

February 13, 2008

Why doesn't she leave?

Tonight, restaurants in downtown St. John's will swell with happy couples musing about love and toasting their relationships over candle-lit dinners. Across town at Iris Kirby House, Valentine's Day will have a very different feel. Over a quiet dinner, staff will talk to the women at the shelter about a different kind of love—the importance of loving one's self.

Last year, the shelter admitted 222 women and children escaping violent situations. Every day, staff at IKH answer at least four distress calls from women in the area. Some of the women seeking help manage to leave their abusive partners for good—others don't.

Many people don't understand why women stay in abusive relationships. "Why doesn't she just leave?" they ask with genuine bewilderment. Without knowing the power dynamics in violent relationships, it's an understandable question.

Women stay in abusive relationships because they become dependent on their male partners, both financially and emotionally. Women in Newfoundland and Labrador earn only 61 cents to every dollar men make. Leaving a male partner means losing more than half the family income and for a lot of women, that means sinking into poverty. With children in tow, the income loss is even more devastating.

Batterers also ensure their partners become emotionally dependent on them. A familiar story at Iris Kirby House is that, by the time they leave, the women were totally cut off from their family and friends by their abusers. Some women at the shelter say their social isolation was so extreme, their male partners were the only adults with whom they had any real contact for years.

Abusers also chip away at their partners' self-esteem. Through insults, bullying and violence, women in these relationships are made to feel worthless. This controlling behaviour leaves a woman feeling grateful for her partner's "love" because she has been led to believe no one else could possibly want her.

After a woman's self-esteem has been shaved down, an abuser can then blame her for the beatings she receives. "If you weren't so stupid," he might say, or, "If you weren't such a cow," he might yell with a raised fist.

When women are socially isolated from the people who care about them and made to feel unworthy of love, it is easy for abusers to keep their partners from leaving. The thought of walking away from the only person who says he loves her—even if his hands say something different—is terrifying.

These are the reasons it's difficult for women to leave abusive relationships. Given the control tactics at play, it's surprising some women actually do leave. Of course, more important than asking, "Why doesn't she leave?" is the question, "Why does he do it in the first place?"

Most men would never lay a hand on their female partners. The thought of hurting a loved one makes no sense to them. Yet violence against women is not uncommon. Last year, the shelters in our province housed 1,084 women and children escaping violent homes while the Sexual Assault Crisis and Prevention Centre took 500 crisis calls.

We clearly have a problem with violence against women—but why?

Violence against women is a consequence of inequality. Abusive men think women are weak and inferior and it makes them feel manly and powerful to beat the crap out of them. They also think women have "a place," and as a man, it is their right to shove them back into it.

The expression "rule of thumb" comes from an old English law which stipulated a man could beat his wife with a stick no thicker than his thumb. In the old days, women were thought of as possessions rather than equals. Some men still see it that way.

We've come a long way but still have ground to cover. Until full equality arrives, including economic, political and social equality, abusive men will continue to find support for their belief that women are inferior.

This Valentine's Day, let's focus on what we can do to make sure love doesn't hurt women. We can start by supporting women's equality efforts.

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