

## **'the personal & public cost of domestic violence' Conference**

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I've been kind of trying to come up with a way to look at this problem through a different lens. I work in tech, and in tech we don't solve technical problems, we solve human problems, and we actually use as little tech as possible.

So I wanted to find a way to connect an abstract with a reality, I mean that's what you're really trying to do is connect an abstract human problem to a real human solution. So...

When we pitch to investors we're told to pitch the problem, and we tell them a story about a real customer, we show how that customer's problem scales, and so many times in the past year and a half I have found this huge gulf between how I'm running my organisation, where my job as a very product focused marketing executive shaping a product, my job is to listen to customers and if our product is failing then we're failing. I mean if they don't know how to use it we're failing, we have to fix the product. And this huge gulf between that and how I have experienced the system, and I mean the system in the largest sense, between the health system, the criminal justice system, my professional and social spheres. And so often it's come back to, actually we live in a society that just hates women.

So I've titled this talk 'Violence against Women as a Feature not a Bug'. It's because when you have a technical product or a system, you get the bugs out, you make it useable.

But when a bug is so unfixable and so fundamental to the program that you just decide that users should work around it because you cannot be bothered to fix it. Actually what that indicates is that you're whole program is broken.

So what's happening is, we're still operating under this understanding that domestic violence is caused by a few bad apples That this is not a culture of violence. And nobody's really asking women who are experiencing this, what we want. Nobody has asked me in the last year and a half. Not a single organisation has asked me what I think could be better, how it could be improved. Nobody wanted to hear it which is unfortunate because I am asked for my opinion on a lot of issues all the time. Except this one.

So I wanted to do this as what we would do in tech, to pitch a problem... You start with the size of the problem. I've taken a sort of conservative statistic of 1 in 7 women experiencing severe domestic violence. Ireland has a very poor user experience or UX (as it is referred to in tech) for female victims of violence. This is not the problem. In tech we would call this a 2 sided business. We have the Customer who pays for the product, in this case it's the tax payer. And that's not always the same as the User, so for example if you use Facebook you are a User, the Customer is the advertiser, there might be crossover, if you have a Facebook

account and you use ads, you're both. But for the purposes of this, the Customer is the person who pays, the User is the person who benefits in the short term. This is the main thing that we need to look at, which is if your Users are not happy then your product is also a fail for your Customers. The point of a 2-sided business is to balance the needs of your Users and your Customers. So for this talk think of your Customers as society, that's everybody, and Users, service users, which is not a term that we tend to use in Ireland when it comes to female victims of violence because there aren't really that many services to use.

Last year there were 12,000 cases identified by Women's Aid of domestic violence. And I was one of them. I only called them once because I didn't know what to ask. And I really didn't know what to say because I wasn't used to it, there's no handbook. I have lots of education and expertise in lots of areas but they don't teach you how to be a victim. This is the part where I run my very brief story. For about 2 years I was in a relationship with a very violent man, called Mark Jordan. The first time he hit me he really straddled me, he just got on top of me in the bed and he let out this really extreme scream and he went to sock me in the face and then he veered off and he punched me in the shoulder really hard. And I rolled over, and I thought this didn't happen and I've so much to do tomorrow, I mean the next day I was going off... I was producing a documentary at the time. And I just kind of said over my shoulder "you just punched me", and he said "no I didn't", and 'I just went I don't have time for this, I have to work, I have to go, I have to go record, I had to go and be a grown up professional the next day, I was going to the field for 5 days'. This was how it went. I knew all the stories of women who'd been victims, I'd been a feminist since I was old enough to understand what it was, before then probably. I'd seen it in my family, I'd seen it among my friends, I'd stood up against it. But I didn't relate to any of these stories, and none of the stories in the media were anything to do with me. I was always part of the problem, 'I'm irrational', 'I'm a needy whiner', 'I'm a pain in the ass', 'I'm a drama queen', 'what he was doing really wasn't hitting'. All the stories that I knew were these women who were sort of innocent and serene and took everything with quiet dignity and there's all this talk of bravery, I wasn't brave. He would turn to me and say 'you're no Snow White'. And he was right. I'm an absolute terror when I'm depressed, when I'm scared. I'm a nervous wreck. I'm insecure. I cry when I think I'm fat. I'm obsessed with whether I'm useful enough to society. I'm a total pain in the ass. So I just thought like, this is not describing me.

So one night, after I'd worked a 16 hour day, he launched at me from our bed and he put me in a headlock and punched until he broke his hand. So I... We were taken to separate hospitals. I got a bunch of stitches, he got his hand rebuilt. I got a barring order, he spent 5 days in the hospital, enumerating my offences against him so he could claim self-defence to the police. The police actually lost him and turned up at my house trying to get me to help them find him. He spent about 30 minutes in a cell, that's the only jail time he ever got. I took him back for a little while until... One day I woke up and realised..., 2 weeks earlier he

had tried to strangle me and he was probably going to kill me. So I broke up with him before I could chicken out. He breached his barring order more times than I can count but the police genuinely treated me like every single incident was my fault except the one time he's being prosecuted for. I went in to try to report the strangulation and they told me not to. And they told me it probably wouldn't go anywhere. I reported breaches of barring order, they were never investigated.

A month later his case came up. His defence tried to smear me in court, they gutted my victim impact statement. And Judge Martin Nolan, who we all know, sentenced him to two and a half years, suspended the entire thing on the condition that he pay compensation within a year. That year was up last week. He paid on the very last day and the cheque has since subsequently been lost in the post. So there isn't a single point at which I am not completely to bear the consequences. So my accountant for the civil suit which I'm filing has calculated that to date this has cost me approximately €42,000. This is lost income., and I'm self-employed so I was back at work working from home with stitches in my face the next day. So let's just say I'm the average, this is just lost work time, lost rent, therapy bills, does not involve legal bills, time in effective hiding, I used to leave the country once a.. for a week every month because I was too scared to be in Ireland, communications bills, anything else.

So I decided, here's what we do in tech, we size the market; how many '*me's*' are there, taking me as average? Approximately a million and a half women aged 16 to 65, if one in seven experience extreme violence and if the cost per user is €42,000, and then add this to the council of Europe's estimation per capita of violence against women costs, and this is hospitals, and legal costs and criminal costs. That's €555 per capita per year in Ireland. That means the cost total is 11.6 billion euro every year when you connect 9.4 billion which is 42,000 dollars per '*me*' and 2.2 billion to the exchequer in criminal costs and health cost. That's how much the bank bailout: 5.2 billion, that's how much that costs us every year.

I also found there was more than one type of cost. There was the personal cost where I lost my key client because they decided that I was a problem person. Someone who worked with them was helping him to harass me because he has harassed me constantly since. I still get newsletter signups to disgusting pro-life newsletters that have come from him. I was actually completely denied my agency as a human being, and as a woman, and as a feminist. I have to say one of the worst things that could have happened was pretty much being stripped of my feminism by other feminists. I used to be a regular fixture on radio about women's issues and I have not been asked once since. If I've been angry, which is the only way I start to feel better is to start to get angry about it, I get dismissed completely. It's okay if I cry, if I'm a nice little victim, if I'm sweetie pie. And I have absolutely no sense of safety. There've been a few times when I've been out of the country and I haven't been

able to get back on the plane to come back to Ireland, because I just don't feel safe here.

So my key client sacked me. I called Women's Aid and they tried to explain the social context to me and I'm like 'I've read all the same feminist theory you have'... And it was like I didn't know what to ask so I just gave up and I never did it again. So there are places I can't go, there are things I can't be part of, I had to turn down a job because I couldn't work near someone who'd been harassing me and the organisation was not willing to deal with it. So the other things are the fact that everybody wanted the "money shot" as I call it, the story of the one night that it was really bad and I was in the hospital and he bashed up my face. And to me, this focus on the extreme violence is to ignore the pattern. This one incident is like.., it was like being told 'tell us about the one time it wasn't your fault'. Then there were official problems like the fact that you don't get separate representation in court. And people don't know this. They still ask me all the time, what did your lawyer say, and I say 'you don't get a lawyer, you're just a witness'. And it's really frustrating because with all the advocacy and all the awareness raising the general public does not know that you have no one to represent you in court. You are a witness in a crime against the State and you do not matter. There's so little public understanding of the nature of the criminal process when it comes to violence against women. I went to family court where I got my unenforceable barring order, it's good for 3 years. I have a stack of evidence of him breaching it, he's been harassing me ever since. The police don't want to know about it. I also had immigration problems. I had to beg for my right to stay after 14 years. The only reason it was granted as an exception was thanks to a pile of letters from people in the tech industry saying I am useful to Ireland's export economy. So far from being cut any slack I basically feel like an over milked farm animal.

Then they lost him, there was no jail time, I had to chase the compensation money myself. And then they lost the cheque in the post...

Then there are the societal problems that I really started to see. You know, my contribution that's demanded from me by immigration and by the economy is compromised by the fact that my geography and my psycho-geography has been contracted by my inability to feel safe, even in my own professional environment. Imagine all the women's contributions that are being denied to society, to the community because they cannot afford to take a risk because they might die. Even the language itself erases the perpetrator. And I'm a writer, I would never let my students say things like 'so-and-so was beaten by someone', I would never allow that to happen because that is using the passive voice. We need to use the active voice and put the responsibility on the person who did it. We literally strip the language of domestic violence just down to the very minimum of agency... it's just enough to use victim blaming language and we just erase the perpetrator.

Then you have campaigns that reinforce patriarchal masculinity. I would be quite critical of things like 'Man Up' because of the way that it discusses... it sort of subtly reinforces this idea that women are helpless and shouldn't be hit and need to be protected. It's not sending a message to women that we have agency and that we can be empowered as human beings.

So... he's still seen as a software bug and I'm a problem person. Just to reinforce what a Feature is, that's when the programmer has declared that they officially hate their end users and plan never to fix the problems in their code. Instead Users are forced to adapt to working around these features. So how, given the realities of the actual situation for a User, how can we solve this problem for the Customer, because we're also the Customer? How can we make Users happy and improve the relationship?

This is the real problem that we can't get around: your Customers hate your Users. That's a really bad feature. In tech if someone doesn't know how to use my product I don't blame them, my product isn't working, I have to find out why and I have to fix it or it's a Fail. If you've an online market place for example and your customers are paying for advertising and your search facility stinks then your Users will give up and leave and your Customers have paid for nothing, and it's your fault. This whole relationship relies on one fundamental thing and that's that your Customer wants to help you User, and in this situation your Customer does not only not want to help your User, your Customer actively hates your User.

This problem is that it's such a huge scale so how do we create a solution that scales because this isn't just a financial cost. I understand that we have to make the business case and I think it's pretty disgusting that we have to make the business case for human lives. So let's look at what's out there: campaigns that focus on women and not on men; services that deny the individual agency of women; police focusing on individual instances of violence and they can't or won't address the pattern and either way they're not, whether they would like to or not. And then things like this; You know, Women's Aid has done an awful lot of great work, but I remember sitting the day after Mark's sentencing, I'd just found out there was a man with a long lens camera outside my house, and Women's Aid was launching balloons, I have never in my life felt so isolated from a group that was supposed to look out for my interests. Balloons, balloons, balloons... There's no anger and the patriarchy loves when we're not angry. They love when we talk about healing and never talk about consequences and I... I had lunch with a friend a few weeks later and he works with torture victims and he talked about how retribution is actually really a key part of healing. So I have been looking at other things like this pilot programme proposed in Sweden which is developed between services and Users and comes from police listening, which was not an experience I had, linking up services, helps women to move on and doesn't just talk about funnelling you into a refuge and then you've survived and now you're a survivor and good for you, see you later. My home state of Massachusetts has a risk

assessment that actually assesses violent offenders for their likelihood to kill. My ex would probably have been very high on that list. Not a single case under this system has resulted in murder. And what it does it allows women to determine their own risk level and act on it, instead of being told to ask someone if they're in danger which is the main thing that you're told when you're in a relationship like this that you're not in danger. So being able to decide that for yourself.

So I decided, hey we could build some tech around this, could have features like self-assessed risk status; friend check-in so that your friends can check in on you; messaging services; harassment recording like 'Evernote' so I wouldn't have to print out everything; improved safety, increased independence. This is actually just a pure coincidence that I costed it and it would cost exactly how much it cost me for a year, this is genuinely just a coincidence. Based on 71% smart phone penetration in Ireland, as of last December, you could reach 159,000 people for the cost of what it cost me for one year of my life. Bad news, lack of tech is not your problem. Customer doesn't want to solve your problem. What services would you link it to? Guards don't always use mobile phones so there's not really much you can do with that. Barring orders aren't particularly helpful. Data is pointless without a goal in mind. Your Users are not liked by your Customers. And the Brand story is weak.

The problem is that solutions have to be built around the existing will to solve a human problem. We are not working hard enough on the will to solve the problem. We're still making this a women's problem. We have to change the User experience by changing the culture. To get angry, to put them in jail, stop enabling user behaviour by saying 'get away from him' and just leave it at that. Ask Users what our problems are. Help Users solve the problems based on their priorities. Because when you have a good user experience for women everyone wins. And the really important way of framing this is the Customer is the person with the problem and the User is the one who feels the pain. That is the way you frame a business issue and this is not the Users problem.

So my main point is that it's completely insane that we have to make a business case for our own lives but we won't stop having to make that business case until we actually change the culture. Thank you