

Why don't they leave and why do they stay?

By Toby Myers

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The life of a battered woman is one of inconsistencies. Some call her behavior counterintuitive—not what one would expect. Why she stays is not hard to understand. She values her family. She wants to give up the violence and abuse, not the man and the marriage. Her socialization tells her to stand by her man, that marriage is not a bed of roses, that she should stick it out for better or for worse, and that she has to take the bitter with the sweet. She buys in to her being part of the problem. It is her job to make it work. She works hard at adapting and adjusting to make it work. If she does not make it work, she is a failure. She may wonder how she will make it without him. He may have threatened to kill her if she leaves, or take the children, or do some other terrible thing. If she is with him at least she knows where he is and what she has got. Man in Arkansas, after killing spree, women left the shelter and went back to husbands. If she leaves, she will have the unknown. Leaving is the most dangerous time in a woman's life; it is when she is leaving that she is killed. Women on their own with children have tough economic problems. As long as she holds out hope, she will be in there pitching, trying to adjust and adapt and make it better.

Leaving is a process. What usually gets her out is the dream dies. The hope that it will get any better is gone. She does not know what else to do to make a go of it. Yet it depends on how deep she is in the quicksand if she can get away, but she may have been so systematically disempowered that it is not possible. Women who do manage to get away don't always get away on the first try. Women may repeat attempts to get away. In order not to be a victim, women need resources and information and he controls most of those. She may be a prisoner of wedlock, a hostage in her own family. As things get worse, she goes from trying to change the situation to surviving. She also minimizes and denies and blames, but in a different way. She tells herself it was not so bad, that she was at fault or that he is under stress at work. She suffers in silence and does not tell people because of the shame and because of wanting to protect him. She focuses in on his good points. Her staying is not deviant behavior, she is simply acting as most well socialized females do who value and want to preserve their families. Also she has learned to live with this constant danger and believes she can take it. I do not think she knows there is a finite amount that she can adapt and adjust. One day she is in quicksand or at the edge of the precipice or she has run out of tether and it is down to him or her. By then she is on automatic pilot at that time thinking only of how it is she can survive. A woman is not under obligation to rearrange her whole life to avoid a situation. She does not waive her legal rights because she stays.

One of the myths I have heard promulgated is women stay because they like it. I have probably seen as many battered women as anyone in our state, and have yet to see one who liked it. At most, some accept and tolerate abuse. Most of us assume that leaving is a normal reasonable response and that leaving will end the violence when it is the most dangerous time of all. Though she is puzzlingly passive, there is an exhibition of quiet strength. She goes on functioning despite difficult circumstances, keeping a household running, nurturing and protecting children, suffering pain and injuries, driving carpools,

making sure children have birthday parties, and frequently working outside the home.