

Behind the Decision: Understanding the Reasons for Staying in or Leaving an Abusive Relationship ^{1*}

Ivana Janković**

Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Serbia

Abstract

Intimate partner violence against women represents a serious social issue with significant negative consequences for victims, their families, and society as a whole. Understanding the reasons why women remain in or leave abusive relationships is essential for the development of effective prevention and intervention measures. The aim of this study was to explore the factors influencing women's decisions to stay in or leave violent relationships. The study was conducted with a sample of 15 women residing in a safe house, using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis for data interpretation. The findings indicate that key reasons for remaining with an abusive partner include the normalization or tolerance of less severe forms of violence, lack of social and economic resources, internalized patriarchal values, religious beliefs, emotional attachment, as well as fear and feelings of shame. In contrast, the decision to leave is typically triggered by the escalation of violence, abuse directed at children, loss of hope in the partner's change, and fear of retaliation. This study highlights the complexity of decision-making processes among women experiencing intimate partner violence and underscores the need for comprehensive support that takes into account their psychological, social, and cultural circumstances.

Keywords: victims, intimate partner violence, remaining with an abusive partner, leaving process

¹ Corresponding author: ivana.jankovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

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**<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3932-4489>

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) against women represents a specific form of violence within intimate relationships, where women are most frequently the victims, and the perpetrators are their current or former partners, regardless of whether they are formally married or cohabiting (World Health Organization [WHO], 2013; Petrušić & Konstantinović Vilić, 2010). This violence spans multiple dimensions: physical, psychological (including coercive control), sexual, economic, and other abusive behaviors (Heise, 1998; WHO, 2013; WHO, 2025). Research has shown that IPV is one of the most common forms of violence against women globally and has profound consequences for their physical and psychological health (Chandan et al., 2020; Garcia-Moreno et al., 2006; Lagdon et al., 2014).

This paper focuses on understanding the reasons why women stay in or leave abusive relationships. The reasons for staying are complex and shaped by personal, social, and economic factors, often involving fear, economic dependence, social pressures, and internal psychological mechanisms (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Grigsby & Hartman, 1997; Saunders, 2020; Stylianou, 2018). Understanding these reasons is key to developing adequate support and intervention strategies.

A comprehensive model explaining why victims of violence may not leave abusive partners was developed by Grigsby and Hartman (1997). According to this model, the first level of barriers to leaving arises from the environment. These barriers concern the availability of resources such as money, alternative housing, support from police or courts, friends, family, or professionals (Caridade et al., 2020; Heron et al., 2022). Even when such resources exist, what matters is the victim's perception of their availability (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Barnett, 2000; Grigsby & Hartman, 1997). Economic dependence on the partner is frequently cited as one of the primary reasons women stay in abusive relationships (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Barnett, 2000; Johnson et al., 2022; Stylianou, 2018).

The second level of barriers relates to the outcomes of socialization and internalized gender beliefs. In patriarchal societies women are socialized to form their identity in relation to their partner, to sacrifice their needs for those of their partner or children (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997). Instead of valuing personal achievements, women learn to seek affiliation through their partners (Woods, 1999), making their sense of well-being contingent on the quality of their relationship (Mookherjee, 1997). Some women fear losing their partner, believing that leaving is worse than occasional physical aggression (Caridade et al., 2020; Frisch & MacKenzie, 1991). In addition, victims do not leave their partners because of love and the hope that the partner will change (Heron et al., 2022; Pocock et al. 2019; Short et al., 2000; Towns & Adams, 2000). By assuming the role of a caregiver, women may internalize guilt for the relationship's failure, which complicates leaving due to their efforts to repair the relationship (Debold et al., 1993, as cited in Anderson et al., 2003; Janković, 2022). A woman may also remain in the relationship to ensure her child

grows up with both parents (Barnett, 2001), or due to the belief that violence is a common feature of romantic relationships (Herbert et al., 1991). Research has found that myths of romantic love may lead victims to perceive aggression as part of relationship dynamics (Ramírez-Carrasco et al. 2023). A certain degree of jealousy may be interpreted by some women as affirming their desirability and as a reflection of their partner's attachment or commitment (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997). Religious beliefs aligned with patriarchal values, such as women's submission to men and disapproval of divorce, can also contribute to staying in abusive relationships (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997; Levitt et al., 2015).

The third level of barriers concerns psychological processes and consequences that arise from victimization. These include defense mechanisms (e.g., denial, rationalization, minimization) that shift blame for the abuse away from the perpetrator (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983). Common rationalizations include beliefs such as "he didn't know what he was doing," "he temporarily lost control," "he's an alcoholic," or "he's unemployed" (Ragg et al., 1999; Varvaro, 1991, as cited in Barnett, 2001). Prolonged exposure to abuse combined with intermittent acts of kindness and enforced social isolation may lead the victim to adopt the abuser's worldview as a means of psychological survival, a process often described as trauma bonding (Effiong et al. 2022). Submission to the abuser can function as a survival strategy (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997), consistent with findings that victims often develop coping mechanisms aimed at minimizing harm and preserving safety, such as appeasing the perpetrator or avoiding conflict (Winfield et al., 2023). Additionally, the cycle of violence (Walker, 1979), alternating between punishment and reward, increases the woman's dependence and reduces her ability to leave, while promises to change sustain her hope that the violence will not recur (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Furthermore, the experience of repeatedly unsuccessful efforts to escape from the abusive relationship can foster a sense of learned helplessness (Walker, 1979).

Explanations that focus on the victim's behavior or personality risk blaming the victim for her own victimization (Barnett, 2001). Although there may be differences between abused and non-abused women, these are consequences, not causes of abuse. The decision to stay is less influenced by individual characteristics than by economic and relational factors (Phillips, 1993; Sullivan, 1991, as cited in Barnett, 2001). It is not possible to identify a psychological profile that predicts choosing an abuser as a partner (Rhodes, 1992). Anxiety, depression, self-blame, low self-esteem, and memory impairments and other serious mental health problems are among the psychological consequences of abuse (Chandan et al., 2020; Lagdon et al., 2014). However, empirical findings suggest that women possessing higher levels of self-esteem and an internal locus of control demonstrate a greater likelihood of leaving abusive relationships (Kim & Gray, 2008).

The fourth level of barriers, according to Grigsby and Hartman (1997), concerns the connection between childhood abuse or neglect and adult victimization. Childhood experiences of abuse may lead to depression, anxiety, dissociation, post-traumatic stress, and other mental health difficulties (Cloitre et al., 2014; Read et al., 2014). Women with such trauma histories are more vulnerable to future abuse,

a phenomenon often described as the revictimization (Walker & Wamser-Nanney, 2023; Widom, 2024). Prior childhood abuse may shape expectations of intimate relationships in adulthood, where receiving love and care from an abusive partner can paradoxically represent the first experience of such affection. This can contribute to downplaying the risks of violence and remaining in the relationship, particularly if the current abuse is perceived as less severe than previous trauma (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997).

Research on the reasons for leaving an abusive partner indicates that leaving is a process that involves preparatory stages as well as the act of leaving itself (Baholo et al., 2014; Saunders, 2020; Wuest & Merritt-Gray, 1999). Internal and external changes that occur during the process of leaving serve as catalysts for this process. Internal changes include recognizing the abuse as unacceptable rather than normal or justified and shifting responsibility from the victim to the perpetrator (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Choice & Lamke, 1997). Victims begin to question beliefs about their self-worth and whether they deserve abuse, which can lead to a sense of empowerment that brings them closer to the decision to leave. External changes that facilitate leaving include access to social support networks, public services, and economic resources that enable independent living (Anderson, 2007; Heron et al., 2022). Social support is essential for redefining the abusive experience and establishing an independent life (Baholo et al., 2014; Puente-Martínez et al., 2025). Turning points often occur when the abuse becomes life-threatening (Enander & Holmberg, 2008). Researchers also highlight emotional shifts, such as loss of hope, accumulation of anger (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983), fear for children's or one's own safety (Heron et al., 2022), deterioration of the relationship, or an increase in violence (Heron et al., 2022; Kurz, 1996; Patzel, 2001). Personal empowerment or cognitive shifts seeing the relationship as abusive are also critical for leaving an abusive partner (Burke et al., 2001; Kearney, 2001; Patzel, 2001).

Given that the reasons for staying or leaving an abusive partner are closely linked to victims' beliefs about violence, the abuser, and intimate relationships—formed within a specific sociocultural context—this study explores the reasons women in Serbia give for staying in or leaving abusive relationships. In Serbian society, traditional gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms still strongly shape perceptions of male and female roles in the family (Babović, 2010; Jugović et al., 2016). These norms often pressure victims to endure abuse for the sake of preserving the family, particularly for the well-being of children or due to societal expectations that marriage must be maintained “at all costs.” Additionally, the stigmatization of women who “leave their husbands” and the normalization of violence through messages such as “endure it, it will pass” or “he didn’t kill you, so what are you complaining about?” make it even harder for women to leave (Babović et al., 2010; Organizacija za Evropsku Bezbednost i Saradnju [OEBS], 2019). In this context, exploring how victims in Serbia explain their reasons for staying or leaving offers a deeper understanding of how personal decisions intersect with dominant societal discourses and can inform the development of more effective support and intervention strategies. Therefore, the central research question of this study is: How do women

who are victims of intimate partner violence in Serbia explain their reasons for staying with or leaving their abusive partners?

Method

Research Design

A qualitative research paradigm was employed to investigate the subjective experiences of women who have experienced intimate partner violence, with a particular focus on their reasons for remaining in or leaving abusive relationships. The research was guided by a realist epistemological perspective (Vilig, 2013), which assumes that experiences of violence reflect real conditions and consequences in the participants' lives, while also acknowledging that these experiences are interpreted and mediated through their personal and social contexts. From this standpoint, victims' accounts provide valuable insights into the dynamics of abusive relationships and the factors that enable or hinder leaving such relationships. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Participants

The study included 15 women who were victims of intimate partner violence and were, at the time of the research, residing in a safe house. This context made it possible to talk with them about both the reasons for staying with and the reasons for leaving their abusive partners. Demographic data were recorded, not with the aim of homogenizing participants' characteristics, but to better understand their diversity and individual narratives. The youngest participant was 30 years old, and the oldest was 74. Six participants were between 30 and 40 years old, five were between 40 and 50, and four were over 50. Seven women were employed, while eight were unemployed. Only one participant did not have children, while the others did. Some women stayed in the shelter with their children, while in some cases the children remained with their fathers. In most cases, the children were also exposed to violence. The duration of the abuse depended on the length of the intimate relationship, and for most women, violence had been present from the early stages of marriage or cohabitation. For eight women, the abuse lasted between 1 and 10 years; for four women, between 10 and 20 years; and for three women, more than 20 years. Three women had witnessed violence or experienced abuse in their family of origin. An informed consent form, which included information about the purpose of the study, was provided to each participant. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time were assured. At the time this research was conducted, there were no Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in Serbia. The study was approved by a mentor and a commission appointed by the Council of the

Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade. The research was conducted in accordance with the Law on the Protection of Personal Data of the Republic of Serbia and with respect for all relevant ethical standards in the research process.

Data Collection and Processing

A semi-structured interview was used for data collection. Participants were given the opportunity to freely share their experiences of intimate partner violence, with minimal researcher intervention, or to respond to specific questions. Prior to the main phase of the study, a pilot study was conducted with three women who had survived violence, in order to refine potential themes and questions and assess their relevance to the research aim.

In the main study, each participant took part in three interviews. The first interview aimed to establish trust, introduce the research goals, and obtain informed consent. It also served to arrange technical details for the next meeting. This interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. The second interview focused on thematic questions related to understanding the reasons for staying with or leaving an abusive partner. Topics included: reflections on the perceived causes of the violence, justifications for the abusive acts, disclosure to or confiding in others, reactions and advice received, contact with relevant institutions, and thoughts about leaving or returning to the partner, as well as the reasons behind those decisions. This interview lasted around 60 minutes. With participants' consent, it was audio-recorded and transcribed, providing the basis for qualitative analysis. The third interview aimed to validate the preliminary analysis and interpretation. After the initial analysis of individual interviews, participants were invited to comment on the results and express their opinions on the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations (Vilig, 2013). This interview also provided an opportunity to revisit themes from the previous conversation—expand on them, emphasize those they found particularly important, or mention topics they had previously omitted. The third interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was employed (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Vilig, 2013). Instead of predefined categories, thematic units emerged during the process of analysis, based on the content shared by the participants. The process included several stages: initially, segments of transcripts that were considered relevant to the research question were identified. Observations and preliminary comments were then noted alongside these segments. This was followed by the coding phase, which involved a thorough reading of the transcripts and the identification of meaningful units, which were labeled with appropriate codes. Codes were then grouped into

thematic units that were further refined and elaborated. These units were checked against the coded data and the overall content of the transcripts to ensure consistency. Finally, the main themes and subthemes were defined and named, and the data were interpreted to generate research conclusions.

Reflexivity

As a researcher and woman, I was aware that my personal and family context could influence the way I approached the topic of intimate partner violence, as well as my interpretation of participants' experiences. My personal values, beliefs about gender relations and family roles, and my sensitivity to issues of violence against women shaped both my research interest and my positioning in relation to the interviewees. Throughout the research process, I aimed to remain open to different perspectives and experiences, avoiding premature conclusions by relying on active listening, an ethical approach, and continuous reflection on my own assumptions. This reflexive stance helped me to recognize my own limitations and to engage with greater empathy and respect with the complexity of the decisions women make in the context of abusive relationships.

Results

During the process of data analysis and interpretation, the reasons for staying with or leaving an abusive partner were presented in several themes and subthemes. Below is a schematic overview of the identified themes and subthemes, accompanied by descriptions supported by quotes from the interviews.

Reasons for Staying with an Abusive Partner

1. Tolerance of "mild" forms of violence
2. Lack of resources
 - 2.1. No shelter — "I have nowhere to go"
 - 2.2. Economic dependence — "I have nothing to leave with"
3. Beliefs as barriers to ending the abusive relationship
 - 3.1. Preserving the family unit
 - 3.2. Religious and moral imperatives
 - 3.3. "Be silent and endure" — patriarchal norms and messages
4. Emotions as barriers to ending the abusive relationship
 - 4.1. Fear of escalation of violence or fatal outcome
 - 4.2. Hope for a change in the partner's behavior
 - 4.3. Shame and fear of social judgment
 - 4.4. Love for the partner
 - 4.5. Pity for the partner

Reasons for Leaving an Abusive Partner

1. Escalation and Perceived Threat as Catalysts for Leaving
2. Protection of children as a motivator for decision-making
3. Loss of hope and extreme exhaustion

Reasons for Staying with an Abusive Partner

1. Tolerance of “Mild” Forms of Violence

The violence experienced by participants varied in terms of severity of injury, intensity, and frequency. Over time, victims became accustomed to sporadic and less severe forms of physical violence, perceiving them as acceptable or insignificant compared to more severe injuries.

Evica: “*It wasn’t often, it happened, but not that often. The physical violence wasn’t that much; maybe one slap, grabbing by the throat, pushing, but I wasn’t beaten like I hear other women are...*”

Experiences like Evica’s suggest that women often do not recognize violence as serious until it becomes frequent and physically brutal. Compared to “more severe cases,” occasional slaps or pushing are rationalized and tolerated. This relativization contributes to prolonged staying in a risky relationship.

2. Lack of Resources

This theme covers situations where women remain in abusive relationships due to a lack of basic resources for independent living. Conditions such as inability to secure housing, financial security, or support from close ones create a strong sense of entrapment and a lack of choice.

2.1. No Shelter – “I Have Nowhere to Go”

The absence of alternative accommodation and refusal of family members to take in the victim and her children leads women to perceive violence as a lesser harm compared to homelessness or social rejection. The feeling of having no one to turn to creates a vicious cycle of returning to the abusive partner.

Tara: “*My mother doesn’t want me, my father died, no one in my family wants me with my child... I had to try twice to go back.*”

Tara emphasizes that lacking family support left her no choice but to return to the abusive relationship, demonstrating how social isolation reinforces dependence.

2.2. Economic Dependence – “I Have Nothing to Leave With”

Financial dependence directly ties the woman to the abusive partner. Lack of income, employment, or access to property limits the possibility of any form of exit from the relationship. Such economic vulnerability not only prevents leaving the partner but further weakens the sense of control over one’s own life.

Dara: “*I have to find an apartment, I have to manage somehow, but what can I do when I have no income or anything anywhere.*”

Without a stable income, Dara does not see a realistic option to leave her partner, which forces her to remain in the relationship despite the violence.

3. Beliefs as Barriers to Leaving an Abusive Relationship

This theme encompasses deeply rooted personal, social, and cultural beliefs that make it difficult for women to decide to leave an abusive partner. Within this theme, three subthemes emerge that illuminate various sources and ways in which these beliefs manifest and are maintained.

3.1. Preserving the Family Unit

One of the key motives for staying in an abusive relationship is the belief that it is important for the children—and for the broader family image in society—that both parents remain together. Women who share this belief often prioritize the needs of the child and the ideal of a “complete family” over their own personal safety and well-being.

Kaća: *“I thought about whether the child would be happy without both parents... not to deprive them of their father.”*

Kaća’s belief in the importance of a “complete” family surpasses her own safety, as she believes the children would suffer from divorce. This perspective on family as a whole, whose structure must not be disrupted even in the case of violence, contributes to the prolongation of the abusive relationship.

3.2. Religious and Moral Imperatives

Among some participants, beliefs based on religious teachings and moral codes were identified, especially those related to the sanctity of marriage and the prohibition of divorce. Women raised in environments dominated by strict religious principles often internalize the idea that it is a moral obligation for a woman to stay with the father of her children regardless of the circumstances.

Nevena: *“I grew up in a family that respects the Ten Commandments... a mother should stay with the father of the children.”*

In this excerpt, Nevena internalizes religious norms that stigmatize divorce, making it harder for her to decide to leave an abusive relationship.

3.3. “Be Silent and Endure”

Patriarchal messages transmitted through family and social heritage often shape the belief that women are meant to endure and sacrifice their own needs for the sake of preserving family peace and reputation. In this spirit, silence about violence is viewed as a virtue, and expressing resistance is seen as shameful. Such messages shift the focus from the abuser to the woman, normalize violence, and further hinder the break from an abusive partner.

Tara: *“A woman has to endure something for the sake of the family’s well-being and preservation... people will laugh...”*

This quote illustrates how inherited messages of silence and endurance place blame on the woman, maintaining the status quo and impeding open resistance.

The beliefs described function as psychological barriers that do not stem solely from individual attitudes but are shaped by broader social norms, religious teachings, and traditional gender roles. These beliefs often legitimize staying in an abusive relationship by redirecting responsibility onto the woman while simultaneously

suppressing her needs and safety for the sake of preserving family, morality, and social reputation.

4. Emotions as Barriers to Leaving an Abusive Relationship

In addition to rational beliefs and social norms, emotional factors play a powerful role in maintaining abusive partnerships. Emotions, which are a natural part of any close relationship, become complex and often contradictory in the context of violence, further complicating the decision to leave. This thematic unit encompasses various affective dynamics that act as invisible forces keeping women tied to abusive relationships.

4.1. Fear of Escalation of violence or Lethal Outcome

Fear of escalating violence or death following an attempt to leave the partner represents one of the strongest emotional motives for staying. Women live in a constant state of danger and believe that trying to exit the relationship could worsen the situation and threaten their lives.

Sneža: *“Then I was afraid to leave him; I thought he might kill me...”*

Sneža’s statement illustrates how the threat of death traps victims in the relationship, blocking attempts to end the partnership.

4.2. Hope for Change in Partner’s Behavior

Hope for a change in the partner’s behavior relies on memories of the partner’s conduct from the period before the violence, as well as the desire to repair the damaged relationship. Women who nurture this emotion often believe that the aggressive behavior is temporary or caused by external circumstances, and therefore postpone ending the relationship in anticipation of a “return” to the former, better relationship.

Anica: *“I knew... I hoped he would change because he wasn’t violent before.”*

Anica’s hope delays the final decision to leave, relying on memories of a period without violence.

4.3. Shame and Fear of Social Judgment

Shame as a consequence of the destruction of the family image and fear of probable social condemnation strongly influence the decision to remain silent about the violence and stay in the relationship. Women feel responsible for not maintaining a “normal” family and fear others’ comments, which further intensifies their isolation.

Kaća: *“I grew up in a family that was ‘normal,’ by some standards, with both a mother and a father, and some traditions were respected... and well... maybe I was ashamed to get divorced because people wouldn’t understand.”*

In this case, shame motivated Kaća to conceal the violence and delay leaving, reflecting societal norms about the woman’s role as guardian of family integrity and honor.

4.4. Love for the Partner

Despite violent episodes, love for the partner remains a strong factor complicating separation. Emotional attachment hampers rational risk assessment

and contributes to justifying the violence through idealization of the partner or the relationship.

Gorica: *"I loved him, I love him... I can't say I hate him now, like some women say their deceased husbands are saints... I can hate what he does, but I can't hate him because, deep down, he's a good person, really good."*

Gorica's quote illustrates the emotional ambivalence that complicates leaving an abusive relationship. Although she recognizes the violence as problematic, she separates the partner's behavior from his personality, insisting on his "good core." Love and idealization reduce the perception of risk and act as barriers to rational decision-making.

4.5. Pity for the Partner

Pity and a sense of responsibility for the partner's fate can lead a woman to stay in the relationship—not out of love, but out of care. Fear of his loneliness, poverty, or social downfall creates emotional blackmail, in which the woman sees herself as the only person who can "save" him.

Dunja: *"I'm with him out of pity, not love... and I endured all of it myself so that he would have a roof over his head and I supported him all these years."*

Dunja justifies her sacrifice by caring for her partner's fate, demonstrating how compassion can be a strong cohesive factor.

The emotions connecting a woman to an abusive partner are often contradictory and intertwined, creating inner confusion and blocking decisiveness to leave. In the context of violence, emotions do not function as guides to personal well-being but as complex psychological mechanisms of survival, attachment, and rationalization of abuse. Fear, hope, shame, love, and compassion do not act in isolation but within a complex web of mutual influences that collectively shape the woman's relationship to her partner and her situation.

Reasons for Leaving an Abusive Partner

Although women in abusive relationships often face numerous obstacles that hinder them from leaving their partner, many still make the decision when their internal capacity to endure or external circumstances reach a critical point. Analysis of the narratives identified three key themes that illuminate the factors contributing to ending the abusive relationship: Escalation and Perceived Threat as Catalysts for Leaving, Protection of children as a motivator for decision-making and Loss of hope and extreme exhaustion.

1. Escalation and Perceived Threat as Catalysts for Leaving.

For many participants, the decision to leave an abusive partner was triggered by heightened danger, either through the escalation of violence or the perceived threat of further harm. Some women left when episodes of violence became severe and life-threatening.

As Anica recounted, “*And then, in the end, the violence really escalated, when I realized I could die, I left. I realized he could have killed me.*”

Her testimony illustrates how the tolerance threshold shifts when physical survival becomes the primary concern, creating a clear turning point. Similarly, fear of retaliation also acted as a catalyst for leaving. In situations where the abuser had been reported or detained, participants described leaving preemptively out of concern for what might happen upon his return.

Kaća explained, “*...who knows what might come to his mind, so we grabbed the most important things... and went to a friend's studio apartment.*”

This statement highlights that violence is not always perceived as a concluded act but as a persistent threat that can escalate, prompting immediate action to escape. Together, these accounts emphasize that both actual escalation and anticipated danger are critical motivators for women’s decisions to leave abusive relationships.

2. Protection of children as a motivator for decision-making.

For most participants, violence directed at their children became unacceptable and triggered an urgent need to end the relationship.

Miona: “*..When he started beating my children, hitting them... I couldn't endure anymore.*”

Miona’s statement illustrates how a victim, despite having tolerated violence towards herself, decides to leave to protect her children, which becomes a decisive motive.

3. Loss of hope and extreme exhaustion.

For some participants, leaving the partner comes only after years of suffering, when exhaustion and disappointment become unbearable.

Suzana: “*...when I saw I no longer had the strength to even stand on my own, I left that house weighing 36 kilos... I don't believe anything can change.*”

Suzana’s narrative shows that the decision to leave can occur even when there is no longer any expectation of change, indicating an emotional and physical limit of endurance.

Discussion

The study identified themes related to the reasons for leaving and staying with an abusive partner. Regarding the reasons for staying with an abusive partner, participants referred in their explanations to tolerance of less severe forms of violence, lack of resources, and beliefs and emotions that acted as barriers to leaving the abusive relationship.

The research results indicate that over time, participants develop tolerance toward “milder” forms of violence, relying on rationalization. If violence is perceived as less severe, they are less likely to make the decision to leave. The connection between the intensity of violence and the decision to stay or leave an abusive partner has also

been confirmed in other studies (Barnett, 2001; Heron et al., 2022). Additionally, participants did not leave abusive partners due to the lack of social support and economic dependence. According to Ferraro and Johnson (1983), the absence of support from family members contributes to the victim's belief that there is no alternative and that they must tolerate the violence. The lack of a safe place to go after leaving the partner is one of the existential reasons victims remain with abusive partners (Davis, 2002; Short et al., 2000). Furthermore, economic dependence on the partner is considered one of the most common reasons for staying with an abusive partner (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Barnett, 2000; Johnson et al., 2022; Stylianou, 2018). Victims are unable to leave abusive relationships, regardless of how harmful or dangerous they are, due to lack of financial means and lack of alternative accommodation (Davis, 2002; Hargrave et al., 2024). These two reasons (lack of social support and economic dependence) frequently overlapped in the victims' narratives.

The study results also show that the decisions made by participants were influenced by various beliefs. Participants linked their decisions to stay with abusive partners to beliefs about the importance of keeping the family intact and to religious convictions. Other studies also confirm that the choice to stay can stem from a mother's desire for the child to grow up with both parents, based on the belief in preserving family unity (Barnett, 2001; Bukvić, 2008; Heron et al., 2022). Moreover, adopted religious beliefs, supported by patriarchal norms discouraging divorce despite violence, can influence women not to leave their partnerships (Grigsby & Hartman, 1997; Levitt et al., 2015). The emphasis on the sanctity of marriage, regardless of the cost to individual family members, is a principle upheld by many religious and political groups in their interpretation of family values (Marano, 1997; Whipple, 1987; Wood & McHugh, 1994; as cited in Barnett, 2001).

The role of retaining women in abusive intimate relationships is also reflected in upbringing messages they received from childhood, such as "be silent and endure." These messages reflect a patriarchal value system promoting female obedience, suffering, and responsibility for preserving the family at all costs (Childress et al., 2023; Dobash & Dobash, 1992). The internalization of such norms contributes to feelings of guilt, shame, and fear of social judgment, further complicating the decision to leave the abusive relationship (Mdletshe & Makhaye, 2025; Nikolić-Ristanović, 2002).

In their narratives, victims of intimate partner violence also spoke about certain emotions that kept them in the abusive relationship. One such emotion is the fear of escalation of violence and fatal outcomes. Findings from other studies likewise indicated that fear is one of the primary reasons why women do not leave their abusers (Barnett, 2001; Bukvić, 2008; Kim & Gray, 2008; Rezaei et al., 2025). Leaving the partner does not necessarily mean the end of violence, and fear often persists even after separation (Kurz, 1996). Furthermore, participants did not leave their partners as long as they hoped that the violence would end, that their partners would change, and recognize their mistakes. This hope is sustained by the so-called honeymoon phase in the cycle of violence (Hughes, 2008; Mamula & Ajduković, 2004). During this phase, the abuser shows remorse and makes promises to change, creating an illusion of control that reinforces the victim's hope and decision to stay

(Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Heim et al., 2018). Memories of earlier times when the partner was not violent also sustain this hope. Even the most violent men are not violent all the time, which forms the basis for the belief that violence is an exception and that the “real man” would not threaten them (Ferraro & Johnson, 1983).

An additional mechanism that, according to participants’ accounts, contributed to staying in the abusive relationship is a strong feeling of shame and embarrassment. These emotional states stem from dominant societal discourse that treats domestic violence as a “private matter,” and women who speak out about abuse are often perceived as “airing dirty laundry” (Nikolić-Ristanović, 2002). Internalization of such messages leads victims to experience guilt, self-blame, and fear of judgment, which further isolates them and prevents them from seeking help (Herman, 1992; Murvartian et al., 2023; Walker, 1979).

Moreover, some participants reported that they did not leave their partners because they felt love for them. Research shows that victims can differentiate between the abuser’s personality, which they love, and the abusive behavior, which they do not, allowing them to remain emotionally attached to the “real nature” of the partner and not leave (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003; Enander, 2011; Heron et al., 2022; Towns & Adams, 2000). Additionally, construing and presenting the partner in a romanticized way (e.g., as a person in whom they found everything, who supports them, someone who will always be there for them) contributes to not leaving the abusive partner (Boonzaier & De La Rey, 2003; Jackson, 2001; Towns & Adams, 2000).

Feelings of pity toward the abuser also functioned to retain participants in the abusive relationship. This finding aligns with attachment trauma theory (Dutton & Painter, 1993) and research showing that victims often develop empathy toward their abusers, justifying their behavior by referring to personal difficulties or vulnerabilities (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Effiong et al., 2022). Pity may be part of a broader pattern of emotional dependency, wherein victims feel responsible for the partner’s emotional state, further complicating the process of leaving the abusive relationship.

When it comes to reasons for leaving an abusive partner, the participants referred in their accounts to several key factors: the escalation of violence and fear of retaliation, violence against children and the loss of hope and exhaustion. Some participants reported normalizing certain forms of violence, but once the abuse exceeded what they perceived as “usual,” or when it became unpredictable, they decided to leave. Previous research similarly showed that victims rarely leave after the first violent incident. Although thoughts of leaving may arise earlier, the actual decision is often made following a “turning point” or “critical incident” (Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Kearney, 2001; Patzel, 2001). One such critical moment identified in the narratives was violence against children. Other studies have also found that harm directed at children is often the trigger or decisive moment for leaving an abusive partner (Davis, 2002; Enander & Holmberg, 2008; Heron et al., 2022; Patzel, 2001).

Participants also described emotional states and internal dilemmas accompanying the decision-making process about leaving the abusive relationship.

Their narratives suggest that these emotions should be understood as part of a dynamic continuum—while they still held hope that their partner might change, they remained in the relationship; the loss of that hope emerged as a critical moment that shifted them toward the decision to leave. These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that women often stay in abusive relationships hoping for change, and that the loss of such hope represents a key psychological shift enabling the termination of the abusive relationship (Baholo et al. 2014; Caridade et al., 2020; Goodman et al., 2003). Furthermore, fear of retaliation or increased violence played an ambivalent role: in some cases, it kept women in the relationship, while in others, it acted as a catalyst for leaving. Research confirms that fear of the abuser may operate in a dual way—both as a barrier to leaving (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [FRA], 2014; WHO, 2013), and as an immediate trigger for exit when a woman assesses that staying could result in severe injury or even death (Heron et al., 2022; Kurz, 1996; Patzel, 2001).

This study clearly illustrates the complexity of decisions surrounding staying in or leaving an abusive partner, which are deeply intertwined with numerous personal, social, and cultural factors. The decision-making process is not an immediate reaction, but rather a prolonged and often painful journey during which victims confront internal dilemmas, conflicting emotions, and external pressures. Understanding this complexity allows us to view intimate partner violence not merely as an individual problem, but as a deeply rooted social phenomenon that demands attention on multiple levels.

One of the key strengths of this study lies in its focus on the experiences of women residing in a safe house, which enables a nuanced understanding of the specific challenges and decision-making mechanisms among survivors of partner violence who have taken the initial step toward leaving an abusive relationship. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for the collection of rich, detailed, and nuanced narratives, while the application of thematic analysis enabled the systematic identification of key themes and patterns in the participants' experiences. This qualitative approach offers insight into subjective perceptions and internal dilemmas that often go unnoticed in quantitative research.

However, the study has certain limitations. Gathering data exclusively from women residing in a safe house may limit the generalizability of the findings to all victims of intimate partner violence, particularly those who have not sought or had access to such support services. Additionally, it is possible that the participants' narratives were influenced by their current circumstances, which could shape the way they perceive and interpret their past experiences. Furthermore, due to the nature of qualitative research and the small sample size, the results cannot be considered statistically representative, but they do provide valuable in-depth insights that can serve as a basis for further, broader studies.

The findings of this study have important practical implications. The complexity of the decision-making process around staying or leaving an abusive partner highlights the need for multidimensional support tailored to different phases of a woman's experience. First, interventions should aim to empower women to recognize and critically reflect on

beliefs that hinder their ability to leave—such as idealization of the partner, religious and patriarchal norms, and tolerance of milder forms of violence. Fostering emotional and psychological self-awareness is crucial for overcoming the mental barriers that delay the decision to leave. Second, it is essential to ensure the availability of stable and accessible resources, including safe shelters, financial assistance, and legal protection, since without concrete options for housing and independent living, exiting an abusive relationship remains difficult to achieve. Third, support must be especially attuned to identifying and responding promptly in critical moments such as the escalation of violence, violence against children, fear of retaliation, and emotional exhaustion. These are the moments when women are most likely to make the decision to leave, and therefore, support systems must be readily available and effective at those times, through emergency measures and continuous psychosocial assistance. Finally, ongoing education and sensitization of professionals working with survivors of violence are crucial, to ensure that their interventions are aligned with the needs of women at different stages of the abusive relationship—from enduring and rationalizing the abuse, through recognizing the threats, to empowerment for definitive separation and recovery. Such an integrated approach enables comprehensive support that both understands and addresses the barriers to leaving an abusive relationship and the motivating factors that ultimately lead women to break free, thereby increasing their chances for a safer and more autonomous life.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into the complex and multilayered reasons why women remain in abusive intimate relationships, as well as the factors that ultimately motivate them to leave their abusers. Key themes identified include the characteristics of the violence experienced, lack of resources, internalized beliefs, patriarchal norms, and emotional attachments to the partner. The findings also underscore that the decision to leave an abusive partner is often a prolonged and emotionally challenging process, marked by phases of hope, fear, doubt, and eventual resolution. Particular attention is warranted in understanding the role of violence against children, escalation of abuse, and fear of retaliation as critical turning points that may trigger a woman's decision to exit the relationship. The results of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological, social, and cultural barriers faced by victims, as well as the internal motivations and dilemmas that shape their decisions. These insights hold significant value for the development of support systems and interventions that are better aligned with the real-life needs and experiences of women subjected to intimate partner violence.

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Iza odluke: Razumevanje razloga za ostanak ili napuštanje nasilne veze

Ivana Janković

Departman za psihologiju, Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Nišu, Srbija

Apstrakt

Nasilje nad ženama u partnerskim odnosima predstavlja ozbiljan društveni problem sa značajnim negativnim posledicama po žrtve, njihove porodice i društvo u celini. Razumevanje razloga zbog kojih žene ostaju u ili napuštaju nasilne veze ključno je za razvoj efikasnih preventivnih i interventnih mera. Cilj ovog istraživanja bio je da se ispitaju razlozi zbog kojih žene žrtve partnerskog nasilja ostaju u, odnosno napuštaju nasilne veze. Studija je sprovedena na uzorku od 15 žena smeštenih u sigurnoj kući, a podaci su prikupljeni polustrukturiranim intervjuima i analizirani tematskom analizom. Rezultati su pokazali da su ključni razlozi za ostajanje sa nasilnim partnerom povezani sa tolerancijom na slabije oblike nasilja, nedostatkom socijalnih i ekonomskih resursa, usvojenim patrijarhalnim vrednostima, religijskim uverenjima, emocionalnom vezanošću, kao i strahom i osećanjima stida. Nasuprot tome, odluku o napuštanju nasilnog partnera obično pokreću eskalacija nasilja, nasilje nad decom, gubitak nade u promenu partnera i strah od odmazde. Istraživanje ističe složenost procesa donošenja odluka kod žena koje trpe partnersko nasilje i naglašava potrebu za sveobuhvatnom podrškom koja uzima u obzir njihove psihološke, socijalne i kulturne okolnosti.

Ključne reči: žrtve, partnersko nasilje, ostanak sa nasilnim partnerom, proces napuštanja

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