

Domestic Violence: A Personal Reflection and Journey

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My story is not so different from many others – an arranged marriage at a young age (barely a teen). My account may echo or resonate with those who read it. I hope that telling it will help others heal or give hope to those still stuck in a cycle of violence.

In the Arab community, domestic violence is a taboo subject. I come from a Yemeni family, where this topic is hard to talk about in a formal circle. I was born and raised in the U.S. and was married at 15 years old, like many of my peers. Arranged marriages were the norm in my generation. We didn't get to finish school or choose whom we married but were deluded into believing that we did. Control was part of being Yemeni and, for some of us, so was domestic violence.

The abuse wasn't physical; that would come later. I educated myself about marriage in Islam and how we should practice it. I learned that both men and women were entitled to respect. But what I learned from my research differed from what my elders and culture had taught. It was completely different from what I had seen or experienced. For as long as I could remember, women not being allowed to seek an education or form opinions about minor things had been the norm in my culture.

I had never been able to accept that and told myself repeatedly that it had to be wrong.

I tried leaving my husband for various reasons, not just because he wanted complete control. I was unhappy with him and thus could not connect with him on any level. It also felt wrong to be with him. However, again, elders and family continued to say, “You think marriage is supposed to be happy. It's not, so stop complaining!” I went so far as to try and resolve the issue myself by confronting my husband and telling him I wanted a divorce. He threatened to kill me, which was the first time he had done this. I became afraid because I believed him. I told my family, but no one intervened. Instead, they thought it was a joke. I continued to search for a way out, but my husband only got angrier. I had gotten the courage to confront him because I had thought I'd be safe doing so while visiting my family. But it didn't make it safer. My faith and prayers are what got me through, for I knew deep down that God does not want His servants to be treated this way, and my research proved this. That revelation helped me continue to search for a way out.

Domestic violence manifests itself in a variety of ways and causes long-term trauma. My husband wanted to control me and mold me into what he wanted. When I felt the end was nowhere in sight, I slowly lost my voice and identity. I went from being outspoken and confident to being submissive and

fearful. Help wasn't coming, I'd tell myself. And yet, there was a tiny part of me that would say, "Maybe not right now, but it's coming." I carried that slight bit of hope with me throughout my hardships, the cheating behind my back, financial, emotional, and psychological abuse. Sadly, I began to hate who I was and neglect myself little by little. One of my tipping points was when he threatened to take my kids away while on a trip overseas. He even said he was unstoppable and I had no power. He would mock me for praying, for wanting to go to the mosque or congregate with Muslim sisters from different countries. He'd say, "They aren't real Muslims and will brainwash you." He'd play mind games and try to manipulate me, trick me, or task me with chores until my feet and back hurt. It did not matter if I was pregnant or postpartum; he did not respect my body or voice.

I began to feel numb and, often, worthless. I remember crying to my Creator and asking how men like this can treat women this way and claim to be Muslim? I called and pleaded my case to my Creator as I prepped Ramadan dinner over a gas range with tears running down my face. I felt my faith begin to weaken, and in that instant, I felt it strengthen as I felt a cold and soothing feeling on my back. A cool sensation brushed my right shoulder to the middle of my back and restored my faith. I had pleaded my case to God, and He responded. He reassured me that He had heard my cries and wanted me to know.

Many events pushed me to the brink of a nervous breakdown. However, I remained firm in my faith, knowing that a door would open someday and allow me the opportunity for escape because God had responded. The same night I cried to God, my husband's affair became known to the world and his reign of terror and lies were coming to light. It was as if that was God's way of reaffirming that He had heard my pleas. Because my faith had grown even more substantial, I knew never to doubt it again. I continued to believe that the day to escape would come. That day finally came, but in a way I never would have expected. I think about it even at this moment, and I feel my faith strengthen; God never forgot me because I never forgot Him.

The day of my escape began with my daily routine of sending my kids to school, preparing breakfast for my husband, and then leaving home to avoid being around him. I will never forget the feeling I got when I returned home to a couple of blacked-out SUVs and a police car on the side of our house. That day I learned that my husband was under federal investigation. The agents advised me to call someone to pick me up so I wouldn't be alone after seeing how distraught I was. They also didn't want to scare my son, who was on his way home from preschool. The agent in charge told me that my husband had been taken in for questioning. It was the scariest and most relieving feeling in the world. I felt a sense of relief through the shock and tears. I had another sensation of God telling me He had again heard my pleas. I immediately called a divorce lawyer because my instincts said, "It's now or never!" I was no longer afraid of my husband at that moment,

and I could hear God telling me, “You were afraid of him; now I have sent someone for him to fear. This is your chance to get away.” This new revelation would make it easier to fight for my freedom, and it did. During my marriage, my health had also become affected. Tension headaches, dizzy spells, and panic attacks were almost daily. Believe it or not, they disappeared the same day my chance for escape came.

In my times of hardship, the community turned its back. Family members and whomever I reached out to for help made me feel helpless or that this was normal. I was an advocate for any woman who needed it, no matter what I was going through. Unfortunately, not many returned the favor when I fought to get away. But I didn't expect anything less. I saw the struggles and challenges of my Muslim sisters and why leaving an abusive relationship is not easy. I know because I've been there.

Leaving can be dangerous, and I know this firsthand. Emotional and psychological abuse soon turned physical and even deadly when I refused to remain complicit in my abuse. I stood up for myself yet again, only to realize how careful I must be because I had no support from my community. I stood up to my abuser and found allies in unlikely places. I found support in my Muslim sisters from other countries — a neighbor friend, and even law enforcement. I was lucky enough to find a fantastic lawyer who helped me find the strength to fight back. I only found this attorney because of another attorney I knew through my networking. Yes, networking and building relationships and friendships with people outside your usual circle come in handy when you least expect it. Going to gatherings where influential people are can also be helpful. I received support from a mentor and female chaplain in the Muslim community. I wouldn't have met her if I had not gone to one of her seminars at a local library. Unfortunately, resources for Muslim women can be slim to none in many areas. One of the most important things I did before every major decision on my journey of escape was praying *istikhārah*.

Islam gives women a platform and a voice. We have incredible, courageous women in our history. I live my life every day reminding myself of that, and it gives me strength and hope.

Five years later, I continue fighting for my sisters and have become a voice and a guide for those who need it. Just like the Muslim mothers and sisters before me, I will continue to amplify the voices of the voiceless and advocate for women's education, empowerment, and independence. Islam teaches us to be the voice of reason, not the voice of destruction, to amplify our sisters' voices, and to provide education to them and the rest of the community. We must educate ourselves and those around us. We must put an end to the corruption and destruction of women's rights.

If we seek advice from those around us who are part of the problem, we will never manage to eliminate domestic violence or any violence in Muslim communities. Sharing our stories and experiences sheds light on situations that others may be going through. Do not be ashamed to ask for help. Learn who to ask by building your network. Do not tell anyone your plans, not even your best friend. Keep money with a friend, a suitcase, and essential documents. I never told anyone my plans, especially when I got my restraining order. Women in my community were under their husbands' scrutiny about their involvement or knowledge of my goals. Luckily, I never trusted anyone but Allah, which not only worked for me in the end, but works for other women as well. It is sometimes a bad idea to seek help from people in our immediate circles, whether a mosque leader or person in the religious community, unless they have significant training in victim support. Elders are not the best at assisting either, for they have suffered their share of cultural norms and may not be the best ones to turn to for advice. Other women can be very judgmental as well. In my experience, women are always the first ones to betray you because they thought they were proving themselves to be loyal wives.

Furthermore, leaving is only the first step; many other actions must follow. It will appear impossible and frightening at first but will become easier with each step and will be worthwhile in the end. I do not regret any part of my decision, and that is because I asked for guidance from God with every step I took; all I had to do was listen. I recently graduated with honors from community college and received a prestigious scholarship to a university. Keep your faith and never give up because Allah does not give up on you.