Stories of strength, survival and the system

New research with female victims of family violence and support workers finds Victoria still has a way to go in challenging misperceptions about women’s experiences of separating from a violent partner.

Despite recent improvements in Australian community attitudes towards violence against women, a substantial proportion of Australians still subscribe to the punitive and victim-blaming attitude of ‘Why doesn’t she just leave?’ Findings from the 2013 National Community Attitudes Towards Violence Against Women Survey (NCAS) show that over half of Australian respondents agreed with the statement that ‘most women could leave a violent relationship if they really wanted to’ and, staggeringly, 78 per cent agreed that ‘it is hard to understand why women stay’ (VicHealth, 2014).

Misperceptions about family violence also continue to plague legal responses to women who kill violent partners despite continual efforts to improve understandings of how violence impacts on women’s responses and why they may remain in an abusive relationship (Kirkwood, McKenzie & Tyson, 2013).

My recent research with 12 women who had separated from an abusive, intimate male partner, along with three semi-structured interviews and five focus groups with 19 support workers from six Victorian organisations that provide family violence crisis and outreach support, highlights not only the profound limits on women’s leave-taking decisions but also the bravery and courage that underpin their experience of leaving.

Overwhelmingly, women in my study recounted the significant barriers they faced when trying to safely separate from an abusive partner. The women’s autonomy, agency and liberty were severely limited because abusive partners used a range of tactics, including physical violence, threats of physical assault and/or to kill,

inbrief

› A substantial proportion of Australians still subscribe to simplistic, victim-blaming understandings of women’s experiences in the context of family violence

› Women face significant barriers when trying to leave an abusive partner, including fear, safety concerns and inconsistent responses from support systems

› There is a need to better understand coercive control and its impact on women’s decision-making when separating from an abusive partner
The women in the study

The women in this study were aged between 25 and 59 years, with an average age of 42 years at the time of interviewing. Seven of the women lived in metropolitan and outer suburbs of Melbourne, four lived in North East Victoria and one lived in South West Victoria.

The length of the women’s relationships ranged from 1.5 years to 28 years. Seven women were married to their partner, while four women were in a de facto relationship and one woman was engaged to her partner.

Nine women had children who resided with them during the relationship. Two had children from a previous relationship, while seven had children with the partner who perpetrated the abuse. The number of children ranged from one to four and, at the time of separation, children were aged between 9 months and 17 years (an average age of 9.5 years). After separating, all of the children continued to live with their mothers. Only two women reported that their children had some contact with their father at the time of interviewing.

Ultimately, women acted upon the desire to leave when they feared their lives were in impending danger

‘micromanaging’ and restrictions on behaviour, and degradation, such as verbal abuse and forced participation in sexual acts to systematically dominate, control and subordinate them within the relationship. Some women also described how their abusive partners ‘turned’ the violence toward their children or how their children’s wellbeing was affected as a result of witnessing the violence.

The women had contemplated leaving for some time and had made attempts to leave, but the prospect of separation was truly terrifying as women feared for their safety and, indeed, their lives. Some women also found it difficult to leave because they felt shame and self-blame for remaining in the relationship or could not sever the emotional ties they had with their partner. When the women had made attempts to leave, or prepared to do so, the abusive partners intensified their control tactics, such as monitoring and surveillance of communication and movement outside of the home, or completely cutting off access to finances. For some women, their interactions with informal and formal supports assisted them in their decision to leave safely, while others placed further barriers on women’s separation by dismissing the experience of violence and disrespecting their decision-making. Rural women in this sample also experienced even further isolation from possible supports due to geographical isolation.

Courageously, the women adopted various strategies and measures to manage safety upon and after separation. Indeed, the women reported an increase and escalation in violence and control, particularly shortly following separation, including being threatened with weapons, being choked/strangled, punching, threats to harm or take children, abusive emails and phone calls, harassment, intimidation, stalking, false allegations of child abuse to authorities, threats of suicide and property damage.

One of the support workers summed up the profound challenges that women face when separating from an abusive relationship:

It’s not that you leave and life becomes better. Once you leave, you leave everything really. You leave everything that’s a semblance of your life. So separating is actually quite problematic. It’s like a death of many things and many connections.

Women’s stories of separating

The paradox of fear

The ever-present threat of physical violence consumed the women’s lives. As Mary remarked, while she was never hurt physically, the threat of physical violence was always there and she ‘basically lived in fear’. For many of the women, like Mary, the constant fear for physical safety significantly underpinned the decision to leave their abusive partner. A feeling of obligation and responsibility as a mother to protect children was also integral to the decision to leave an abusive partner. As the women recognised that the violence had become directed toward children and/or was impacting on children’s welfare, this was an important turning point in making the decision to leave.

However, fear also made it difficult to separate, despite the decision and desire to do so. Melanie said one of the reasons why she did not leave earlier was ‘fear for what he would do’ and fear for her safety and life. Many of the women also feared the risk of violence posed to children after leaving and thus delayed leaving earlier. Indeed, the women identified that they had been threatened—subtly or explicitly—about the retaliatory ‘consequences’ of leaving throughout the relationship. The knowledge that leaving was an act of betrayal according to the abusive men invoked fear and terror in the women, forming a significant barrier to leaving earlier.

Ultimately, women acted upon the desire to leave when they feared their lives were in impending danger. For four women, the decision to leave became one of living. For instance, while Melanie feared her partner’s reaction to her leaving, she decided to leave after a physically violent incident because she believed she would be seriously injured or killed:

I left on the day that I left because I thought that the next day I was either going to be severely disfigured or killed.
Managing safety and survival
When women had made the decision to leave, they adopted various measures to manage safety and survival for themselves and their children. The women carried out different and individual concealed, calculated and strategic measures, such as planning ahead to leave so as to present little direct challenge to the abusive men’s power and control and, in doing so, to limit the risk of escalating violence as a response to their leave-taking. Yet, women spoke of how this gave them a degree of control to separate at a time when it was relatively safe for themselves and their children. These plans and preparations took place over time. Some of the women abandoned and changed their plans when, for instance, their partners suspected their decision to leave and responded violently.

As the women and their children experienced an escalation in violence after separation, they engaged even further in strategies to safeguard against severe violence. Unsurprisingly, the women’s fears for safety heightened after separating and many seriously believed that the abusive men would kill them and/or their children. Some women increased security measures around their homes, devised ‘safety plans’ for themselves and children, and sought to ensure that fear did not consume their lives. Some women, however, reported that they found it difficult to manage their fear and safety and returned to the relationship after a period of separation precisely because the violence had escalated and they were extremely scared for their safety.

Empowering and disempowering support systems
The women’s interactions with formal and informal networks provided avenues for empowering or disempowering them to exercise a degree of agency in their separation from an abusive partner. Interactions were empowering when they validated women’s experiences of violence, and practically and emotionally supported their leave-taking decisions. In contrast, disempowering interactions were traumatic, controlling, and mirrored the power and dominance underpinning the abusive relationship.

For the ten women who contacted family and/or friends to disclose the violence or announce the decision to leave, the responses from family were very mixed. Six women described their family and friends as unconditionally supporting their decisions and plans to leave safely and providing alternative housing and financial support. The impact of such support was that these women were able to leave a relatively short time after announcing the desire to do so. On the other hand, four of the women experienced dismissal and disbelief when they told family and friends about the violence and their decision to leave. Most of the women who had such experiences lived in rural Victoria and...

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Women reported that police did not see the importance of planning ahead to leave or the complexity of decision-making in the context of separation. Only those who sought assistance specifically to leave, or had left, were adequately supported.

Stories of support workers

Empowering women to leave safely

Supporting women to overcome fear and manage safety when separating from a violent partner was identified by the support workers as the most challenging and complex aspects of their work. Many women come to them with an idea that something is ‘wrong’ and have been thinking about leaving for some time, but are ‘hugely fearful’ about how their partners will react when they leave. Often, the women they support cannot envisage a safe life after separation and cannot imagine that they will be able to protect themselves from further violence. As one worker aptly referred to it, women feel ‘blinded’ by the situation because they believe that their abusive partners will ‘take it out on them’ but do not know what they will do or when this might occur. These fears, understandably, make it difficult for women to leave a violent relationship.

The support workers sought to empower women to overcome their fears by assisting them to put measures in place to protect themselves. Supporting women to assess the risk of violence posed to themselves and their children is a critical first step when women make contact. While women undoubtedly carry out their own individual assessments, the workers help women work through the specific issues and barriers they need to face in order to leave safely. Helping women to practically plan ahead to leave also empowers women to take back a degree of control over their situation and means they can leave at a relatively safe time, rather than when their lives are in danger. However, supporting women to manage safety after separating is frequently thwarted when abusive men escalate their violence, domination and control.

Many of the support workers have struggled to accept that some women go back to violent situations where their safety and lives are at risk. The workers felt that, over time and through experience, they have come to accept the reasons behind women’s decisions.
to return after periods of separation (such as emotional attachments, and feelings of shame or self-blame) and how this invariably forms part of the separation process. As a result, they now recognise the positive role they can play in supporting women during periods of separation and return by, for instance, building their knowledge base and confidence, rather than solely focusing on women leaving.

Navigating the legal and criminal justice systems

Assisting women to navigate the legal and criminal justice systems brings about considerable frustration for support workers as these are often sites of further re-victimisation for women. The workers talked about how, for many of the women they support, abusive men use the court process to continue financially abusing women by dragging out matters and returning to court over and over again. This increases the financial burden on women due to court costs, and reduces the share of assets women may acquire. Workers also explained that abusive men use the legal system, particularly the Family Law Court, to ‘continually take [women] back to court and continue the threats and harassment through the court process’. Some workers were frustrated by this because they feel the courts have a responsibility to ensure the system is not used by abusive men to continue violence and control in the context of separation.

Unfortunately, women are often traumatised by the very systems that are designed to offer safety and protection. Many support workers felt that the courts simply do not appropriately recognise the dynamics of family violence in the context of separation. As such, the courts often ignore forms of abuse other than physical violence that comprise a systematic pattern of coercive control and extend into separation to maintain fear and control. Support workers expressed that the failure of the legal system to adequately understand women’s experiences of violence and separation results in a lack of comfort, safety and security for women and their children.

Support workers described the disjointed nature of the existing system, reflected by a lack of collaboration, consistency and communication across and within sectors. Workers explained that communication between different sectors is an area that needs significant improvement in order to ensure women receive adequate help when seeking to leave a violent partner regardless of the entry point that they take into the family violence system. The support workers described a need for services to ‘talk to each other’ and to have clear understandings about shared responsibility to ultimately hold the safety of victims as paramount across the system, workers also emphasised the importance of addressing the considerable inconsistencies in service provision across the system where women can receive a different level of support depending on how and where they enter the system.

The (dis)integrated family violence system

Despite efforts to establish an integrated family violence system in Victoria over the past decade, the support workers described the disjointed nature of the existing system, reflected by a lack of collaboration, consistency and communication across and within sectors. Workers explained that communication between different sectors is an area that needs significant improvement in order to ensure women receive adequate help when seeking to leave a violent partner regardless of the entry point that they take into the family violence system. The support workers described a need for services to ‘talk to each other’ and to have clear understandings about shared responsibility to ultimately hold the safety of women and children as a priority. To hold the safety of victims as paramount across the system, workers also emphasised the importance of addressing the considerable inconsistencies in service provision across the system where women can receive a different level of support depending on how and where they enter the system.

The workers indicated that it is often impossible to adequately support women due to the constraints of an under-resourced and in-demand system. They work within a system where the limited resources available are directed toward crisis responses for women with ‘critical needs’ with few provisions for longer-term or ongoing support. On this issue, the workers talked about the current prescribed timeframe of service delivery as failing to recognise that
In their own words

I took to carrying a bag with me that had all my papers in it. All the kids' birth certificates and all my papers and everything, my IDs and all my bank papers. I had a joint account and I changed it just to an account in my name. The things I did to begin with were things he wouldn't notice. Things I could do without letting him know what I was thinking. (Mary)

I'd just got a new phone. I didn't know how to clear the recent call history and the last thing I wanted him to do was look at it and say, 'You called your Mum. What are you doing?'

I found a payphone right near a pedestrian crossing. I thought if he comes looking for me, then he'll have to stop at a pedestrian crossing and he'll see me at a phone box and he'll think 'What's she doing?' So I walked all the way to the other side and by this point I'm bawling because I can't find a phone box. I found one, called my Mum and she said, 'Where will we get you?' So I've said, 'Alright, the town hall.' So I was waiting outside the town hall and I'm like, if he comes looking for me, what's he going to think I'm doing? There was a wallpaper shop a few doors down ... so I thought ok, I'll wait in there. If he comes looking for me I can be, 'Oh, I thought I'd just look in here.' (Angela)

The Royal Commission into Family Violence is undertaken, the women’s stories in this research indicate that the entire family violence socio-legal system must operate from a shared understanding of family violence based on the gendered nature of family violence and the dynamics of coercive control. Building upon this value base, it is critical that the system shares a clear understanding of the profound barriers that women face when separating from an abusive, male partner, particularly the risks posed to women’s lives and the fears they have for their safety. It is vital that specialist gendered family violence services are adequately resourced throughout Victoria to ensure that women receive appropriate support and that their safety and wellbeing is considered paramount. Services, too, must be resourced to provide ongoing and long-term support if we are to truly acknowledge the significant barriers that women face throughout the process of separating from an abusive relationship. Alongside this, there is a need for personnel working across the various sectors encompassed within the family violence system, such as the legal and social security sectors, to be trained and skilled in understanding the dynamics of coercive control and the impacts of violence on separation.

The women in this study discussed that, fundamentally, they sought social and structural support that empowered them to safely separate from their abusive partners. As Mary highlighted, this calls for the community and support systems to respect and understand the complicated nature of women’s decision-making in the context of separating from a violent partner:

So when people ask ‘Why don’t you leave?’ you feel like hitting them. You really just feel like, why are you asking me this? Why aren’t you asking why is it OK for him to behave violently? You know, why aren’t you asking why is it that I’m not safe in my own home? But I have to leave the home, uproot my children and family, and put my life at risk because this person is not being responsible. It’s a choice to be violent. Not an accident. It’s a choice.

Recommendations for change

The women’s stories suggest that there is a need to better understand women’s experiences of coercive control and the impacts on decision-making when separating from an abusive partner. This is critical in moving beyond the simple ‘stay/leave’ binary that is frequently used to explain women’s experiences.

A woman’s decision-making when seeking to leave a coercively controlling relationship is complicated. Women recognise the significant threat and risk of violence for themselves and children as associated with separation and, therefore, managing safety and survival is paramount to the kinds of leave-taking decisions they make. Women take different and individual measures to manage their safety upon and after separating, and they must be empowered to exercise a degree of agency when seeking to safely separate from an abusive male partner.

There has been a recent push nationally and internationally for the introduction of ‘coercive control’ as an offence. These discussions are an important step in recognising the realities of women’s experiences within an abusive relationship and the significant barriers they face in separating from a violent male partner.

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