

There were many years in which I felt like the 'lucky one' in my small friendship circle, most of them had a sexual horror story and at the time, the only contributions I had to make came from empathy and not experience, in 2011 that changed.

I left my ex-husband at the start of 2011; at the time I left things were tense, but civil, that didn't last long. In an attempt to cut a very long story short - basically after leaving he became overly controlling, I tried IVO's, but the police officer who was meant to serve the order changed it, unbeknownst to me, this then led to case dismissal and enabled my ex to spend five years decimating me in court using his lawyer brother. Not long into the IVO nightmare, I went to court to try to get another IVO and after coming across the nastiest magistrate I've ever had the displeasure of being in front of, I went to the police station to try to make a statement about having ex charged with domestic abuse - I had hoped that would be the beginning of the end, instead, it was just the beginning of a new horror story.

I had written something to take to court, not knowing where to start my story, I showed the very young constable. As she was reading, she pointed to one line and said, "that's sexual assault" and to the next line she said, "that's rape, I need to go and speak to my Sergeant". When I left in January I knew I'd had a bad marriage, but in February I was told it was a DV relationship; March, that my children had been being sexually abused in front of my eyes and I didn't see it and now in April, I was told that what I'd believed to be a 'normal part of marriage' was sexual assault and rape - I lost the plot and was homeless by July.

My life turned into this unrecognisable extended version of SVU - my past had been a total lie; my present was a waking nightmare and every future I looked towards vanished before my eyes - everywhere I went in Victoria turned into a nightmare within a nightmare, there was no help; there was no support and what there was was fleeting or helpful once and a disaster if you went back - I had to leave my home state and go to Adelaide to get help.

Eventually I stumbled through a backdoor into Victoria's housing system where I did get the help and support I needed, but that was twelve months after this began and by then, I was a shell. I had literally lost everything because I went to our injustice system for help - I have since become a homelessness advocate because nobody in Australia should have my story.

Since becoming an advocate in 2014, I've heard more horror stories than you have time to hear - one woman, was sexually abused the first time at seven weeks old and so many other's, I've been in the unfortunate position of being able to say, "she was doing ok until her last gang rape." There's one young woman who basically can't leave her house without being abused - she literally has the internal and external scars of what one monster did to her and not one of us has any justice. Those of us who have been to the police have either been dismissed; made to feel we bought it on ourselves; that they've gone for something no evidence exists for and totally dismissed everything provable; they've left children in danger; they haven't followed their own freely available policy and procedures and they've had the sensitivity of steamrollers. Not one of us has made it to the DPP, no matter how much evidence they have. Police want to know why there's animosity towards them from the homeless community, this is one of the issues - just because people are homeless, it doesn't mean they aren't citizens, we can and do vote. I know you absolutely can discriminate against someone on the basis of their housing status, but that doesn't mean you should and the police should NEVER discriminate on this basis and yet they do all the time.

An issue around sexual assault and rape that for a while I'd only heard about from women in the homeless world, but then discovered it's prevalence, is what we have termed 'consensual rape'. What is 'consensual rape'? It is those times where you are in a situation, however you got there, in which you read the atmosphere and choose to 'lie back and think of England' so you can leave 'safely', rather than say "no" and risk a violent assault - I know I've been in this situation a number of times, what I didn't know was how many women have

been too. We think that by 'lying back' we're protecting ourselves, but it obviously does get through and does impact us - we should never be made to feel this is our only option, yet this is the case; it is rarely discussed; it's causing big issues and it needs to be raised from obscurity.

For a decade now, I've been caught in a world where sexual assault, abuse and rape are common - I'm hoping some of my male friends are contributing to this because the treatment in the aftermath for them is worse than it is for us. In the homeless world, almost everybody has a sexual trauma story. Sexual abuse is rampant and what help is out there, isn't for us. Just like so many other aspects of society, the justice system excludes us. After having had hundreds of conversations over the past decade, not one has received any form of justice - that's not for us. For us, the outcome (if we're lucky) is a shelter where we are treated like criminals and this has got to change. I think we'd all agree that survivors should never be made to feel at fault and yet as we fast approach 2021, welcome to homelessness in Victoria and to my world.


Homelessness Advocate