

Why Some Women Keep Living With Abusive Men

In the nation of Colombia, where I ministered last month, a woman is killed by her husband or partner every four days. The problem is so serious that sociologists have coined a new term for it: *femicidio*, or femicide.

I've often quoted the statistics about domestic violence, but when I was in the Colombian city of Barranquilla, I saw the scars up close. The emotional pain I encountered while praying with and counseling women there was excruciating. Some were gang raped as teenagers. Others were sexually molested by relatives. Many had been slapped, punched, choked, kicked or attacked with knives or iron rods by husbands or boyfriends.

Celia (not her real name) had the saddest story. She gave her life to Christ a few years ago, but she maintained an on-again, off-again relationship with a boyfriend whom she admitted was abusive. He screamed at her constantly, he pushed her to the floor on one occasion, and he often told her she was inferior to his other girlfriends.

Yet Celia couldn't stand it when he stopped calling her. She wanted his attention, even when he called her names and bragged about his sexual conquests with other women.

Why do some women actually want to stay in relationship with men who act like total jerks? It's a complicated problem, but we can't use that as an excuse to ignore it. The Christian community must learn to confront domestic abuse if we ever hope to heal the women who suffer from it. In my experience, I've found five main reasons why abuse is tolerated:

1. Women feel compelled to keep their abuse a secret. Any form of abuse produces shame. The victim is made to feel she is the guilty one, so she feels compelled to keep quiet about it. In

many cultures, relatives enforce this secrecy by insisting that what goes on inside the home stays inside the home. Often a mother will tell her daughter that exposing her husband's abuse will discredit the family. So a woman is expected to be the scapegoat, bearing the shame for her uncle's sexual advances or her husband's beatings.

2. Their fathers abused their mothers. One woman I met in Colombia told me she has always ended up with abusive men in her life, ever since her boss raped her in his office when she was in her early 20s. In counseling we discovered that her father constantly abused her mother physically and verbally—and that her mother stayed in the marriage even though she was miserable. Today, the mother's agony has been passed down to the next generation. The mother sent a signal to her daughter that women should simply roll over and take abuse.

3. They have lost their self-esteem. Women who are addicted to abusive men don't become this way overnight. It can start with a lack of affection and affirmation at home. But usually a traumatic experience such as a rape, childhood sex abuse or even a serious bullying incident can trigger the downward spiral. Abuse victims start believing they are worthless—and that they deserve to be mistreated. When this lie has fully metastasized, an abused woman will feel attracted to men who reinforce this sense of worthlessness.

4. They are financially dependent on their husbands. In the United States, women can call the police and secure protection from an abuser (although the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence says only 25 percent of victims in the U.S. report the crime). But in developing countries, reporting the abuse is rarely an option. In Peru, police have been known to rape women who report abuse! No wonder many women feel helpless. They have no legal way out of this nightmare—and if they leave the marriage, they have no money. So most women live with their bruises and suffer in silence.

5. They received flawed counsel from pastors. I've met many Christian women who felt trapped in horribly abusive marriages. In some cases, their husbands were HIV positive (because of affairs) and yet they demanded sex. In other cases, the men were hitting their wives, emotionally battering them or even threatening to kill them. Yet when the women sought help from the church, they were told to submit and endure. Often the line goes like this: "If you will be more submissive, your husband will change."

That is the worst advice any counselor could tell a woman whose self-esteem has already been torn to shreds. She already questions whether God loves her—and now a pastor suggests that God wants her to be abused. This type of "pastoral care" is actually a form of spiritual abuse!

Often pastors tell women to "be quiet and take it" because they don't want to encourage divorce. Pastors will use Malachi 2:16—"God hates divorce"—and yet ignore the rest of the passage, which says, "And him who covers his garment with wrong" (NASB). Many scholars say this passage should be translated, "And him who covers his wife with violence."

Yes, God hates divorce—because He created the family. But He also hates it when women are abused. If we want His heart, we must defend women from abuse and devise compassionate strategies to protect and heal them.

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