

Gisele Pelicot has become an icon, but that was never something she sought. *Photo: AFP*

‘I had to keep standing. If I collapsed, I knew my children would too’



Gisele Pelicot talks to **Julia Molony** about surviving her sex abuse ordeal and the heavy toll it took on her family

Gisele Pelicot isn’t comfortable with being referred to as an icon, she tells me, sitting in front of a tall bay window at the French Institute in South Kensington.

She prefers the designation chosen for her recently by the French feminist historian and feminist Michelle Perrot, who called her an “eveilleuse” — which translates roughly as “awakener” or “consciousness-raiser”.

It’s just over a year since Mme Pelicot waived her right to anonymity as a victim of sexual violence — so the world could know the details of the atrocities she suffered at the hands of her ex-husband, who drugged and raped her and solicited dozens of strange men online to abuse her inert body.

Since then, she has become the figurehead of a worldwide movement, the focus of a groundswell of support and solidarity among a public, largely female, who have rallied around her insistence that “shame must change sides”.

The letters started arriving around mid-September 2024. First, a clutch of them showed up at the sorting offices in Avignon. And then, a steady stream, until hundreds a week were arriving, bearing postmarks from across the world.

The letter-writers, in their thousands, had no personal address for their intended correspondent, nor had they ever met her. No matter. Many simply wrote “Gisele Pelicot, Avignon” on the envelope, or “Gisele Pelicot, Mazan”. Then, in an act of blind faith, they released their messages into the flowing currents of the global postal system, in the hope that they would find their way into the right hands.

And they did.

At the end of every gruelling day at the Palais de Justice in Avignon, where Mme Pelicot was the plaintiff in the biggest ever rape trial in France, court staff would approach her as she was leaving and press into her hand a bundle of mail.

Outside, as she made her way home, she passed crowds of women who had travelled from all over France to show their support and to share their own stories as victims of sexual violence.

In the evenings, instead of reading the newspaper accounts of the sordid drama in which she found herself unexpectedly at the centre, she sat down and read the letters instead.

“The stories sent to me by women gave me so much strength,” she writes in her new memoir, *A Hymn to Life*.

“I hope I passed that strength on to them as well.”

She also describes how, as the world’s press descended upon Avignon for the trial, its courthouse was suddenly “at the epicentre of women’s suffering”.

If Avignon became the epicentre of women’s suffering, then Mme Pelicot — the diminutive, composed woman in her 70s, with a chic copper bob and an earnest, open expression — became its emblem. Her image was broadcast across the world. Overnight, she became a symbol: a feminist icon.

But an icon is not a person. And above all, through everything she has lived through in the past few years, her fight has been for the restitution of her humanity, in a response to the unthinkably brutal actions of the man who sought to strip her of those things, and the dozens of men he recruited.

Today, she is giving a handful of interviews. Yesterday, she appeared on the stage at the Southbank Centre for an event at which Kate Winslet, Kristin Scott Thomas and Juliet Stevenson read from her book.

“It was my first time speaking in front of 2,300 people,” she says. Of the A-listers present, she adds: “It was extraordinary to meet them… they read passages from my book. That was moving too.”

Mme Pelicot has never sought prominence or a platform. Her life’s ambition was to have a stable marriage and a happy family — something she cruelly lost in her own childhood. She was nine when her gentle, loving mother died of cancer, leaving Gisele, her brother and her father broken and bereft.

And yet she has proven herself to be someone with the inner strength to rise when faced with adversity.

So it was when she lost her mother, the woman from whom she believes she inherited her resilience. While her brother and father floundered, she decided, with a child’s logic, that it was up to her to buoy up the family.

“My father had enormous difficulty recovering from the death of my mother, and I felt that fragility in him, and also in my brother,” she says. “It was up to me to help them. It was up to me to carry them.”

So it’s perhaps not surprising to see that today, despite being someone who describes herself as “discreet” and “retiring” by nature, she seems to have risen amiably to the demands of a hectic global press tour.

She is dressed in a military-style jacket and is a picture of vitality and vigour. While her bearing seems lighter than when she appeared in front of the world during the trial, that keen, open expression in her wide brown eyes remains the same.

It takes character to survive the unimaginable horror that was inflicted on her in the last 10 years of her marriage.

Just over five years ago, she felt that, a few years into retirement, her life was complete. Happily married for over five decades, she and her husband Dominique had survived what she considered the typical ups and downs of marriage — they had overcome financial difficulties, his career struggles, mutual infidelity. But they had settled contentedly into retirement in the south of France, renting an attractive bungalow with a swimming pool, an idyllic spot where they regularly welcomed their children and grandchildren during the school holidays.

She had, she believed, some ongoing health issues which multiple doctors had failed to identify. She suffered from blackouts and absences, as well as mysterious gynaecological complaints. And though these triggered a low-level whispering dread that something was seriously wrong — that she was perhaps going to succumb to the same brain cancer that had killed her mother — she tried to put these worries aside and enjoy what was supposed to be a golden time of life with her husband.

But all that changed in November 2020, when she and her husband were summoned to the local police station.

Her husband, she was informed, had been caught in a nearby supermarket, using a hidden camera to film under the skirts and dresses of female shoppers.

Taking her into a private room, the officer quietly informed her that during their inquires, they had discovered a cache of photographs that showed that over the last 10 years, her husband had been drugging her with powerful sedatives and muscle relaxants, and inviting local men to the house to violently rape and abuse her while she slept. There were videos too.

In the police’s assessment, she had been raped over 200 times.

That was the last time she saw her husband outside a courtroom. The day he was taken into custody, her mysterious symptoms stopped, her marriage ended and her family life fell apart.

In *A Hymn to Life*, she describes movingly the catastrophic damage that intra-familial abuse inflicts, and the struggle she has gone through with her children to repair bonds that were blown apart.

First, the challenge for her children was to accept that their loving father was capable of such monstrosity.

Later, worse was to come, when Gisele’s daughter Caroline was told that her father had also taken photos of her while sleeping, and had perhaps perpetrated incestuous abuse. Doubts were also raised about his behaviour towards the eldest grandchild, Nathan. Both Caroline and Nathan filed complaints, but neither case has been progressed.

“We were not able to be on the same page in all this, because of the sense of betrayal, and the hatred and anger that they carried within them,” Gisele says of her children today.

“They didn’t understand that I didn’t function in the same way as they did, and I felt powerless in the face of all that. I could see they were devastated, but I was trying to stay upright, to keep moving forward, to keep standing.

“I knew that if I collapsed, everything would collapse for them too. So I didn’t allow myself to fall apart.”

While her children wished to scrub all traces of their father from their existence, she felt the need to salvage memories of their life together.

“I needed to tell myself that those 50 years hadn’t been just a lie, in order to keep living, because otherwise there would be nothing left,” she says.

That was not the case for her children.

“They wanted to overturn everything, to sweep everything away, to erase it all.”

The book, she says, was a conscious effort to account for herself through all this, and to provide an explanation to her children.

“What happened shattered us completely. Each of us is now trying to rebuild in our own way, at our own pace,” he says. “We’re on the right path now. I think the book has helped with building understanding, and I think the tension is easing.

“With my children, we are much closer now. At one point, we put distance between us, and I think that was a necessary stage.”

In reading the book, she says, her children and grandson discovered things she had never told them “partly out of modesty, but also because I didn’t want to burden them with my childhood.”

> **“I needed to tell myself those 50 years of marriage hadn’t been just a lie, in order to keep living**

After reading it, they told me that they “understood better” who she is.

“I needed to explain to my children who we were when we were young, how I met their father,” she says. “Even if they already knew, I needed to explain it in my own words.”

While the world admired her composure, her children struggled to make sense of it.

“When you lose your mother, you grow up faster than everyone else,” she says. “You quickly understand that your childhood is different to the others around you.

“With regard to my children, I didn’t allow myself — I couldn’t allow myself — to break down. I felt powerless, but I had to hold on to happiness. That’s what has shaped me, in fact.

“When you’re a mother, you don’t allow yourself to collapse — most mothers are like that, I think. You face adversity and you allow yourself to move forward again. That’s important.”

It’s this part of her that has allowed to retain her optimism, her faith in life, and even in love. Her new partner, Jean Loup, sits in the corner as we talk, a gentle, attentive presence.

“We mustn’t fall into paranoia either. Not all men are perverts, not all men are rapists,” she says. “Men and women are meant to live together in harmony and understanding.

“I think there are some men, yes, who have that perversion within them and who choose evil rather than good. But we mustn’t tell ourselves that all humanity is perverse.

“Yes, my husband chose the darkest depths of the human soul. And I think I couldn’t have seen that. Perhaps I could have helped him if I had known he had suffered sexual violence when he was much younger.

“Perhaps I would have fought for him to seek help, to speak to someone. But we cannot go back. Life cannot be replayed. That’s just the way it is.”

‘A Hymn to Life: Shame Has to Change Sides’ by Gisèle Pelicot, translated by Natasha Lehrer and Ruth Diver, is published by Bodley Head



Gisele Pelicot is greeted by supporters during her husband’s trial. *Photo: Getty*

