

## Safety Planning for Women\* Who Stay: Before We Begin

*"I told my mother he was beating me. She said, "Just be glad he works and puts a roof over the kids and your head. All men do it ..."*

*"The shelter said I have 30 days to find a house, get a job, change the kids' schools, figure out transportation. The doctor said no stress or changes for 2 months because of my concussion. Can't even eat or sleep much less think!"*

*"Where the hell am I supposed to go? He's everywhere in my life! If it's not him, it's his family! There's a two year waiting list for low-income housing! I lost two jobs because no daycare and he keeps calling and showing up. Protection order? ...there's like a four hour to two-day response...and I'd have to go back to court!"*

The original intention of this article was to overview helping women be safer if they were staying with their batterer. But it morphed into something else. That topic is important and so there are links to a few excellent resources providing guidance at the end of this article. However, having been taught that preparation is half of ceremony, along with lessons about social change and advocacy requiring critical questioning and thinking, this transformed into more of a reflective discussion about context and perspective.

Safety planning for women who stay is a fairly rare topic of discussion. It is not a common issue in advocacy training. Why is that? How is it that we understand what the phrase "women who stay" means without explanation? Where are they "staying"? The unspoken answer is their own homes. When we understand the unspoken meaning something, it's an indication that we are operating on assumptions. Sometimes, those assumptions need examination because they are based upon ideas society has taught us without questioning. How did we get to a place where staying in your own home is a bad thing? How, as a society, did we arrive at the conclusion that victims (majority female) of serial violent crime (by an intimate partner – usually male) are responsible for their own safety?

*"He said if I left he's beat up my parents. I didn't believe him- my folks are old and frail – who would do that? So I left. He beat up my parents. They were too scared to go to the police. I went back."*

Consider assumptions held by society that advocacy work focuses on helping women leave. It's commonly expected that women who are battered should reach out for help to law enforcement, the criminal justice system, and advocacy and shelter programs. In some places, women are charged with "failure to protect" their children if they don't leave. Some shelter programs make leaving the batterer and staying away a requirement to reside in shelter. We assume they will get the help, resources and safety they need – they just need to decide and cooperate with the various systems.

Consider:

- various studies show women leave and return to their batterers on average between 5 and 12 times before they permanently leave
- battered women are at most risk for being murdered while leaving or after they have left their batterer
- one of the largest homeless populations is women with children
- poverty, including lack of housing, transportation etc. in Indian Country is a chronic, pervasive reality
- law enforcement and criminal justice systems in Indian Country (and most of rural America) is under-funded and under-staffed, and jurisdictional issues create additional barriers to safety
- the dynamics and tactics of battering are constant, multi-faceted and commonly supported by collusion of family, community and institutions
- battering often results in physical and emotional damage, including traumatic brain injury, chronic trauma responses (sleep deprivation, exhaustion depression, anxiety etc.)
- "leaving" usually means *escaping* with a bag of clothes, no or few resources with children, emotional, physical injuries...while someone is "out to get you."

- thousands of women and children are turned away from shelter each year due to lack of space
- the vast majority of batterers batter every intimate partner they have

***“He said if I left he’d kill me. I believe him.”***

In the face of this partial list of challenges and barriers women who are battered confront, there is cause for wonderment and celebration of the strength and resourcefulness of so many women who are able to leave and reclaim their lives! This is also cause to honor and acknowledge all the powerful, life-saving advocacy done under extremely difficult and under-resourced advocates, their programs and allies.

However, there is dire need for some critical questioning and thinking about the focus on “safety” for battered women as their own responsibility. What does “safety” mean to women who are battered? What are we trying to make them safe from? Where is the focus on offender accountability? If the batterer is held accountable, would she and her children not be safe? Battering is serial violent crime. Why is it that no other victim of violent crime is expected to run, hide and make themselves safe? The context for safety planning for battered women must take into consideration the societal failure to hold offenders accountable as relatives, communities and systems. As one woman said: *“You keep saying that I’m not at fault, that I’m the victim. Are you sure? If I’m the victim how come I’m the one who has to give up everything, go into hiding and leave my home and family?”*

According to a study done by Sherry Hamby, described in her article “Guess How Many Domestic Violence Offenders Go to Jail,” in *Psychology Today*:

- One in five domestic violence calls to law enforcement were dismissed over the phone
- Three in five that were investigated led to an arrest
- Of those arrested, almost one in three were *not* charged
- Of those charged, less than half were convicted
- Of those convicted, less than 2% ever spent time in jail

These statistics will vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, but the overall picture remains the same: a very small percentage of batterers are held accountable. A look at numbers of and funding for batterers re-education and probation programs paint an equally bleak picture. The message to women who are battered is clear, bringing to life the message many batterers send “No one will believe you. No one will do anything to help you.” This reality has not slowed down the number of times advocates are asked “why does she stay?” or hear “She must like it – she keeps going back” or “She must be doing something to make him mad.” etc.

***“My husband said if I leave, he’ll make sure he gets custody and I’ll never see my children. He has a job, the house everything. My minister said “God doesn’t allow divorces and in the afterlife I would never see my children.”***

Most advocates are over-worked, under-paid, compassionate, dedicated and mad multi-taskers. Their reality is there isn’t enough – enough time, energy, support, resources, allies. Advocates are given the responsibility for ending violence against women, although it’s actually a community and societal responsibility. Moving outside shelter doors, creating coordinated community responses, system change, social change initiatives can feel like an impossibility. However, it is extremely important to maintain perspective, and strive to continue to educate, strategize, organize and hold those responsible accountable for holding offenders accountable. Otherwise, at some point, we may end up, unintentionally, victim blaming and colluding.

***“Oh, I’ll be back to shelter. You advocates are great. But there’s one thing I haven’t tried yet to make it work. Figure I’ll be back in less than two weeks. But when I do leave, I need to know I tried everything I could.”***

Preparation for doing safety planning and advocacy in general, includes an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of battering, the myriad of tactics batterers use and barriers posed by programs, agencies and

institutions. Education about the impact of battering is integral to providing support and developing a realistic safety plan. The amount of information about traumatic brain injury and the impact of trauma has blown up over the last 10 -20 years. Have we developed expertise in identifying and responding in trauma-informed ways? Do we have a clear understanding of why women stay/ barriers to escape? Do we accept the harsh reality that staying may, at least temporarily, be safer? Can we honestly say we support women's decisions? Have we clarified what safety planning and the many aspects of safety (i.e. physical, mental, emotional, economic, medical, social etc.) means to the individual women we work with?

Ending violence against women and children is, most simply put, about reconnecting and making relationships – acting as relatives. This is true about advocacy, including safety planning with women who stay. Making a relationship takes time and is a process. Trust, honesty, acceptance and accurate information are key. If we want women who have been brutalized and betrayed to trust us, we need to figure out how to be trustworthy. Safety planning requires having conversations about traumatic and sensitive experiences and issues. Put yourself in her shoes. Bring what you already know about being a good friend and relative. Take time, visit, share food like you would at home.

Many shelter and advocacy programs assume women want to leave. That's reality based, and that expectation is often normalized in everything we do. That's the over-arching message women hear and so they may not ask for help, be embarrassed or ashamed to come forward and ask for what they want and need given their circumstances. Have we found ways to send the message that advocacy, resources etc. are available whether they stay or leave – it's about their safety and sovereignty as women.

There is no one recipe for safety planning that will fit every woman, especially if she still lives with him. It depends on the woman's desires, abilities, goals, needs and circumstances - and available resources, accessibility and timing. It may depend upon her knowledge of battering and tactics. She has expertise about her batterer, but she may not have any information about battering, tactics, myths, trauma, impact on children etc. Do we routinely ask about what she's tried and the response she got? What's worked for her? Have we visited with the woman enough to have a working relationship? What trauma effects is she experiencing? The woman is the expert on her batterer, the tactics he uses, his dangerousness etc. She can be your guide in your work as an advocate.

Simply put, advocacy to end violence against women prioritizes safety and offender accountability on all levels and initiatives, i.e., individual, programs, institutional, societal and cultural. The goal is to regain the status of women as sacred and make women safe everywhere, all the time. Connections and relationships are both the means and the end.

Links to articles and booklet specific to safety planning for women who stay:

- *Advocacy Beyond Leaving*, by Jill Davies for Family Violence Prevention Fund (now Futures Without Violence)
- *Fifty Obstacles to Leaving, a.k.a., Why Abuse Victims Stay*, by Sarah Buel
- *20 Reasons Why She Stays- A Guide for those who Want to Help Battered Women*, by Susan G. S. McGee
- *Safety Means... Accountability Means...*, by Brenda Hill for Sacred Circle, National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women

\*Although there are men who are battered, including in the Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender/Transsexual communities, the vast majority of those battered are women, so the word "women" is used in this article.