Sarawak Women for Women Society

May 1996
## SWWS Committee 1996

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A lot of people don't understand why women stay in a relationship where they're victimised," says Theresa David, 38, a marketing manager who shares her story only because she hopes it will let women in a similar situation know there is an avenue out.

Theresa was divorced when, in 1990, she met Tony, an instructor at a management course sponsored by her office. She soon noticed that he was paying special attention to her. At the end of the course, he roped her in to help organise a party for the class.

Although it was established that Tony is married, both of them met often and had dinner together. As far as Theresa was concerned, nothing complicated was going on. They got together primarily to organise the class party. However, Theresa was concerned that Tony started talking more about himself and less about his wife. To allay her concern, he decided to arrange for the two women to meet.

"Tony and I were just friends, I thought, why so elaborate, why meet his wife? But I thought I might as well since it was better to assure her that we were only friends. My marriage was broken up by another woman and I didn't want to be put in the same position.

"He left us to talk and his wife said, 'I understand you are seeing each other'. She told me that even though they are staying together, they

Indonesia to attend to her sick mother. As he only worked evenings, he would help Theresa with the cooking and the cleaning. He would even help look after her son, Zac. And gradually, Tony moved in.

"My son was 10 at that time. I felt that he was looking for a father figure to relate to. And when Tony came into our lives, he would help Zac with his school work — he's very creative and knowledgable — and he would talk to him. Tony was putting so much effort into the boy. Even Zac's real father didn't put this kind of effort in. He would cry with Zac and hug him. It was all very pleasant."

But that was not for long. Tony's mean streak started to show and Zac was soon on the receiving end of his violent tantrums. "Initially, when he started lecturing my son, I would accept it because I thought the kid needed to be disciplined. But as a mother, I actually wondered if he was bullying the child."

If Theresa was cuddling Zac, Tony would slam the doors around the house to show his displeasure. Or he would bowl like a baby or pop bills of sorts into his mouth. "I would go hysterical and try to stop him. He'll push me away and go into the bathroom and drink water. At that time, I didn't know, but that couldn't have been real," reckons Theresa.

"Even today, I can say that Tony had a nice character and was very sensitive to my feelings, were no longer husband and wife. The only thing that was stopping them from getting divorced were their parents. She told me, 'if you do feel for him, you mustn't'. I wondered why she was offering her husband to me on a silver platter."

Theresa was to later find out that Tony's wife had been battered, and was relieved to have Tony find another distraction. On subsequent visits to Tony's home, Theresa noticed him shouting and screaming at his wife and parents. But she didn't see where the signs were pointing.

Still, Tony was such a nice person to have around, especially when Theresa's maid left for

likes and dislikes and would go all out to get me things that I liked. He was very caring and would do everything for me, even surprising me with breakfast in bed. I knew he cared for me, but I couldn't figure out why he was doing all these things. He didn't smoke or drink. His meanness was in his temper. He was such a big bully."

It got to a stage when Theresa would reprimand her son for merely asking for a drink in Tony's presence. "I scolded Zac, 'if Tony is around and you want something, just ask me quietly because he isn't happy with it.'"

On one particular incident, Tony got furious. D

BY GEMMA KOH
because Theresa was fussing over Zac while Tony washed the car. "His argument," says Theresa, "was that I knew he was washing the car and yet I didn't bring him a drink. But if you're an adult, you want a drink, you ask. I'll bring it to you."

Tony then insisted on leaving at that very moment to ferry Zac to piano classes which weren't to start for another two hours. "He was horning, horning, horning for us from the carpark. Then he drove very crazily at 120km/h. When we dropped Zac off, I told Tony to drive slower or I would get out of the car. But he refused. I opened the door to get out when we stopped at a red light but he hit me on the leg," she says, pulling up her skirt to reveal a circular scar of teeth marks just above her knee. "I screamed. Passers-by tried to pull me out of the car, but they couldn't because he wouldn't let go. He bit for so long, I was hysterical.

"Then he revved the engine and drove off with the door still open. The car hit the road divider and the tyre burst. Luckily, there were no oncoming cars. I had to shut the door. He was very verbal and was scolding me very loudly. All this while I was screaming away."

"He got out to change the tyre and warned that if I tried to leave the car, he would beat me with a bat he keeps by the driver's seat — just in case he encounters trouble on the road. I saw a patrol car and horned. But they didn't hear. He came and shouted at me. Like before, he used his size, strength and voice to scare me. He was such a bully."

"Later, he brought me to a doctor. I said, 'Doctor, you know he bit me. You as a doctor, wouldn't you make a police report?' The doctor didn't say anything. Apparently, he was a family friend. He just put some ointment on the bite. And I, I didn't make a police report."

Theresa breaks down as she tells of the time Tony wouldn't let Zac into her apartment. "Do you know how it feels when you find your son sleeping on the floor of the lift lobby?" When Tony fell asleep, Theresa led Zac back in and put him to bed. When Tony woke up in the morning and saw Zac in the flat, he demanded that Theresa make him leave.

"He's my son. It's my home. But I woke Zac up and asked him to leave. I told him. Just to let you know how crazy he is, remember mommy told you, I was bitten on the leg by a dog? It's not true. I wasn't bitten by a dog. He bit me here. He's so terrible, I'm scared he'll do something to you. You'd better go."

But the last straw came when Tony hit Zac with a brass bookend.

"Tony wouldn't let Zac listen to Depeche Mode because he claimed they were satanic. They got into an argument and I knew my son would lose, because Tony's so big sized. He took the bookend and hit the boy on the head. I tried to stop him but he pulled me into the bedroom and threw me onto the floor. At that time, it didn't hurt. I was trying to keep him in the room so Zac could call his dad. I remember Tony smashing the phone on the floor. I screamed at Zac to call the police. Thankfully, we had another phone in the kitchen and he used that to call his father."

"My exhusband came and when the two men left the flat, I quickly locked five months until the day after his exams. Theresa had already tried to run away from Tony on two occasions, but he would harass her colleagues or son. Somehow, he always managed to track her down and convince her to return with threats of suicide. Another time he promised not to control her movements.

"But," says Theresa, "when he overheard me making dinner plans with my girlfriends, he got angry and demanded to know why I was making arrangements without consulting him. I asked, 'Haven't you forgotten you said you wouldn't interfere?' He said, 'That was before. Now you have me. You have to discuss with me.'"

One of the reasons Theresa gives for going back to Tony was because she knew that he cared for her. "Knowing that he loved me and would try himself for me was one of the reasons why I went back."

This time, having made arrangements with the crisis centre, which would be her refuge for two months, Theresa tried not to aggravate Tony even if it meant "acting stupid" or covering in a corner while Tony threw a bag of duriens at her. "I didn't do anything because it would have made things worse."

"And I was so sick of him pestering me for sex all the time. He had a very high sex drive and would get angry and not let me sleep even if I was tired. I got so fed up that I'd just strip myself and think: 'Okay, you want it, just shove it in, shove it up.' Because I'm leaving, I'm not going to cause any trouble."

"I called my counsellor several times crying, 'I can't take it any longer.' She said, 'If you leave now, leave for good. If you leave and come back, it doesn't serve any purpose.'"

As the day neared, Theresa packed some things including her important documents and left them with her neighbour. "I told her what was happening and I couldn't let Tony know I was leaving."

On the day of Theresa's planned escape, she removed all her photographs from Tony's wallet while he was in the shower. She pretended everything was normal and promised she'd have supper ready when he came back from class. The
HE GOT OUT to change the tyre and warned that if I tried to leave the car, he would beat me with a bat he keeps by the driver's seat.

Tony had not come to get his things and sent it to his house. A locksmith came to change the door locks and leaving her son in the care of her ex-husband, she left for the crisis centre.

"Staying at the crisis centre was an eye-opener for me. I wondered what I was doing there among people who ran away from their homes in really bad shape. Here I was, running away from a man I wasn't even related to.

"I made a police report and had to go to court to meet him. My counsellor was so worried because during one of their sessions, he said he wouldn't let me go; he will do something to me, I couldn't get anyone to escort me — CISCO doesn't have this kind of service — so I got a matron from the centre to go with me.

"He came to court with his lawyer and tried to hand me a rose, but I walked away. He tried to put his hand around my shoulder as we walked into the magistrate's room. I walked away. Before the magistrate, Tony promised not to harass me, but I said, 'That's what he says in here. Outside it's a different thing'. The magistrate warned him. When we walked out, he became abusive and started threatening me. The clerk heard. I went in and filed another report."

Returning to her home after the two months at the crisis centre was very frightening. Tony would watch her apartment from the car park and "mentally harass" her by demanding to be let into her home. "I'd be calling the police four to five times a day," says Theresa.

At work, her colleagues screen all her calls. She never returns Tony's calls because she says that if she were to speak to him, he'll think she's interested and he'll come back.

To go to work, Theresa would walk to the police post and take a taxi from there. One morning, Tony came towards her.

"I screamed and shouted for passers-by to call the police, but Tony shouted at them, 'Don't get involved, this is my wife.' I tried to move right, but he'd block my path. Move left, he'd block it. He wanted to talk and wouldn't let me go, so we stood there arguing and shouting and I was hoping for the police to come. True enough, someone must have called them because a patrol car drove by.

"At the police station, he told them he was the victim and asked them to call his wife as a witness. I filed my own report and went back to the crisis centre."

Theresa and Tony finally met in court — this time, with Tony's new girlfriend by his side, Theresa dropped the charges since Tony hadn't harassed her in nine months.

Today, Theresa's family members look to her for advice which is far >
cry from how they treated her while she was seeing Tony.

"My mom used to avoid me and wouldn't visit me. At one time when she
found Tony staying here, she was so mad, she
left a rod, knocked at my door and
yelled all kinds of vulgarities. She outcast
me saying, 'here we are giving you all
kinds of advice and you don't heed it.
Instead you get yourself into this kind of
shit. You get out of it yourself.'

"Family members do everything to
break up relationships they don't ap-
prove of. I wanted to tell my mother if the
older generation does that, your
children and grandchildren are not
going to respect you.

"People can advise, paint a scenario
and tell others what to do. But you have to
let them experience the fall themselves.
When they fall, they will wake up and
become stronger people. If you try to pro-
tect them and they don't see it that way,
you'll only be nagging them. Whatever it
is, don't outcast them. Let them know if
anything should happen, you'll be around
for them to fall on.

Theresa, who continues to seek strength
in the faith that Tony introduced her to,
says people can advise you to get out of
an abusive relationship until they're blue
in the face. But, ultimately, it's the indi-
vidual that has to want it.

"I tell my parents, you can tell me I don't
say this, don't say that, but I broke up
with him not because you asked me to. But
because I wanted to. And you can tell me
everything, but if I don't want to, I will still
remain in the relationship. You must want
- to leave. The want must be very strong.
And don't waiver: yes, no, yes, no. You
have to look ahead, if you don't do some-
thing, you will land up in the same misery
for years. You could lose a loved one or
yourself. It's very important to get profes-

FREEING YOURSELF
In an abusive environment, it may be difficult
to think and act clearly. Some victims even
feel powerless. Others may be forced to take
desperate measures to escape. It is important
for victims of abuse to know that they don't
have to live with violence and that they can
rationally think through how to leave.

BASIC GUIDELINES
● Your safety is most import-
ant. Go to a friend's or
relative's house or call one of
the helpers on our list.
● Take your children with you
if you think they may be in
any danger.
● Plan to leave at a calm time
when your partner is gone.
● Immediately on departure,
notify the police.
● Get a Personal Protection
Order (PPO). Magistrates can
issue at their discretion a PPO
to protect the applicant from
violence/ threats of violence,
and Expelled Order (an
urgent PPO granted when
there is imminent danger or
injury before trial) or a
Domestic Exclusion Order.

THE PLAN
● Choose a trusted person.
Tell him/her your plans and ask
for help in carrying them out.
● Copy all important documents
like your PPO, passports, ICS,
birth certificates, medical
records, insurance records,
will, property deeds, vehicle
titles, CPF account numbers,
bank account numbers, credit
cards and important telephone
numbers. Because once you
leave it may be impossible to
return for them.
● Open a safe deposit box in
your name or jointly with your
trusted person. Leave your
important documents here.
● Copy all keys to your house
and car. Make one set for
yourself, another for your
trusted person and put one in
the safe deposit box.
● Get a post office box and
request a change of address
from the post office.
● Hide money wherever and
wherever you can.
● Give valuables (like jewe-
elry, heirlooms, even photos)
to your trusted person for
safekeeping.
● Prepare your children for
emergencies, teach them to
dial 995 should anything
happen to you.
● Don't wait. Set a deadline.
Things won't get better and it
will happen again.

ONCE OUT
● Stay safe. Keep doors
locked. Screen calls with an
answering machine (message
recorded by a male friend). Let
your trusted person know
where you and your children
will be at all times.
● If necessary, go to a hospital
for a medical examination.
● Instruct your children to
inform you anytime they see
the person in question.
● Copy your PPO and give
copies to your landlord/person
you are staying with and
children's school.
● Seek support from counsel-
ing, a social worker or hotline.
● Seek legal advice on your
rights and options. The Sin-
gapore Association of Women
Lawyers give free legal coun-
selling at selected community
centres. Call the People's
Association at 344 8222 to
find out the dates and times
of service.
● Take control of your finances
and paperwork. Get a friend
to help if you are not sure
where to start.
● Take threats seriously and
report them to the police. Make
written notes with dates of
threats and any violations of
your PPO. Note the events
that led to an assault and the
witnesses, if any.

CHANGE YOUR MINDSET
● Give up on changing him.
You can only change yourself
and you can't do that when
you are under his control.
● Know that you and your
children will be safe now that
you are away from this
violent person.
● Expect change, confusion
and loneliness. This is tempo-
rary and things will get better.
● You are now free of danger.
Look forward to a new life
without violence.

Adapted from There Is A Way
Out compiled by Lisa Smeller
Cadiz in Harmony: A Celebration
of the Family.
Bit of a rush this issue ...so no time to stop and chat...

DIC Outreach programme
to SMK Penrissen No 2
Wednesday 1st May
9.00-11.00 am
"Boy-Girl Relationships"

First meeting of the
Education group in May....please join
us...we need fresh ideas and faces!
Contact Stephanie or Patricia

CPL Volunteer training
for new members starting July

Patricia to KL for conference "All forms of Violence against Women" organised by NCWO