

1.5 Barriers to Leaving an Abusive Relationship

Disclosing or leaving an abusive relationship is a difficult and lengthy process that is highly complex. Service providers must understand that women may be hesitant to disclose for a number of reasons and are confronted with many barriers when considering and attempting to leave an abusive relationship.

Some of these barriers may be:

Emotional attachment to the abuser: The woman may love the abuser and hope that the relationship will improve. She may therefore minimize or deny that the abuse is happening. She may also believe that she is at fault and is the one who needs to change.

Fear: Women can fear what the abuser will do if she leaves. She may fear retaliation by the abuser, fear losing her children, or fear that her family, friends, possessions and/or pets will be harmed.

Women can also fear the impact of “the system” if she leaves. She may fear discrimination, deportation, and lack of protection. She may fear the police and fear the involvement of immigration officials.

She may also fear other consequences, including being ostracized by her community, bringing shame to her family, and being vulnerable without male protection.

If her partner is a prominent member of the community or works in a well-respected profession, she may also fear that she may not be believed.

Inaccessibility of social services: She may have tried to leave in the past, only to find that there were waiting lists for counselling, shelters and other services.

Lack of access to adequate or affordable shelter and housing: The woman may not have anywhere to go with her children if she leaves the relationship. There may not be a shelter in her community, or the shelter may not have adequate space.

Language or cultural barriers: She may have difficulty finding and/or accessing services that are culturally and linguistically sensitive. She may have experienced prejudice, discrimination, or racism in past encounters with various institutions and agencies.

Where interpreters are available, they may be people from the same community as the woman, which may make her feel uncomfortable and may threaten confidentiality or her safety.

Older women with certain conditions such as Alzheimer's, or women with disabilities may not be able to tell anyone that they have been abused.

Lack of information: She may be unaware of the support available in her community.

Financial obstacles: There may be financial obstacles to leaving the relationship and concern that she will be unable to provide for her children. She may be financially dependent on the abuser, and may have little or no income, and limited work experience, making it difficult for her to find employment.

Faith: She may have strong beliefs about keeping the relationship and family together. Separation or divorce may be contrary to her religious beliefs. She may also have concerns that her children will grow up without their father.

Helplessness: Abuse undermines a women's sense of self, her self-esteem and her self-confidence. She may know from past attempts at leaving that the abuser will search for her until she is found.

Family: Her family may pressure her to stay in the relationship. They may pressure her to work out the problems in the relationship and encourage her to believe that her partner will change.

Isolation: The abuser may have isolated her from family and friends. She may therefore have little support to leave the relationship. She may be surrounded by people who deny that the abuse is happening or who minimize it.

The woman may also live in a rural area, far from family, neighbours and social supports.

Fatigue: She may be too physically and emotionally exhausted to leave.

Hopelessness: Due to psychological conditioning and the ensuing belief that the abuse is her fault, leaving may not even occur to her as an option.

Shame and embarrassment: She may feel that she has brought the abuse on herself. She may feel ashamed of her abuser and of herself.