



## Why do women stay?

A reflection on why women put up with abuse from a partner or find it hard to leave

part of the Dignity initiative



## Why do women stay?

People ask why on earth someone puts up with violence from a partner. If you are in a secure, safe relationship, it is difficult to imagine what it would be like, but women who are being abused do not on average report it until more than 30 attacks of some sort have taken place. Why? Why not leave?

It can be hard for a woman to leave for many reasons:

- ✚ She may fear the future - nowhere to live, no money, no home for the children, always running away or hiding.
- ✚ She may be afraid that if she cannot look after the children they will be taken away from her.
- ✚ Threats of what will happen to friends, or family. Fear that she or the children will be killed.
- ✚ She may believe it is all her fault and that she must try harder.
- ✚ She may still love her partner, cling to the hope of a future together, make excuses for him, or hope that he will change.
- ✚ She may be so scared, confused, or ashamed that she cannot begin to think what to do.

When self-esteem is at rock-bottom, it is difficult to make decisions, or look for help. Many women do not know what help is available and are afraid of not being believed.

For a Christian in an abusive relationship, there may be great difficulty in thinking through what she has believed and understood about herself as a person, about her relationship with God and her relationship with her partner.

## Towards a spiritual understanding

### 1 Her self-understanding

Historically, thinking about human development has invariably taken 'maleness' as the norm or standard. This has often left women feeling they are of less intrinsic worth than men, because they think and feel differently.

Recently, much research has been done to discover and to value the distinctive way in which women 'tick'. It is now becoming more widely accepted that men and women develop along separate paths, that each gender understands itself differently, that one is not 'better' than the other. Therefore humankind has no one 'norm' by which all are to be judged. Generally speaking, for girls and women, maintaining connection and relationship are their primary concerns as they grow and mature, while men pursue individuality and hierarchical status achieved through more competitive lifestyles. If a woman sets great store by being in right relationship with others, she is more likely to seek their well-being

at the expense of her own interests. This self-denial will often be reinforced by the theology she has grown up with, or the biblical teaching which has resonated most in her heart.

## 2 Her self-understanding in relation to God

### **Self-sacrifice and guilt**

Many women imbibe a spirituality which encourages, even ennobles, self-sacrifice. So when a woman suffers abuse, she spiritualises it, believing it is the expression of her Christian calling, the highest ideal modelled by Christ in his death in the cross. Self-sacrifice is often motivated by the belief that true agape, Christian love, involves self-abnegation, even self-annihilation. A woman may feel guilty, believing that the violence against her is somehow her fault, even a punishment from God for her sinfulness. By her suffering, she is atoning in some measure for that sin.

### **Fullness of life**

For Jesus, suffering was secondary, the consequence of his life of love. His primary calling - and ours - is to fullness of life, experienced in mutual giving and receiving. Suffering denies people full life. When Jesus said, 'Love one another as I have loved you' he was speaking about living positively, not about suffering and dying. Although suffering may be the consequence of a life of love, and may bring about new life, it is not its full meaning.

### **Suffering**

To suffer for another must be an act of free choice. Where it is inflicted on an unwilling victim, then as with Jesus' own suffering, we cry, 'This is unjust'. Jesus did not seek suffering; he rebelled against it even on its threshold. Losing your life in order to save it (see Luke 9.24) expresses the paradox at the heart of our faith, but it should not be taken out of the context of the whole of Jesus' life. It should never be used as a justification of violence or abuse against women, and women should be encouraged to read the scriptures in a way that affirms their identity and their gifting.

### **Value in God's eyes**

A woman will often see her value only in so far as she sacrifices herself for her husband and family. If her husband is violent towards her, she may well then see God as an angry and violent father who requires sacrifice from his sinful children as the price of salvation. The image of the suffering servant with which women often identify in this context, reinforces the belief that suffering is good *per se*.

Women need to be helped to re-vision God as loving creator, in whose being as Trinity, femaleness is fully integrated. It may sometimes be helpful for women to see God as Mother. To delight in the female in God is another way women can be helped to treasure themselves as made in God's image.

### 3 Her self-understanding in relation to her partner

Most marriage services these days omit the word 'obey', but some women, even if they do not use the word at their wedding, still live out a life of obedience to their husbands. When a woman adopts the thought and belief patterns outlined above, it is easy for her to believe it is her God-given duty to submit to the authority of her husband; she will defer to him in all decision making; she will see herself, and her development as a person, only in terms of the marriage relationship. When her husband becomes abusive, she will therefore find it easy to blame herself, because she feels she has failed - she has not lived up to the standard expected of a good Christian wife. She will not challenge his 'right' to hit her, rather she will want to try harder, to do better, to do all she can to please him in the areas she has 'failed', whether that is in the kitchen or the bedroom. It takes a great deal of courage to begin to challenge these fundamental thought patterns.

In the second leaflet in this series *Marriage... where do you stand?* the story of Sue and Andy is probably typical. At the end of it, Sue begins to rebel against the theological constraints that have formed the basis of her life so far. The advice for ministers in the leaflet is to do all they can to encourage women like Sue to believe that there is a different way to think. By his violence towards her, Andy has broken his side of the marriage bargain, thus giving Sue permission to begin to think differently.

This is an enormous step, but once she has begun to do so, with the help and support as outlined in the leaflet, her self-understanding, in relation to herself, her partner and God, may begin to change also.

#### **Leaflets for Ministers and Pastoral Workers in this series:**

- P1 *When the silence is broken... what does the law say?*
- P2 *When the silence is broken... prepared to listen*
- P3 *When the silence is broken... marriage ...where do you stand?*
- P4 *Why do women stay? Towards a spiritual understanding*
- P5 *What churches need to know about pastoral support for abusers*
- P6 *Agencies which may be able to help*

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