Research Brief
Risks of Women Leaving Violent Relationships: Changing the "Why didn't she leave?" question

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) against women by men was historically regarded as a private issue, rather than a matter of public and community concern. When such violence did become public, often after serious or lethal violence, women were frequently blamed for provoking the violence or failing to adequately protect themselves. Although IPV is now understood to be a pressing social issue, various types of victim blaming continue to impact the way we view and respond to IPV. 'Why didn't she leave?' is a question that still puzzles many people.

The assumptions embedded in this question are at odds with the evidence about the dynamics of IPV and the risks involved in leaving a violent man. The question's focus on the behaviour of the woman who has experienced violence works to shift accountability from perpetrators to victim/survivors. Some of the factors that make it difficult for women to leave violent partners, including risks to safety, are the focus of this research brief.

IPV and women's safety

Risks to women's safety in situations of IPV are now better understood. Violence in the home is the leading cause of preventable death, disability and illness in Victorian women aged 15 to 44 (VicHealth 2016). At least one woman per week is killed by a current or former partner in Australia (OurWatch n.d.). In 73% of homicides where the victim is a woman, her current or former intimate male partner was the perpetrator (National Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book (Cth)).

Furthermore, there was a recorded history of family violence in 44% of intimate partner homicides in Australia from 2002-03 through 2011-12 (Cussen & Bryan 2015). This does not take into account non-reported or unrecorded incidences of family violence.

Risks for women leaving violent relationships

Women face exacerbated risks to their safety during periods of relationship separation from abusive partners. The risk of violence in the context of separation is a critical factor for women considering leaving an abusive relationship. A 2015 study by ANROWS found that 2 out of 5 women experienced violence when temporarily separated from their violent male partner, while 6 out of 10 women reported an increase in violence during separation (Cox 2016). Women's safety is impacted by protection orders being unavailable at short notice, delayed arrests, and the absence of the perpetrator at the time of intervention (Hageman-White et al. 2015).

Women experiencing IPV additionally face economic risks. Primary economic considerations for women experiencing IPV include financial dependency, the accumulation of debt (often by the perpetrator in the victim's name), homelessness, expensive court proceedings, time spent away from work, and counselling

and medical treatments (Hughes et al. 2015).

A risk of emotional re-traumatisation through legal processes may also arise. The emotional impact of separation on children may be a further concern for women (Bagshaw et al. 2011). In addition, women who experience IPV may become disconnected from their support networks as a result of separation from the violent partner (Wendt et al. 2015). This may particularly be the case where separation is stigmatised on religious or cultural grounds (Murray 2008).

The above risks are compounded in situations where the victim is old or young, physically or intellectually disabled (Pestka & Wendt 2014), or faces discrimination by police and judicial authorities based on marital status, age, "race", religion, or socio-economic background (García-Moreno et al. 2015).

Coercive control

The risks to women's safety in leaving violent relationships are usefully understood through the concept of coercive control (Buzawa et al. 2017; Stark 2007). Coercive control describes the broad context of IPV. It can include psychological, sexual, emotional, mental, economic and physical abuse, intimate terrorism, intimidation, surveillance, regulation, coercion and control. Physical violence is not always present in a situation of coercive control.

Coercive control and the fear and violence it creates entraps women and affects their perception and autonomy (Buzawa et al. 2017; Stark 2007). Coercive control highlights that IPV is ongoing, cumulative and chronic, rather than discrete incidents of violence. This shows that there are not necessarily moments free from control and coercion where a woman can consider and organise leaving the violent relationship.

Myths and assumptions

The severe risks women face when leaving violent relationships are increasingly understood. Nevertheless, myths about why women do not leave violent and abusive relationships have proved hard to dislodge. The myths are underpinned by a long history of victim-blaming and gendered assumptions.

Victim blaming: Women in western societies are blamed for IPV in a setting of gender inequality (Hanser 2002). Feminist scholars have drawn attention to previous medical neglect of women who experienced IPV, where physicians labelled women 'frequent visitors', 'hypochondriacs' and 'hysterics' (Buzawa et al. 2017). Where medical treatment was provided, psychoactive medications and approaches re-affirmed the abusive partner's narrative that the woman was irrational and responsible for the abuse, and women were often left in the "care" of their abuser (Bowker & Maurer 1987).

Although Sex-Role, Intergenerational Transmission and Cycle-of-Violence theories all had feminist epistemologies and emancipatory potential, they all implied that the victim was in part responsible for her experience of IPV. As Davis puts it (1992), women in the 1980s were encouraged to assume control over their personal lives and change "abuse-generating" behaviour.

Gendered assumptions: From the late-1970s, psychobiological

explanations for persistent family violence were developed. The most well-known examples are Walker's (1980) "Battered Woman Syndrome" (BWS) (1980) and Graham's (1994) contemporary variation of 'Stockholm Syndrome' (SS). BWS and SS have been challenged for their reductive interpretations of victim agency, and their failure to account for women's survival considerations (Pajak et al. 2014).

Pyschobiological explanations for IPV insinuate that women are psychologically unstable, and have been used as "scientific" justifications for paternalistic measures to address IPV in law enforcement and judicial settings. Such measures have disempowered women and created structural impediments to victims seeking redress. Believing a woman to be traumatised, for example, male police officers might converse with the perpetrator rather than the victim (Gracia et al. 2008). In addition, in police organisations cultural beliefs emerged that a woman's lifestyle or demeanour could mitigate the seriousness of an offence (Meyer 2016).

Paternalistic measures and psychobiological explanations for "why women stay" have been more directly contested (Meyer 2016; Fitz-Gibbon & Walklate 2016). Despite this, their influence is still-evident in social-psychological theories applied to explain IPV.

Shifting the focus

Women experiencing IPV contend with a range of risks that prevent or make it difficult for them to leave violent relationships. Nevertheless, harmful myths and assumptions about why women stay persist. Transforming society's response to, and understanding of, violence against women, and IPV in particular, means we need to change the stories we tell and the questions we ask about the people who commit it and experience it. "Why didn't she leave?" is always the wrong question: "Why did he do it?" and "why couldn't she leave?" are the questions we need to confront today.

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