Women Who Leave Violent Relationships

by Maryann Syers

"And I looked, and he was running after me, and I just thought, I just can't let him catch me. I have to go on. I knew that that was it, that I would not be going back. It had clicked that this was really, really insane, that he was going to kill me or else I was going to kill him. I wasn't going to stay there any longer. It was time to go."

Each year in Minnesota thousands of women flee violent relationships and face the challenge of rebuilding their lives. More than 45,000 Minnesota women are battered by their spouses or boyfriends each year. Research estimates that 45 to 70 percent of battered women eventually leave their assailants. Despite these large numbers, we know very little about women's experience once they escape the violence. Research to date has focused primarily on women who are currently being battered or are deciding whether or not to leave. This ignores the reality that a majority of women eventually do leave violent relationships and it has led to significant gaps in services for women recovering from the trauma of battering.

Women must confront tremendous obstacles as they seek to establish lives independent of their assailant. Many continue to be harassed and victimized by their former partners. Divorce proceedings and custody decisions become a nightmare as women seek to guarantee their safety and meet the needs of their minor children. Financial stress often accompanies their efforts to be sole provider for their families. Child support, if awarded, is likely to be received sporadically, if at all, and efforts to enforce payment may lead to further abuse. Finally, women must confront the challenges of raising children as single parents. Time and energy deficits plague women who must care for their children alone.

This article reports findings from a study that asked formerly battered women what problems they faced and what helped in their adjustment after they left their violent partner. The research used a qualitative method that involved intensive interviews, averaging seven-and-a-half hours, with fifteen formerly battered women. These were women who had been out of an abusive relationship for at least one year prior to the interview. The sample was chosen from women who responded to a flyer sent by the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women to its member organizations or who were referred by individuals in the community who

Often, further education is the key to the future for women who have left a violent relationship.
had heard about the research. An effort was made to include women in the sample who varied from one another on certain key characteristics, such as racial and ethnic background, length of time since separation from the abuser, and whether or not they had been married to the abuser.

The interviews explored in depth each woman's post-separation process. Topics discussed included the woman's history of abuse; the decision to leave the abuser; emotional, cognitive, and spiritual changes; economic status; relationships with family and friends; and the formal resources that she used. This article focuses on resources, both formal and informal, to which women turned in their efforts to recover from the violence and maintain their families.

The Women

The women interviewed ranged in age from twenty-seven to fifty-eight, with an average of about thirty-eight years. The majority were white (eleven). In addition, there were two black women, one who was black and Hispanic, and one who was white and Hispanic. All of the women interviewed had children; ten of them had minor children living with them. They had been living separately from their violent ex-partners for eighteen months to seventeen years, with an average of about six years. The women in this sample were generally well-educated. Four had completed high school, eight had some post-secondary education in addition to high school (six were currently in college or technical school), three had completed college, and one had finished a graduate degree.

The majority of women (ten) had been married to their violent partners. Four had lived with their abuser but never been married to him. Only one had neither lived with nor been married to her violent partner. Women in this sample had relatively short-lived relationships with their assailants. Twelve of the fifteen women stayed with their assailants less than five years (four less than two years). Three had stayed in the relationship more than five years (one for twenty years) before leaving. Seven had been in more than one violent relationship.

More than half of the women in this sample (nine) had received AFDC or some other form of income maintenance since leaving the violent relationship. Only six, however, were still relying on public assistance at the time of the interviews. Eight of the women were employed at the time of the interview. Of the ten women with dependent children only three were receiving child support. One woman was paying child support to her former husband.

Informal Social Support

The majority of women interviewed identified support from friends and family as the most critical factor in helping them get on their feet again once they had left the abuser. Karen, who had to pick her life up after an abusive relationship and learn to control her chemical dependency at the same time, says, "My friends are 90 percent responsible for where I am today. They care. They love me."

Friends and family provided a combination of emotional and instrumental supports such as child care, temporary shelter, and financial resources. Describing the type of support that she received from her friends Connie says,

"The talking was the most important part. Letting me talk, letting me recognize that I had other choices. Urging me to continue to see a counselor, going to a counselor. Occasionally loaning me money, mostly listening. Mostly being there, staying and my friends instead of going away from me when things were hard. Being involved with me in ways other than just work. Outside of work, kids, softball games, other things. Being a friend, just being friends."

Families were also instrumental in helping women to get on their feet again. Even for those women whose parents or families were not particularly active in providing resources, the women described them as providing a kind of "safety net." Several spoke of knowing that their families were always there if they really needed them.

The women interviewed stated that they had changed friends since separating from their abusers. Several described their new friends as being generally healthier than their old friends—not in abusive relationships themselves, not chemically dependent, and not always focused on problems.

The focus of their friendships had changed as well, from talking about the men to talking about themselves and how they were growing and changing. Elizabeth, an early thirties and the woman of forty-two, says of her friendships,

"More of the women's issues have come up with my other women friends...we spent more time talking about those other things where as other, earlier years we'd be still trying to find ways to be attractive to a man and please him."

All but three of the women interviewed had support networks of family and/or friends. The three without this kind of support appeared to be struggling with feelings of depression and hopelessness more than the other women. They seemed to feel powerless to effect real change in their life. They had not given up trying to improve their lives, but just dealing with life's daily stresses seemed more of a struggle for them than for the other women. For these three women, the one or two friends they did have provided more stress than support. Informal networks of support appear to be critical to a woman's adjustment after leaving a violent partner.

Formal Sources of Support

Women in the study used a wide array of institutional resources to meet their needs and the needs of their children. These included: services or activities provided by the women's community, such as the rape crisis center, career counseling programs, and a women's law clinic; self-help groups like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and battered women's support groups, and both individual and group counseling; chemical dependency treatment; parenting classes or groups; housing assistance in the forms of shelters, Section 8 assistance, and transitional housing programs for women; the full range of economic assistance programs, such as AFDC, SSI, clothing closets, food shelves, day care subsidies, government commodities, and food stamps; school and education programs; and the criminal justice system, including police, attorneys, courts, and family court workers.

- Counseling and Self-Help Groups

Thirteen of the fifteen women attended a self-help group, either a twelve-step group such as AA or Alanon, or a women's support group, or a battered women's support group. In addition, fourteen of the women were receiving individual or group therapy or counseling. The fifteenth woman had sought counseling but stated she was unable to find a therapist with whom she felt comfortable. She did, however, have a strong network of friends and attended women's support groups.

The women generally felt their experience with self-help groups and counseling had been helpful. The groups provided a place to discuss issues with other people experiencing similar problems. This ongoing support was the most critical element of the groups.

According to the women in this sample, counseling or therapy helped by increasing their self-esteem and encouraging them to deal with their feelings about the abuse and separation. In addition, counseling provided information about battering and helped them learn what resources were available in the community and how to make use of them. Finally, several women mentioned that counselors provided positive role models for them. Kathryn, who lost primary physical custody of her children following her separation, said,

"I have such respect for (the agency). It's like they throw you out a line if you're drowning, that's what they were like for me. It's like I came in there and I wasn't even a person. I was just a pathetic non-person I guess. I didn't know who I was, what I wanted. They helped me to see that what was happening was not right. They helped me to look at myself and see what kind of real sorry state I was in. They helped me to care about myself more. They helped me to express the anger at what (my abusive partner) was doing to me and to see what he
was doing to me. I couldn’t even see it. They opened stuff that was in my head that I didn’t even know was there. There’s so much they know about that.”

The women also talked about negative influences. Only three were dissatisfied with their self-help groups. Maria, for instance, had difficulty in her first AA group because of other members’ ignorance of battering issues. While some of the criticisms can be attributed to individual personalities, Maria’s concerns seem more universal. Other women spoke of troubling experiences with therapists who lacked an understanding of battering issues or women’s issues generally. Elizabeth described a series of therapists that she felt were insensitive to her victimization issues. They had, “kind of an attitude, an implication that I should pull myself up by the bootstraps...sort of blaming the victim attitude...”

Another obstacle was the judgmental attitude of therapists. Yvette felt that because her therapist had a different life experience (white and upper middle class) she was critical of Yvette, “...I’ve experienced that with her, where she’ll go, like it’s disgusting or something, things that I would tell her. I’d get this feeling, like when I’d tell her certain things, especially around the prostitution stuff. It’s like she’ll do something, roll her eyes or something...”

**Economic Resources**

Ten of the women interviewed had used some form of public assistance since leaving their abusers. Only six were on public assistance at the time of the interview. Nine had also received assistance through other programs, such as the food stamp program, food shelves, government commodities, the Women, Infant and Children (WIC) program, and clothing distribution centers. Some participated in a program where they donated time in order to receive food at a reduced cost. More than a third of the women relied either on Section 8 or public housing and two had been in transitional housing programs. Only three had used battered women’s shelters.

Getting AFDC or SSI meant survival for these women and they expressed appreciation for the support. For Sylvia and Susan it provided short-term assistance until they could heal somewhat from the emotional effects of the violence and find adequate employment. Several other women relied on AFDC for longer periods while they prepared for employment through further education.

Despite these advantages, these women, like all women receiving AFDC, were forced to cope with the numerous and persistent challenges posed by this system. One challenge was what they perceived as inconsistent and arbitrary policies and rules. Diana, for example, related that because her older daughter received Social Security payments from her father’s death, her younger daughter was denied AFDC. Social Security required Diana to sign a statement yearly that income received from Social Security would go only toward the support of her older daughter. This left her without any means of support for her younger daughter.

Community attitudes toward women receiving welfare also presented obstacles. The women struggled with the feelings produced by the stigma attached to being a “welfare mother.” Using food stamps in a grocery store, for example, may bring up feelings of shame.

The welfare system places women in an irreconcilable bind, these women said. Public assistance programs do not provide enough income for women to support their families yet the system punishes their efforts to supplement their incomes. It encourages one to engage in fraudulent activities. Maureen said,

> “I simply looked at the amount of income they give me and how much the government says you need to survive at the poverty level and realized that it wasn’t enough. So what I realized is they were putting me in a situation where I would have to be a criminal to survive.”

Not only does the welfare system make it difficult to live above a mere subsistence level, but it also makes it difficult to leave the system. These women expressed a strong commitment to working themselves off of welfare by going to school and getting jobs, but felt discouraged by the obstacles placed in their paths. If women earned extra income they were punished. If they found jobs they lost child care benefits. Once they left the system they forfeited medical benefits.

Finally, women noted the amount of energy required to live on low incomes. They engaged in endless efforts to identify and gain additional resources. Obtaining extra food or clothing for their children required considerable planning and time. Most did not own cars and had to rely on public transportation or friends to get where they needed to go. In addition, considerable energy was needed to deal with the bureaucratic welfare system. Diana says,

> “...it’s like you’re walking across the bridge across the Grand Canyon and trying to get across the other side, it’s one of those swinging, rope bridges. And somebody’s sitting there swinging the bridge the whole time. It takes a long time to get across. If they quit swinging the bridge and let your life stabilize you could get across.”

**School and Education Programs**

Even of the fifteen women interviewed had either graduated from a post-secondary program or were currently enrolled in an education program. Six were in college or technical programs at the time of the interviews. This particular resource seemed to hold the key for their futures. Rhonda, who was about to complete her bachelor’s degree and planned to go on to law school, said, “This is my ticket out.”

**Conclusions and Implications**

The women in this study were struggling against tremendous odds to establish their lives independent of their abusers. They had driven widely upon the resources available to support themselves and their families. They relied heavily on informal social supports. Two-thirds of the women identified friends and family as the most critical factor in helping them to get on their feet again. Their informal social networks provided them with both emotional and practical support. They also used formal sources of support. While these resources were not
identified as the most critical factor in their adaptation after the separation, these resources were often what enabled the women to survive independent of their abusers.

The heavy reliance on informal support systems and self-help groups underscores the need for programs (both domestic violence programs and more general social service agency programs) that will provide resources for support groups and for enhancing women's informal support networks.

Therapy and counseling services were used extensively by the women in this sample. While this may be an artifact of this particular sample, because of the way it was drawn, human service professionals need to be knowledgeable about what formerly battered women experience and how to help support them in their recovery. They require specialized training in battering issues. Counseling programs must be willing to provide ancillary services such as home visits or child care during counseling sessions. In addition, these women often need outside resources and help in how to access them. The role of the human service professional must extend beyond facilitating their emotional recovery to include helping women negotiate the practical aspects of survival in this culture.

While Minnesota has taken great strides toward a criminal justice policy that attempts to protect battered women, these women continue to feel vulnerable to further harassment and abuse. Policy makers and criminal justice personnel must recognize that women continue to be in danger even after they have left the violent relationship, sometimes for years. Research shows that more murders of women by intimate partners occur after a separation than at any time during the relationship. Like counselors and therapists, criminal justice professionals require specialized education in battering issues if they are to respond adequately to the very real danger these women face.

Serious limitations in the welfare system were identified by the women in this study. Policy makers must continue to advocate for necessary changes in that system which will not only allow these women to survive, but also encourage and support their efforts to work themselves off of welfare. Specifically, battered women need to have transitional services such as day care, medical benefits, and housing assistance once they are terminated from AFDC. In addition, women should be rewarded for finding ways to supplement their meager income rather than punished for those efforts.

Education about the battering of women continues to be a pressing need. School programs on violence are needed to counteract the socialization to violence and male domination of women that children receive in this culture. Broader education of the community will help those women who would not seek out specific domestic violence programs and services. Education needs to occur at all levels, in places such
Groundwater in Southeastern Minnesota’s Karst Country

by Betty J. Wheeler, E. Calvin Alexander, Jr., and Russell S. Adams, Jr.

During the past two decades, there has been an increased public awareness and concern about the quality of the groundwater in the state of Minnesota. Although groundwater resources are unevenly distributed across the state, the areas of greatest population (the southern, central, and northwestern regions of the state) are blessed with groundwater which is generally abundant and of high quality.

Groundwater occurs under the earth’s surface in layers of rock or unconsolidated sediments known as aquifers. Different areas of the state rely on different aquifers, each having its own characteristics. The karst region of southeastern Minnesota has several different aquifers at varying depths from the surface. Some of these aquifers deliver great quantities of water to wells in the area. Most of the private wells rely on one of the two or three uppermost aquifers. Research during the past two decades has shown that there are groundwater problems in some of the karst area.

This study, funded by the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources for 1985-87 and extended through 1998 by funding from CURA and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), has collected data about the quality of groundwater in the karst area of southeastern Minnesota and has acquired crucial long-term information about changes in groundwater quality there.

Karst Country

The karst area is distinguished by a carbonate bedrock, lying at or near the earth’s surface. The peculiar nature of this type of bedrock creates both the topography and the hydrology of the area (see Figure 1). Carbonate rock is soluble in acid and both natural and human-made acids slowly dissolve the carbonate bedrock in karst areas. A weak natural acid is formed when carbon dioxide dissolves into water. Stronger acids are formed when air pollutants combine with precipitation. As water percolates slowly through the soil and moves down into the bedrock, along vertical and horizontal fractures in the carbonate rock, it dissolves the rock along some of the fractures, slowly enlarging them. The fractures that have been enlarged eventually carry most of the water. Water flowing through the widened fractures can be as rapid as flow through a pipe.

Sinkholes develop where there is a shallow cover of soil over densely fractured carbonate bedrock. They result when water carries soil and dissolved rock into the underlying fractures of the bedrock. Small