

# Why Doesn't She Just Leave?

*"I had no memory anymore... I had gone to university, I was a registered nurse, but I couldn't work, I could barely cope. I couldn't clean the house. I couldn't do anything... I just couldn't. I just know that I felt like I wanted to die - I just wanted to be dead because it was too painful to live. I didn't try to commit suicide, but I was hoping for something to happen. Then the problems just got worse. I couldn't be any more afraid of him."*

Many people who do not understand the dynamics of family violence often ask the question, "Why doesn't she just leave?", not understanding why someone would put themselves or their children in a situation of abuse. Perhaps a more appropriate question is "Why doesn't he just stop abusing her?"

Women in abusive relationships have often been socialized to consider others before themselves. Expecting women to leave or begin focusing on themselves and their safety and needs is a complete and total deviation from what they have learned from a relationship which has destroyed their confidence, esteem, and identity.

*"I was so scared in every way and brainwashed so much that I didn't do anything or say anything. I just kept my mouth shut."*

*"...you don't get married to get divorced, that's the way I look at it... you're together and you have all these plans... and you feel you're nothing without a man. It took a long time to realize that you're stronger without him."*

*"I was totally beaten ... you could have given me a million pamphlets [on family violence] and I couldn't read them, I couldn't think. I couldn't read that stuff - I could barely read the grocery labels at that point."*

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The quotes in this document are from PEI women interviewed in 1999 during herStory of woman abuse and the PEI justice system, a project of the Woman Abuse and the PEI Justice System Research Team of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research.

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There are many reasons why a woman may not leave an abusive partner or why it may take several attempts to do so before she leaves for good:

- ⇒  she fears more violence towards herself or her family
- ⇒  she cannot afford to support herself and her children
- ⇒  she feels shame and humiliation that this is happening to her
- ⇒  she hopes to change the man she loves and believes the honeymoon promises that the abuse will never happen again
- ⇒  she believes that children need their father and that families need to stay together "for better or for worse"
- ⇒  he has threatened to take her children away if she leaves
- ⇒  she doesn't realize that she is being abused
- ⇒  she is crippled by constant trauma and erosion of self-esteem
- ⇒  she believes that she "causes" the abuse
- ⇒  she is pressured by family, community or religious pressures to "keep the family together"
- ⇒  she is aware of problems accessing financial assistance, affordable housing, childcare and family law legal aid in PEI
- ⇒  she lives in isolation and has little or no knowledge of options or resources available
- ⇒  cultural isolation, such as language barriers, make services inaccessible
- ⇒  she fears losing her Canadian status and is unaware of her rights as a refugee or newly landed immigrant

*"I think I would have left a lot earlier and went to Anderson House, but Charlottetown is a long way from this end of the Island."*

*"... any time I did bring it up with family members, it was, 'You're pregnant, don't rock the boat, he's a good provider'."*

*"I left with nothing and had to start all over again with nothing. I had no table, no chair, bed, I had no groceries..."*

*"I felt selfish doing something like that for myself [leaving the relationship], I really did. I even prayed to God if I'm being selfish to forgive me, because it's just that I was very afraid of ending up murdered."*

## What Happens After Women Leave?

To answer the question of why women don't leave, it is useful to examine what happens when women do leave.

When the question is asked, "Why doesn't she just leave?", it assumes that leaving will solve the problem. The opposite is more often true. Women undergoing a separation from their abusive partner are at an elevated risk for experiencing violence<sup>1</sup> and, in fact, separated women are 9 times more likely to be murdered by their estranged partner.<sup>2</sup> Data collected by Statistics Canada reveals that 39% of spousal abuse victims who reported post-separation violence indicated that the violence only began after separation.<sup>3</sup>

*"... after I moved out from Anderson House, weird things started happening. Bottles would be broken right under my front car tires, doors were opened in the morning and they were locked when you went to bed. The only way it would end is, one of us wouldn't survive and the police knew that, they were worried, horrified, they suggested guns, suggested dogs, but a gun wouldn't stop him and certainly a dog can be killed. So I was looking after myself, and the kids knew too, but fortunately it didn't come to that, I was ready, I still am...."*

Often, when a woman has come to a decision to separate herself from her abuser, she soon realizes that she cannot and that even if she is living separate and apart from him, the abuse can continue indefinitely in similar or new ways.

*"I had not been out of the house for a year, because of him waiting for me outside and assaulting me once I came out. My father would pick me up once a month to take me for groceries and he'd pull right up here to the front step and I'd run down the step and jump in the car and he'd be right behind us in his car, every time."*

*"[he] had custody of the children every second weekend, but they didn't want to go with him... [They] were crying and not wanting to go with their father. They were terrified without me there to protect them."*

*"It's terrifying because you know that no matter where you go, you know that no matter what you do, you never stop looking over your shoulder... You don't make any friends because they're subject to the terrorism, and you know that you can't go home. You know that you have no family. That you really are alone... I've left so many homes so many times, sometimes not even without my glasses or purse - I just ran."*

*"He's still in my life though, he still phones me. He's married, he has another child. If I start dating someone, they get threatened. It's sick - he's sick. Something in his mind tells him that I'm his, and that's the way it's going to be. We make these terrible choices in our lifetime. I made a real bad choice and sometimes the consequences go on forever."*

*"Well, when I was pregnant with my first child, after the miscarriages, we had very little food in the house ... he would sometimes ... go eat at the canteen and I wouldn't know. I can remember one day saying to him, "if we don't do something I'm going to go kill one of your cows and eat it," and I was very pregnant at that time ... he'd bring home dozens of people sometimes for me to feed at all hours of the day and night and he would even go out and send people home and not come home to eat, but he'd go up the street and tell everyone well, the wife's got dinner ready for him ."*

### **Long-term Impacts of Family Violence**

Even after the abuse ends, the effects can last for a long time. Many women experience flashbacks, nightmares, fear, difficulty making decisions and financial insecurity after leaving an abusive relationship.

*"It's hard to be on my own after all these years. It's scary when you've had somebody tell you from the day married and for 22 years...what I can and can't do and where I can and can't go. And then all of a sudden I'm on my own....I have a hard time to make decisions because I was never allowed to make too many when I was home."*

*"It took me a month and a half after he was in jail before I could go to the store after dark. The first time I was walking home I was so proud of myself. Then this car comes down the street and it backfires and I hit the pavement - I thought I'd been shot. I ripped my face and my hands were all cut..."*

*"This place - a place of hell...and those memories of family life. I think about it sometimes in bed, having dreams. Get up in the morning, all shook up and no one to tell."*

*"If there's a man - even if it's a friend or relative - and they quickly get off the chair - jump off of the chair, I'll just freeze.... It's kind of like being in a war, a trauma - terrible flashbacks!"*

*"After I left him I was on welfare. It was terrible. Terribly degrading and embarrassing."*

*"I still don't feel safe and I probably never will. He would have to be dead before I'd feel safe."*

1. Statistics Canada (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics), *Family Violence in Canada: A Statistical Profile 2000*, note 2 at 15-16
2. Statistics Canada (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics), *Juristat: Spousal Violence After Marital Separation*, (Vol. 21, no. 7), pg 7.
3. Statistics Canada (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics), *Juristat: Spousal Violence After Marital Separation*, (Vol. 21, no. 7), pg 2