“Why Doesn’t She Leave?”

An Examination of Chains & Taboos Against Leaving Abusive Partners

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Domestic violence - physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse by a person you’d never think could do such heinous acts. 1 in 3 women are victims of abuse by an intimate partner. On average, 20 people per minute are physically abused by their partner in the US. (National Coalition Against DV, 2017). It’s a cycle that continues over and over and can only be broken once the victim leaves. Why doesn’t she leave?

“Why doesn’t she leave?” An easy question with the words translated countless times in various languages. The answer is not so easy.

When abuse is perpetuated by a lover – the person whom she’s shared the most intimate moments with or perhaps a father – the person who was supposed to protect her, the mind conforms to a state of shock, denial, and hopelessness.

These people are a part of her and she is a part of them. She denies that he is a monster – he does these things because he loves her. Most outsiders, who find out, shame her – claiming they’d leave after the first punch. Yet, they don’t understand the hope that glistens in her soul after he brings flowers home to her, stating he’s sorry and promising he’ll never do it again. Alas, the promise ends the next day, and she’s trapped in the sorry-forgive me roundabout.

She could leave. It seems easy to the outsider – just open the door and walk out. Financial abuse and manipulation is also common in abusive relationships. She’s generally isolated from family, friends, and the outside world. She may not be allowed to work or her income may be significantly less than his income. She’s economically dependent upon him. And he’s already told her that she won’t be able to survive without him. In America, 39 % of cities cite domestic violence as the primary cause of family homelessness (US Dept of Justice, 2015). Homelessness is its own vicious ordeal –the constant worry for shelter, food, clothing, and daily living essentials is a pain that gnaws on the heart and mind.
When children are involved, it’s likely she’ll be forever trapped. The court of law believes that the children should have contact with both parents, sometimes regardless to the degree of the father’s abuse. Some children will speak out against the abusive parent and some will remain quiet in fear that the abusive parent forever holds power. And some children will continue to like or love their abusive father – hope sees beyond the obvious and children often hold onto it tightly. Even so, sometimes the mother will be blamed for parental alienation for the children who decide to speak up. If she’s blamed for parental alienation, it’s likely the abuser will be given full custody of the child(ren). A mother will do anything to protect her child and sometimes she’ll believe that staying with the abuser will protect her children – at least she can somewhat protect her children as she won’t be able to at all if they are under his full custody. It’s mind-boggling for people to grasp the idea that a father could abuse his own child. Unfortunately, it happens and usually goes unnoticed.

Strong religious and/or cultural beliefs sometimes prevent women from standing up against their abuser. Her family may shame her for leaving the husband. Taboos against divorce exist in various cultures and religions. She desires to make her family proud and leaving the abuser would be a dishonor. Additionally, there are many countries – especially in South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Eastern Europe– where domestic violence resources and women rights advocacy are practically nonexistent. Without resources and advocacy, most victims will believe staying with the abuser is their only option.

She can leave his physical presence, however, he will always be with her like the cancer that never goes away. The emotional wounds are deep. Her mind is an ocean of greatness, but the rubbish will always linger in the depths. She’ll suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Something or someone will trigger a reminder and the memories will suddenly flood into her mind like hot lava. The anxiety – she’ll sometimes tremble and her voice will shake when speaking to a man. Depression will cloud some days – the painful memories will continue and she’ll stay in bed, sometimes for hours or days, to pass the time.
Therapy to patch up the wounds will be crucial for her to live rather than exist. Yet, the scars on her heart and mind will never fade away.

“Why doesn't she leave?” The chains and taboos hold her. To empower her to leave, however, we must stand by her. The support of family and friends is crucial for domestic violence survivors to leave and seek appropriate mental health care. Social support can transcend all struggles and hardships. Remind her frequently that it was never her fault. Take her outside for fresh air. Help her find financial and legal resources for her and her child(ren) to lead a safe and productive life. Love can be expressed in so many different ways and love is what gives a survivor hope, courage, and dignity.

Citations