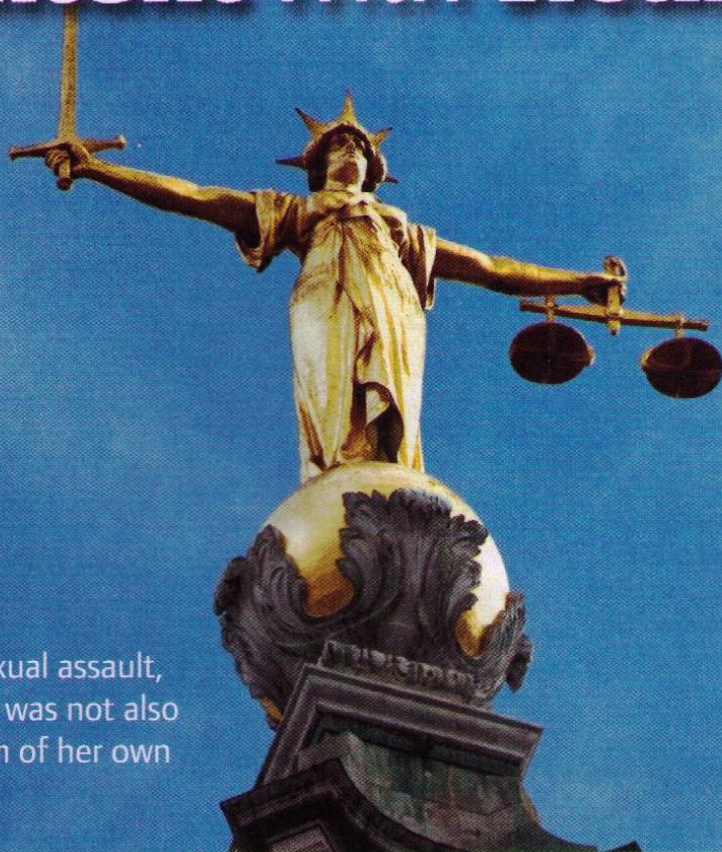


upclose&personal

Not content with victimhood



As a victim of serious sexual assault, **Annie Makoff** says she was not also prepared to be the victim of her own silence

It is every woman's nightmare; it is the unconscious fear at the back of our minds perpetuated in part by the likes of *Crimewatch* or late night TV dramas. Yet for some women (and of course, men) that fear can become a reality.

What was done to me by a friend's "carer" four years ago in my own home wasn't quite rape, but the affect it had on me psychologically will stay with me forever. My decision to tell the world about my experiences stems from a need to shed

my shame and appeal to victims of sexual assault that it is your right to speak out, however horrific the ordeal.

Going through the court system, both in the lead-up and the actual hearing can be as traumatic as the assault itself. From when you first inform the police, to having statements taken, to finally standing in the witness box many months later – the entire process is not for the faint-hearted. More than anything, I was terrified of the outcome.

What if he is not

convicted? What if they cast aspersions on my character? What if I go through all this for nothing?

If the months of waiting for the trial were not bad enough, facing cross-questioning by a stern-faced barrister to a court of strangers is enough to bring on a multitude of panic attacks and flashbacks.

Yet I knew I had to go through with it. Even though my case was postponed for several months on three separate occasions due to "technical issues", even though each

time I psyched myself up, only to be told on the day it wasn't going ahead, even though it made me so ill that I had to be hospitalised even though it brought on suicidal thoughts, I stuck with it. It took 15 months to get to court. 15 months of anxiety, stress, illness, despair, anger and even guilt. But I forced myself on.

The desire to see justice done wasn't just for my own peace of mind. I had known this man (old enough to be my father) through a close friend. Naively, we both trusted him even though

we knew little about his background: we took everything he said at face value.

Had we decided to dig into his past, a simple search online for instance would have brought up various news stories about him: his convictions of paedophilia, his stints in prison and the cunning ways he went about grooming children. His name – and crimes – were detailed in a 2006 BBC Wales story. It was ridiculously easy to find. If only we had searched earlier.

“I wanted him to know that he had met his match: he may have seen me as an easy target being both small and disabled, but vulnerable or not, I was prepared to fight”

This man is unlikely to “recover” from his sickness that leads him to do these disgusting things. But I knew that by not going to the police, I was giving him

the green light to continue his assaults.

I wanted him to know that he had met his match: he may have seen me as an easy target being both small and disabled, but vulnerable or not, I was prepared to fight.

Following a guilty verdict on just one count out of three charges of sexual assault, he was given a three-year prison sentence, although what he had done was much more than the jury were prepared to believe.

His sentence did give me

some comfort. Even though he was out on parole after 18 months, I knew that during his time inside at least, he wouldn’t be a risk to the public.

Four years on, I often wonder how differently I would have felt had I not gone to the police. Yes, I would have saved myself a year of further distress, but his crime would have gone unpunished. At least now his crime (or part of it) is on his records and he has been finally placed on the Sex Offenders Register indefinitely.

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