

Leaving domestically violent relationships: exploring how barriers to leaving are similar and different across gender and sexuality

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One of the least understood aspects of domestic violence in the public mind is why victim/survivors stay. Understood as a "simple" decision resulting from a single incident or moment in which the problem is realised, the "common sense" view, also held by many professionals, is frustration and impatience that victim/survivors apparently will not make this "right" ("healthy", "rational") choice and act on it; or if they do, they then make the "wrong" ("unhealthy", "irrational") choice to return (sometimes more than once). Often explanations of this apparent inability of survivors to make the right decision focus on (or blame) the survivor for individual inadequacies/psychologies. However, compelling evidence from work with heterosexual female victim/survivors demonstrates not only that leaving is a process rather than a single act/decision; but that many socially and culturally produced factors impact on the decision-making process. Drawing on our qualitative study of women and men who have experienced domestic violence in heterosexual and/or same sex relationships, we explore, for the first time in a UK context, some of these factors and the ways in which gender and sexuality might impact on this process. Reasons for staying can be understood to coalesce around at least four themes: recognition factors that reveal understandings of what constitutes domestic violence; cultural factors that reveal dominant ideas about marriage, relationships, family and heterosexism; relationship factors that reveal narratives of love; and behavioural factors that reveal abusive partners' strategies for keeping victim/survivors engaged in relationships. These themes overlap at times but are separated here to enable discussion both of the beliefs and expectations held by victim/survivors about themselves and what constitutes an adult love relationship as well as the particular strategies perpetrators adopt to exert control over their partners. In parallel with discussion about these themes we will also consider some of the ways that gender and sexuality intersect to construct gendered experiences of domestically violent relationships which can, in turn, produce gendered understandings of leaving.