

WHY WOMEN STAY IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The Barriers to Ending the Abuse in Women's Lives

This is a commonly asked question by friends, family, neighbours and the community in general when it is discovered that a woman is in an abusive relationship. Ironically, the question, "Why doesn't the abuser stop abusing?" rarely gets asked. In asking "why women stay," it is important to recognize that the question itself arises out of a lack of understanding over the complexities and dangers of woman abuse. At another level, it is a question that ultimately puts responsibility for the abuse and ending it, upon the woman. The first step in supporting a woman is to examine the barriers she faces in making the choice to leave and to provide her with support and information. The challenge is acknowledging why it is so difficult for women to live free of violence and examine ways in which community institutions and cultural values have the ability to perpetuate or to end woman abuse.

Some of the barriers women are facing in trying to end the abuse or leave abusive relationships:

Women are concerned about the disruption of their children's lives that comes with separation, including the child's relationship to the abusive partner, changes in living environment or school, as well as changes in economic circumstance.

FACT: During a six month period ending in 1996, a survey of LAWC clients indicated that many women were staying with, or returning to, an abusive partner due to cuts in income maintenance programs, Second Stage Housing and legal aid.

FACT: In Canada, 1.3 million children live under the poverty line, and 40-45% of all food bank clients are children. In London, the number of single parent families who access emergency food supplies has increased dramatically.

Abusive partners often threaten to abduct children, refuse economic support or to fight for custody.

FACT: In 1990, there were 432 reports of parental child abduction where charges were laid. The majority of children were under the age of 10, and 80% occurred where there was no court order in place. (Canadian Social Trends)

Some abusers make threats to kill their partners, to commit suicide, or to harm children, pets or other family members.

FACT: Women are at most risk of being killed by an abusive partner after separation. In Canada, intimate femicides account for between 61% and 78% of all killings of women where an offender is identified. Abusers may also kill the victim's children, parents, relatives, friends or acquaintances. The perpetrator may also commit murder-suicide.

Women with disabilities may be dependent on their abusive partners for attendant care and be faced with a lack of resources or the possibility of losing custody of their children if they leave.

FACT: 33% of women with disabilities reported they were assaulted during their adult years, mostly by husbands, as compared to 22% of non-disabled women. The unemployment rate for women with disabilities is 3 times that of unemployed non-disabled men, and double that of non-disabled women. (Dawn Canada)

Women may have additional language or cultural barriers that impact their ability to get the help or information that they need.

FACT: Funding for cultural interpreters, learner centres and ESL training has decreased. Requests by non-English speaking or immigrant women to anti-violence services has decreased since cutbacks in funding have occurred.

Women care about and have made a commitment to their partners.

FACT: Studies show that 73-85% of women do not experience physical violence until they have married or moved in with their partner. It is rare that the abuse begins with a serious assault. More often the tactics of control begin with less overt things that the abuser excuses with harmless or endearing explanations (i.e. bouts of jealousy explained away as proof of caring and concern), and escalate by degrees over the course of time. When women do speak of leaving the relationship it is very common for abusers to promise change as a tactic to alter her decision.

Women are afraid that no-one will believe them.

FACT: Abused women are 4-5 times more likely to require psychiatric treatment as a result of the abuse and five times more likely to attempt suicide. The stigma of mental illness can be used in a court to reinforce that women are crazy, have made up the abuse or are unfit parents or witnesses.

Abused women often report that the effects of emotional and psychological abuse are just as debilitating as the physical assaults. As well, abused women are quite often isolated from family and friends and do not have the information or support that they need.

FACT: Fear, anxiety, fatigue, post-traumatic stress disorder and sleeping and eating disturbances are common long-term reactions to abuse. Women are often so worn down by it that they live one day at a time, unable to plan for more than a day or two into the future, making undertaking a plan to leave completely overwhelming.

In investigating their options for leaving, they find there is a lack of community resources to assist women, such as housing, childcare, or legal aid.

FACT: In 1997, revisions to the Landlord and Tenant Act (Bill 96) allowed for prospective tenants to be denied housing based on their income. This act increases discrimination against women who are seeking housing in order to flee abusive situations.

Women are economically dependent upon their abusive partners and unable to support themselves and their children.

FACT: In research done by Statistics Canada, it was found that after separation, a woman's standard of living decreases by 23-29%, while a man's increases by 10-30%. In 1996, large scale downsizing and centralization occurred to the Family Support Plan in Ontario. Women are now waiting months to receive child support from the new Family Responsibilities Office resulting in inability to pay rent, increased reliance on food banks, and increased need for welfare which will later have to be repaid.

Women do not know their rights or do not have access to legal resources to inform themselves and have their rights protected in a court of law.

FACT: Contrary to public perception, women are not automatically granted custody of children by the court. Abused women often experience ongoing harassment and abuse through the custody and access process. Due to cutbacks to legal aid, women often have no choice about entering mediation or are pressured into accepting joint custody which puts them at further risk of abuse.

Women are told by their families, friends, church or other community professionals that they should stay in the relationship no matter what.

FACT: Whether for reasons of religious or cultural beliefs or a perceived stigma of divorce, quite often those people to whom an abused woman turns to for aid end up serving the interests of the abuser rather than the victim. In such cases, it is the image of the family that is preserved not the family itself, resulting in long-term harm to both the woman and her children.

Women are ashamed of disclosing the abuse and feel they are to blame.

FACT: Abused women are regularly blamed by their partners for the abuse that they themselves perpetrated. By asking "why women stay" rather than why abusers refuse to take responsibility for their behaviour, we place the onus on the woman to change the situation, when in fact the problem is with the abuser. In reality many women who do leave abusive partners continue to be abused by them.