

Celia Peachey: Mum was killed by her ex – I want a public inquiry

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Celia Peachey was standing in a field in Herefordshire when she discovered her mother had been murdered. “I found out 15 minutes after leaving the silent retreat I’d been on,” she recalls, keeping herself under steely control. “We’d put our phones away when we checked in. I was cut off from the world and by the end of the week I felt amazing, completely renewed.”

When Peachey retrieved her phone she was puzzled to see so many missed calls. “It was loads of messages from the police saying: ‘Please call, please call, please call.’” The last one was from her mother’s best friend. “I told everyone I had to get out of the car. So we stopped and I walked a few yards off the road into a field to call her.

“Jackie said: ‘I’m really, really sorry. Your mum’s been killed. And it’s by Marc.’ I just screamed. I couldn’t fathom it. It didn’t feel real.” It was only a few hours later, once Peachey was back at her flat, that “it hit home, and my heart just broke”.

It has been a year since Peachey launched a call for a public inquiry into the way the police address violence and emotional abuse within intimate relationships. The murder of her mother, Maria Stubbings, in December 2008 has become one of the most notorious domestic homicides in recent years because of the extraordinary series of failings by Essex

police to protect her, despite knowing that her ex, Marc Chivers, had recently been released from jail in Germany for murdering a previous girlfriend.

Stubbings was just 50 when she died, strangled with a dog lead before being dumped on the floor of the downstairs toilet in her home, her body covered with coats. She had been going out with Chivers for only a few months before she reported him for assaulting her in July 2008 and ended the relationship.

Her killer made himself at home in her house for two or three days before Stubbings's body was discovered on December 19. The exact date she was murdered is unknown. In a sinister twist, Chivers pretended that he was looking after her 15-year-old son — Celia's brother, Bengi — while Stubbings was supposedly away from home. In fact, he was making sure Bengi didn't stumble upon his mother's corpse.

Police knew Chivers had only recently got out of prison after his latest conviction for Stubbings's assault. This should have indicated that she was at very high risk. However, the fact that she was lying dead within feet of her own front door went unnoticed by officers who called to check on her welfare. They failed to search the premises after being falsely reassured by her killer that all was fine — this from a known murderer whose behaviour had prompted Stubbings to ring police just days previously, saying he had entered her house uninvited and that she was scared.

Peachey was 28 when she lost her mother, to whom she was “exceptionally close — we talked on the phone most days”. Her mum, she remembers, “was the gentlest, humblest person you could ever meet. A beautiful woman, a beautiful person; she attracted a lot of attention.”

The past five and a half years have been an anguished nightmare of guilt and rage during which Peachey says she isolated herself from the world “just to survive”. She has only recently begun tentatively to emerge and today sits bursting with determination to change attitudes to domestic abuse. The publication in March of a scathing review of the national police response to domestic abuse by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) came as a cataclysmic reminder to her of just how inadequately victims are still served.

Peachey knew nothing about Chivers assaulting her mother in the past, his imprisonment on remand or his previous murder conviction, but she recalls her unease at the change she'd observed in her mother during the brief relationship. “The last time I saw her, I'd been to visit her in Chelmsford in the November. I thought it was all over. But Mum was standing in the lounge and she just looked so broken, like a shadow of herself. I felt like she wanted to tell me something but she couldn't. It was the same as I'd felt when we were on the phone: her clipped responses made me feel like she didn't want to know me, but I didn't realise that he was there in the background, still controlling everything she was doing and saying, and that she was in absolute, terrorised fear.”

What Peachey is describing is the effect of coercive control exerted by one partner over another. Coercive control has recently been incorporated into the definition of domestic abuse and is a known precursor to physical violence. Because it does not injure it cannot currently be prosecuted.

“She dropped me at the station,” Peachey continues, “and I said, ‘I promise I'll take you out for afternoon tea for your birthday when I come back. We'll do something indulgent and fun.’ And she said, ‘I love you, Celia. I wish you were here more often. I feel so much stronger when you're around.’ And she hugged me and didn't want to let go. I was so confused because she'd been so distant with me at the house, but when she was in the car she was

different. So it's possible that he may have been inside, hidden, without me knowing, all along."

There is an aftermath to murder that most people will never see: the unravelling of the victim's life that relatives discover as the investigation and trial remorselessly unfold. "He'd emptied her bank accounts and sold all her clothes. He'd even sold our Christmas presents that she'd chosen," says Peachey, her eyes suddenly shiny with tears. The utter disrespect for a woman so precious to her still cuts deep. "I'm going through the house afterwards and I can see the absolute disdain he had for her and my little brother, who he was lying to and befriending all that time, then selling his toys . . . I mean, he literally took everything he could."

She stops to take a breath and hovers over the next words before deciding to say them. "I found a crowbar with blood on it." I look at her aghast, and she nods. "I had to help clean up the murder stuff. He killed my mum and then cooked himself food, so I'm there, cleaning up after he's had a fry-up. I had to take down the Christmas tree . . ."

She re-tucks her legs under her and mentally regroups: what she wants now is not just for the three Essex police officers facing misconduct cases to be held accountable for their mistakes, but for there to be a wholesale shift in the way that domestic abuse is tackled by all the agencies of the state.

Together with the charity Refuge, Celia, Bengi and their uncle, Stubbings's brother, are calling for a public inquiry into the way that the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, social services, healthcare and education address violence and emotional abuse within intimate relationships.

Peachey is aware of the scale of the social transformation she's seeking. "I'd want a public inquiry to enable and encourage people working with victims to re-evaluate their beliefs and prejudices and totally change their attitude to domestic abuse and remotivate them in how they do their jobs. It's not about pointing the finger. I just want us to all work as a team and I want everyone to realise that these are our public services and that they work for us."

Her mum, she points out, wasn't failed by the police alone: other agencies also washed their hands of Chivers. "I keep hearing that there aren't the resources for a public inquiry, but this is about prevention and saving lives. We can't afford not to have one."

Refuge's chief executive, Sandra Horley, backs her up: she believes the scope for scrutiny and reflection offered by a public inquiry is the only way to ensure a sufficiently deep examination of the state's response to domestic abuse. "This country's failure to protect women is chronic and persistent," Horley insists. "A public inquiry is broad in scale: it would examine the state response to domestic violence from every angle, impacting on the lives of perpetrators, victims and professionals across multiple fields."

Despite this month's news that domestic-abuse prosecutions have increased, there is no room for complacency, Horley believes. "The conviction rate has risen by just 0.3 per cent since 2012/13," she says. The 58,276 convictions reported last year may sound a big number, "but when we consider that over a million women experience domestic violence each year, it's barely scratching the surface".

On average two women a week die at the hands of their partner or ex. That figure does not take account of the hundreds of thousands who live in daily fear of violence and emotional abuse. Children's lives too are blighted — many are directly targeted and harmed, according to recent research by national charity CAADA (Co-ordinated Action Against Domestic Abuse).

Children die because of domestic abuse, points out CAADA chief executive Diana Barran — indeed, just three years after Stubbings’s death, in another high-profile domestic homicide in Essex, Christine Chambers and her two-year-old daughter were murdered. “It’s a factor in the family background of two thirds of serious case reviews [where a child has been killed]: the recent deaths of Daniel Pelka and Hamzah Khan highlight children’s vulnerability to the multiple dangers of living in abusive households,” says Barran.

A petition for the public inquiry Peachey is demanding has already gained 40,000 signatures. It needs 100,000 to stand a chance of being debated in parliament. In the meantime, what else is happening in the wake of the HMIC report that sent such shock waves through all 43 police forces in England and Wales?

At the national stalking advocacy service Paladin, founder Laura Richards is building the case for domestic abuse itself to be criminalised. “Unless there is physical evidence, police say they there isn’t an offence to arrest on, and when there is physical evidence, for some women it’s too late.” It certainly was for Maria Stubbings: the IPCC investigation identified a number of occasions where police considered arresting Chivers but judged there were insufficient grounds.

A central criticism in the HMIC report was that frontline officers often didn’t bother investigating incidents they were called to and failed to gather evidence of assaults, so could not build a case in order that charges could be brought. Culture change within the force cannot come soon enough, says Barran. “If the chief officer tipped up once every so often in the public protection unit, went out in the car on the odd Friday night and called in unexpectedly at a multi-agency risk-assessment conference, trust me, officers would get better at it pretty quick.”