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A Look Into the Complex World of Domestic Violence  
Why Do They Stay?

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## **ABSTRACT**

Domestic Violence is a widespread dilemma that affects everyone in some manner. Law enforcement officers are frequently faced with this often-misunderstood problem. In order to do their jobs effectively the police must be a part of the solution to the domestic violence travesty. By determining the causes of domestic violence and exploring why women stay in abusive relationships, hopefully I can provide law enforcement with the information they need to combat this ever-growing parody.

In an attempt to understand the components of domestic violence, a survey was conducted utilizing a random sampling of law enforcement officers, victims, and perpetrators. Law enforcement revealed their mediocre understanding of domestic violence by maintaining a neutral opinion throughout the survey. Conversely, victims expressed strong opinions by responding at extremes of the survey. Lastly, the perpetrators rated themselves on the side of "rare" or "very little" revealing an attitude of unaccountability. Further research revealed that there are numerous reasons why women remain in violent relationships. Some victims believe they can change their abusers and sometimes shift the blame to themselves. Others believe they can prevent the violence by meeting the wants and needs of their partners. In most homes where domestic abuse occurs there is a control issue and an unequal distribution of power. Intervention is a necessity in combating domestic violence.

There are numerous reasons why women remain in violent relationships. Armed with the information maintained in this research project, law enforcement will be able to help curtail domestic violence.

## INTRODUCTION

During the early stages of this project, although I knew I wanted to research domestic violence, I wasn't quite sure from what angle to approach the venture. Initially, I was interested in viewing this phenomenon from the perspective of the victim. Upon conducting further research I started leaning toward a more causal approach. Finally, I decided to conduct my research on the causes of domestic violence, in an attempt to answer the question "Why do women stay in abusive relationships?" Having worked in the field of domestic violence, I will incorporate some of my own experiences into this project, as well as drawing additional research information from the following available sources: the Internet, printed materials, and a survey. Domestic violence, directly or indirectly, affects everyone. It is an unfortunate travesty that is rampant in our society. Hopefully this research will provide law enforcement with additional knowledge and understanding to combat this universal social problem.

Violence against women exists in every country; it cuts across boundaries of culture, class, education, income, ethnicity, and age. Women are sometimes in immense danger in the place that they should feel the most secure: their own home. For some, home is where they face a routine of terror and violence at the hands of the man who is suppose to make them feel secure, someone they should be able to trust... their husband.

Those who are maltreated suffer both physically and psychologically. They are unable to make their own decisions, voice their own opinions, or protect

themselves and their children from fear of reprisal. Most victims of repeated domestic violence suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, while others struggle to survive with bouts of anxiety disorders and depression (American Psychiatric Association 1994). G. T. Wilson says partner abuse is defined as “repeated acts of physical assault, which includes any assault that may result in injuries” (Wilson 1996). Domestic violence is committed predominately by men against women. Women can also be violent, but their actions account for only a small percentage of domestic violence. Although partner abuse is domestic violence, it is not to be singled out as the only form of domestic violence. Domestic violence may include any member of a household. In addition, there are other forms of abuse apart from physical. These include sexual abuse, mental abuse, and destruction of property. Domestic violence is comprised of a vast array of components.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Causes**

There is no one distinct cause, which accounts for the violence perpetrated toward women. Social and cultural factors have kept women particularly vulnerable to the violence directed toward them. Historically, unequal power relations between men and women have contributed to domestic violence (Lloyd 2001). Other contributing factors include: socioeconomic forces, the family institution where role expectations are rigidly enforced, control over female sexuality, belief in the inherent superiority of males, and legislation and cultural

sanctions that have traditionally denied women and children an independent legal and social status (Lloyd 2001). A lack of economic resources increases women's vulnerability to violence; as well as making it more difficult to remove themselves from a violent relationship. The link between violence and lack of financial stability and/or dependence is twofold. On one hand, the threat and fear of violence at the hands of the woman's partner keeps her from seeking employment, or at best encourages her to accept low-paying jobs. And on the other hand, because of economic dependence, women may feel they have no power to escape from an abusive relationship.

Some men view a woman's increasing economic activity and independence as a threat that leads to increased male violence. This may further be magnified when the male partner is unemployed and feels his power is undermined in the household. Increases in poverty, unemployment, hardship, income inequality, stress, and alcohol abuse, all lead to a rise in violence in a society (Lloyd 2001). This includes violence against women.

Experiences during childhood, such as witnessing violence and experiencing physical and sexual abuse, are factors that contribute to domestic violence. Violence may be learned as a means of resolving conflict and asserting manhood; victimization may also be learned as an acceptable response to violence. Alcohol and drug abuse, have been identified as factors that may provoke aggression and violent behavior toward women and children (Young 1994).

The isolation of women from their families and communities is known to contribute to increased violence (Young 1994). The victim is not able to communicate her fears and “speak out” about the abuse. In addition, if she is not “allowed” to socialize, any physical signs of the abuse go undetected by others. Women’s participation in social networks has been noted as a critical factor in lessening their vulnerability to violence and in their increasing ability to resolve domestic violence (Young 1994). These networks could be informal (family and neighbors), community organizations, or women’s self-help groups. Until recently, the public/private distinction that has ruled most legal systems has been a major obstacle to women's rights. Increasingly, however, states are seen as responsible for protecting the rights of women, even in connection with offenses committed within their homes (Mayer 1997). In the state of Texas, numerous bills were passed during recent legislative sessions in an attempt to combat domestic violence. Still, in many places, those who commit domestic violence are prosecuted less vigorously, and punished more leniently, than perpetrators of similarly violent crimes against strangers.

Why do they stay?

Women who remain in abusive relationships may feel undeserving of love or happiness. To compound these feelings of worthlessness, physical batterers also emotionally violate their victims. This emotional violation generally takes the form of berating and degrading the victim. For a woman who already doubts her own self-worth, these continuing and incessant messages can become a part of

what she tells herself and what she believes about herself (Coker 2001). The comments, thus, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. She lives as she sees herself: useless and hopeless.

Victims of domestic violence have an increased vulnerability to the following: an increase in risk-taking behavior, enhanced alcohol and drug abuse, the breakdown of social support networks, and the economic dependence of women on their partners (Lloyd 2001).

The abused wife often feels, “I can keep this from happening again.” The fallacy in this thinking should be obvious. The victim takes on the role of being the “peacemaker” and assumes the responsibility for keeping the batterer from becoming angry and aggressive (Coker 2001). She spends a great deal of time thinking about what happened during the last screaming or hitting episode, and planning how to make things different the next time. She scripts upcoming events. But other’s involved haven’t read the script and don’t play out their roles. Her advanced planning doesn’t work. Despite repeated failure to script or manage the situation, she frequently continues to try the same management plan over and over, always remaining hopeful, and never doubting that it will work next time (Frye 1996). Unfortunately, the plans often end with dire results: injury, even death.

Other abused women believe they can change the attitude of their abuser. Perceived as “nagging”, they inadvertently may ease the mind of the batterer, who feels justified in his irresponsible and violent behavior (Lerner 1986).



To complicate things, there are some women who feel the need to defend their husbands. Law enforcement officers will attest to the defense tactics of some domestic violence victims. The officer may respond to a call for assistance at a home only to find that upon the officer's arrival, the victim has changed her mind. Or, when the officer arrives while the violence is in progress, any attempts to diffuse the situation may be met with resistance by the victim. Or the victim may simply bail her husband out of jail and refuse to file any charges. Some women will defend their families and choices because of many of the reasons mentioned earlier.

One of the most difficult concepts for people to understand is that of a woman who stays in an abusive relationship because of an odd sense of safety or comfort (Frye 1996). People tend to move toward relationships that are familiar, and thus, most comfortable. Comfort in this sense does not necessarily mean physical or emotional gratification, rather, comfort in the sense of having lived in a similar situation. It seems easier to deal with the known and expected, rather than with uncertainty. It is similar to the Stockholm syndrome in which the captive develops a strong bond to the captor.

It might seem obvious that if a woman is being beaten to the extent that she is trying to cover bruises with heavy make-up and making occasional (or frequent) trips to the emergency room for treatment, that she would perceive herself to be a victim of abuse. This is not necessarily true, there are many victims who do not apply this term to themselves. These may be intelligent

women with friends who have been abused. They consider their friends victims, yet they do not see themselves as abused despite repeated, confirming evidence. There are women who have never known peace and happiness and do not know it exists. More often than not, they were surrounded by it growing up and know no other lifestyle.

These same women are likely to blame themselves for being abused. They believe that something they did (or did not do) brought on the assault, as justified punishment. The batterer contributes to this thinking, as he is likely to blame the victim (Frye 1996). This is called displacement, and refers to blame being placed on someone other than the responsible person. It ties in with their attempt to keep their dysfunctional lives and internal chaos in order by controlling their environment. Control is at the heart of all domestic violence. The movie, "Sleeping With the Enemy", depicts this. If the wife in the movie did not hang the three bathroom towels exactly as the husband defined, or keep kitchen cabinets expertly stocked and arranged, then he would beat her. Included in this category of abusers are those who are obsessively jealous, most often, without justification. These unreasonably jealous husbands continually imagine their wives are cheating on them. They generally try to keep their wives at home without any outside friends or activities. The expectation is that the wife will be waiting at home to tend only to the needs and desires of her husband. In these situations, the victim lives in a fantasy world. They believe if they are good, then

they will not be hit again, or even more extremely. They believe that they truly need to learn how to be a better wife, homemaker, and generally a better person.

Included in the many reasons why a woman stays in an abusive relationship, is that she is simply in love with her abuser. Her religious beliefs, however misguided, may also prompt her to stay.

### The Cycle

The domestic violence phenomenon is an ongoing cycle. The circle consists of three phases: the tension building phase, the violence phase, and the honeymoon phase (Mayer 1987). The tension building phase is the period when stressors are building in the life of the perpetrator, who is unable to (or chooses not to) relieve his stress in a productive manner. Instead, he moves on to the violent phase of the cycle, and physically or mentally harms his wife or family. Following the violent episode, the abuser, whether out of guilt or for whatever reason, moves on to the honeymoon phase. In the honeymoon phase he apologizes and may even bring gifts to his victim, expresses his love, and repeatedly promises her the abuse will never happen again. The entire cycle usually repeats itself over time and tends to increase in severity. There is danger to the victims when the cycle is allowed to continue and escalate. Some women cling to the memories of the honeymoon phase, block out the tension and violence, and make it easier for themselves to remain in the relationship.

## **METHODOLOGY**

“Why do women stay in abusive relationships?” It is hypothesized that women remain in violent relationships for numerous, yet similar, reasons. The fact that 95 percent of serious domestic violence is perpetrated with males as the abuser and females as victims was taken into consideration throughout this research project.

Three variables were utilized to convey this survey by questionnaire (see attached). The first variable was victims with one level of measurement being female. The second variable was perpetrators with one level of measurement being male. The third and final variable was law enforcement officers with the level of measurement being generic.

The data was collected randomly from 45 participants. Included in that group were 15 perpetrators, 15 victims, and 15 law enforcement officers. The perpetrators, as well as the victims, were surveyed at random through the Women's Center of Brazoria County, Inc. A random survey of law enforcement officers was conducted throughout the Brazosport, Texas area.

The survey yielded a 100 percent return providing 45 responses. Each participant was asked ten questions. The responses were based on a likert scale with responses ranging from 1-6 with 1 representing “often” or “great deal” and 6 representing “rarely” or “very little”.

The data was then compiled and processed. This researcher created a spreadsheet using the data gathered from the 45 questionnaires. A bar chart

and line chart were then created to provide the reader with visual displays of the results. The results can also be located in the findings section of this paper.

## **FINDINGS**

Through research I have discovered that there are numerous reasons why women remain in violent relationships. Law enforcement officers are frequently exposed to domestic violence situations; therefore it is imperative that they comprehend this paradox. Understanding, both why women stay in dangerous relationships and why men abuse, will certainly assist law enforcement in facing this daily occurrence.

Historically, the criminal justice system has not been diligent in its response to domestic violence. Until recently, it was condoned by society and was viewed as a private “family matter”, as opposed to a crime. Lack of intervention by legislation led victims to be reluctant in asking for help. In recent times the lawmaker’s public attention to, and community education of the problem has resulted in a push for effective criminal and civil solutions to help break the cycle of violence. When surveyed, both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence agreed that it was rare for those who committed domestic violence to be prosecuted less vigorously and punished more leniently than perpetrators of similar crimes against strangers. On the other hand, law enforcement officers feel that this injustice occurs more often than not.

A profile of the batterer discloses some interesting information. Generally speaking, male perpetrators of domestic violence have a tendency to be domineering and some even have a false sense of inherent male superiority. Combine those traits with alcohol and/or drug abuse and low self-esteem and inevitably the outcome can be a disaster. After compiling the results of the survey (see attached) it was revealed that out of the ten questions asked, only two displayed the responses of the perpetrators and victims to be closer than that of the victims and the law enforcement officers. The victims and perpetrators both sensed that alcohol and/or drug abuse was a big factor in domestic violence; whereas, law enforcement rated the alcohol and /or drug abuse factor slightly lower. In addition, when asked if there is an equal power distribution between the husband and wife involved in a domestic violence situation, the response of the law enforcement officers and that of the perpetrators showed a slight difference in their mutual belief that there is only a minimal power distribution. The victims claimed that there was almost a mutual power allotment between husbands and wives that experience the domestic violence lifestyle. Some casualties of domestic violence script their daily lives in an attempt to cope with their abusers. While others accept the blame for their abuse by striving to shift the responsibility from the abuser. Certain women use these tactics to aid them in coping with their day-to-day nightmares. There are some victims that

actually believe they can abbreviate their abuse by meeting the needs of their abusers. Unfortunately, these coping skills are not effective; conceivably, they may enable the abuser. There have been instances where an abusive husband may isolate his wife in an attempt to increase her vulnerability. The survey revealed that both victims of domestic abuse and law enforcement believe that isolated women are more vulnerable to abuse, whereas the perpetrators believe the isolation is not as effective. The law enforcement officers and victims surveyed feel strongly that the shifting of responsibility from abuser to victim occurs often, whereas the perpetrator pictures the shift occurring less frequently. According to the perpetrators, victim's scripting does not occur nearly as often as the victims and law enforcement feel it does. The responders had a similar neutral response when asked if victims attempt to curtail their abuse by meeting the needs of the offender.

Overall this survey disclosed that 80 percent of the victim's responses were at either one extreme or the other revealing that they displayed strong opinions about domestic violence. Law enforcement maintained a neutral stance 60 percent of the time, varying their responses rarely. The abusers rated their surveys 70 percent of the time on the side of "rare" or "very little" revealing the fact that they don't qualify their responsibility in this dilemma.

## **CONCLUSION**

Domestic violence is a nationwide dilemma that affects us all whether directly or indirectly. Why women remain in abusive relationships is a question

pondered by many. Law enforcement faces this elusive travesty daily. It is imperative that law enforcement maintains a worthwhile understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence. It was hypothesized that there were numerous reasons why women remain in violent relationships. The findings of this research support that hypothesis. Victims of domestic abuse will benefit from knowledgeable law enforcement officers that respond to their cries for help.

There are many variables involved in the reasons why women remain in violent relationships. The motives are common but vary from victim to victim. Some women believe they can change their abusers, while others believe they can prevent the abuse by meeting the wants and needs of their partners. Unfortunately, these tactics do not work. Certain women accept the blame for their abuse in an attempt to shift the responsibility from their abusers. In most homes where violence occurs there is a control issue and an unequal power distribution. Generally speaking, the perpetrators of domestic abuse have a low level of self-esteem coupled with a false sense of inherent male superiority. Economic concerns may cause a woman to stay in a violent relationship due to her inability to visualize a productive life without her source of income, the violator. A victim may be isolated from her friends and family leaving her emotionally dependent on her abusive husband. Alcohol and/or drug abuse can be a fueling factor in most abusive relationships. These are but some of the causes and reasons women continue to be abused by their spouses.



Domestic violence is a continuing and widespread occurrence. There are many causes for the abuse, and many reasons why women stay in the relationships. Part of the effort to put an end to this travesty focuses on law enforcement's knowledge of the dynamics that keep battered women in violent relationships. People frequently ask, "Why won't she just leave?" As we all become increasingly aware of the components involved, we should concentrate on the perpetrator. He is responsible and should be held accountable. Domestic violence is a violation of the law. We should ask, "Why does he batter?" instead of "why does she stay?"

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### Questionnaire

Please answer the following questions by circling **a** number 1-6 according to their assigned values.

1. Are those who commit domestic violence prosecuted less vigorously and punished more leniently than perpetrators of similar crimes against strangers?

Often 1 2 3 4 5 6 Rarely

2. Is there an equal power distribution between the husband and wife involved in a domestic violence situation?

Great deal 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very little

3. In a home where spousal abuse occurs frequently do you believe there may be a control issue?

Often 1 2 3 4 5 6 Rarely

4. Does alcohol and/or drug abuse factor into domestic violence?

Often 1 2 3 4 5 6 Rarely

5. Do you believe that in most cases of domestic violence that the abusive husband may have a false sense of inherent male superiority?

Often 1 2 3 4 5 6 Rarely

6. If a husband isolates his wife from her friends and family could she become more vulnerable to abuse?

Great deal 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very little

7. Do some victims of domestic violence script (plan out) their daily lives in an attempt to cope with the abuser?

Often 1 2 3 4 5 6 Rarely

8. Do some victims of spousal abuse believe they can curtail their abuse by meeting all the wants and needs of their abuser?

Often 1 2 3 4 5 6 Rarely

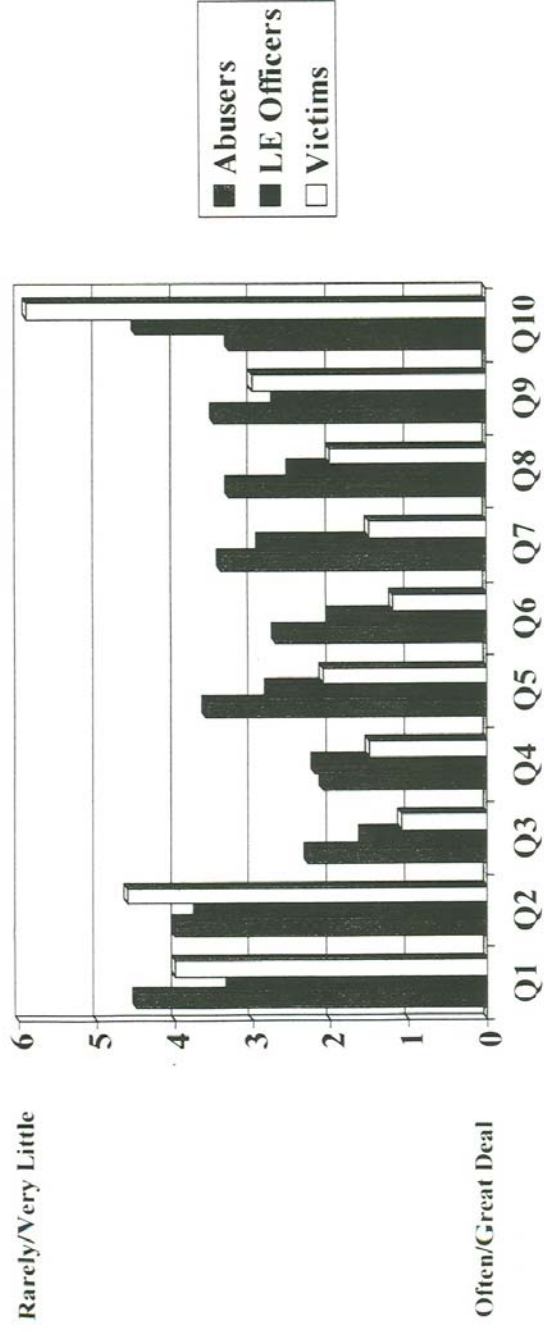
9. Do some victims accept the blame for their abuse in an attempt to shift the responsibility from the abuser?

Often 1 2 3 4 5 6 Rarely

10. What level of self-esteem does the perpetrator of domestic abuse possess?

Great deal 1 2 3 4 5 6 Very little

# Domestic Violence



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