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My wife physically abused me for 20 years:

Reluctant to report it, more and more men are becoming victims of domestic violence. *John Costello reports*

By John Costello

The attack was ferocious. A spittle-soaked volley of expletives exploded from the twisted, enraged face as Brendan* tried to deflect the blows. An empty bottle struck him on the back as he turned and ran for the sanctuary of the bathroom.

He quickly locked the door behind him, his breath heavy and his heart pounding. His large six-foot frame slumped to the ground, his head held in hands. The vitriolic tirade continued to erupt on the other side of the door, his wife who was half his size, still venting her uncontrollable fury.

"The episodes of physical violence, punching and kicking, were maybe once a week," recalls Brendan. "I was a big man and she was only five-foot nothing. She was only half my size so anyone looking at us would say, 'Ah there's only one aggressor there, that's that big strong man.'

The police, the courts and the social workers took her side of things at the beginning, but I kept telling them that she's an alcoholic and that she was attacking me. It took them a long time to cop on that this was in fact the situation."

Brendan's horrific experience is far from unique. Last year 3,644 men contacted Amen, a support service of male victims of domestic abuse -- an 80% rise on the previous year.

This surge in victims reporting abuse has been so great it has even prompted RTE's Fair City to run a male domestic abuse story line, where Suzanne violently attacks Damien. But for many men their experience is far from that of soap opera fiction.

A quarter of callers reported being stabbed, burnt by cigarettes and having their hair pulled out.

One-third suffered verbal abuse, while 38% were subject to psychological abuse, according to Amen's annual report.

"If I stood up for myself then I was the attacker, I was the aggressor," says Brendan. "She would turn the tables and on some occasions she would go as far as calling the police and saying, 'Look what he's after doing to me' and I would have done nothing. It would have been turned around totally."

Brendan grew up in the west of Ireland and moved to Dublin with his job in his early twenties. He married quickly, but soon the telltale signs of future abuse became evident.

"People ask if I did not see the warning signs," he says. "Of course I did, but like many other people when you are in a relationship you ignore them. She was very controlling and used to lose her temper if I didn't do exactly what she wanted. But you think this is going to change and this is only a blip. You blame yourself for it."

Most of his wife's violence stemmed from alcohol and as the months and years passed, her drinking and temper escalated to an unbearable level.

"It developed into shouting matches and then into a little bit of pushing and shoving, and then punching and kicking," he says. "It often happened in public and people would never want to know. It could be in a pub, in a restaurant or when we were walking on the street."

But it was not just physical attacks. "It was also psychological," says Brendan. "She would be always making you out to be a no-good person."

"She would call you a bully if you stood up to her. She would call you a wimp if you didn't stand up to her.

"It was like walking on eggshells all the time and you didn't know when the next episode was going to happen.

"But I think the fear was worse than anything else. It was the fear of hearing her feet pound down the hall and I knew I'd have to be gone when she arrived or I'd be in for it. I used to have to lock myself in the bathroom so I wouldn't be attacked."

Things became so bad Brendan applied for and was granted a protection order from the courts, but the authorities still had little sympathy for his situation.

"I remember one time when the police arrived one of them saying to me, 'Ah wouldn't you just leave tonight and just go somewhere?' But here was me having the protection order in place and I had to leave her in the family home. I was the one that had to walk away. That was the most hurtful thing of all."

His wife's drinking and violent behaviour continued to spiral out of control.

"I got a phonecall late one night asking, 'Can you come and collect your wife? She's here in the police station. She's been arrested for being drunk and disorderly and in breach of the peace.'

"And I said no I am not going to come and collect her, because I know what's going to happen. She's going to attack me and I'll be calling you again, so keep her for the night. This was a continuous cycle all the time of madness."

Isolated and alone, like most men experiencing domestic abuse, Brendan had nowhere to turn.

"I felt I was getting no help from anybody," he says. "The marriage was over but I was staying for the sake of our three young children. I used to plead with her not to shout in front of the kids and not to drink in front of them, but she used to bring them as an audience when she attacked me.

"She'd say, 'Now look at your daddy and see what type of man he is.' She tried to get me to retaliate. It was this provocation -- to try and get me to do something. She'd roar at me, 'Go on, hit me! Hit me now!'"

Even though the UK charity Parity claims 40% of domestic abuse cases are male, assaults by wives and girlfriends are often ignored by police, social workers and the media.

"I did anything but talk about it for a long time," says Brendan.

'I would go out with my friends and try to forget about it. But when women go out, they talk about it. Men don't talk and that's the sad part of it. One in 25 men report, whereas one in five women report at a very early stage. It took me 20 years before I reported mine."

Brendan's wife eventually secured a barring order against him, forcing him to leave the family home. It was only through lengthy court procedures that the authorities discovered the truth and gave Brendan custody of his children after his wife was deemed unfit to raise them.

"Through all this experience I've learned to live with it and accept it,' he says. "But the sad thing is society doesn't accept it. Society believes it doesn't happen to men. And that's the big problem."

*Brendan's name has been changed to protect his identity. The interview was arranged through Amen, the support group for male domestic abuse (www.amen.ie).

- John Costello
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