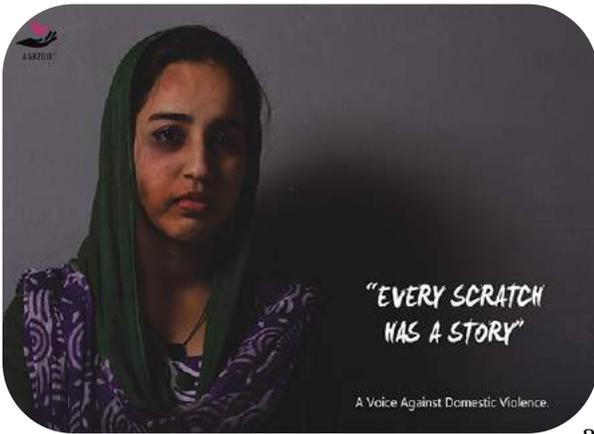


NOW I AM UNBREAKABLE



My husband was working as a beach boy in Batu Ferringhi, when I met him. I didn't fancy him at first but he persistently wooed me. He told me how his childhood was difficult as his uneducated mother struggled to support the family. His determination and willingness to help others captured my heart. He told me he couldn't imagine building a life with any other.

He proposed after a year. My parents did not agree to the match. His parents were always quarreling, his father was having multiple affairs, two of his brothers were drug addicts and the one brother who was doing well cared only for himself. My parents cautioned that my husband would not be able to keep me happy. I believed in our love and did not budge. *"Whatever comes your way from this day on- good or bad- you're on your own,"* my parents said on the day of the solemnisation. I went without any well-wishers to my mother-law's house. I was nineteen.

Initially, my husband and I would go out for meals, sit hand-in-hand, talk and laugh. My happiness was short lived. A month into marriage my husband and mother-law began showing their true colours. My wedding trousseau hadn't yet arrived and my mother-in-law dictated that I sleep on the floor instead of the bed until it did. When I protested my husband said I was making a mountain of a molehill. I slept on the floor every night for over a month.

I became the family maid. I had to prepare meals for everyone, clean the rooms, wash the clothes and do the gardening. Unaccustomed to this, I did my best to learn and impress, but my mother-in-law was a cruel supervisor. The food was too salty, or not salty enough. The beds were not made right. The clothes were not dried properly. *"What kind of girl are you? Didn't your mother teach you anything?"* She monitored my every movement, jeering and *chi chi-ing* at what I wore, what I watched on TV and how much I ate. I felt imprisoned.

Soon after marriage I got pregnant. I was forced to stay home and toil. My mother-in-law also spread poisonous stories about my family and me to others in the kampong. People would come up to me and accuse me of being a disgrace or question me on what they had heard.

I started working in a factory after the birth of my daughter. However, things at home didn't improve. I would arrive home after 12-hour shift to empty pots and a sink full of dirty dishes. Nobody cared if I had eaten or that my legs and back ached. I was expected to get straight to chores.

I tried talking things out with my mother-in-law, but that only worsened things. She would wait until my husband got home from work to incite arguments. She complained that I was lazy, irresponsible and disrespectful. I brought bad fortune to the house. My husband would get angry at me turned violent.

He slapped me. Pushed me against the wall. Choked me. Threw things at me. Once, he dragged me and threw me out of the house. *"What have I done to deserve this? Why are you beating me every day?"* My husband had turned into his mother's puppet. He accused me up of trying to break up the family. My husband never once stood up for me.

On days when life seemed unbearable, I would secretly go to my parents' house after work. Though happy to see me, my parents reminded me that I was merely a guest in their house. My friends at the factory advised me to save money for my children's future. So, I gave part of my wage to my mother for safekeeping, and the rest to my husband for my mother-in-law to run the house.

Unbeknownst to me, my husband had gambled the money away instead. It hurt me to hear her sneering, “*Good for nothing. Eating and living for free.*”

Day in day out my mother-in-law taunted me. My husband was largely absent; present only to hurt my body and heart. Is this what my life is going to be like? I must be so terrible to be treated like this. Why can't I get out? My thankless future stretched out in front of me. I was twenty-one and pregnant with my second child. I jumped into the sea wanting to drown and escape it all. However, God had different plans for me. I didn't drown and instead went back to my living hell.

After one particularly bad argument in which my husband beat me badly, I was rushed to the hospital. My face was blue-black and swollen. The doctor insisted I made a police report and referred me to WCC. The WCC social worker educated me about domestic violence and encouraged me to think differently but I couldn't.

Four years into marriage, my husband began bringing women home and introduced them as his girlfriends. When I protested, he said I wasn't sexy enough. I didn't know how to dress up. I was too argumentative. My mother-in-law encouraged my husband to leave me and marry someone else. I had spent all my married life taking care of my husband, children and mother-in-law. I couldn't bear the betrayal. I swallowed rat poison wanting to find permanent peace. Again, God saved me. I thought to myself, He has saved me twice He must want me to live.

It took me another six years to find the strength to make a change, but once I found it, it roared. I confronted my husband and asked him to choose between his mother and me. He chose his mother. So I packed up my belongings, took my four kids and went to my mother's house. I told them that I could no longer live in hell. I asked for her help to rebuild my life. From that point on my family became my biggest source of support.

I got a job as a machine operator in a factory. My grandmother looked after my children while I was at work. Each time I felt overwhelmed, my grandmother, mom and brother would say, “*Don't sit and cry Asha, you can do it.*” WCC also helped me a lot too by motivating me, guiding me to plan for the future and ensuring regular food donation.

After working many years and with the help of my siblings, I managed to buy a house. Once I had my own house, my husband visited me frequently. In 2012, after an accident in which he broke his legs, he moved in permanently. But now he could not control me. I was no longer the submissive downtrodden Asha. I have risen to the position of engine operator in my workplace. I dress how I want and go where I want. I can support my family on my own. I am a force to be reckoned with.

This story and artwork was written as part of WCC's *Doodle for Change* project on survivors' stories.

