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Lawyers in abusive relationships often keep quiet out of reputational fears

BY AMANDA ROBERT

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As a family law attorney, Candice Madanipour helps clients move past the ugliest parts of their marriages, including those dominated by domestic violence.

It's an experience she knows all too well.

After marrying her now-ex-husband in 2006, Madanipour endured what she describes as "insidious" abuse. He hurled insults that "hit deep," including saying that Madanipour was "nothing" and wouldn't be a successful lawyer without him, she says. He threatened her often, and toward the end of their marriage, he punched a hole in a wall of their home, she says.

“It is the kind of abuse that breaks you emotionally, that tears at your sense of being and your quality of life,” says Madanipour, the owner of Madanipour Law Group in Irvine, California. “It sends chills down your spine. It’s almost worse than being physically hit.”

Madanipour left her ex-husband and filed for divorce in 2018 after realizing the abuse was severely affecting their 4-year-old daughter. As much as she wanted out of the relationship, it was hard for her to admit she was a victim, she says.

“As a divorce lawyer going through it, I felt embarrassed,” Madanipour adds. “I was going to be in the same courtroom where I defend my clients, and I felt torn reporting it or even leaving because I had a stance, and I had a reputation. And how could I be dealing with the same thing that I fight against every day?”

Madanipour isn’t alone. While it receives little attention, lawyers can and do experience emotional, physical and other forms of abuse, according to Amanda Lee, the owner of the Lee Consultants, which offers corporate training on domestic violence and support to high-achieving professionals who also are victims.



Candice Madanipour (Photo by David Hartig/ABA Journal)

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As is common with domestic violence, lawyers can struggle to leave abusive relationships because of fear that no one will believe them or that their partner will retaliate against them. But Lee says lawyers who experience domestic violence also face unique challenges.

They may feel added pressure to stay silent in a profession that typically champions strength and condemns weakness, Lee adds. If they leave their abuser and file for a restraining order or divorce, they may be forced to come out to their colleagues and the judges who hear their cases before they’re ready.

Because of stigma, lawyers may not even understand what they are experiencing is abuse, adds Lee, who lives near Baltimore and is also a domestic violence survivor. As part of her work, she hopes to help change the narrative around what domestic violence is and who it affects.

“A victim doesn’t look like what is often portrayed in movies, books and even domestic violence campaigns,” Lee says. “It’s someone who you are standing next to in a boardroom, in a courtroom, in some decision-making capacity, and you’re looking at them with respect.”

Lee would know. Her career has included prosecuting sex crimes and child abuse cases. She now works for the U.S. Department of Defense.

“I always say I would walk in the courtroom and command that courtroom,” she says. “Nobody would look at me as weak. But if they found this out, they might.”

Challenging misconceptions

More than 47% of women and 44% of men in the United States reported experiencing sexual violence, physical violence or stalking by an intimate partner, according to [2016-2017 data](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Additional [data](#) from the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics, which tracks crimes, criminal offenders and victims of crimes, showed 34% of female murder victims in 2021 were killed by an intimate partner. About 6% of men murdered that year were victims of intimate partner homicide.

It’s hard to understand the extent of the problem in the legal profession because no study has focused on how domestic violence affects lawyers, says Dovie King, the author of *Survivor at Law: A Lawyer’s Memoir of Trauma, Narcissistic Abuse and Weaponized*



Amanda Lee (Photo by Tracy Michelle Photography)

Divorce. King, a public interest lawyer based in Massachusetts, hears often from lawyers and law students who have experienced domestic violence and includes some of their stories in her book.

“*That’s one of the things that women risk ... they’re disbelieved, or there’s no support.*”

While getting help is an important part of King’s book, she emphasizes that domestic violence victims can’t do that until they understand they are experiencing abuse.

“What I’ve found for myself and other educated, professional women is we couldn’t pinpoint what was happening to us. I just thought it was a bad marriage,” King says, adding she felt her ex-husband was mean and emotionally abusive, but that she never thought it was domestic violence until she went to get counseling. “It took an outsider to name it,” she says.

The National Domestic Violence Hotline defines domestic violence as “the willful intimidation, physical assault, battery, sexual assault, and/or other abusive behavior as part of a systematic pattern of power and control perpetrated by one intimate partner against another.” It includes not only physical and sexual violence but psychological violence and emotional abuse.



Dovie King (Photo courtesy of Dovie King)

Since 2020, California, Washington and several other states have passed laws to include “coercive control” as a type of domestic violence. In California’s statute, coercive control is described as “a pattern of behavior that in purpose or effect unreasonably interferes with a person’s free will and personal liberty.” It includes isolating someone from friends or family and monitoring or controlling someone’s movements, communications and finances.

“It’s not the textbook abuse; it’s not domestic violence 101,” Madanipour says. “Domestic violence 101 is somebody who’s being knocked out, thrown to the floor. There’s blood and broken bones.

But that’s not the abuse I dealt with, and that’s not the abuse that victims of domestic violence deal with daily.”

Misconceptions that domestic violence victims are poor, uneducated or weak also make it more difficult for lawyers and other professionals to acknowledge they are targets of abuse, Lee says.

Lee met her ex-husband in high school. Even though she dealt with what she now recognizes as emotional and physical abuse, she says she thought, “If I became better, then it would all get better.”

She got married after law school in 2005, and for years she felt like she lived two lives. In one, she first-chaired jury trials. In the other, she took photos of the clock on her computer to prove she was working late. Lee never told anyone what was going on at home.

“I learned how to compartmentalize,” Lee says. “I would go to work and just put on this face, put on that I’m strong, put on that my marriage was great, and constantly make excuses.”

Keeping quiet

Many lawyers who experience domestic violence don’t talk about it while it’s happening or even years after they’ve divorced.

When Lee dealt with the most serious physical abuse of her relationship, she worked as a prosecutor in the town where she lived in Maryland. If she reported her ex-husband, the officers who responded would have come from the office she worked with daily, and any criminal charges would have been brought in the courthouse where she practiced, she says. “There was no way I was going to report, given my situation,” Lee says.

Lee and her ex-husband, who have three children, divorced in 2018. She didn’t disclose her abuse until about five years later because she still feared what it could do to her reputation, she says.

“What were people going to think about me handling cases? Would they think I was incompetent?” Lee says. “To me, victims were always treated like they were weak, they were vulnerable, they needed help. I didn’t want anyone looking at me like that.”

Allison Croft worked for the Washington State Office of the Attorney General for about 20 years before joining Simmons Sweeney Freimund Smith Tardif, where she is now a partner and handles personal injury defense of public entities. She agrees that admitting she was experiencing abuse—but not feeling she could leave her marriage—felt like “complete weakness.”

Croft married her high school sweetheart in 2001. During their marriage, in which they had two children, Croft says she experienced psychological and emotional abuse. After their divorce in 2010, she married her second husband, who she also characterizes as “incredibly physically and emotionally abusive.”

In a petition for a protective order in 2013, Croft detailed how her second ex-husband berated her in front of her children and threatened to kill her. In one incident, she says, he forced her to kneel on the ground while he stood on her back. And in another, he held a razor blade to her throat.

“For professional women, especially for women in male-dominated careers, it is really hard to come forward because you absolutely have to project this attitude or presence of command, of power, of strength,” says Croft, who lives in Tacoma, Washington. “You can’t be vulnerable. I think that does lead to women not disclosing.”

Croft struggled to leave her second ex-husband because he also threatened to call her boss and file a bar complaint to embarrass her, she says. After they separated, he was arrested for breaking into her home, where he was found by police with a hatchet in his backpack.



Allison Croft (Photo by Teri Weaver)

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After her divorce in 2015, Croft began sharing these experiences with some of her colleagues. She recently worked on a case with a social worker, whom she also told about her past abuse. “I told myself if I ever have the opportunity to go talk to other women about what I went through, I would do it,” Croft says. “Domestic violence, the reason it continues and is perpetuated, is because of embarrassment and shame. We know it’s wrong, but we also stay in it.”

Men also often find it difficult to admit they have experienced domestic violence, says John Sciacotta, a senior member of Aronberg Goldgehn Davis & Garmisa and immediate past president of the Chicago Bar Association.

“It’s hard for men to talk about this,” Sciacotta says. “I think for men to be vulnerable is difficult. It’s what society expects of men, that you’re strong and you’re virile.”

In 2018, when Sciacotta joined the board for the WINGS Program, a nonprofit organization in Palatine, Illinois, that supports domestic violence survivors, he noticed there were fewer men than women, he says. Sciacotta since has made significant inroads in engaging others, including by co-founding the WINGS Men’s Alliance to End Domestic Violence with former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel. The men’s alliance will assist male victims as well as former abusers.

For Sciacotta, who witnessed domestic violence in his home as a child, the work has been challenging but necessary. “I just don’t want people to go through what I had to go through,” he says.

Coming forward

King says she wasn’t able to talk openly about domestic violence for nearly a decade. Then, she published *Survivor at Law* in September after years of intensive therapy and as her son approached his 18th birthday.

“It’s not just my story,” King says. “It’s a story of so many voiceless people who are fearful to step forward and afraid of losing custody or afraid of repercussions and retaliation by their abusers if they go public, which is exactly what happened to me.”

King writes about the years of abuse she endured during her relationship with her ex-husband, a lawyer whom she married in 2005. But she focuses more on the aftermath.

King says her entire career derailed after filing for divorce in 2015. She and her ex-husband owned a labor and employment law firm in San Diego that she says she was forced to leave. She never practiced in that area of law again. “That’s one of the things that women risk when they come forward, and they’re disbelieved, or there’s no support,” King says. “There’s a great risk of repercussions at work.”

King faced other challenges. She asked a local domestic violence agency to help her get a restraining order but was told she didn’t qualify for services under its income guidelines, she says. When she later moved with her son to Massachusetts, she discovered she had to list any cases she was involved in when applying to practice there.

“I was literally forced by my attorney to apply, because I was so humiliated to disclose to the overseers of the bar that I had this restraining order case open and that I had this family law case,” King says.

Judge Ashleigh Parker, who sits on the 10th Judicial District in North Carolina, didn’t disclose she experienced emotional abuse during most of her 10-year marriage to her ex-husband until a couple of years ago.

Parker, who is the lead child support judge and one of two abuse, neglect and dependency judges in Wake County, created and began teaching seminars for judges on how to recognize and respond to lesser-known forms of domestic abuse. After telling a group of judges that “survivors could be anybody,” she showed them a photo of herself.

“At the end of the day, I don’t really care, because somebody is going to be helped by my transparency.”

The reception has been mixed, Parker says. Some people come up afterward to thank her and share similar experiences. Others have told her, “that was too personal, and that’s not what we’re here for,” she says.

“At the end of the day, I don’t really care, because somebody is going to be helped by my transparency,” says Parker, who has shared that her ex-husband wouldn’t talk to her for weeks and then gaslighted her into doubting her words and actions. She says she also dealt with pathological lying and passive-aggressive punishments for what she considered minor offenses.

Parker, who has two children with her ex-husband, filed for divorce in 2023. In August, she published her book, *From Broken to Brazen: 40 Day Devotional for Healing from Heartbreak, Loss and Rejection*, which shares more of her experiences and how she overcame them. A few months later, she received the ABA Commission on Domestic & Sexual Violence’s Judith S. Kaye Award for Judicial Excellence.

Other lawyers, like Madanipour and Croft, say being a lawyer and disclosing abuse during their divorces proved to be painful.

Madanipour spent nearly six years in court before her divorce was final in 2024. During that time, she also received two restraining orders against her ex-husband.



Judge Ashleigh Parker (Photo by Caver Imaging)

She often had “an audience” during those proceedings because people in the courthouse knew her, she says.

“The court clerks would call their friends, and they would come in,” Madanipour says. “They’d be discreet, but I knew what was happening. They all wanted to know what was going on.”

Croft remembers feeling unsupported by the legal system because she was a lawyer. At one point, she says, both the prosecutor in her case and her ex-husband’s attorney implied she made up her abuse to gain custody of her kids.

“It was this idea that because I was an attorney, I was manipulating the legal system for personal gain,” she says.

As is likely for other attorneys who are domestic violence survivors, Croft finds people in the legal community are surprised when they learn about her past. “They don’t believe it, because they’re like, ‘You’re a lawyer. You know how to get out of this. Why would you allow someone to do this to you when you know the legal system?’” Croft says.

'There is light'

Lee had a similar experience when telling a former supervisor that she endured domestic violence during her marriage. “Her first question to me was, ‘Why didn’t you just leave?’” Lee says.

Lee started her consulting firm last year to educate lawyers and other professionals about the realities of domestic violence. She also wants to help create a more open dialogue about abuse so survivors feel supported and less alone, she says.

“I was ready to talk about something that no one talks about, despite being terrified to do it some days,” Lee says. “I wanted to go out to corporate America, to lawyers, accountants, doctors, CEOs and tell them this happens to people like us.”

Lee understands the importance of support firsthand, finding it herself in 2018 through an online group for single mothers who are also lawyers. Nearly 50 of them have been in the group since she joined, and many are survivors of domestic violence, she says.

“I still sometimes have to take a deep breath and think: ‘I’m going to talk about this, and it’s OK,’” Lee says. “I already know this does not make me a different person, and it should not in any way hinder who I am professionally.”

Madanipour also came forward because she wanted her clients—most of whom are executives who are highly educated or from higher socioeconomic backgrounds—to know it’s possible to experience domestic violence and still be successful.



"I tell clients, 'It's OK. I've been there. I know what it's like.'" Madanipour. (Photo by David Hartig/ABA Journal)

"Actually, my story is so public in Orange County, California, that I am one of the most referred-to divorce attorneys from social media groups, from mom groups," Madanipour says. "And I tell clients, 'It's OK. I've been there. I know what it's like.'"

Madanipour, who is happily remarried, has another message to share with lawyers who are experiencing domestic violence. "I would tell them that there is light," she says.

If you or someone you know is experiencing domestic violence, the National Domestic Violence Hotline is available 24 hours a day: 1-800-799-7233.

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