Barriers Faced by Immigrant Women

It is important to keep in mind when thinking about the barriers facing an individual attempting to leave an abusive relationship is that extreme emotional abuse is always present in domestic violence situations. Immigrant women have special barriers to leaving. The reasons they return or stay in the relationship vary from case to case.

Situational Factors:
- Economic dependence
- Immigration status – not able to access services, discrimination, being turned in by police or other service providers
- Cultural barriers – not speaking English well or at all, not being familiar with legal system and laws, being afraid of the authorities, small, close knit community
- Fear of deportation
- No one she knows or trusts who speaks her language; no family or friends in the US
- Fear of losing custody of the children, often based on the partners’ remarks and threats.
- Lack of alternative housing or job skills; inability to work or qualify for services because of immigration status
- Social isolation resulting in lack of support from family and friends.
- Fear of involvement in court processes as she may have had bad experiences before.
- Fear of her abuser doing something to her – report her to Border Patrol, report her to the police

Emotional Factors
- Loyalty. “He is sick and needs help.” Wanting to help.
- Fear that he will commit suicide if she leaves (often he has told her this).
- Love. Often the abuser is quite loving and lovable when he is not being abusive.
- Guilt. She believes and her partner and family members all agree that it is her fault.
- Shame and humiliation in front of the community.
- Unfounded optimism that the abuser will change. “He’s starting to do things I have been asking for.” (Counseling, anger management, things she sees as a chance of improvement)
- Demolished self-esteem. “I thought I was too (fat, stupid, ugly, whatever he has been calling) to leave.

Personal Beliefs
- Parenting, needing a partner for the kids. “A crazy father is better than none at all.”
- Religious and extended family pressure to keep the family together no matter what.
- Responsibility. It is up to her to work things out and save the relationship.
- Identity. Women are raised to feel that they need a partner
- Belief that marriage is forever.
- Belief that violence is the way all partners relate (often this woman has come from violent childhood).