

Power, Evidence, Validation & Legitimacy

Who has the Power to be Heard and **How Can We Change It?**

It's really hard evidencing something when language poses a limitation on your ability to describe what has happened.

As victim/survivors of domestic abuse, coercive control, sexual coercion and sexual violence, we are told to write down everything that happened. We are told to keep a journal of what happened and how it impacted us, as that is often the only means we have of evidencing what has happen, that it happened and that we're not exaggerating or lying or mistaken.

It's the only way, in the absence of witnesses,
It's the only way in the absence of a recording of an act of violence or a threat, or an email threat or a text message.

And even though victims are told they will be believed, they are often met with eye-rolls, impatience, baffled amusement, confusion or simply plain old lack of disbelief and that what we are saying is really not severe enough to have impacted us in the way we claim or credible enough to be afforded credence.

It's no surprise that reports of abuse are taken more seriously when there is accompanying physical violence, after all it's a much easier investigation however I have yet to meet a victim/survivor who HAS both experienced and been able to evidence physical violence, who HASN'T said that the emotional, the psychological, the controlling parts of the abuse were much harder to recover from than the physical and yet.....

Yet knowing this, society still maintains that abuse, in the absence of physical violence is minor, not as serious, too low level to be taken seriously. It almost never reaches the criminal threshold of "Beyond Reasonable Doubt" even though a victim/survivor journey to recovery will very often be that much harder and often accompanied by self doubt and self blame.

Broken bones and bruises heal but that voice in your head, the memory of the deadness behind his eyes, the chilling snarl of his lips as he repeatedly told you you were worthless, and nothing and would be better off dead as no one would miss you. The constant drip, drip of undermining and erosion that gouges your very being until it resembles an escalation site and yet the criminal justice system is ill-equipped to see that eroding of the self as violence to the psyche.

Those messages- we rarely get them out of our head even if we are able to move on. They cut deeper, heal slower as searing as a third-degree burn hidden behind a cloak of invisibility and yet we are conditioned to believe that what was inflicted was minor and so we feel flawed and

worthless and not worthy of being believed because, we aren't really sure that we believe it ourselves.

I've spent a long time thinking about how we can change this understanding because, at the moment, it's not really working. Yes, coercive control and controlling behaviour have entered the lexicon of the everyday person in everyday day life, but too often it's used as a buzzword that few really truly understand the meaning of - or it is regarded as a series of acts without understanding the corresponding impact of those acts on the victim/survivor.

I laugh when I see someone talk about cohesive control and not because they got it wrong. That laugh is bittersweet because maybe cohesive is a better descriptor than coercive- after all, the perpetrator makes sure you are bonded to him.

I'm still trying to work this out and maybe it doesn't make sense now but I truly believe that what we need is to look at language and where the gaps are and fill them in.

At the moment evidence is primarily focused on what someone can SEE

What we need to change is the focus on what we HEAR.

Victim/Survivor language needs to change, it needs to be expanded to truly capture the experiences and the depths of the torment.

The word abuse just doesn't cut it.

The words we use, distress, fear, isolated, disempowered, terror, terrified, walking on eggshells, trauma, anxious, despressed, desperation. What we word we use, it's been used and overused and fails to viscerally describe what was done and how deeply it seared.

I once read a book which described how Inuits had 50 words for the word snow whereas we just have snow,

And that is what we need . A vocabulary that truly reflects the abuse that the eye can not see so that those in the law enforcement, criminal justice and family court systems can truly HEAR.

But first we have to start by destigamtising the word victim.

Perpetrators use the word to undermine victims. They use it in a way that gives it negative energy and we can't let them.

Being a victim isn't saying we're weak.

Or pathetic

Or pitiful.

You don't hear people claiming to have survived a burglary or a mugging or credit-card fraud or bullying and yet women who have been subjected to acts of violence and police can't even use language to describe what a perpetrator did without being judged for it.