice I would give to others:

Be aware of what constitute acceptable behaviours in a relationship. Even though I had been in previous relationships, he still got me to buy into this extraordinarily affectionate person. Now, with hindsight, I would be very cautious around someone showing such traits.



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