

Edinburgh West MP moves the House of Commons to tears with rape account

✖ Michelle Thomson MP for Edinburgh West made a contribution to the UN International Day debate yesterday at Westminster on the subject of Violence against Women, which brought some members to tears.

She related her own experience of rape when she was just 14 by someone she knew. She opened her speech by saying: “I am going to relay an event that happened to me many years ago. I want to give a very personal perspective to help people, both in this place and outside, understand one element of sexual violence against women.

“When I was 14, I was raped. As is common, it was by somebody who was known to me. He had offered to walk me home from a youth event. In those days, everybody walked everywhere—it was quite common. It was early evening. It was not dark. I was wearing— I am imagining and guessing—jeans and a sweatshirt. I knew my way around where I lived— I was very comfortable—and we went a slightly differently way, but I did not think anything of it. He told me that he wanted to show me something in a wooded area. At that point, I must admit that I was alarmed. I did have a warning bell, but I overrode that warning bell because I knew him and, therefore, there was a level of trust in place. To be honest, looking back at that point, I do not think I knew what rape was. It was not something that was talked about. My mother never talked to me about it, and I did not hear other girls or women talking about it.

“It was mercifully quick and I remember first of all feeling

surprise, then fear, then horror as I realised that I quite simply could not escape, because obviously he was stronger than me. There was no sense, even initially, of any sexual desire from him, which, looking back again, I suppose I find odd. My senses were absolutely numbed, and thinking about it now, 37 years later, I cannot remember hearing anything when I replay it in my mind. As a former professional musician who is very auditory, I find that quite telling. I now understand that your subconscious brain—not your conscious brain—decides on your behalf how you should respond: whether you take flight, whether you fight or whether you freeze. And I froze, I must be honest.

“Afterwards I walked home alone. I was crying, I was cold and I was shivering. I now realise, of course, that that was the shock response. I did not tell my mother. I did not tell my father. I did not tell my friends. And I did not tell the police. I bottled it all up inside me. I hoped briefly—and appallingly—that I might be pregnant so that that would force a situation to help me control it. Of course, without support, the capacity and resources that I had within me to process it were very limited.

“I was very ashamed. I was ashamed that I had “allowed this to happen to me”. I had a whole range of internal conversations: “I should have known. Why did I go that way? Why did I walk home with him? Why didn’t I understand the danger? I deserved it because I was too this, too that.” I felt that I was spoiled and impure, and I really felt revulsion towards myself.

“Of course, I detached from the child that I had been up until then. Although in reality, at the age of 14, that was probably the start of my sexual awakening, at that time, remembering back, sex was “something that men did to women”, and perhaps this incident reinforced that early belief.□

“I briefly sought favour elsewhere and I now understand that

even a brief period of hypersexuality is about trying to make sense of an incident and reframing the most intimate of acts. My oldest friends, with whom I am still friends, must have sensed a change in me, but because I never told them they did not know of the cause. I allowed myself to drift away from them for quite a few years. Indeed, I found myself taking time off school and staying at home on my own, listening to music and reading and so on.

“I did have a boyfriend in the later years of school and he was very supportive when I told him about it, but I could not make sense of my response—and it is my response that gives weight to the event. I carried that guilt, anger, fear, sadness and bitterness for years.

“When I got married 12 years later, I felt that I had a duty tell my husband. I wanted him to understand why there was this swaddled kernel of extreme emotion at the very heart of me, which I knew he could sense. But for many years I simply could not say the words without crying—I could not say the words. It was only in my mid-40s that I took some steps to go and get help.

“It had a huge effect on me and it fundamentally—and fatally—undermined my self-esteem, my confidence and my sense of self-worth. Despite this, I am blessed in my life: I have been happily married for 25 years. But if this was the effect of one small, albeit significant, event in my life stage, how must it be for those women who are carrying it on a day-by-day basis?

“I thought carefully about whether I should speak about this today, and it was people’s intake of breath and the comment, “What? You’re going to talk about this?”, that motivated me to do it, because there is still a taboo about sharing this kind of information. Certainly for people of my generation, it is truly shocking to talk in public about this sort of thing.

“As has been said, rape does not just affect the woman; it affects the family as well. Before my mother died early of cancer, I really wanted to tell her, but I could not bring myself to do it. I have a daughter and if something happened to her and she could not share it with me, I would be appalled. It was possibly cowardly, but it was an act of love that meant that I protected my mother.

“As an adult, of course I now know that rape is not about sex at all—it is all about power and control, and it is a crime of violence. I still pick up on when the myths of rape are perpetuated from a male perspective: “Surely you could have fought him off. Did you scream loudly enough?” And the suggestion by some men that a woman is giving subtle hints or is making it up is outrageous. Those assumptions put the woman at the heart of cause, when she should be at the heart of effect. A rape happens when a man makes a decision to hurt someone he feels he can control. Rapes happen because of the rapist, not because of the victim.

“We women in our society have to stand up for each other. We have to be courageous. We have to call things out and say where things are wrong. We have to support and nurture our sisters as we do with our sons. Like many women of my age, I have on occasion encountered other aggressive actions towards me, both in business and in politics. But one thing that I realise now is that I am not scared and he was. I am not scared. I am not a victim. I am a survivor.”

Last night the MP tweeted her thanks for the support she received after her speech:

Overwhelmed by the number of supportive messages I have received today. Thank you to everyone who has been in touch.

– Michelle Thomson MP (@MichelleThomson) [December 8, 2016](#)

Ms Thomson now sits as an independent MP following her links to possible mortgage fraud, which she has robustly denied since resigning the SNP whip in autumn 2015. Police Scotland confirmed that they were investigating the allegations after Ms Thomson's solicitor, Chris Hales, was struck off by the Scottish Solicitors Discipline Tribunal in connection with his work on transactions involving Ms Thomson.

She appears to abide by the SNP whip of her own accord and voted most recently on Wednesday against the government's plan for Brexit along with the SNP.

The Edinburgh West MP sits on the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, Committees on Arms Export Controls and the Education Skills and the Economy Sub-Committee.