

## 20 Reasons Why She Stays A Guide for Those Who Want to Help Battered Women

by Susan G. S. McGee

(Minerva, Inc. [SusanGSMcGee@aol.com](mailto:SusanGSMcGee@aol.com))

This article really should be entitled “Why Some Battered Women Sometimes Stay for Varying Periods of Time”.

### I. This is the wrong question.

The questions we should be asking are: **Why** do assailants terrorize and torture their partners? **Why** is it that the vast majority of batterers are men and the vast majority of survivors are women?<sup>1</sup> **Why** does the community allow battering to continue?

We routinely scrutinize and evaluate the survivor. What is she doing wrong? How can she change? What should she be doing? By doing so, we avoid looking at the behavior and intentions of the perpetrator of the violence. This error rests on the assumption that if we could change the survivor or force her to leave, the battering would end. This allows the assailant to continue his terrorism unchallenged, since the focus is not on what **he** is doing but what his partner is or isn't doing. Since violence and abuse in an intimate relationship is under the sole control of the assailant, by constant microscopic examination of the survivor, we miss how we can reduce or stop the violence. By our misplaced focus on survivor behavior, we also miss the ways our culture condones, supports and gives permission for battering.

People believe that if battered women **REALLY, truly, honest to goodness** wanted to leave they could just get up and go. (Therefore, if we can “get” her into shelter<sup>2</sup> or convince her to leave we've done good. Our job is over). We overlook the environmental barriers<sup>3</sup> that prevent women from leaving, ignore how the batterer is trapping her, and too often focus on psychological "characteristics" of survivors instead.

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<sup>1</sup> It's important to note that there are a few men battered by women. Women are battered by women, and men are battered by men, and in fact, gay male battering may have the highest incidence of all the different configurations. I use the term battered women to emphasize the role of sexism and the breadth and extent of male violence against women.

<sup>2</sup> Many people are unaware that most survivors who leave do so without ever entering a shelter.

<sup>3</sup> Environmental barriers are different from psychological/individual barriers. Environmental barriers include survivors not having access to: safe and affordable housing; quality affordable child care; transportation; effective police protection; legal representation; high quality legal representation; credit repair; money; education and employment opportunities. If survivors leave, they may lose their health insurance, dental coverage, and eye coverage for themselves and their children. Barriers also include access to mental health and/or alcohol and other drug treatment if needed.

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? Since women are usually **murdered** after they leave, how can we increase safety for women who do make the courageous decision to escape? **Which** specific counseling and support methods are helpful to women and which are not? What does outstanding advocacy look like? How can we reach **ALL** survivors and get them the information and support they need? How can we mobilize the community to support survivors and to prevent domestic violence?

In our work in the community, we should be pushing for graduated, consistent consequences for batterers, including jail time (because if he's in jail, he can't assault her).<sup>4</sup>

And by the way, why doesn't **he** leave?<sup>5</sup>

## II. **There are incorrect assumptions underlying the question "Why does she stay"?**

**Many don't 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. Leaving is a process and it may take several times before the survivor is able to depart. Our communities are full of formerly battered women who are living safely and independently.<sup>6</sup>

For battered women who leave the violence is often *just beginning*. Batterers oftentimes escalate their violence when a woman tries to leave, shows signs of independence or has left.

Although the concept of stalking is often associated with celebrities, survivors and their advocates knew about stalking long before it became a crime or attracted the attention of the media. Assailants often stalk their partner both during the relationship and after it ends. The batterer's pursuit rarely ends until he has found a new victim, the victim relocates or the consequences for the stalking are too great.<sup>7</sup> However, some

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, some batterers do harass their partners from jail or prison, influence or coerce others to control her on his behalf or even hire someone to kill her from jail or prison. In general, however, she is safer when he is locked up.

<sup>5</sup> Casey Gwinn, an attorney active in reforming the criminal justice system, often says in training that in hundreds of phone calls from police and prosecutors throughout the U.S., not one has said "what's wrong with this guy? if she's so awful, why doesn't he leave her?" They all asked about the survivor's behavior.

<sup>6</sup> Because battering is dangerous, causes grave injuries and can end in death, we may ignore the fact that MOST battered women are NOT killed and MANY escape.

<sup>7</sup> The study "Stalking in America" found that 78% of stalking victims are female and 87% of stalking perpetrators are male. Only 23% of female victims are stalked by strangers. Women are

assailants return years later to re-assault or to kill their partners. National expert Lydia Walker believes that assailants re-contact and harass all their prior victims as each of their relationships end.

In almost all of 50 domestic violence homicides that our shelter tracked in Michigan in 1993, the woman had left her assailant, was about to leave, or had given him good cause to believe that he had finally lost her. Assailants are most likely to kill their victims when they believe that she is actually going to leave them.

## **Separation 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. Assailants believe they are entitled to their relationship with battered women and that they "own" their female partners. They view women's departure as an ultimate betrayal that justifies and demands revenge. (Saunders & Browne, 1990; Dutton, 1988; Bernard et al., 1982)

A group of advocates, survivors and advocates started naming this concept "separation violence" in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

### **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 services sustained injuries after leaving the batterer. (Stark et al., 1981)

In another study in Philadelphia and Chicago, almost 1/4 of the women killed by their male partners 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)

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significantly more likely than men (59% and 30% respectively) to be stalked by intimate partners, about half of whom stalk their partners while the relationship is intact. Patricia Tjaden and Nancy Thoennes, **Stalking in America: Findings from the National Violence against Women Survey**. April, 1998. National Institute of Justice, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.ncjrs.org/txtfiles/169592.txt>.

<sup>5</sup>. "Legal Images Of Battered Women: Redefining The Issue Of Separation." by Martha R. Mahoney \* Copyright (c) 1991 Michigan Law Review Michigan Law Review October, 1991 90 Mich. L. Rev. 1 <http://www.lawsite.ca/51301/mahoney.htm>

Women are most likely to be murdered when attempting to report abuse or to leave an abusive relationship. (Sonkin et al., 1985, Browne, 1987).

In his book on domestic violence homicides, Neal Websdale cites the following studies: "The extant research literature shows that women experience an increased risk of lethal violence when they leave intimate relationships with men. Wilson and Daly's analysis of interspousal homicide from summary data in Canada (1974-90), New South Wales (1968-86) and Chicago (1965-90) reveals that wives experienced a 'substantially elevated' risk of lethal victimization when estranged from and no longer living with their husbands. These researchers comment that among married, cohabiting Canadian spouses between 1977 and 1983 'a man was almost four times as likely to kill his wife as to be killed by her; among estranged couple, he was more than nine times as likely to kill her as she him.' According to Wilson and Daly the significantly increased risk was not due to an escalation of the violence that was already present in these marital relationships. Rather, they point out that batterers warned their wives that if they left they would be killed; they then followed through on those threats.

Easteal also reports that the suicide of the perpetrator of intimate –partner homicide is more likely if the parties were separated before the killing, although she contends that the length of the separation does not seem to be important. For Easteal, in cases of homicide-suicide, it is the inability of the offender to conceive of himself as an entity separate from his partner that propels him toward killing."

"Because leaving may be dangerous (from the point that the batterer learns that the relationship may end through years after separation)<sup>9</sup> does not mean that battered women should stay. Cohabiting with the batterer is highly dangerous. Violence may increase in frequency and severity over time, and never disappears without intervention. A batterer may engage in preemptive strikes, fearing loss of ownership or anticipating separation even before the battered woman reaches such a decision. Although leaving may pose additional hazards, at least in the short run, the research data and our experience as advocates for battered women demonstrates that ultimately a battered woman can best achieve safety and freedom apart from the batterer. Leaving will require strategic planning and legal intervention to avert separation violence and to safeguard survivors and their children." (*Revised and reprinted from **Confronting Domestic Violence: Effective Police Response** by Barbara J. Hart, Jane Stuehling, Micki Reese and Edmund Stubbing. Published by the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 1990. Quoted with permission.*)

Some of my earliest experiences as a shelter worker included the following:

In the Jones case, (not the real name), Joe Jones, a psychiatrist under contract at Community Mental Health, was convicted of felonious assault for hitting his soon to be ex-wife over the head seven times with a claw hammer. She had been separated from him for a year, was in counseling, and had a restraining order. The divorce was final one

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<sup>9</sup> Lydia Walker, national expert on domestic violence, believes that survivors are in most danger of homicide or an assault in the first year after separation, and after each successive victim of the batterer leaves. NOTE: **LYDIA** Walker, not Lenore.

week after the assault took place. Carlos Warrington was convicted of second degree murder for smashing his three year old son's head in with a furniture table leg. The jury decided that he had meant to kill his (soon to be ex wife), but killed his son instead when she escaped. She had left him, had her own apartment and had a restraining order. Sharon White was killed by her former boyfriend Lyle Taylor. He had been arrested four times for domestic assault, and convicted. Unfortunately, the two felonies were plea bargained to misdemeanors. Greta Haaken, age 13, was murdered by a boy with whom she had broken off a dating relationship. He had confessed to choking her into unconsciousness the week before, but had not yet been arrested. Holly Jones was murdered when her assailant received an eviction notice for her apartment

### **III. Some battered women are held prisoner in their own homes. Assailants use psychological terrorism and brainwashing techniques to keep them in the violent relationship.**

Take a look at the "Stockholm Syndrome", often used as an explanatory model by law enforcement. The hostages identify with, become attached to, and take the side of their captors. Studies have found that members of the following groups have suffered from the "Stockholm Syndrome" -- concentration camp survivors; prisoners of war; physically and/or emotionally abused children; battered women; civilians in Chinese Communist prisons; cult members; women and youth trapped in prostitution, women and youth trafficked internationally.<sup>10</sup> The Stockholm Syndrome is valuable in describing the systematic methods used to break down the victims' will to resist and bring them under control. It is also valuable in explaining how the responses of those who are victimized -- -- which may seem incomprehensible -- become easily understandable survival reactions in life-threatening, abusive situations.

Emotional abuse occurs in virtually all relationships where physical violence exists. The assailant will use extremely derogatory, often sexually explicit epithets tailored to the vulnerabilities of the survivor. He will employ knowledge gained in an intimate relationship to attack the woman's spirit and sense of her own value. This constant barrage of verbal abuse wears down the woman's resistance, making it more difficult for her to leave.

Psychological terrorism goes far beyond name-calling and vicious verbal attacks. It may involve withholding food and water, sleep deprivation, withholding medication, administering drugs and medication, total isolation, degradation, "gaslighting",<sup>11</sup> Russian Roulette, demonstrations that the batterer is "all powerful", occasional reinforcements for compliant behavior, and frustrating any attempts at non-compliance.

Rape, sexual abuse and sexual humiliation are common in battering relationships. This is another tactic habitually practiced by hostage takers and those who

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<sup>10</sup> See the excellent article by Dee L. R. Graham and Edna I. Rawlings in **Dating Violence: Young Women in Danger**, edited by Barrie Levy, for a description of this syndrome.

<sup>11</sup> To gaslight crept into English from the movie directed by George Kukor and starring Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman. It means to convince someone they are going crazy. He "loses his watch" (having planted it in her purse), and she believes she took it. He turns the gaslight down in her room as part of the plot to make her crazy.

run concentration camps. Because sexuality is such a potentially intimate and sacred experience, sexual abuse and domination are particularly degrading to the spirit and weaken the capacity to resist.

Torture and murder of pets - particularly those special to the woman - is also not unusual. The assailant often deliberately destroys property (particularly pictures) that has immense intrinsic value to his victim. Again, the assailant wields these weapons to demonstrate his control and her powerlessness. (See also **Judith Hermann's** outstanding book **Trauma and Recovery** for further information about trauma victims. Ginny NiCarthy in her book **Getting Free** has a chart that compares survivors of domestic violence to victims of brainwashing).

**Extortion.** I have found that when I can't really understand what's holding a survivor in a battering relationship that the assailant is often holding damaging information over her head. This extortion takes all kinds of forms. He can threaten to report wrongdoing or criminal behavior to child welfare, welfare, the Internal Revenue Service or the Immigration and Naturalization Service. He will threaten a police report. Sometimes her behavior is not criminal at all, but would humiliate or embarrass her. Assailants have been known to videotape sex acts, particularly those that are especially problematic for the survivor and threaten to mail copies to parents, friends, employers, etc. He might threaten to disclose an abortion, or an episode of infidelity, etc.

#### **IV. Some battered women stay because they believe that counseling or therapy will help their batterers stop being violent.**

Professionals may refer women to couples or marital counseling. Alternatively, they may suggest therapy or anger management for the assailant. Unfortunately, when the assailant enters counseling, this bolsters the woman's hope that the relationship can be salvaged, and she may stay or return. If he can be cured, she reasons (and her reasoning is supported by the therapist who is doing the counseling, who she sees as the expert), then the violence will end and their relationship can resume. This applies to pro-feminist high quality batterer intervention programs as well. A 2001 review of research published on VAWnet states "Referral of a batterer to a BIP is one of the strongest predictors that a woman will leave shelter and return to the batterer."<sup>12</sup>

I have found no research indicating that traditional therapy works for batterers.<sup>13</sup> Anger management classes are worse than useless for assailants. They are based on the thoroughly discredited idea that batterers lose their temper and strike out. Assailants' violence is planned, not impulsive. The anger assumption leads to a lot of terrible public

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<sup>12</sup> Larry Bennett and Oliver Williams. "In Brief: Controversies and Recent Studies of Batterer Intervention Program Effectiveness". August, 2001. VAWnet, Applied Research Forum, National Electronic Network on Violence against Women.

[http://www.vawnet.org/DomesticViolence/Research/VAWnetDocs/AR\\_bip.php](http://www.vawnet.org/DomesticViolence/Research/VAWnetDocs/AR_bip.php)

<sup>13</sup> Lundy Bancroft delineates five ways in which therapy differs from a high quality abuser program i.e. that therapy will give unconditional support to feelings, and will not address what Bancroft calls the central causes of abusiveness – entitlement, coercive control, disrespect, superiority, selfishness or victim blaming. Bancroft, Lundy **Why Does He DO That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men.** New York: Berkley Books, 2002, p. 356.

and program policy that is designed to placate and avoid making the batterer angry rather than holding him accountable.

Research is mixed and not yet extensive enough to really reach any conclusions regarding the effectiveness of specially tailored batterers' intervention programs.<sup>14</sup> There is some evidence that indicates that bips may be effective for **a relatively small number of batterers** in a high quality program backed up by sanctions from the criminal justice system.<sup>15</sup>

Most experts believe that a man must be violence free for two to three years before marriage counseling is safe or appropriate. (Ellen Pence, one of the founders of the Duluth project, quoted in the February 16, 1992 New York Times article "When Men Hit Women" by Jan Hoffman)

Professionals<sup>16</sup>, therefore, must be very careful in referring an assailant to counseling. They may unwittingly keep a woman in a violent relationship by fostering erroneous beliefs in the positive outcomes of therapy, anger management or specialized batterers intervention programs. They must diligently inform both parties of the facts about the effectiveness of counseling for assailants.

No one really wants to be the person who brings the survivor the bad news that her spouse, or boyfriend, is not going to end his violence and that there is little hope for a non-violent relationship. However, this information must be communicated, and it must be done compassionately and carefully. Most battered women do NOT get this information and therefore are not ABLE to make better informed choices.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bennett and Williams in the VAWnet article referenced in footnote 11 state: "While nearly 50 empirical studies have been published on batterer program outcomes, in only four of these studies were batterers randomly assigned to a BIP or a no-treatment control group. Experimental research is difficult and expensive, and at present inconclusive."

<sup>15</sup> A recent report issued in June of 2003 by the Department of Justice. National Institute of Justice. Shelly Jackson, Lynette Feder, David R. Forde; Robert C. Davis, Christopher D. Maxwell, and Bruce G. Taylor. "Batterer Intervention Programs: Where Do We Go From Here? Here are its findings. "Two evaluations of programs in Broward County, Florida, and Brooklyn, New York, based on more rigorous experimental designs, claim that they have little or no effect.....In the Broward County study, no significant differences were found between batterers in the treatment and control groups on reoffense rates or attitudes toward domestic violence. In the Brooklyn study, the results were more complicated: Men who completed an 8-week treatment program showed no differences from the control group, but men who had completed a 26-week program had significantly fewer official complaints lodged against them than the control group. No difference was found among the three groups in attitudes toward domestic violence."

<sup>16</sup> In this article, the term professional refers to any person whose job description includes helping, interacting with or serving battered women. So shelter workers, advocates, police, nurses, etc. are all included.

<sup>17</sup> If the batterers intervention program is housed within the same organization that runs the shelter and advocacy services, the survivor may assume that the organization believes that her assailant can and will be helped by the bip. Accurate information is therefore even more important

Assailants can seem romantic and charming. They **can** choose to behave very well, and will until that tactic no longer effectively controls their partners. Then, they use a variety of coercive methods up to and including physical force to get what they want and bring their partners back under control. Their ability to mask their abusive behavior at certain times also keeps hope alive for the survivor.

**V. Some battered women stay because they hope he will change and become non-violent.**

Battered women (sometimes) stay for varying lengths of time because they very much hope their assailant will change his behavior. *All women want the violence to end; many do not want the relationship to end.* The assailant usually tells his partner that he will change, that the violence was a one time event, and this bolsters her hope.

**Cycle of Violence Theory.**

Lenore Walker developed a theory of describing what happens in a battering relationship. She observed three phases in battering relationships. **PHASE I** is the tension building phase. It involves a gradual escalation of tension. The abuser instigates minor incidents of physical, sexual or emotional abuse. This stage may last anywhere from minutes to days, weeks or month. **PHASE II** is the acute battering incident. The assailant attacks his partner. The violence may last for hours, days, or even longer. **PHASE III.** This has been named the "loving, contrition phase", the "honeymoon" phase or the "respite" phase. The batterer cries, pleads, buys presents, sends flowers, and swears to change. He apologizes and pleads with the woman not to leave. He may enter therapy briefly during this phase. Sometimes the woman perceives this phase as a sign that the assailant is changing his behavior, and stays in the relationship. Unfortunately, the cycle starts right up again at some future time. In her 1984 study, Walker found that 65% of all women report a tension-building phase, and 58% report a "loving, contrition" phase.

Therefore, although this theory is helpful in describing some battered women's experiences, it cannot be applied across the board.

Battered women and advocates have objected to the names for PHASE III. The ostensibly better behavior of the batterer in the respite phase is just another means of control. He is afraid she will leave so he uses different tactics to keep her in the relationship. The theory seems to mistakenly promote the idea that batterers are tense, and their tension "erupts", that they have a "short fuse" and "explode" rather than plan their controlling behavior.

**VI. Some battered women are forced to stay because they can't afford justice.**

Getting a civil protection order<sup>18</sup> may require getting a lawyer -- which usually requires money. The assailant may challenge the protection order, and the survivor may need to retain counsel to represent her. Legal aid offices may not necessarily handle divorce, and many do not have the resources to handle divorce and custody cases when

<sup>18</sup> Civil protection orders are known as protection orders, personal protection orders, restraining orders, or temporary restraining orders in different parts of the U.S.

domestic violence is involved. Major cuts to legal services have hindered even the limited options for legal redress that battered women formerly had. A woman often cannot afford as skilled an attorney as her spouse/partner. The assailant may have told her that he will hire an attorney who will take her children from her if she leaves him. Too often, this threat becomes reality.

When a survivor is charged with a crime, she oftentimes cannot afford quality legal representation. She may be assigned an attorney by the court who knows nothing about domestic violence or worse accepts the assailants' version of the crime.<sup>19</sup>

Many battered women are incorrectly arrested for domestic violence. Their assailant may set her up by scratching or cutting himself and claiming she did it. Most often, she has acted in self-defense (brandished a knife to prevent a beating or scratched or clawed at him to prevent strangulation). She is quite likely to admit this action, whereas batterers routinely deny the violence. Too many law enforcement officials (police and prosecutors<sup>20</sup>) are not adequately trained or knowledgeable about self-defense and domestic violence. Survivors may also have retaliated against their abuser, or engaged in force pre-emptively to avoid an assault.

Other survivors have been coerced into crime by their assailants.<sup>21</sup>

Without adequate legal representation, battered women often just plead guilty or no contest.

## **VII. Battered women stay for their children.**

Battered women fear that their partner will get custody of the children.<sup>22</sup> Some studies indicate that contrary to popular belief, the majority of the times that men contest custody, men are awarded custody. Any advocate for survivors will have several reports to transmit of batterers getting custody of their children.

Sometimes survivors sacrifice themselves for their children particularly if the batterer is not beating or raping the children. They stay so that their children can have a father, or so that their children will be able to go to good schools, live in a safe neighborhood and have financial security. Women may not want to see their children have to leave their home, their neighborhood and their schools (this is especially true for older children).

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<sup>19</sup> Many high priced attorneys fit into this category, too. However, when you have money you're more able to pick and choose.

<sup>20</sup> The term prosecutor is used in Michigan. In other parts of the U.S. the term District Attorney, (D.A.) is used, and in Canada, the term is Crown Attorney.

<sup>21</sup> Please read **Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered, Black Women** by Beth Richie.

<sup>22</sup> In the anthology **Listen to the Thunder: Advocates Talk about the Battered Women's Movement**, there is an article by Janet Freeman that illustrates this point. The article is entitled "From Pillar to Post: One Woman's Experience of Battering and the Systems That 'Help'", and chronicles how a survivor's children were ordered returned to their extremely abusive father.

### **VIII. Some battered women stay because there is no place for them to go.**

Shelters do not exist everywhere. They are often full. Their funding is in constant danger, and they are vulnerable to attacks from groups that decide they are "destroying the family" or are "anti male".

Housing is a major roadblock. Most women cannot find or afford safe housing.<sup>23</sup> They become stuck in emergency shelters, unable to find a place to live. Women who are NOT battered who have children face discrimination in the rental market. Landlords are often reluctant to rent to formerly battered women, believing that their assailant will show up and cause property damage or physical harm. The assailant often deliberately sabotages his partner's credit rating (or prevents her from establishing one at all) so as to keep her from renting or buying a new domicile.<sup>24</sup>

### **IX. Some battered women stay because they are not given accurate information about battering.**

They are told (by professionals, family, friends and the batterer) that alcohol or other drugs cause battering. They are told that they are codependent, that they enable his behavior, and if they would change, then their assailants would. Women then endlessly attempt to modify their behavior only to watch the violence worsen. They are then told that they are not trying hard enough or that they are resistant. They are sent to mediation or couples counseling, and told that if this does not work out, it is their fault

### **X. Some battered women stay because they believe what most people in our society think about battered women. They may believe that:**

- battered women imagine, exaggerate, deliberately fabricate, or initiate the violence.
- battered women somehow provoke or are to blame for the violence.
- all battered women come from poor, uneducated, or minority backgrounds.
- their partner just has a problem controlling his anger, or that stress or unemployment problems have caused the battering.

If those that the woman goes to for help (family, friends or professionals) believe these myths, they might (for example) suggest to the woman that she help her partner reduce his stress or find a job or stop making him angry. If the woman believes she is provoking his violence, she will work on pacifying him. These strategies will not work, the violence will continue, the woman will stay in the relationship longer, and it will be harder for her to escape.

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<sup>23</sup> "Housing and Battered Women" by Amy Correia and Jen Rubin (November 2001) does an excellent job of describing these barriers. The article can be found on the net at [http://www.vawnet.org/DomesticViolence/Research/VAWnetDocs/AR\\_housing.php](http://www.vawnet.org/DomesticViolence/Research/VAWnetDocs/AR_housing.php).

<sup>24</sup> See the fact sheet "Domestic Violence and Homelessness" at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/domestic.html>

**XI. Some battered women stay (for varying lengths of time) because their assailants deliberately and systematically isolate them from support.**

People who are in trouble need support. They need the aid of family, friends, co-workers and professionals to weather the crisis and make the best decisions for themselves. Assailants commonly force their partner to account for every minute of their time. One assailant marked the tires of his girlfriend's car to monitor her use of it. Another nailed the windows shut and put a lock on the outside of the door. Many take car keys, disable cars, sabotage the computer, read her email, unplug or break telephones, steal cell phones, or routinely drain the battery.

Assailants methodically drive friends and family away. Sometimes this is accomplished through overt threats or physical attacks; sometimes they make life thoroughly unpleasant for anyone with the temerity to be around them. Many assailants act extremely jealous and are very possessive. They constantly accuse their partners of affairs and sexual advances. They demand that their partner speak to no one, and enforce this by accusing them of infidelity every time they do so.

Survivors may be reluctant to leave their domestic or farm animals to the assailant who may hurt, torture or kill animals in order to prove what disgusting violence he is capable of, as well as to erode the survivor's resistance through instilling despair. (If he can do this to a kitten, what will he do to me?)

Friends and family who believe myths about battering and who do not support survivors also help keep women in battering situations.

**XII. Some battered women stay because they believe in love and they still love their partners.**

This is often one of the hardest phenomena for people who have not been battered to understand. However, many people have been in difficult relationships or jobs they that knew they should leave, but either couldn't, or needed time to be able to depart. Love is glorified in our culture. Popular songs and movies perpetually buttress the idea that love is the most important thing in life, and that people should do anything for love. This is particularly reinforced for women.

Women may love their partners, and at the same time hate their violent and abusive actions. A helpful comment when working with survivors is to point out that the woman does not have to stop loving her assailant in order to leave. Some women may be troubled about making it on their own, and about being lonely. When they leave, they may endure feelings of grief and loss. Frequently, leaving a batterer means abandoning a circle of friends, family, a neighborhood and a community. Some women have to change their names and disappear in order to live without an assailant's constant harassment. It is hard for women to live by themselves without any of their customary supports.

**XIII. Some battered women stay because they believe what their assailant is telling them, *such as*:**

- "You're crazy and stupid. No one will believe you."
- "You're the one that's sick. You need help. You're hysterical."

- "I know the judge; he won't put me in jail."
- "The police will never arrest me."
- "It's not serious. You're not really battered."
- "If you leave, I'll get custody because you'll have abandoned me and the kids."
- "If you leave, I'll find you and kill you. I'll kill your family, your kids, and your pets. You'll never escape me."

Assailants deliberately supply their partners with false information in order to keep them in the relationship.<sup>25</sup> They may sabotage their partner's attempt to use the civil or criminal justice system by giving spurious information about the process. At the same time, assailants often play on their partners concern for their well being. A common ploy is to tell their partner that if they are prosecuted they will spend long years in prison. (In fact, convictions are rare. They are almost always for misdemeanors. Assailants are more likely to be sentenced to counseling than to jail).

Many assailants tell their partners that shelters are lesbian recruiting stations, that all the staff are lesbians, that she will be attacked by lesbians if she goes to the shelter, and if she leaves him, she will become a lesbian. Battered women who believe this are sometimes reluctant to seek shelter.

When no one believes a battered woman, when her assailant isn't arrested, when she is criticized and scrutinized, when he gets custody of the children, and when he tracks her down and tries to kill her, she believes what he says. Why? Because his predictions too often turn out to be true.

Institutions, professionals and citizens must work to undercut assailants' control of survivors by making his predictions false.

**XIV. Some battered women stay because they are addicted and their addiction prevents them from taking action on their own behalf. Some battered women stay because their assailant encourages or coerces them into using alcohol or other drugs, and/or sabotages their recovery.**

When a woman has an alcohol or other drug problem, it is extraordinarily difficult for her to leave the battering relationship. Some women may be consuming alcohol or other drugs to numb the psychic, emotional or physical pain caused by the violence. The assailant often promotes consumption. It makes the woman less able to act on her own behalf, and it gives the assailant a handy tool for discrediting and blaming her. Doctors may prescribe tranquilizers for a battered woman's "nerves". Few women know or are told that minor tranquilizers can be seriously and quickly addictive. If a woman is in recovery, the assailant may prevent her from going to meetings, or to treatment. He may physically force her to use, or threaten her with physical violence if she does not.

**XV. Some battered women are trapped in battering relationships because of sexism (unequal treatment of women).**

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<sup>25</sup> Even worse, the assailant may be telling the truth. The police MAY never arrest him; he might in fact know the judge, etc.

Barbara Hart: "The most likely predictor of whether a battered woman will permanently separate from her abuser is whether she has the economic resources to survive without him." Women do not have economic resources equal to or approaching men. The poverty rate in female-headed households is much greater than that of married families. Nearly one half of all female headed households with children live in poverty, as compared with only 8% of male headed households. The majority of African American and Latina female-headed households live at or below the poverty level, and nearly 60% of all African American children under the age of 14 live in a female-headed household.

Many battered women cannot find a job. Her assailant may have systematically damaged her employment record by harassing her at the work place or by causing excessive lateness and absenteeism.

Indigent battered women may only be able to find a job at an hourly wage. If she has children, this wage will not be sufficient to support her children. If she does not receive public assistance, she probably will not be able to afford medical insurance for herself or her children.

Child care is a serious problem for women entering the work force. It costs a lot of money. Women worry about the risk of leaving their children for long periods of time, and it is sometimes difficult to find quality care.

#### **XVI. Some battered women stay because institutions are helpless or unwilling to offer them protection or assistance.**

I have used some examples of the helplessness of institutions. There are many other examples. In every institution, there are those who are allies to battered women and actively search for ways to be helpful. Others are well intentioned, but have no training or knowledge about domestic violence. This analysis of institutional practice is not meant to blame the people in the institutions, or in any particular agency.

It is designed to look at:

- 1) how almost everyone in our society believes incorrect information about battering, battered women, and assailants;
- 2) how institutional policies and practices reflect that misinformation;
- 3) how those policies help to keep women in abusive relationships, and
- 4) to begin the process of exploring how to create new policies which will undercut the assailant's control of his partner.

#### **The Legal System**

- Assailants are still not routinely arrested in many parts of the United States.
- Police still tell survivors that they must have a protection order before an arrest can be made (in jurisdictions where this is not true). This builds in a "free assault" system, since an arrest is not made until after a protection order is issued.

- Personal protection orders are often not enforced. Many police believe that a survivor can “nullify” a protection order if she “invites” an assailant to her home or workplace.
- Female survivors of domestic violence are often arrested when they are in fact acting in self defense.
- Cases where a crime would in other circumstances (stranger assault) be charged as a felony are charged as a misdemeanor (because they are "domestics" and not as important.)
- Courts do not make sure that battered women are notified of their court date. Then, when she doesn't show up, they blame her for dropping the charges.
- Some courts issue bench warrants and threaten to jail the woman for contempt if she determines she cannot continue with prosecution, ignoring the terrorism her batterer is exercising over her.
- Some prosecutors will drop charges when the survivor calls them on the telephone to ask them to do so, ignoring the possibility that the woman is being coerced into the phone call, (or in some cases, that it is not the survivor on the phone at all).
- A battered woman may see the prosecutor for only two or three minutes immediately before her court case, making it very difficult for the prosecutor to gather enough information to proceed in the most effective manner.
- Some judges deny battered women custody even when the children have been abused by the batterer. There is a fallacious assumption that the woman will return to her abuser or will become involved with another batterer. Often judges are so impressed that a father wants custody of their children, they fail to consider the effects of domestic violence on the children.
- Courts often believe that the woman is making up, or exaggerating the violence. They often believe the assailant's story, and go to great lengths to empathize with his problems.

## Religious Institutions

Clergy have tremendous influence in women's lives, and there are those who have been very helpful to survivors of violence. For example, the Rev. Dr. Marie Fortune has written a number of different articles and books for women of faith.<sup>26</sup> Too often, however, people in religious institutions have helped to keep the battered woman in the

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<sup>26</sup> More information on the organization that Rev. Dr. Fortune helped found as well as resources for women of faith and those who wish to help them can be found at the FaithTrust Institute's web site at <http://www.faithtrustinstitute.org>.

relationship. In an article "Women Who Have Ended Abuse" (Horton, Wilkins, and Wright), the authors tabulated reports from clergy whose responses served to keep women in the abusive relationship.

One minister suggested sex to wear the assailant out; another that the survivor cook meals that are more appetizing. Some women were told to pray, sing hymns to raise their spirits, go to services and read Scriptures. Some were told that battering was their cross to bear, and that it was God's will. Some were told that divorce was against God's law. Others were told not to provoke him or that they needed to forgive and forget. One woman I spoke to told me her minister told her to pray to be a better wife, and then her husband would not beat her.

If battered women get the message that they are at fault, they will focus their attention on changing and staying in the relationship.

If a survivor believes that her church, coven, mosque, temple or other religious institution supports the batterer or puts preservation of the family above her safety, she is more likely to stay. If her Imam, priest, rabbi, minister, high priest or priestess, or any other spiritual or religious leader supports her, she is more likely to act on her own behalf. Survivors who leave often cite the constant emotional, spiritual, and pragmatic assistance from their community of faith as a major reason she was able to go.

### **Psychiatrists, Therapists, Mental Health Workers, Health Care Professionals.**

These professionals may not have adequate tools, time and/or training to assess domestic violence. Studies have indicated that up to one quarter of all women entering hospital emergency rooms have been battered, yet most emergency rooms identify only a small fraction of those women. Some professionals do not even ask the questions -- are you battered? or is there violence in your relationship? They may not interview the partners separately. Battered women may not identify their experiences as "battering", or they may not label forced sexual intercourse by spouse as "rape".

Some professionals may misdiagnose battered women as mentally ill. Others may believe that violence is caused by alcohol or other drug use. Some report being afraid of the assailant, and therefore unwilling to counsel the survivor. Some see battering as a dysfunctional relationship, and may do couples counseling with the two people. Professionals may not be aware of, or refer to, their local domestic violence program for counseling, shelter, and advocacy. These issues prevent battered women from getting the help they need to leave their assailants. Mental health professionals working with survivors who ARE mentally ill may apply time tested policies such as involving the family member in medication decisions and monitoring, or will work at cementing and respecting partner bonds. This works well except if the spouse or partner is a batterer. Then the professional inadvertently colludes with the batterers' abuse.

Physicians working with a survivor who has an opiod<sup>27</sup> dependency may ask the spouse/partner to administer pain-killing drugs, particularly when the survivor has overdosed on the medication previously. The batterer may then use the medication to strengthen his control over his partner.

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<sup>27</sup> Opioid dependency as in hooked on vicodin, Tylenol 3, morphine, Demerol, darvon, darvocette, etc.

**XVII. Some battered women stay because they believe what women have been taught to believe about both women's roles and men's roles (gender socialization).**

It is my hypothesis that gender stereotyping and enforced adherence to it play a major role in battering.

Certainly, girls are taught to be passive, to smile, to be nice, to be accommodating, to take care of others and to be sensitive to others needs. Beyond "teaching", our culture actively punishes girls who violate those rules. Such punishment includes social ostracism, ridicule, poor grades in school, and oftentimes sexual harassment, assault, and physical violence. Girls soon learn the price of speaking out, independence and autonomy. Individual females may have these lessons mitigated or more strictly enforced by their own particular family members, extended family, neighborhood, school and teachers, but the overall cultural message remains constant. Those who are singled out for encouragement and special treatment are often brainwashed into seeing themselves as different, better, singular, and are taught to treat other women with (at best) tolerance and (at worst) contempt.

Usually, (in discussions of gender stereotyping) the issue is raised that men are taught to be tough, not to cry, not to be verbal and not to discuss their emotions. However, this is not the aspect of gender stereotyping that contributes to battering. Batterers express emotions of anger, pain, grief and loss very well. They do cry. Many are highly articulate, persuasive and skilled at identifying and expressing their feelings.

The facet of gender roles that directly contributes to domestic violence is the concept of entitlement. Men are taught entitlement. Men are trained to believe that they are entitled to the attention and services of women. This includes: listening to them talk; supporting them emotionally; enhancing their status with other men; fulfilling their sexual needs; and caring for their children. Some men are more up to date --- they demand intellectual stimulation as well. If they are more traditional, they expect cooked meals, clean clothes and houses, too. When men don't get these services, some may try negotiation, some pressure, and some may leave their partners. Some men choose to use violence to obtain those services.

Men have the vast pool (ocean?) of sexism to dip into. Every batterer has images and arguments about the inferiority of women ready to his hand. Every batterer can use arguments from the Bible or the Quran<sup>28</sup> that justify his control of and dominance towards women. Every batterer has the range of insults and put downs tailored specifically towards women at his behest. Every batterer can point to a man who has gotten away with murdering his wife and many do – often posting newspaper clippings or reading aloud from egregious cases where men are acquitted after torturing, beating or killing their partners. If it were not for the history of men's ownership and control of women, the current unequal status of women, batterers would not have the kind of power they do over their partners.

Many men (and women) do not even realize the extent to which we have all

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<sup>28</sup> These two holy texts are used as examples for brevity. There are many different interpretations of all holy texts – some that seem to support sexism and some that do not.

been socialized to accept our differential status. Some men are struggling conscientiously to divest themselves of the benefits that they accrue just by being men. Gender roles are so pervasive and so insidious that men (and women) don't even realize how seriously they affect and inform our behavior. Those men who have chosen non-violence, who are actively working on equal relationships with women, and who are challenging men's entitlement should be welcomed as allies. They must take a greater role in challenging other men's violence and sexism.

Women are indoctrinated with the notion that women are only valuable if: a) they are with a man, b) married c) in a relationship with a man d) they want to be in a relationship with a man and e) they have or want to have children.

In addition, family looms large in our culture(s). The threat of losing a family presages major grief and loss. Women are taught to believe that they are responsible for their family, and charged with its health and well-being. Society teaches women to be nurturing, caring, and self-sacrificing. Women are taught to put their partners and children's welfare above their own.

These beliefs work against women who become trapped by violent men. When women do what they have been taught to do (stand by their man; take care of their kids), they are blamed for staying. They are labeled masochistic or codependent.

**XVIII. Some battered women stay because in addition to being women and being battered, they are from another historically disenfranchised population.**

Women of color face additional barriers due to racism.<sup>29</sup> There is more discrimination in housing. Women of color make even less money than white women, and so have a more difficult time finding the economic means to live independently. Women of color are less likely to be believed when they report rape and battering. If their assailant is white, they have even less hope for belief, a police report, an arrest and a conviction than do white battered women. Women of color may be concerned that their assailant may be brutalized by a racist criminal justice system.

Native American (Indian) women may live on reservations where there are a chronic lack of resources. Tribal orders of protection may not be respected by state or county courts outside of Indian country. Alaskan native women may be physically unable to leave because they will not survive in the cold. Rural women may have to travel hours to reach a shelter or another place of safety and may be concerned about leaving farm animals.

Lesbians and gay men face additional danger from their assailants than do heterosexual survivors. If their assailants threaten to expose their sexual orientation, the survivor could lose his or her job, housing, children or family. Lesbians and bisexual women may have particular confidentiality concerns if their local shelter is staffed in part by women who are part of or in touch with the local lesbian/bisexual community. They

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<sup>29</sup> Allan G. Johnson in his book **Privilege, Power and Difference**, McGraw-Hill, 2001 says it would be more helpful to analyze not IF racism has affected a specific interaction but HOW it has affected it, i.e. assume that racism is always present – which of course it is.

may fear their assailant posing as a survivor and getting services. If a survivor has heard that her/his relationship is inherently “sick”, “unnatural”, s/he may be reluctant to disclose problems of abuse in the relationship.

Trans individuals face enormous obstacles.<sup>30</sup> They often lose their job while transitioning from one gender to another. Some shelters have policies that bar them from entering. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people never know when they will encounter a fairly tolerant helper or when they will encounter mild prejudice or vehement bigotry.

A person with a disability has formidable obstacles to overcome. Sometimes, her assailant is her personal care attendant, and she is dependent upon him for food, clothing, mobility, and medical care. If a batterer takes away a person’s telecommunications device for the deaf (t.d.d), that survivor may not be able to call for help. Places where the survivor goes for counseling or refuge may not be accessible to her.

Elderly women may have more serious barriers than younger women for some of the same reasons.<sup>31</sup> In addition, most people erroneously assume that people abused in later life are hurt by stressed caregivers. Older women may be especially concerned about losing their home, income from social security or health insurance if they leave their abusive spouses.

Young women, particularly adolescents, may not be able to get access to services because of their age. Their relationships may not be taken seriously because of their youth. The law may not protect unmarried girls and women to the same extent it protects married girls and women.

Women who do not speak English, who do not speak English well, and/or are struggling with immigration issues find it particularly hard to leave. There may be a lack of resources or advocacy for those not speaking English. Immigrant women may also be struggling with issues of dislocation, war and/or oppression in their country of origin, social upheaval, and acculturation. Those helpers who understand domestic violence may not understand immigrant issues, particularly the legal ones – and vice versa.

A batterer may hammer on issues of racism and marginalization, telling her that she would betray her community, culture, race, country or ethnicity by telling others about the abuse. He may remind her that he will be punished more severely than an assailant from the dominant culture will. He’ll talk about how shameful her plight is and underline traditions of not going outside the group for help. He’ll invoke community

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<sup>30</sup> I **STRONGLY** recommend a wonderful handbook called “Transitioning Our Shelters: A Guide to Making Homeless Shelters Safe for Transgender People” published by the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. It was written in 2003 by Lisa Mottet and John M. Ohle and is available online at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/civilrights/transgender.html>

<sup>31</sup> Bonnie Brandl and Loree Cook-Daniels have authored an overview of these issues in the article “Domestic Abuse in Later Life” December 2002 on VAWNet. [http://www.vawnet.org/DomesticViolence/Research/VAWnetDocs/AR\\_later-life.php](http://www.vawnet.org/DomesticViolence/Research/VAWnetDocs/AR_later-life.php)

traditions about the value of family and the necessity to keep the family together. He may emphasize that the community is extremely valuable because of the support it offers them in the face of discrimination.

People who face discrimination daily have their energy siphoned off by bigotry" --energy that is desperately needed for the daunting task of leaving a batterer. It is utterly exhausting being Black in America" says children's advocate Marian Wright Edelman "physically, mentally and emotionally...There is no respite from your badge of color."

### **XIX. Some battered women stay because of what the media says about domestic violence and battered women.**

The media does an abysmal job of covering domestic violence. Language (such as "love triangle", "domestic squabble" and "estranged" husband) reinforces the idea that battering is trivial, uncommon and really just a byproduct of a messy relationship.

When batterers murder their partners, these crimes are usually written about as unintentional "crimes of passion" caused by the man's intense love for the woman and his inability to live without her, rather than his ultimate expression of power and control over her.

The media is one of the prime purveyors of the new (or revived) mythology about women that women are conniving, manipulative, vengeful liars. They feverishly search the newspapers for information about new laws. They are just waiting (like giant black widow spiders) for men to make a wrong move. They will then seize the chance to make a false police report and get revenge (for what? is my question. What is it about this fantasy that makes me think that too many men think women have something to seek revenge for.)

There has been a lot of discussion about how men feel "unsafe". They don't want to touch their children, or say the wrong thing, or "go too far" on a date for fear of being falsely accused of crimes against women and children. But there is no empirical evidence that women are making false reports.<sup>32</sup> All the research demonstrates the opposite. It is, in fact, women who are unsafe and becoming less safe. If women are raped or battered, many people jump to the conclusion (because of the media blitzes) that women are lying. So a man can rape and batter with impunity, and then claim that the woman was trying to get back at him. Rather than "male bashing", we are seeing a campaign of discredit, bigotry and hatred towards women.

### **XX. Some battered women stay because they are afraid that if they try to leave they or their children will die.**

They should fear death. Battered women are in real danger.

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<sup>32</sup> An outstanding, carefully researched and documented examination of false allegations is available online at <http://www.vaw.umn.edu/documents/acquaintsa/participant/allegations.html>.

So should battered women stay? No. The community, professionals, family, employers, friends and other individuals must help battered women leave safely.

Finally, I can only offer my salute, recognition, and awe to those survivors who leave their batterers daily and whose resistance to violence will always be an inspiration to me.

c. Susan McGee, 1995. Revised, 2004.

Contact [SusanGSMcGee@aol.com](mailto:SusanGSMcGee@aol.com) for permission to reprint.