

WHY BATTERED WOMEN STAY: SOME REFLECTIONS

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I. THIS IS THE WRONG QUESTION.

The questions we should be asking are:

- Why do assailants terrorize and torture their partners?
- Why do men beat women?¹
- Why does the community allow battering to continue?

A common mistake in understanding domestic violence is to scrutinize and evaluate the survivor. This practice avoids looking at the behavior and intentions of the perpetrator of the violence. It also misses the essential task of examining the ways in which our culture condones, supports and gives permission for battering.

People believe that if battered women REALLY wanted to leave they could just get up and go. Many people overlook the environmental barriers that prevent women from leaving and too often focus on psychological "characteristics" of women instead.

Further questions we should be asking are:

- how do many, many women overcome incredible obstacles and achieve safety and non-violence for themselves and their children?
- why do women leave?

- when do women leave?
- how can we be helpful to women in the process of leaving?
- which specific counseling and support methods are helpful to women and which are not?

II. THERE ARE INCORRECT ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING THE QUESTION—WHY DO THEY STAY?

- Many battered women do leave. Shelters are usually full.
- Some battered women stay only for a short period. Some battered women leave immediately after the first assault and never return.
- Almost all battered women try to leave at some point.
- For battered women who leave the violence may just be beginning. Batterers escalate their violence when a women tries to leave, shows signs of independence or has left.

Separation Violence

THE PENNSYLVANIA COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE.

Many, perhaps most, people believe that battered women will be safe once they separate from the batterer. They also believe that women are free to leave abusers at any time. However, leaving does not usually put an end to the violence. Batterers may, in fact, escalate their violence to coerce a battered

woman into reconciliation or to retaliate for the battered women's perceived rejection or abandonment of the batterer. Men, who believe they are entitled to relationships with battered women or that they "own" their female partners, view women's departure as an ultimate betrayal which justifies retaliation. (Saunders & Browne, 1990; Dutton, 1988; Bernard et al., 1982)

Evidence of the gravity of separation violence is overwhelming:

- Up to 3/4 of domestic assaults reported to law enforcement agencies were inflicted after separation of the couples. (U.S. Dept. of Justice, 1983)
- One study reveals that 73% of the battered women seeking emergency medical service sustained injuries after leaving the batterer. (Stark et al., 1981)
- Almost 1/4 of the women killed by their male partners in one study in Philadelphia and Chicago were separated or divorced from the men who killed them. 28.6% of the women were attempting to end the relationship when they were killed. (Casanave and Zahn, 1986). In one study of spousal homicide, over half of the male defendants were separated from their victims (Bernard et al., 1982)
- Women are most likely to be murdered when attempting to report abuse or to leave an abusive relationship. (Sonkin et al., 1985, Browne, 1987)

Because leaving may be dangerous—dangerous from the point that the batterer learns that the